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NOW HIRING

MJ's Sinclair of Groton is looking for someone to work weekends and nights. Stop out and see Jeff for an application.



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

Groton Airport getting renovation

The Groton Airport north of Groton is getting a major renovation this summer. The entire airport was disced up and will be replanted. In addition, the trajectory of the airport will be shifted slightly more northward. The use of the airport has been increasing in recent years and the major renovation was necessary to accommodate the increased travel.

One of the highlights is the annual fly-in. According to Darrell Hillestad, the coordinator of the event, they are planning to have the fly-in this year (Sept. 18-19); however, the event will be more at the mercy of the weather this year. He said that if it rains and the runway gets soft, they will have to cancel it.



Courtesy photos given to the GDI from Darrell Hillestad



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Northeast Conference Track Meet

The Northeast Conference track meet was held Thursday in Groton. Those placing second were Andrew Marzahn in the 100m dash, the boys 3200m relay team, Kenzie McInerney in the triple jump and Caleb Furney in the discus.

Girls Team Points: 1, Milbank 174; 2, Roncalli 136; 3, Hamlin 105; 4, Groton Area 79; 5, Redfield 62; 6, Webster Area 53; 7, Clark/Willow Lake 49.5; 8, Deuel 33.5; 9, Sisseton 22; 10, Britton-Hecla 18.

Boys Team Points: 1, Milbank 218.5; 2, Roncalli 85; 3, Webster Area 83.5; 4, Hamlin 74; 5, Clark/Willow Lake 68; 6, Groton Area 66; 7, Sisseton 50; 8, Britton-Hecla 33; 9, Deuel 32; 10, Redfield 16.

Boys 300m Hurdles: 4, Jackson Cogley, 47.32.

Girls 100m Dash: 12, Karsyn Jangula, 13.85; 21, Camryn Kurtz, 14.67.

Boys 100m Dash: Prelims: 1, Andrew Marzahn, 10.96; Finals: 2, Andrew Marzahn, 11.10.

Girls 200m Dash: 9, Laila Roberts, 28.37; 17, Kenzie McInerney, 31.67

Boys 200m Dash: 7, Andrew Marzahn, 23.34.

Girls 400m Dash: 6, Jerica Locke, 1:07.69; 11, Rylee Dunker, 1:13.65; 17, Camryn Kurtz, 1:17.72.

Boys 400m Dash: 10, Cole Simon, 59.16.

Girls 800m Run: 3, Faith Traphagen, 2:36.35; 7, Talli Wright, 3:00.1.

Boys 800m Run: 13, Douglas Heminger, 2:45.25.

Boys 1600m Run: 4, Isaac Smith, 5:07.20; 7, Jacob Lewandowski, 5:15.76; 15, Douglas Heminger, 6:17.72.

Boys 3200m Run: 3, Isaac Smith, 11:26.52.

Girls 400m Relay: 4, Groton (Jerica Locke, Aspen Johnson, Karsyn Jangula, Laila Roberts), 56.06.

Boys 400m Relay: 5, Groton (Andrew Marzahn, Tate Larson, Ethan Gengerke, Taylor Diegel), 48.92.

Girls 800m Relay: 3, Groton (Jerica Locke, Aspen Johnson, Karsyn Jangula, Laila Roberts), 1:58.91.

Boys 800m Relay: 7, Groton (Andrew Marzahn, Tate Larson, Ethan Gengerke, Taylor Diegel), 1:43.41.

Girls 1600m Relay: 3, Groton (Jerica Locke, Rylee Dunker, Laila Roberts, Faith Traphagen), 4:36.36.

Boys 1600m Relay: 7, Groton (Ethan Gengerke, Jacob Lewandowski, Cole Simon, Tracy Keegan), 4:02.11.

Boys 1600m Sprint Relay: 4, Groton, 4:12.51.

Girls 3200m Relay: 5, Groton (Rylee Dunker, Talli Wright, Anna Fjeldheim, Faith Traphagen), 12:10.52.

Boys 3200m Relay: 2, Groton (Isaac Smith, Keegan Tracy, Cole Simon, Jacob Lewandowski), 9:20.54.

Girls High Jump: 3, Kenzie McInerney, 4-11; 16, Anna Fjeldheim, 4-01; 18, Emilie Thurston, 3-11.

Boys High Jump: 4, Jackson Cogley, 5-5; 9, Paxton Bonn, 4-11.

Girls Long Jump: 3, Kenzie McInerney, 15-5; 5, Aspen Johnson, 14-7.5; 10, Trista Keith, 13-3.75.

Boys Long Jump: 11, Jackson Cogley, 17-00; 15, Keegan Tracy, 15-10.25; 18, Tate Larson, 15-6.75.

Girls Triple Jump: 2, Kenzie McInerney, 33-0; 5, Aspen Johnson, 31-00.75; 14, Trista Keith, 27.00.5.

Boys Triple Jump: 9, Jackson Cogley, 36-3.75; 13, Paxton Bonn, 33-3.25.

Girls Discus: 3, Chloe Daly, 84-7; 6, Maddie Bjerke, 81-0; 16, Faith Fliehs, 66-10.

Boys Discus: 2, Caleb Furney, 109-11; 9, Holden Sippel, 94-2.5; 11, Caleb Hanten, 88-5.5.

Girls Shot Put: 3, Maddie Bjerke, 32-1.5; 5, Chloe Daly, 29-9; 13, Faith Fliehs, 26-1.

Boys Shot Put: 4, Caleb Furney, 39-4.75; 12, Holden Sippel, 33-11; 17, Caleb Hanten, 30-2.75.

Upcoming Events

Friday, May 14

1:00 p.m.: Track: 7th/8th @ Groton

Sunday, May 16

2 p.m.: GHS Graduation, GHS Arena

Monday, May 17

10 a.m.: Track: 7th/8th Northeast Conference Track Meet at Swisher Field

Thursday, May 20

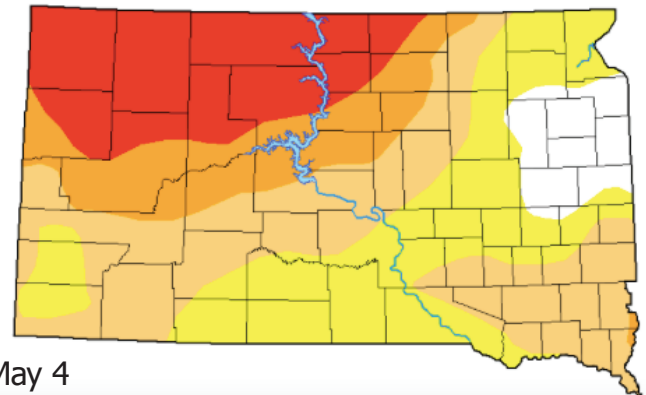
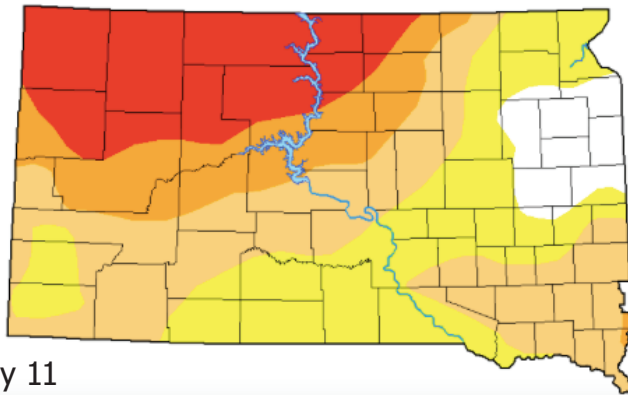
Noon: Region 1A Track Meet at Sisseton

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Drought Monitor

Drought Classification



High Plains

On this week's map, areas of the region—including Colorado and Wyoming—saw improvements, including a reduction in areas of Extreme Drought (D3), Severe Drought (D2), and Moderate Drought (D1) in response to rainfall during the past week and above-normal precipitation during the past 30-to-60-day period. During the past 60 days, the percentage of normal precipitation has been ~150 to 300% of normal. Moreover, NASA SPOrT is showing soil moisture levels (0 to 10 cm depth) ranging from the 70th to the 98th percentile. Conversely, abnormally dry soils and areas of dry vegetation are being observed in far western portions of Colorado and Wyoming. In terms of streamflow activity, 7-day average streamflows are much below normal (<10th percentile) across much of western Colorado, southwestern Wyoming, and northern portions of North Dakota. Average temperatures for the week were mainly below normal (2 to 12 deg F) with the greatest negative departures observed in the Dakotas. According to the latest (May 10) USDA North Dakota Crop Progress and Condition report, topsoil across the state was rated 52% very short and 28% short with subsoil moisture supplies rated 52% very short and 29% short. In Colorado, reservoir storage levels statewide (end of April) are below normal at 85% of average compared to 104% of average last year. Storage levels were notably below normal in the San Miguel, Dolores, Animas, and San Juan Basins at 57% of average compared to 95% of average last year at the same time. In terms of NOAA NCEI's climatological rankings, North Dakota observed its driest 6- and 9-month periods on record. On a climate-division level, western Colorado's Climate Division 2 (Colorado Drainage) observed its driest April on record, as well as its driest 12-month period on record.

#438 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

We continue to show declines. There were 38,529 new cases reported today, bringing us up to 32,880,669 total cases, which is 0.1% more than yesterday. Average hospitalizations is down again at 35,679. And deaths are at 583,990, which is 0.1% more than yesterday. There were 780 deaths reported today. Not much change, although the overall trend is a slow decrease.

On May 13, 2020, one year ago today, we had reported 1,392,500 cases and had lost 83,818 lives to this virus. New case and death numbers were declining, just as they are today. We talked about counting deaths because the conspiracy theories were already circulating about doctors falsifying death certificates. This has to do with excess deaths estimation, and my most complete description of that is in my Update #79 posted May 12, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3587274557955591>. We had some indications at this time that the virus was not going to be seasonal. This was also one of my first debunkings of a variety of silly stories. I'll link all of that here in case you missed it and are interested: Update #80 posted May 13 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3589866071029773>.

Regeneron expressed optimism about its monoclonal antibody treatments; you will recall this is a lab-made, highly-purified antibody targeted against the coronavirus which did prove in the long run to be beneficial. The Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington was predicting more deaths based on "explosive increases in mobility in a number of states." We were slow learners early—later too, truth be told. There were indications smokers were at higher risk from this virus, more likely to develop serious disease. Worldwide, we had more than 4.3 million cases and 295,000 deaths.

New CDC ensemble forecasts for deaths in the US are out this week; they make projections over the next four weeks. It is good news that the forecast of up to 602,000 for June 5 is barely higher than the 600,000 projected for May 29. This is another sign this thing is slowing down.

And here's the worm in our shiny apple of declining cases and deaths: Florida, where cases and deaths have been on the decline, just as across the country, has had an explosion in the proportion of those cases caused by variants. The timing suggests this is a direct result of spring breakers coming in; there have been almost 12,000 variant cases reported so far—most in the country. Here's the trend: On March 14 there were reports of 753 variant cases (B.1.1.7, P.1, and B.1.351); on April 15 there were 5177 variant cases; and on April 27 there were 9248 variant cases. It is important to recognize that less than one percent of cases in the state are genomically tested, so this is simply an indicator, not a hard count; but it should set off alarm bells.

We should also note that, while new-case reports are finally starting to decline in Brazil, Canada and Cuba have picked up the flag for the Western Hemisphere. Additionally, several South American countries are showing sharp increases, including Guyana, Bolivia, Chile, Peru, and Argentina. A wave is expected to follow on recent country-wide protests in Colombia as well. We still have 40 percent of the world's new cases in the Americas. Just over 11 percent of these continents' population have been fully vaccinated, so we're not out of the woods.

The CDC reported yesterday that more than 72 percent of coronaviruses sequenced from the 35,000 patient specimens we sequence each week are now B.1.1.7, the highly transmissible variant first identified in the UK. No question now it has become our predominant variant. And no question it's why we still have as many new cases as we do; we knew that was going to happen.

The big news today is that the CDC has loosened guidelines for fully vaccinated people. Masks and distancing are no longer recommended for them in indoor or outdoor settings with any size crowd. The only exceptions are public means of transportation (planes, trains, buses), transportation hubs (airports, stations), and medical settings like clinics and hospitals. Those who are immunocompromised such that they cannot necessarily expect fully efficacy of their vaccination should consult with their physicians to decide what course of action is appropriate for them; they may well decide to continue masking and distancing. I'm going to gently suggest we don't start giving side-eye to those wearing masks while we

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go boldly forth without them; you do not know anyone else's story. Individual businesses and organizations may still impose whatever requirements they wish, and we must follow those requirements on their premises. And of course, we are still obligated to follow state and local mandates. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, said at a White House briefing, "If you are fully vaccinated, you can start doing the things you had stopped doing because of the pandemic."

As expected, the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) at their meeting yesterday recommended use of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine in 12 to 15-year olds. The vote was 14-0, so it wasn't close. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, has also adopted that recommendation, so immunizations can proceed beginning immediately. Given several states were preparing in advance of this decision, I would guess you could get your child in this week yet in most states. I know my 14-year-old granddaughter had her first dose today, which is a matter of some relief to me.

Also on ACIP's agenda yesterday was a discussion of that rare blood clotting disorder, thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS), that has occurred in a small number of people after administration of the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine. There have been no additional deaths since the committee's last update last month; there have been a few more cases. Out of 8.7 million doses given, 28 have developed TTS. The condition has been "plausibly" linked to the vaccine, but the CDC has said the benefits of the vaccine outweigh the risk. Most cases are occurring in people 30 to 49 and in women, although there have been cases in those from 18 to 59 and in six males as well. Nineteen of those cases were the brain blood clot called cerebral venous sinus thrombosis (CVST); the others had other kinds of clots. The committee did not recommend any updates to vaccine policy arising from this update.

A letter published Wednesday in the New England Journal of Medicine reports on laboratory research done by Pfizer, BioNTech, and the University of Texas, testing the effectiveness of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine against variants of concern in the US. This is one of the first pieces I've seen testing any vaccine against a B.1.1.7 variant which has acquired an E684K (eek) mutation known as B.1.1.7 + E484K. Variants tested include B.1.526, B.1.429, B.1.1.7, and B.1.1.7 + E484K, as well as the previously dominant variant, D614G. All of the variants remain susceptible to neutralizing antibody found in the serum of vaccinated persons; neutralization against B.1.429 was "slightly lower" than for the others. The E484K mutation, according to the letter, "caused little compromise to neutralization," which is very good news; that had been a worry with this permutation of B.1.1.7 as well as B.1.351 and B.1.526. Real-world effectiveness has not yet been studied against all of these variants and, of course, research will have to continue into the future as more variants emerge; all of that will take some time, more now that the transmission rate has slowed.

In other encouraging news, some preliminary findings are in on tests of vaccinated serum against B.1.617, the variant that first was identified in India. This one has been very concerning because among its dozen or so mutations, it has two which could mean trouble: L452R and E484Q. L452R substitutes the amino acid leucine for the amino acid arginine at position 452 in the spike (S) protein and appears to confer an advantage in binding to ACE2 receptors on the host cell's surface; it is believed this makes the virus more transmissible by requiring a lower exposure dose of virus to cause infection. There is also some evidence it may contribute to escape from neutralizing antibodies. This mutation is also seen in B.1.526, B.1.427, and B.1.429. E484Q is a similar mutation to E484K (the so-called eek mutation). While E484K substitutes negatively-charged glutamic acid for positively-charged lysine at position 484 on the S protein, E484Q substitutes polar, uncharged glutamine for lysine at that locus. Although these two mutations are different, they have the same functional outcome; both are known as escape mutations, that is, ones that aid the virus in evading neutralizing antibodies. This double mutation is what has had experts worried; each mutation individually gives the virus an advantage against our antibodies, so you wonder who knows what they'll do together. Well, a team at the University of Cambridge has done some work on the problem which is available in preprint (so not yet peer-reviewed). What this team has found is that antibodies still neutralize B.1.617, but their potency decreases considerably against it. I want to be clear that the immune response to vaccine is so robust that this diminution of activity does not prevent antibodies blocking the variant, so our immunity seems to hold. The data suggest the mRNA vaccines are going to work just as

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well against B.1.617 as they do against B.1.351 (the variant first identified in South Africa), which is very well, indeed. While mild and asymptomatic infections may be more frequent with this variant, these vaccines appear to still protect very effectively against severe illness and death. The takeaway in the US is that the vaccines we have available are going to be effective. We do not have a lot of data on the vaccines available in India where the variant is prevalent, but preliminary evidence from the Centre for Cellular & Molecular Biology in Hyderabad, India, indicates the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine, known as Covishield in India, will also be effective against severe cases and deaths. If so, we've dodged another bullet. I don't know how long we're going to be lucky, but I hope it's for a while yet.

I wrote this next a couple of days ago before the CDC's guidance change on masks. I do not know where this will leave us; it depends on what local authorities do in Colorado with their policies since local mandates will supersede CDC guidance: A sign of something I think we're going to be seeing a great deal more frequently is the change in Denver's mask policy that links indoor masking requirements to vaccination rates. If 80 percent of people working in an office can show proof of vaccination, masks will not be required; likewise, if 85 percent of a restaurant's workers can show proof of vaccination, they will not be required to wear them. Gatherings of nine or fewer will not be required to mask. They will still be required for children and at most stores, childcare centers, schools, hospitals, and nursing homes, as well as on most modes of transportation and in many other settings.

Fifteen states now have more than half of their adults fully vaccinated: Hawaii, New Mexico, South Dakota, Nebraska, Minnesota, Iowa, Wisconsin, Maine, Vermont, New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Jersey, and Maryland. On the other hand, 10 states have less than 40 percent vaccinated; these are Wyoming, Utah, Arkansas, Louisiana, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, West Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia. And we have six states which have already met the Biden goal of 70 percent with at least one shot that the President set for July 4: Hawaii, Maine, Vermont, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut. It is clear some parts of the country are in far better shape than others. We'll see what happens from here.

There is another update to vaccination guidelines. Earlier, it was advised not to receive another vaccine within 14 days of a Covid-19 vaccine; but as data have accumulated on the safety profile and immunogenicity (ability to elicit an immune response) of the Covid-19 vaccines, the CDC has been able to modify that guidance, and the American Academy of Pediatrics concurs. The new guidance says these Covid-19 vaccinations may be administered on the same day as well as within 14 days of other vaccinations. That should be a help going forward with pediatric vaccination since children typically receive more vaccinations than adults do and a great many routine vaccinations have been put off over the course of the pandemic. It will be OK to go ahead and schedule those catch-up vaccinations at any time irrespective of when the Covid-19 vaccine is being given.

I've seen a report on an as-yet unpublished (so not peer-reviewed) Cleveland Clinic study of vaccine effectiveness in their employees and their patients. The employee portion of the study included 47,000 employees in various stages of vaccination, 1991 of which got Covid-19. Just 0.3 percent of those folks were fully vaccinated; 99.7 percent of them were not. That seems pretty definitive, doesn't it? Well then, they took a look at their 4300 Covid-19 admissions between January 1 and April 13, and what they saw there was that 0.25 percent of those were fully vaccinated, which means 99.75 percent of them were not. So there.

The CDC has reported fewer than 10,000 breakthrough infections in vaccinated people; so far, there have been just 9245 cases in 95 million fully-vaccinated individuals; that's 0.01 percent, which is exceptionally low. We get a variant with immune escape capabilities, this number could rise; but for now, things look very, very good. These vaccines work. Go get one.

A piece of good news for all of us is that, according to an Indonesian study, a vaccine made by Chinese pharmaceutical company Sinovac called CoronaVac, has turned out to be more effective in the real world than it looked in clinical trials. This is an inactivated virus vaccine made in the same way the Sinopharm vaccine we talked about a few days ago is made—by growing the virus in monkey kidney cells, then dis-

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abling it so it cannot establish an infection. It is also adjuvanted, as is the Sinopharm vaccine, but this one uses an aluminum compound as adjuvant instead of a saponin. In the large-scale clinical trial conducted in Brazil, efficacy was 50.4 percent, just above the threshold the WHO set for acceptable vaccines. However, this more recent study of more than 128,000 health care workers in Jakarta found it was 94 percent effective in preventing symptomatic infection, 96 percent effective in preventing hospitalization, and 98 percent effective in preventing death. Another report published after study in Chile showed the vaccine reduced hospitalizations by 85 percent. We still don't have good real-world results against variants because Indonesia has very low penetration by these variants, but it will be a boost to world efforts to control this disease to know this vaccine is more effective than previously thought.

That's what I see today. I'll keep an eye on things for you.

Stay safe. We'll talk again, probably on Monday.

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From the Dept. of Tourism

It was great to see many partners last week during National Travel and Tourism Week. We want to thank each and every one of you for your contribution in making NTTW such a huge success this year!

Here are a few key insights (and a lot of GREAT news) from the latest COVID Research update:

South Dakota made up a lot of ground in travel spending for the month of March, down only -5% (vs. 2019), which is so much better than the national average of -31%.

Coronavirus anxiety—from both health and financial perspectives—remains lower than at any other period during the pandemic. In fact, pessimism about the pandemic's course in the U.S. reached a record-low (10.9%).

The returning belief in travel's safety remains strong. Three-quarters of American travelers now have confidence they can travel safely, and more than 90% have travel plans or are planning their trip right now.

More than 70% of American travelers are highly excited by the prospect of near-term travel and highly open to travel inspiration. More than three-quarters of American travelers say their state-of-mind is "READY" when it comes to travel. If you aren't already, now is the time to begin marketing your destination, attraction or event.

The average American traveler plans to take 3.0 leisure trips this year. More than 75% will take a trip within the next 3 months. June and July are again the most popular months for travel this year with 60% of travelers planning to do so in that timeframe.

Consumer expectations about travel prices may have started to catch up with the reality of the demand. The proportion who believe travel prices will be low this summer declined.

Avoidance of meeting and business events have reached a record-low at 53.2%. This segment of the industry is expected to make a significant rebound starting in the second half of 2021 and future bookings are already picking up.

Local support of tourism keeps growing as well. The proportion who don't want travelers in their community remains under 40%. Anticipated happiness of seeing a travel ad about their community rose again, this time to 56.8%, the highest level recorded in the pandemic.

As several key Travel Sentiment Indicators continue to trend in the right direction or even set pandemic highs, many Americans are also recognizing that local businesses (many of which are tourism-related) were hardest hit by the economic fallout of the pandemic and wish to see their community and leadership make their recovery a priority.

Thank you to our research partners for providing this information: H2R Market Research, Near, Tourism Economics, Destination Analysts, STR, U.S. Travel Association, Arrivalist, Miles Partnership, MMGY Travel Intelligence, ADARA, and Longwoods International.

SBA PPP Loan Update

From our partners at the South Dakota Small Business Administration Office: "Since April 2020, SBA partner lenders have assisted SBA in successfully launching more than 63,000 Paycheck Protection Program forgivable loans to SD small businesses and non-profits. The combined total of 2020 and 2021 PPP loans for South Dakota is approximately \$2.7 billion. Last week, after more than a year of operation and serving more than eight million small businesses across the U.S., funding for the bi-partisan Paycheck Protection Program has been exhausted." SBA has compiled a Q&A regarding pending applications and an update on the PPP Loan program that can be viewed [here](#).

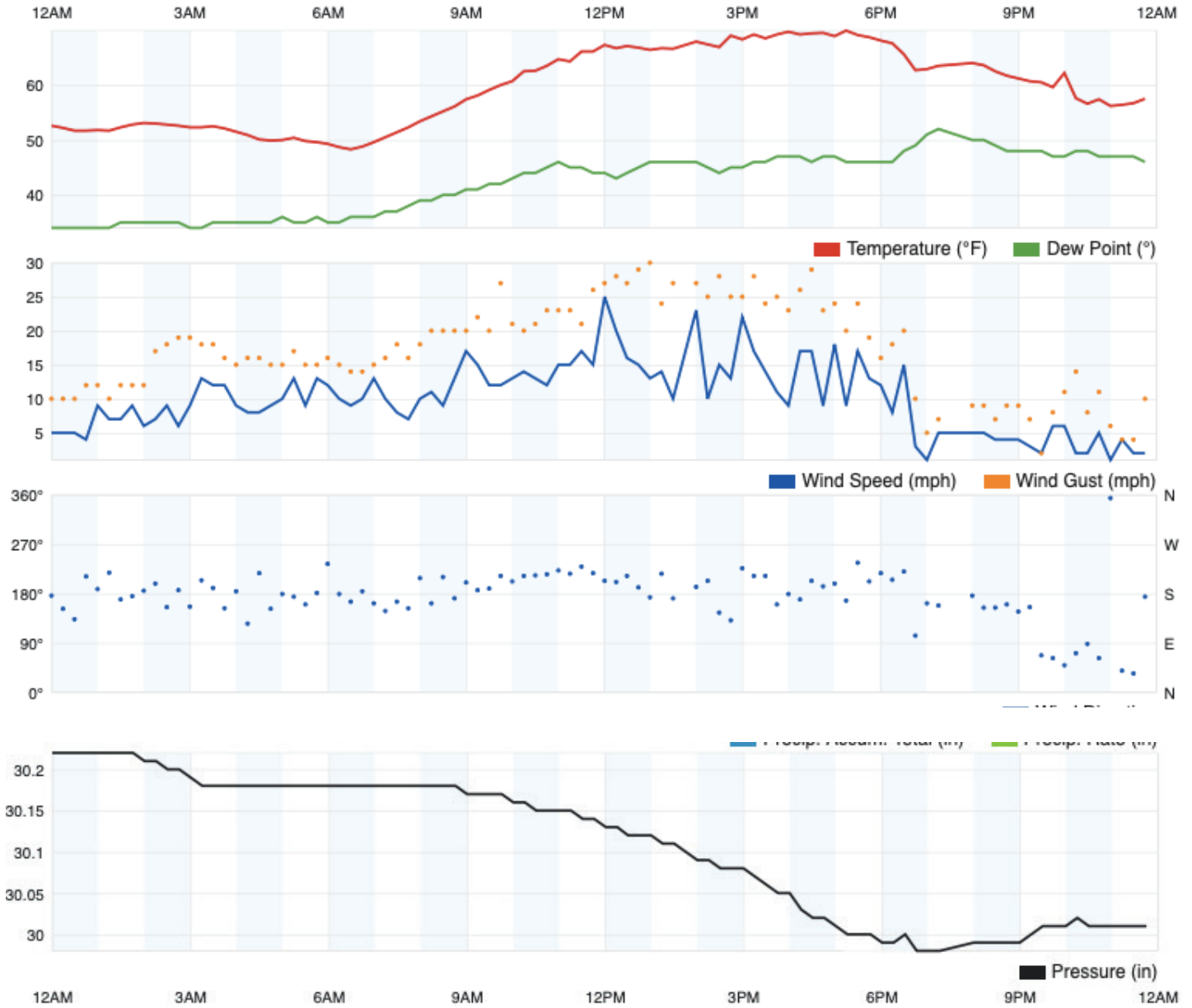
Things are looking very positive for this summer travel season. If we can be of any help to you, please don't hesitate to reach out to us. Stay well!

All our best,
Jim Hagen
Secretary of Tourism

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Yesterday's Groton Weather



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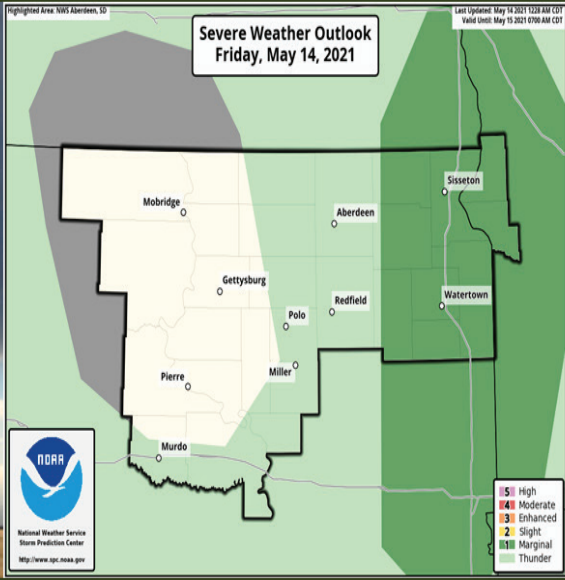
Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Sunny then Slight Chance T-storms	Mostly Clear	Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Slight Chance Showers then Slight Chance T-storms
High: 74 °F	Low: 45 °F	High: 75 °F	Low: 49 °F	High: 76 °F



Highlighted Area: NWS Aberdeen, SD

Severe Weather Outlook
Friday, May 14, 2021




Last Updated: May 14 2021 12:28 AM CDT
Valid Until: May 15 2021 12:00 AM CDT




Legend:
 High
 Moderate
 Enhanced
 Slight
 Marginal
 Thunder

Scattered showers and thunderstorms mainly along and east of the James River Valley. Hail, pea to quarter size possible.

3 Day Forecast

Friday	Saturday	Sunday
		
65-75°	70-77°	70-79°



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD
5/14/2021 6:10 AM

Afternoon temperatures will be near to slightly above normal across the region this afternoon. Areas along and east of the James River Valley may see an afternoon shower or thunderstorm develop. While isolated in coverage, the stronger storms may produce hail.

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Today in Weather History

May 14, 1982: Torrential rains pushed the Bad River over the banks at Fort Pierre. One house four miles outside of Fort Pierre had to sandbag. Rainfall amount of 3.83 inches was recorded in Pierre.

1923: An early morning violent estimated F5 tornado cut a 45-mile path of destruction through Howard and Mitchell counties in Texas. 23 people lost their lives and 250 sustained injuries. The path width of the tornado reached 1.5 miles at one point, and entire farms were "wiped off the face of the earth." The First Baptist Church in Colorado City, Texas became an emergency hospital for tornado victims.

1990: Thunderstorms developed ahead of a cold front produced severe weather from northwest Texas to western Missouri. Severe thunderstorms spawned seventeen tornadoes including nine in Texas. Four tornadoes in Texas injured a total of nine persons. Thunderstorms in Texas also produced hail four inches in diameter at Shamrock and four and a half inches in diameter near Guthrie. Thunderstorms over northeastern Kansas produced more than seven inches of rain in Chautauqua County between 9 PM and midnight.

1896 - The mercury plunged to 10 degrees below zero at Climax, CO. It was the lowest reading of record for the U.S. during the month of May. (David Ludlum)

1898 - A severe thunderstorm, with some hailstones up to 9.5 inches in circumference, pounded a four mile wide path across Kansas City MO. South-facing windows were broken in nearly every house in central and eastern parts of the city, and several persons were injured. An even larger hailstone was thought to have been found, but it turned out to be a chunk of ice tossed out the window of a building by a prankster. (The Kansas City Weather Almanac) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Seven cities across the western U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date as unseasonably hot weather made a comeback. The record high of 103 degrees at Sacramento CA was their ninth in eleven days, and also marked a record seven days of 100 degree heat for the month. Their previous record was two days of 100 degree heat in May. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Sunny and dry weather prevailed across the nation. Temperatures warmed into the 80s and lower 90s in the Great Plains Region and the Mississippi Valley. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing along a stationary front produced severe weather in south central Texas and the Southern High Plains Region during the afternoon and evening hours. Thunderstorms produced softball size hail at Spearman and Hitchcock, TX. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Thunderstorms developing ahead of a cold front produced severe weather from northwest Texas to western Missouri. Severe thunderstorms spawned seventeen tornadoes, including nine in Texas. Four tornadoes in Texas injured a total of nine persons. Thunderstorms in Texas also produced hail four inches in diameter at Shamrock, and hail four and a half inches in diameter near Guthrie. Thunderstorms over northeastern Kansas produced more than seven inches of rain in Chautauqua County between 9 PM and midnight. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 70 °F at 5:12 PM

Low Temp: 48 °F at 6:25 AM

Wind: 31 mph at 2:47 PM

Precip: .00

Today's Info

Record High: 94° in 1932, 2001

Record Low: 24° in 2004

Average High: 70°F

Average Low: 44°F

Average Precip in May.: 1.43

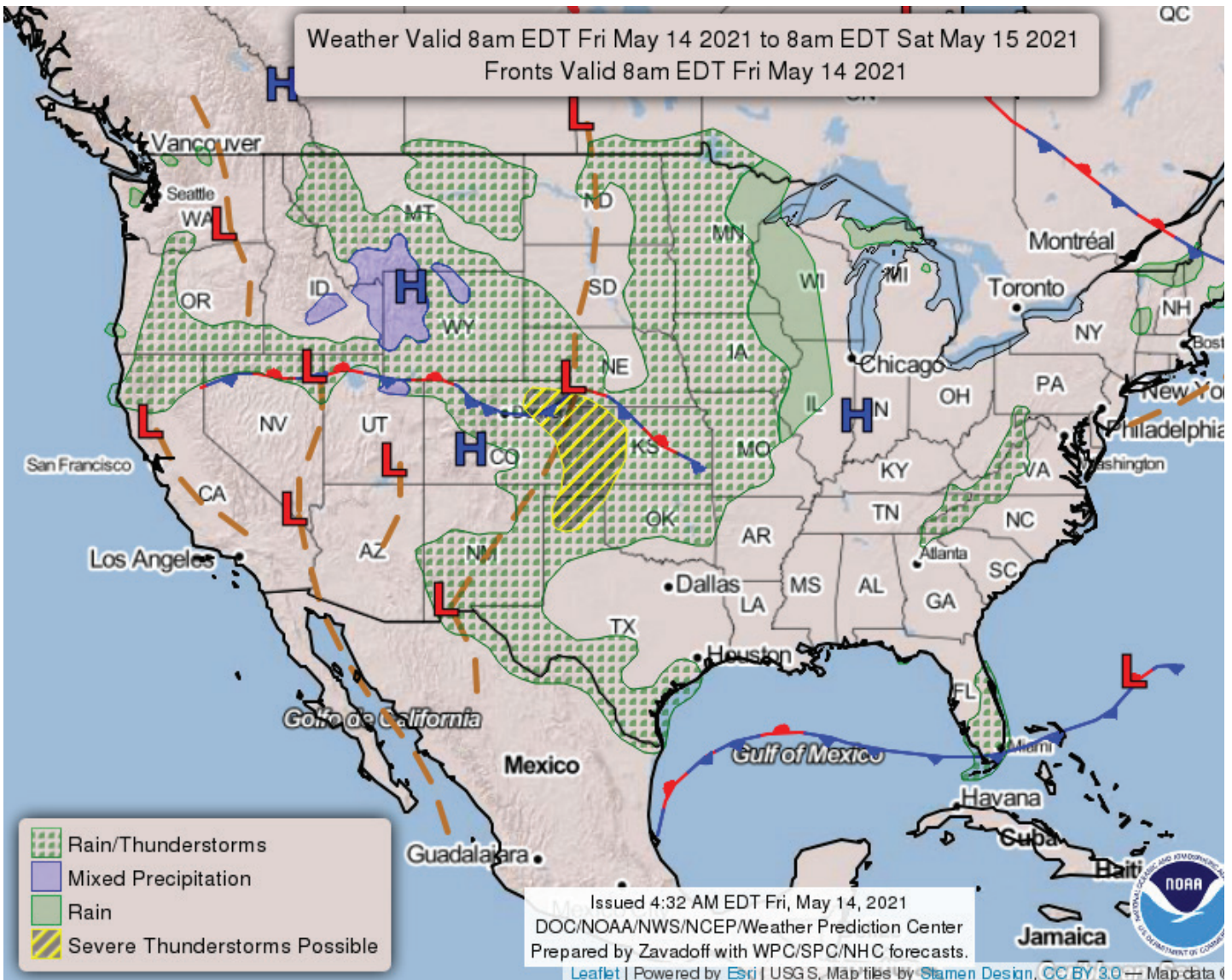
Precip to date in May.: 0.25

Average Precip to date: 5.40

Precip Year to Date: 3.02

Sunset Tonight: 8:57 p.m.

Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:03 a.m.



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NOTHING BUT THE TRUTH!

After a sermon on "Hospitality Evangelism," the Harts were convinced that they should invite their unsaved neighbors to dinner. Their pastor clearly and carefully explained a process to witness God's plan of salvation after the meal.

On the night of the dinner, the host and hostess were both anxious to begin and end the evening with real-life situations and Christian standards that presented "God at work in their household."

After sitting down for dinner, Mr. Hart said to five-year-old Bruce, "Would you please say grace?"

Shy and overcome by the drama of the situation, he said, "I don't know what to say." Naturally, there was an awkward pause while they attempted to recover from this serious setback to their strategy to witness to their neighbors.

"Well, dear," said Mrs. Hart with a forced smile, "just say what Daddy said at breakfast this morning."

Obediently, Bruce folded his hands, bowed his head, and said, "Oh, God, we've got those horrible neighbors coming to dinner tonight."

Truth came straight from Bruce's heart because he was filled with innocence and openness, trust and honesty. Bruce spoke the truth naturally because his heart was pure!

But what about the rest of us? Do we speak the truth no matter the situation or cost?

Truth comes from our hearts when we least expect it. And it comes from what we put into our hearts. David explained it this way: "You desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place." Our God is a God of truth and wants His character to be within us and flow from us. If we fill our hearts with His Word, His truth will flow from us.

Prayer: Father, give us no rest until we fill the smallest space in our hearts with Your Word so we live and speak Your truth each day. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: You desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place. Psalm 51:6

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2021 Community Events

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

News from the Associated Press

Girl injured at Sioux Falls daycare playground has died

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A young child who was injured at a Sioux Falls daycare center earlier this week has died, according to police.

The 3-year-old girl was using playground equipment on Monday afternoon at the daycare facility when a rope became tangled around her neck, according to police spokesman Sam Clemens.

A CaringBridge site identifies the child as Sophia Biver. A post says a CT scan on Wednesday showed there was no recovery possible from her brain injury. She died later that day.

Clemens said police are still investigating.

Unique, exhausting season reaches finale with FCS title game

By HANK KURZ Jr. AP Sports Writer

The longest college football season in history comes to a close this weekend after a grueling, haphazard stretch that saw the Football Championship Subdivision push the majority of its games into the spring for the first time because of the pandemic.

While Bowl Subdivision teams staged a shortened season last fall, the FCS took the unusual step of putting off its games until spring even though some teams had been preparing since last summer. Players and coaches alike say the constant specter of a sudden shutdown for coronavirus protocols made for a mentally exhausting season and one that athletic directors said only slightly mitigated the revenue lost.

But, they add, at least they got to play the games.

South Dakota State and Sam Houston will play for the FCS championship Sunday in Frisco, Texas, capping an abbreviated season marked by high level football and some historic performances, but also dozens of games lost to COVID-19 outbreaks.

The day will also start a countdown that has raised concerns: Many programs will be idle for less than two months before reconvening to prepare for fall football. Coaches have tried to adjust.

South Dakota State played as many as 10 true freshmen, coach John Stiegmeier said, and made concessions on physical contact in practice.

"Our staff decided to really limit the amount of contact we have during practice," he said.

So, too, did Sam Houston, though coach K.C. Keeler said the toll on his players has been far from just physical.

"We came back in June thinking we were going to be playing in September and then, all of a sudden, that was not on the table," Keeler said. "And then we're kind of getting ready for a spring season but now there's a lot of questions: Are we going to get to a spring season? Are there going to be spikes? It's been physically and mentally exhausting going through all those ups and downs from June."

Daily or three-times-a-week testing for the coronavirus provided a constant threat to players hoping they could play and coaches hoping they could field a team. Many programs didn't play at all and those that did became familiar with postponements or cancellations.

For James Madison, ranked No. 1 for most of the season, a period of five weeks toward the end of the regular season resulted in four cancellations because of the virus. A twice-postponed game with Richmond rescheduled for the final day of the regular season allowed the Dukes to qualify for the Colonial Athletic Association's automatic berth in a truncated 16-team playoffs. The Dukes won 23-6 on April 17, the day before the playoff field was set.

The cost of the pandemic won't be known until fiscal years end in June, several athletic directors said, but the Dukes' Jeff Bourne had a dire guess at what the coronavirus has cost his program.

"Suffice it to say, the revenue was down 90%-95%, so that's a tremendous hit," Bourne said. James Madison not only lost a \$600,000 guarantee for a game at North Carolina in the fall, but they were allowed only 250 fans for their first two home games.

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They averaged 3,616 fans for five home dates, nearly 22,000 below capacity.

Joe D'Antonio, commissioner of the CAA, said the cost to the league just for COVID-19 testing during the playoff rounds of the CAA's winter and spring sports was at least \$500,000. Schools had to pay for the mandatory testing during the season.

One bonus for spring football: exposure. With no Power Five games to compete with, the FCS got more time on television, providing "a real showcase for FCS football," Richmond AD John Hardt said.

And it rewarded the players who stuck with it. Hardt recalled attending Richmond's first practice in the spring.

"The joy that I saw behind those masks on players' faces and then in their eyes and coaches, the spring in their step being able to do what they love and they enjoy so much, I think it was a real, real valuable experience," he said.

And a respite from the relentless uncertainty.

"We've been going at it mentally since last March when we all got sent home for COVID when our school got pushed online," SDSU senior linebacker Logan Backhaus said. "Then we ramped it up in the summer when we came back, were doing COVID checks every single day. We were about ready to start fall camp and then our season gets canceled."

With the Jackrabbits one win away from their first national title, they've also heard talk that the championship will carry an asterisk because some leagues and teams opted out of competing altogether.

"We've proven that we can win on the road, we've proven that we can win from behind, so the people that are saying there's an asterisk behind this championship ... they don't know the mental and physical work we've been putting in for over a year now," Backhaus said.

On Sunday, that struggle will have all been worth it for a first-time national champion.

Vaccinations begin for 12- to 15-year-olds in South Dakota

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — U.S. Census data shows there are more than 48,000 young people who are now eligible for the coronavirus vaccine in South Dakota.

The state Department of Health has announced that adolescents between the ages of 12 and 15 can receive the Pfizer vaccine.

The announcement came after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Wednesday authorized the emergency use of the Pfizer vaccine for that age group.

"Given vaccines have proven safe and effective, offering them to this age group is yet another way to protect our citizens and our communities against COVID-19," said Daniel Bucheli, health department spokesman.

Twelve-year-old Drew Pociask, from Sioux Falls, was Sanford Health's first vaccine recipient in that age group and was inoculated Wednesday evening, the Argus Leader reported.

Pociask is the son of Sanford Health's director of operations and said he was excited to get the shot because online classes aren't very fun.

Pociask will start seventh grade at O'Gorman Junior High School next school year, and apart from that was excited to be one step closer to being around his grandparents more.

The Pfizer vaccine requires two doses.

South Dakota health officials say half the state's adult population is fully vaccinated against COVID-19. That's more than 304,000 people.

Afghan police say Kabul mosque bombing kills 12 worshipers

By TAMEEM AKHGAR Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — A bomb ripped through a mosque in northern Kabul during Friday prayers and killed 12 worshipers, Afghan police said.

Spokesman Ferdaws Famararz said the mosque's imam, Mofti Naiman, was among the dead. Another 15 people were wounded.

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The bomb exploded as prayers had begun. No one claimed responsibility for the bombing, but initial police investigations suggest the Imam may have been the target, Faramarz said.

A worshipper at the mosque, Muhibullah Sahebzada, said he had just stepped into the mosque when the explosion went off. Stunned, he heard the sound of screams, including children, as smoke filled the mosque. Sahebzada said he saw several bodies on the mosque floor and at least one child was among the wounded.

It appeared the explosive device had been hidden inside then pulpit at the front of the mosque.

"I was afraid of a second explosion so I came immediately to my home" he said.

An image circulating on social media showed three bodies lying on the floor of the mosque, which showed minor damage.

The explosion comes on the second day of a three-day ceasefire announced by the warring Taliban and Afghan government. The pause was for the Islamic festival Eid-al-Fitr, which follows the fasting month of Ramadan.

Until now many of the attacks in the capital have been claimed by the local Islamic State affiliate, but both the Taliban and government blame each other.

The most recent attack last week killed over 90 people, many of them pupils leaving a girls' school when a powerful car bomb exploded. The Taliban denied involvement and condemned the attack.

The relentless violence comes as the U.S. and allied NATO forces continue with their final withdrawal from Afghanistan after nearly 20 years of war.

Just this week the last of the U.S. troops left southern Kandahar Air Base, while some NATO troops still remained. At the war's peak more than 30,000 U.S. troops were stationed in Kandahar, the Taliban heartland. Kandahar was the second largest U.S. base in Afghanistan after Bagram north of the Afghan capital.

The Latest: Shin Bet chief vows to catch violent Arabs, Jews

The Associated Press undefined

JERUSALEM (AP) — The Latest on the stepped-up fighting between Israel and militant Hamas rulers (all times local):

JERUSALEM — The head of Israel's Shin Bet says the service won't tolerate ethnic violence "by Arabs nor by Jews" after nightly clashes this week in some of the country's cities.

Chief Nadav Argaman said Friday that Shin Bet "will not allow violent lawbreakers to carry out terrorism on the streets of Israel."

He spoke after consecutive nights of apparent revenge attacks by Arab and Jewish mobs in Lod, Jaffa, Haifa and elsewhere inside Israel.

Argaman said Shin Bet is working with Israeli police and Border Patrol in those mixed cities. The effort is aimed at identifying, catching and prosecuting "whoever tries to hurt Israeli citizens, Jews and Arabs, until peace returns to the streets of the country."

BERLIN - Chancellor Angela Merkel's spokesman says Germany won't tolerate anti-Semitic demonstrations amid tensions in the Middle East.

Anti-Israel protests in several cities this week have drawn concern and condemnation, particularly a protest outside a synagogue in Gelsenkirchen. A video showed dozens of protesters waving Palestinian and Turkish flags and yelling expletives about Jews.

Merkel spokesman Steffen Seibert said Friday that "anyone who uses such protests to scream their hatred of Jews is abusing the right to demonstrate." He added that "our democracy will not tolerate anti-Semitic demonstrations."

Seibert said Merkel condemns Hamas' ongoing firing of rockets at Israel and "nothing can justify such terror." He said the rocket attacks must stop immediately.

In neighboring Austria, Chancellor Sebastian Kurz tweeted that the Israeli flag was raised over his office on Friday as a signal of solidarity.

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DHAKA, Bangladesh — Thousands of Muslims led by activists from an Islamic political party have demonstrated in Bangladesh's capital to denounce attacks by Israel against Palestinians.

After the end of Eid al-Fitr prayers at Dhaka's main Baitul Mokarram Mosque Friday, activists from the Islamic Andolan Bangladesh, or Islamic Movement Bangladesh, began protesting and were joined by thousands of others.

Muslim-majority Bangladesh celebrated the key festival in a subdued manner after the government urged people to avoid large gatherings. Authorities arranged prayers in phases at the Baitul Mokarram Mosque, where devotees maintained distancing to avoid spreading the coronavirus.

Afterward, protesters crowded together outside, carrying signs reading "Boycott terrorist state Israel" and chanting "Down with Israel."

The current eruption of violence between Israelis and Palestinians began a month ago in contested Jerusalem. The clash surged on Monday into the most severe outburst of hostilities since the 2014 Gaza war.

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip — Palestinians living along Gaza's northern and eastern borders are fleeing intense Israeli bombardment.

Families toting supplies sought refuge on Friday in temporary shelters in central Gaza City as Israeli artillery pounded northern Gaza in an attempt to destroy a vast network of militant tunnels. The assault brought the front lines closer to dense civilian areas and paved the way for a potential ground invasion.

Fleeing families arrived in pickup trucks, on donkeys and by foot at schools run by the United Nations, hauling pillows and pans, blankets and bread. Men lugged large plastic bags and women carried infants on their shoulders, cramming into classrooms.

One mother who fled to a downtown school with her children said "nothing remains for us" back home in the northern town of Beit Lahiya. Her son, Othman, said he had felt the family's house "shake up and down," adding that "everyone was running."

House GOP set to put Trump defender Stefanik into No. 3 post

By ALAN FRAM and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republicans are ready to vault Rep. Elise Stefanik into the ranks of House leadership, with the party hoping to turn the page from its searing civil war over the deposed Rep. Liz Cheney and refocus on winning control of the chamber in next year's elections.

Stefanik, R-N.Y., a moderate turned avid defender of former President Donald Trump and his unfounded claims of 2020 election fraud, was widely expected to be elected Friday as the No. 3 House GOP leader.

She'd replace Cheney, R-Wyo., who was ousted this week for repeatedly rebuking Trump for encouraging supporters who attacked the Capitol on Jan. 6 and for his lie that his 2020 reelection was stolen from him by fraudulent voting.

Stefanik, 36, gives Republicans a chance to try changing the subject from the acrimonious fight over the defiant Cheney by installing a Trump loyalist — and one of the party's relative handful of women in Congress — in a visible role.

But GOP schisms are unlikely to vanish quickly. Many hard-right conservatives have misgivings about Stefanik's centrist voting record, and tensions remain raw over Trump's taut hold on the party and Cheney's rancorous ouster.

"We are unified at making sure that we win the majority, and that we focus on the damage that the Biden-Pelosi agenda is doing across America," Stefanik told reporters Thursday, amplifying her argument that she'd be an aggressive messenger for her party. She called Trump "the most important leader in our party for voters" and said she was strongly positioned to win.

Stefanik got an early start lining up votes to succeed Cheney, a decisive factor in leadership races. Crucially, she's also backed by Trump and House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., plus two of the House's most influential conservatives: No. 2 House GOP leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana and Rep. Jim

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Jordan, R-Ohio.

One of the House's most conservative members, Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, told reporters he would run against Stefanik. He's a prohibitive long shot, but his candidacy signals to leaders that hard-right Republicans expect a robust voice moving forward.

"Always healthy to have debate," McCarthy said when asked about a potential Stefanik challenger. He spoke a day after he successfully helped dump Cheney from party leadership for refusing to stifle her differences with Trump.

Cheney, a daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney and an ambitious GOP force in her own right, was among 10 House Republicans who voted this year to impeach Trump for inciting the Capitol riot. Since then, she's battled Trump often and many Republicans ultimately turned against her, arguing that the dispute was a damaging distraction.

Even so, Cheney is not going away. She's said she'll remain in Congress, run for reelection and actively work to derail Trump if he seeks a White House return in 2024.

Stefanik has told colleagues she'd serve in the leadership job only through next year, according to a GOP lawmaker and an aide who spoke on condition of anonymity last week to discuss internal conversations. After that, she'd take the top GOP spot on the House Education and Labor Committee, which some consider a more powerful position because it can produce legislation on important issues.

Stefanik is a four-term lawmaker from an upstate New York district that in the past four presidential elections backed both Trump and Barack Obama twice. She was a Trump critic during his 2016 campaign, calling his videotaped comments on sexually assaulting women "just wrong" and at times avoiding stating his name, local news reports said.

Her voting record is among the most moderate of all House Republicans', according to conservative groups' ratings. She opposed Trump's marquee 2017 tax cuts and his efforts to divert budget funds to build a wall along the Mexican border.

She hurtled to GOP prominence — and Trump's attention — by defending him in 2019 during his first impeachment over his efforts to pressure Ukraine to produce political dirt on Joe Biden, a Democratic presidential contender at the time.

She has remained a Trump booster and joined him in casting doubt on the validity of the 2020 election, despite findings by judges and local officials that there was no evidence of widespread fraud. Hours after the Capitol attack, she voted against formally approving Pennsylvania's state-certified electoral votes.

Roy said Thursday on "The Mark Davis Show," a Dallas-based conservative talk show, that Stefanik was too moderate and should be challenged from the right. He also conceded there was a "big likelihood" Stefanik would win.

Trump reiterated his support for Stefanik on Thursday and said in a statement that Roy "has not done a great job" and would likely lose the GOP primary for his seat next year.

Roy ran afoul of Trump in January when he voted to formally certify Trump's Electoral College defeat, saying the Constitution left "no authority for Congress" to overrule states' handling of the election.

Palestinians flee as Israeli artillery pounds northern Gaza

By FARES AKRAM and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Palestinians grabbed their children and belongings and fled neighborhoods on the outskirts of Gaza City on Friday as Israel unleashed a heavy barrage of artillery fire and airstrikes, killing a family of 6 in their home. Israel said it was clearing a network of militant tunnels ahead of a possible ground invasion.

Israel has massed troops along the border and called up 9,000 reservists as fighting intensifies with the Islamic militant group Hamas, which controls the Gaza Strip. Palestinian militants have fired some 1,800 rockets, and the Israeli military has launched more than 600 airstrikes, toppling at least three high-rise apartment buildings, and has shelled some areas with tanks stationed near the frontier.

As Israel and Hamas plunged closer to all-out war despite international efforts at a cease-fire, communal

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violence in Israel erupted for a fourth night. Jewish and Arab mobs clashed in the flashpoint town of Lod, even after Israel dispatched additional security forces.

The Gaza Health Ministry says the toll from the fighting has risen to 119 killed, including 31 children and 19 women, with 830 wounded. The Hamas and Islamic Jihad militant groups have confirmed 20 deaths in their ranks, though Israel says that number is much higher. Seven people have been killed in Israel, including a 6-year-old boy and a soldier.

Palestinians living outside Gaza City, near the northern and eastern frontiers with Israel, fled the intense artillery bombardment Friday. Families arrived at the U.N.-run schools in the city in pick-up trucks, on donkeys and by foot, hauling pillows and pans, blankets and bread.

"We were planning to leave our homes at night, but Israeli jets bombarded us so we had to wait until the morning," said Hedaia Maarouf, who fled with her extended family of 19 people, including 13 children. "We were terrified for our children, who were screaming and shaking."

In the northern Gaza Strip, Rafat Tanani, his pregnant wife and four children, aged 7 and under, were killed after an Israeli warplane reduced their four-story apartment building to rubble, residents said. Four strikes hit the building at 11 p.m., just before the family was going to sleep, Rafat's brother Fadi said. The building's owner and his wife were also killed.

"It was a massacre," said Sadallah Tanani, another relative. "My feelings are indescribable."

Lt. Col. Jonathan Conricus, a military spokesman, said tanks stationed near the border fired 50 rounds. It was part of a large operation that also involved airstrikes and was aimed at destroying tunnels beneath Gaza City used by militants to evade surveillance and airstrikes that the military refers to as "the Metro."

"As always, the aim is to strike military targets and to minimize collateral damage and civilian casualties," he said. "Unlike our very elaborate efforts to clear civilian areas before we strike high-rise or large buildings inside Gaza, that wasn't feasible this time."

The strikes came after Egyptian mediators rushed to Israel for cease-fire talks that showed no signs of progress. Egypt, Qatar and the United Nations were leading the truce efforts.

The fighting broke out late Monday when Hamas fired a long-range rocket at Jerusalem in support of Palestinian protests there against the policing of a flashpoint holy site and efforts by Jewish settlers to evict dozens of Palestinian families from their homes.

Since then, Israel has attacked hundreds of targets in Gaza, causing earth-shaking explosions in densely populated areas. Of the 1,800 rockets Gaza militants have fired, more than 400 fell short or misfired, according to the military.

The rockets have brought life in parts of southern Israel to a standstill, and several barrages have targeted the seaside metropolis of Tel Aviv, some 70 kilometers (45 miles) from Gaza.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu vowed to continue the operation, saying in a video statement that Israel would "extract a very heavy price from Hamas."

In Washington, U.S. President Joe Biden said he spoke with Netanyahu about calming the fighting but also backed the Israeli leader by saying "there has not been a significant overreaction."

He said the goal now is to "get to a point where there is a significant reduction in attacks, particularly rocket attacks." He called the effort "a work in progress."

Israel has come under heavy international criticism for civilian casualties during three previous wars in Gaza, which is home to more than 2 million Palestinians. It says Hamas is responsible for endangering civilians by placing military infrastructure in civilian areas and launching rockets from them.

Hamas showed no signs of backing down. It fired its most powerful rocket, the Ayyash, nearly 200 kilometers (120 miles) into southern Israel on Thursday. The rocket landed in the open desert but briefly disrupted flight traffic at the southern Ramon airport. Hamas has also launched two drones that Israel said it quickly shot down.

Hamas military spokesman Abu Obeida said the group was not afraid of a ground invasion, which would be a chance "to increase our catch" of Israeli soldiers.

The current eruption of violence began a month ago in Jerusalem. A focal point of clashes was Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, on a hilltop compound revered by Jews and Muslims. Israel regards all of Jerusalem

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as its capital, while the Palestinians want east Jerusalem, which includes sites sacred to Jews, Christians and Muslims, to be the capital of their future state.

The violent clashes between Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem and other mixed cities across Israel has added a new layer of volatility to the conflict not seen in more than two decades.

The violence continued overnight into Friday. A Jewish man was shot and seriously wounded in Lod, the epicenter of the troubles, and Israeli media said a second Jewish man was shot. In the Tel Aviv neighborhood of Jaffa, an Israeli soldier was attacked by a group of Arabs and hospitalized in serious condition.

Police spokesman Micky Rosenfeld said some 750 suspects have been arrested since the communal violence began earlier this week. He said police had clashed overnight with individuals in Lod and Tel Aviv who hurled rocks and firebombs at them.

The fighting deepened a political crisis that has sent Israel careening through four inconclusive elections in just two years. After March elections, Netanyahu failed to form a government coalition. Now his political rivals have three weeks to try to do so.

Those efforts have been greatly complicated by the fighting. His opponents include a broad range of parties that have little in common. They would need the support of an Arab party, whose leader has said he cannot negotiate while Israel is fighting in Gaza.

What insurrection? Growing number in GOP downplay Jan. 6

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — What insurrection?

Flouting all evidence and their own first-hand experience, a small but growing number of Republican lawmakers are propagating a false portrayal of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, brazenly arguing that the rioters who used flagpoles as weapons, brutally beat police officers and chanted that they wanted to hang Vice President Mike Pence were somehow acting peacefully in their violent bid to overturn Joe Biden's election.

One Republican at a hearing Wednesday called the rioters a "mob of misfits." Another compared them to tourists. And a third suggested the sweeping federal investigation into the riot — which has yielded more than 400 arrests and counting — amounts to a national campaign of harassment.

It's a turn of events that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, another target of the rioters, called "appalling" and "sick," and it raises the possibility that the public's understanding of the worst domestic attack on Congress in 200 years — an attack that was captured extensively on video — could become distorted by the same kinds of disinformation that fueled former President Donald Trump's false claims of a stolen election. It was the lie about the election that motivated the rioters in the first place.

"I don't know of a normal day around here when people are threatening to hang the vice president of the United States or shoot the speaker, or injure so many police officers," said Pelosi, who has pushed for a bipartisan commission to investigate the riots.

The hearing Wednesday was supposed to be the latest dive by congressional investigators into the chaos of Jan. 6 — the missed warning signs, confusion and delays that allowed the rioters to terrorize the Capitol for an entire afternoon. But several Republicans used their rounds of questioning not to pepper the witnesses with questions but to downplay the brutal assault on America's seat of democracy.

"Let's be honest with the American people — it was not an insurrection, and we cannot call it that and be truthful," said Rep. Andrew Clyde, a Republican from Georgia serving his first term.

Clyde said one video feed of the rioters looked like they were on a "normal tourist visit." Those in the video, taken in Statuary Hall, were able to enter the building after rioters broke through glass, pummeled officers and busted through the doors as lawmakers were frantically evacuated. They were headed to the House chamber where they tried to beat down the doors with lawmakers still inside.

Clyde wasn't the only Republican making that argument. Arizona Rep. Paul Gosar portrayed a woman who was shot and killed by Capitol Police as she tried to break through a door next to the House chamber as a martyr. He said Ashli Babbitt was "executed" and noted she was an Air Force veteran who was wear-

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ing an American flag. The Department of Justice decided after an investigation not to charge the police officer who shot her.

The Justice Department, Gosar said, is "harassing peaceful patriots across the country" as federal prosecutors file charges against hundreds of people who stormed the Capitol and participated in the riot. The massive investigation, one of the largest in American history, remains ongoing with federal agents continuing to serve search warrants and attempting to locate dozens of other people still being sought for questioning.

Georgia Rep. Jody Hice also painted the rioters as the victims, noting that they were four of the people who died, including Babbitt. The other three suffered medical emergencies while part of the crowd laying siege to the Capitol. "It was Trump supporters who lost their lives that day, not Trump supporters who were taking the lives of others," Hice said.

A fifth person, Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, collapsed immediately after the insurrection and died the next day. Video shows two men spraying him and another officer with a chemical, but the Washington medical examiner said Sicknick suffered a stroke and died from natural causes. The men have been charged with assaulting the officers.

Two other officers took their own lives in the days afterward, and dozens more were hurt — including one officer who had a heart attack and others who suffered traumatic brain injuries and permanent disabilities. The union that represents the Capitol Police said some of the officers may never return to work.

The attempt to defend the insurrectionists came on the same day that House Republicans voted to oust Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney from their leadership team for repeatedly rebuking Trump for his false claims that the election was stolen. Cheney voted with Democrats to impeach Trump for telling his supporters hours before the Jan. 6 attack to "fight like hell" to overturn Biden's win. Trump's lies about widespread election fraud were rebuked by numerous courts, election officials across the country and his own attorney general.

Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin, who led the Democrats' impeachment prosecution and sits on the Oversight Committee, said after the hearing that he believes that Republicans were "emboldened and emancipated" by Cheney's ouster earlier in the day.

"They have declared themselves to be on the side of Donald Trump and the 'big lie,' and the 'big lie' now has spread outwards to include denial of what happened on Jan. 6," Raskin said.

Timothy Naftali, a professor of history and public service at New York University, says it is "deeply cynical" to set aside the insurrection as if it didn't happen. He compares it to political elites in Southern states after the Civil War who failed to examine its causes, which he says prevented racial reconciliation and healing and still affects the country to this day.

"Political amnesia never helps," Naftali said. "It's a source of poison."

Given the extensive record of the attack, captured in video and photos seen the world over, defending the insurrectionists required some creative omissions. One point Clyde emphasized was that the rioters never made it to the House floor — even though they tried, only to be held back by police officers with guns drawn. Some lawmakers were taking cover in the gallery of the chamber as they tried to beat down the doors.

"I can tell you the House floor was never breached and it was not an insurrection," Clyde said. "This is the truth."

The mob did break into the Senate minutes after senators had evacuated, some carrying zip ties and tactical equipment. They rifled through desks and hunted for lawmakers, yelling "where are they?" They walked into Pelosi's office, stealing a laptop and calling out her name while some of her staff huddled quietly under furniture.

Other Republicans — some quietly, some publicly — have made clear they don't agree with their colleagues.

"I was there," said Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, who was caught in security video being diverted away from the rioters by a police officer. "What happened was a violent effort to interfere with and prevent the constitutional order of installing a new president. And as such, it was an insurrection against the Constitution. It resulted in severe property damage, severe injuries and death."

Illinois Rep. Mike Quigley, another Democratic member of the Oversight panel, says the Republican denials are wishful thinking that reverberates with their most partisan voters.

"These folks passionately want what they want to be true," Quigley said after the hearing. "So it's no longer I'll believe it when I see it. It's I'll see it when I believe it."

UK jubilant as lockdown restrictions to be lifted next week

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — When London's Science Museum reopens next week, it will have some new artifacts: empty vaccine vials, testing kits and other items collected during the pandemic, to be featured in a new COVID-19 display.

Britain isn't quite ready to consign the coronavirus to a museum — the outbreak is far from over here. But there is a definite feeling that the U.K. has turned a corner, and the mood in the country is jubilant. "The end is in sight," one newspaper front page claimed recently. "Free at last!" read another.

Thanks to an efficient vaccine rollout program, Britain is finally saying goodbye to months of tough lockdown restrictions.

Starting Monday, all restaurants and bars in England can reopen with some precautions in place, as can hotels, theaters and museums. And Britons will be able to hug friends and family again, with the easing of social distancing rules that have been in place since the pandemic began.

It's the biggest step yet to reopen the country following an easing of the crisis blamed for nearly 128,000 deaths, the highest reported COVID-19 toll in Europe.

Deaths in Britain have come down to single digits in recent days. It's a far cry from January, when up to 1,477 deaths a day were recorded amid a brutal second wave driven by a more infectious variant first found in Kent, in southeastern England.

New cases have plummeted to an average of around 2,000 a day, compared with nearly 70,000 a day during the winter.

There are some worries on the horizon. British authorities have voiced anxiety about a rise in cases of a coronavirus variant first identified in India, after a closely monitored study of infections in England found it becoming more prevalent.

Ministers are poised to order further action, including door-to-door testing in the worst-affected areas. One response being considered is bringing forward the date for a second dose of vaccine for eligible groups to increase protection. For now, the jabs are offered largely based on age, with vaccines now available to those ages 38 and 39.

British health officials have raced to get ahead of the virus by vaccinating hundreds of thousands of people a day at hospitals, soccer pitches, churches and a racecourse. As of this week, almost 38 million people — approximately 68% of the adult population — have received their first dose. Almost 19 million have had both doses.

It's an impressive feat, and many credit Britain's universal public health system for much of the success.

Experts say the National Health Service, one of the country's most revered institutions, is able to target the whole population and easily identify those most at risk because almost everyone is registered with a local general practitioner.

That infrastructure, combined with the government's early start in securing vaccine doses, was key. British authorities began ordering millions of doses from multiple manufacturers late last spring, striking deals months ahead of the European Union and securing more than enough vaccine to inoculate the entire population.

"I don't think it's surprising that the two countries in the world with probably the strongest primary care systems, which are us and Israel, are doing the best with vaccine rollout," said Beccy Baird, a policy researcher at the King's Fund, a charity for improving health care.

"We have the medical records. We can understand where our patients are. We're not trying to negoti-

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ate with loads of different insurance companies. ... It's the same standard right through the country," she added. "Whereas in the States, it's going to be harder to really think about how do you reach underserved communities, how do you get out there and provide the same access to everybody to this vaccine?"

David Salisbury, a former director of the government's immunization program and a fellow at London's Chatham House think tank, added that Britain also has the edge because of its track record in successfully rolling out other vaccines, such as the seasonal flu shot.

Many around the world were skeptical about Britain's decision to delay the second dose by up to 12 weeks to free up vaccine for more people, but that strategy also paid huge dividends. The two shots of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines were intended to be given three and four weeks apart.

Anthony Harnden, an Oxford academic and a top government vaccination adviser, said "there were lots of questions asked" and "we were up against many countries" who disagreed with spacing out the two doses, but officials stuck to the plan.

"You have to remember, looking back at that time, there were a thousand or more people dying every day in the U.K. So there was a huge imperative to get our vulnerable people vaccinated," he said. "It was an innovative strategy, a bold strategy, but it was based on our experience of previous vaccines."

The vaccine program's success has been a much-needed boost for Britain.

Many of those who accuse the government of poorly managing the outbreak last year say the U.K. is finally doing something right.

"We didn't hand (the vaccine rollout) over to an outsourcing company. That would have been a major failure. And we also didn't delay the way we did in the first wave. We moved quickly," said Martin McKee, professor of European public health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. "So it was almost like the mirror image of the mistakes we made in the first wave."

Still, McKee said he is worried that too many people may throw caution to the wind too soon.

Young people, who run a much lower risk of serious illness but can still spread the virus, are not included in the vaccination program. Official figures also show significant gaps in vaccine uptake among minorities and poor people.

McKee and many others are also concerned about the variants of the virus that are turning up. That risk is especially worrying as the U.K. slowly reopens to foreign tourists this summer.

"We've seen very discouraging evidence from Chile and from the Seychelles, both of which have high proportions of people who have been vaccinated and where many restrictions were lifted, and they've had upsurges," McKee said.

Harnden is more optimistic. If the U.K. can roll out a booster vaccine program later this year and if people remain cautious, he said, "we can get ourselves out of this" and get close to normal by the summer of 2022.

"We're not completely out of this yet," he said, "but we're in a much, much better place than in the last few months."

Greece joins Mediterranean race to win back tourists

By DEREK GATOPOULOS and THANASSIS STAVRAKIS Associated Press

NAXOS, Greece (AP) — In her kitchen, Kyriaki Kapri has enough food to feed an army. Piles of squid for frying, lemons to be quartered, thumb-thick potato wedges to make oregano-sprinkled French fries, and seafood for the dishes famous on the Greek island of Naxos.

She's done everything she can think of to prepare for tourists at her Naxos beachside restaurant Gorgona — Greek for Mermaid — but customers are still a rare sight.

Greece launched its tourism season Friday amid a competitive scramble across the Mediterranean to lure vacationers emerging from lockdowns.

"We're all vaccinated, the tables are outside and spread out, with hand sanitizers on each one. We're ready. Now we wait," Kapri said, standing beside large display cabinets with fresh fish on beds of crushed ice. During a six-month lockdown, Gorgona closed for the first time in its 50-year history.

The European Union has yet to roll out its cellphone-friendly travel pass system. But southern member-

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states, driven deeper into debt by the pandemic and highly dependent on tourism revenues, are not waiting.

Croatia has already reopened, as has Cyprus, joined Friday by Greece where residents were allowed to leave home without an electronic permit for the first time in six months.

Last year, the number of visitors to Greece plummeted by 78.2% to 7.4 million — from a record 34 million in 2019 — according to official data, with a corresponding drop in tourism revenues.

Greece is hoping to claw back half the 2019 visitor level. It's vowed to finish vaccinating its entire island population over the next six weeks and will even waive test requirements for tourists who have received vaccines made in Russia and China that are not approved for use domestically.

Other Mediterranean countries are also looking for an edge.

Malta is promising visitors vouchers to go diving and cash rebates to high-end hotel customers.

In Turkey, visitors from abroad have been exempt from stay-at-home orders applying to Turks, thus enjoying an empty Istanbul, and little-populated beach resorts. Starting Monday, travelers from China, Britain, Australia, and 13 other countries will be allowed in without even having to present a negative COVID-19 test.

Portugal is the only southern European country to so far make Britain's so-called Green List of quarantine-free destinations. Travelers in the UK pounced on the news, according to Emma Coulthurst from holiday price comparison site TravelSupermarket.

"Week-on-week, if you compare all package holiday price comparison searches via TravelSupermarket, the site has seen an 865% increase in searches for package holidays to Portugal," Coulthurst said.

In neighboring Spain, Trade and Tourism Minister Reyes Maroto said her government was in "constant" consultations with Britain to try to have its travel status upgraded. Some 18 million U.K. holidaymakers traveled to Spain in 2019.

Italy is expected to drop a five-day quarantine requirement for travelers from the EU, Britain and Israel this weekend, but many in the hospitality industry are still bracing for another tough year.

"I think (tourism) is going to increase but very slowly. For this year we have to accept whatever comes," said Elisabetta Menardi, manager of the Ca' Foscolo apartment hotel in Venice.

Just a short walk from the famed Rialto bridge, the hotel is usually fully booked year-round but is currently running at 20% occupancy.

"Normally in January we already get a lot of reservations for the summer. That has stopped. So we don't know what's coming now," Menardi said. "People make reservations, then they cancel. It's kind of a dance." ___ Gatopoulos reported from Athens, Greece. AP staff from across southern Europe contributed.

Beset by virus, Gaza's hospitals now struggle with wounded

By ISABEL DEBRE and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Just weeks ago, the Gaza Strip's feeble health system was struggling with a runaway surge of coronavirus cases. Authorities cleared out hospital operating rooms, suspended nonessential care and redeployed doctors to patients having difficulty breathing.

Then, the bombs began to fall.

This week's violence between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers has killed 119 Palestinians, including 31 children, and wounded 830 people in the impoverished territory. Israeli airstrikes have pounded apartments, blown up cars and toppled buildings.

Doctors across the crowded coastal enclave are now reallocating intensive care unit beds and scrambling to keep up with a very different health crisis: treating blast and shrapnel wounds, bandaging cuts and performing amputations.

Distraught relatives didn't wait for ambulances, rushing the wounded by car or on foot to Shifa Hospital, the territory's largest. Exhausted doctors hurried from patient to patient, frantically bandaging shrapnel wounds to stop the bleeding. Others gathered at the hospital morgue, waiting with stretchers to remove the bodies for burial.

At the Indonesia Hospital in the northern town of Jabaliya, the clinic overflowed after bombs fell nearby.

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Blood was everywhere, with victims lying on the floors of hallways. Relatives crowded the ER, crying out for loved ones and cursing Israel.

"Before the military attacks, we had major shortages and could barely manage with the second (virus) wave," said Gaza Health Ministry official Abdelatif al-Hajj by phone as bombs thundered in the background. "Now casualties are coming from all directions, really critical casualties. I fear a total collapse."

Gutted by years of conflict, the impoverished health care system in the territory of more than 2 million people has always been vulnerable. Bitter division between Hamas and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority and a nearly 14-year blockade imposed by Israel with Egypt's help also has strangled the infrastructure. There are shortages of equipment and supplies such as blood bags, surgical lamps, anesthesia and antibiotics. Personal protection gear, breathing machines and oxygen tanks remain even scarcer.

Last month, Gaza's daily coronavirus cases and deaths hit record highs, fueled by the spread of a variant that first appeared in Britain, relaxation of movement restrictions during Ramadan, and deepening public apathy and intransigence.

In the bomb-scarred territory where the unemployment rate is 50%, the need for personal survival often trumps the pleas of public health experts. While virus testing remains limited, the outbreak has infected more than 105,700 people, according to health authorities, and killed 976.

As cases climbed last year, stirring fears of a health care catastrophe, authorities set aside clinics just for COVID-19 patients. But that changed as airstrikes pummeled the territory.

Nurses at the European Hospital in the town of Khan Younis, frantically needing room for the wounded, moved dozens of virus patients in the middle of the night to a different building, said hospital director Yousef al-Akkad. Its surgeons and specialists, who had deployed elsewhere for the virus, rushed back to treat head injuries, fractures and abdominal wounds.

If the conflict intensifies, the hospital won't be able to care for the virus patients, al-Akkad said.

"We have only 15 intensive care beds, and all I can do is pray," he said, adding that because the hospital lacks surgical supplies and expertise, he's already arranged to send one child to Egypt for reconstructive shoulder surgery. "I pray these airstrikes will stop soon."

At Shifa, authorities also moved the wounded into its 30 beds that had been set aside for virus patients. Thursday night was the quietest this week for the ICU, as bombs had largely fallen elsewhere in Gaza. Patients with broken bones and other wounds lay amid the din of beeping monitors, intercoms and occasional shouts by doctors. A few relatives huddled around them, recounting the chaotic barrage.

"About 12 people down in one airstrike. It was 6 p.m. in the street. Some were killed, including my two cousins and young sister. It's like this every day," said 22-year-old Atallah al-Masri, sitting beside his wounded brother, Ghassan.

Hospital director Mohammed Abu Selmia lamented the latest series of blows to Gaza's health system.

"The Gaza Strip is under siege for 14 years, and the health sector is exhausted. Then comes the coronavirus pandemic," he said, adding that most of the equipment is as old as the blockade and can't be sent out for repairs.

Now, his teams already strained by virus cases are treating bombing victims, more than half of whom are critical cases needing surgery.

"They work relentlessly," he added

To make matters worse, Israeli airstrikes hit two health clinics north of Gaza City on Tuesday. The strikes wreaked havoc on Hala al-Shawa Health Center, forcing employees to evacuate, and damaged the Indonesian Hospital, according to the World Health Organization. Israel, already under pressure from an International Criminal court investigation into possible war crimes during the 2014 war, reiterated this week that it warns people living in targeted areas to flee. The airstrikes nonetheless have killed civilians and inflicted damage on Gaza's infrastructure.

The violence also has closed a few dozen health centers conducting coronavirus tests, said Sacha Bootsma, director of WHO's Gaza office. This week, authorities conducted some 300 tests a day, compared with 3,000 before the fighting began.

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The U.N. Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, ordered staff to stay home from its 22 clinics for their safety. Those now-closed centers had also administered coronavirus vaccines, a precious resource in a place that waited months to receive a limited shipment from the U.N.-backed COVAX program. Those doses will expire in just a few weeks and get thrown away, with "huge implications for authorities' ability to mobilize additional vaccines in the future," Bootsma said.

For the newly wounded, however, the virus remains an afterthought.

The last thing that Mohammad Nassar remembers before an airstrike hit was walking home with a friend on a street. When he came to, he said, "we found ourselves lying on the ground."

Now the 31-year-old is hooked up to a tangle of tubes and monitors in the Shifa Hospital surgical ward, with a broken right arm and a shrapnel wound in his stomach.

Radical rabbi's followers rise in Israel amid new violence

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — In the 1980s, Rabbi Meir Kahane's violent anti-Arab ideology was considered so repugnant that Israel banned him from parliament and the U.S. listed his party as a terrorist group.

Today, his disciples march through the streets by the hundreds, chanting "Death to Arabs" and assaulting any they come across. This week, they took part in a wave of communal violence in Jerusalem and mixed cities across Israel in which Arabs and Jews viciously attacked people and torched cars.

On Thursday evening, there was more ethnic strife. In Tel Aviv, two Jewish men attacked a journalist covering a gathering of ultranationalists. In the central Israeli city of Lod, a Jewish man was shot and seriously wounded by an Arab man. In Jaffa, an Israeli soldier was attacked by a group of Arabs and was hospitalized in serious condition.

Israelis shocked by the violence have cast the right-wing extremism as a nasty aberration or a reaction to Palestinian violence. But to Arab citizens, who make up 20% of Israel's population, the heirs of Kahane are a natural outgrowth of a discriminatory system — normalized by some mainstream leaders who largely share their views.

Admirers of Kahane were elected to parliament in March as allies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, and one of the most prominent has become a fixture on Israeli TV.

Their resurgence has injected another element of volatility to the conflict. It's also part of a broader shift to the right in Israel, where Kahane's disciples are hardly alone in adopting a hard line toward the Palestinians and trafficking in anti-Arab rhetoric.

Right-wing parties that support Jewish settlements and oppose Palestinian independence won a large majority of seats in March, and Netanyahu and other right-wing leaders have often cast Israel's Arab minority as a fifth column — unless they needed their votes.

During his lone term in parliament in the mid-1980s, before he was banned, Kahane was shunned by colleagues, including the Likud, and frequently gave speeches to an empty chamber. His racist agenda called for banning intermarriage between Arabs and Jews, stripping Arabs of their Israeli citizenship, and the mass expulsions of Palestinians. At one point, he was suspended for waving a noose at an Arab lawmaker.

Kahane was banned from running in 1988, and two years later, he was assassinated by an Egyptian-American in New York. But his hate-filled ideology has remained influential in Israel.

In 1994, Kahane follower Baruch Goldstein opened fire in a holy site in the occupied West Bank city of Hebron, killing 29 Muslim worshippers and wounding over 100. That led both Israel and the U.S. to label his Kach movement and an offshoot, Kahane Lives, as terrorist groups.

In March, another admirer of the late rabbi, who for years had hung a picture of Goldstein on his living room wall, was elected to Israel's parliament.

Itamar Ben-Gvir joined the Knesset as part of Religious Zionism, a bloc of far-right parties that came together at Netanyahu's prodding so none would fall below the electoral threshold.

Since then, Ben-Gvir has made frequent media appearances, displaying a cheerful demeanor and a knack for deflecting criticism as he banters with TV and radio hosts.

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It's working: Ifat, a research firm, says Ben-Gvir is the third most interviewed politician on Israeli TV and radio, behind Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett, another right-wing politician.

"He's a good speaker and he knows how to play the game," said Shuki Friedman, an expert on Israel's far right at the Israel Democracy Institute. "On one hand, he is addressing his supporters. ... On the other hand, he knows not to make mainstream Israelis too angry."

He has staged provocative visits to Arab areas and been a near-constant presence on the sidelines of recent clashes, rallying ultranationalist supporters to confront Palestinians and assert "Jewish Power" — the name of his party.

Last week, he set up an outdoor parliamentary "office" in an Arab neighborhood of east Jerusalem where Jewish settlers are trying to expel Palestinians from their homes, setting off a melee. He later called for police to use live fire against Palestinian protesters at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a site sacred to Jews and Muslims.

A long-range Hamas rocket, fired at Jerusalem on Monday, disrupted the Jerusalem Day parade, which celebrates Israel's annexation of east Jerusalem.

The mob violence erupted the next day. A Telegram channel displaying the Kahanist emblem — a yellow fist inside a black Star of David — swelled from a few hundred members to more than 6,000.

It was used to organize a crowd in the Tel Aviv suburb of Bat Yam on Wednesday that pulled an Arab from his car and beat him severely. The attack horrified Israelis and was widely condemned, including by far-right politicians. Israeli media reported the country's police chief blamed Ben-Gvir for inciting a Jewish "intifada," the Arabic term used to refer to two Palestinian uprisings.

As a lawyer with a long history of defending Jewish extremists accused of attacking Arabs, Ben-Gvir has been careful not to run afoul of laws against incitement. He calls Kahane "righteous and holy," but has tried to distance himself by saying he doesn't agree with everything the rabbi said.

Ben-Gvir first became a national figure when he famously broke a hood ornament off then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's car in 1995.

"We got to his car, and we'll get to him too," he said, just weeks before Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist opposed to his peace efforts with the Palestinians.

Israel has shifted even more to the right since then, driven by the failure of peace efforts, repeated rounds of violence and demographic shifts. Ben-Gvir's supporters are largely religious and ultra-Orthodox Jews, who tend to have large families.

Netanyahu hoped to tap into that by assembling a far-right bloc with Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, another ultranationalist. Ironically, they foiled Netanyahu's plan by blocking his outreach to a small Arab party needed to secure a parliamentary majority.

Dan Meridor, a former justice minister and Likud heavyweight who helped lead efforts to ban Kahane from parliament in 1988, believes Netanyahu made a grave error in rehabilitating his followers.

"You can just see the dramatic and very harmful change the Likud went through when they legitimized the Kahanists," he said. "It changed very tragically to me."

Palestinian citizens of Israel, on the other hand, view Ben-Gvir as the latest in a long line of Israeli politicians — including Netanyahu — who have treated them as second-class citizens, if not enemies of the state. It's one of many grievances they point to in explaining the recent protests and clashes with police.

Diana Buttu, a lawyer and analyst who is a Palestinian citizen of Israel, says it's easy for Israelis to dismiss the Kahanists as a fringe group.

"But if you step back and look at this country through the eyes of a Palestinian, you see that at every single political level, in every single political party, there's been some form of anti-Palestinian racism."

Conservatives seize on gas crunch to blame Biden, stir base

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

A graphic calling the East Coast fuel supply crunch "Biden's Gas Crisis." A tweet speculating that gas stations running dry was an "INSIDE JOB." A meme depicting the president and vice president cheering

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about the "Green New Deal" in front of a snaking line at a fuel station.

These and thousands of other social media posts along with conservative websites and commentators this week misleadingly painted President Joe Biden and his administration as catalysts of chaos — who not only mishandled the temporary shutdown of the nation's largest fuel pipeline on Friday — but engineered it.

In reality, a ransom-seeking cyberattack, not a Biden executive order or energy policy, triggered the shutdown that drove residents of states such as North Carolina to panic-buy so much gas that nearly 70% of service stations in the state remained without fuel on Thursday afternoon.

Biden spoke about the hack Thursday as he sought to assuage fears around the supply crunch, reassuring the public that his administration had helped get the Colonial Pipeline back online Wednesday and that remaining outages at gas stations were a "temporary situation" that panic-buying would only exacerbate.

Still, some of the most widely shared tweets discussing the gas crunch between Friday and Wednesday lobbed criticism toward the president, according to the media intelligence firm Signal Labs. Posts surfaced by Signal blamed the president for the outages, criticized his response and condemned him for canceling plans for the Keystone XL oil pipeline — though that project, which would have built a crude oil pipeline, would have had no impact on the current situation.

Misleading narratives targeting Biden began picking up speed on Monday, the day North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper became the first of several governors to declare a state of emergency over the disruption.

"Wouldn't it be weird if the CYBER-ATTACK that shutdown the United States' top fuel line was an INSIDE JOB to pretend Joe Biden isn't responsible for the insane increase in gas price.." read a widely shared tweet by former Florida congressional candidate Chuck Callesto.

"People can't complain about gas prices if there's no gas to buy," read the caption of an image depicting a sinister Biden with his fingers interlaced, retweeted by U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert, a Republican from Colorado.

Other posts claimed the long gas lines across the Southeast U.S. were a harbinger of America's future under Democrats, casting Biden as a socialist in a strategy that Republicans have frequently turned to in recent years.

"Gas shortages now, food shortages tomorrow?" tweeted Fox Nation host Tomi Lahren. "Wow ... starting to feel like socialism is on the way...."

In another narrative, posts equated Biden to former President Jimmy Carter who saw his presidency crumble as a result of the 1979 fuel shortage. A statement from former President Donald Trump on Wednesday, amplified by conservative websites including Breitbart News, branded a laundry list of national and global challenges as Biden's fault.

"Jimmy mishandled crisis after crisis, but Biden has CREATED crisis after crisis," Trump wrote. "First there was the Biden Border Crisis (that he refuses to call a Crisis), then the Biden Economic Crisis, then the Biden Israel Crisis, and now the Biden Gas Crisis."

Fox News Channel's Sean Hannity on Tuesday first broadcast the graphic of Biden smiling with the words "Biden's Gas Crisis," a term that later gained momentum on Facebook and Twitter.

Recent world events have challenged the Biden administration in its economic goals. Over the past week, it has faced a disappointing monthly jobs report, worrisome signs of inflation and escalating violence in Israel and the Gaza Strip with deaths that could foreshadow a war in the Middle East.

All the while, Biden is still attempting to vaccinate the nation against the coronavirus, distribute hundreds of billions of dollars in economic aid and negotiate his own infrastructure and families plans that total a combined \$4 trillion.

Higher energy prices often have political fallout, complicating reelection campaigns for incumbents outside oil-producing regions.

With gas prices already rising as COVID-19 restrictions loosen and Americans travel more, the pipeline's shutdown has created an even worse public relations problem for Biden. Fuel hoarding and lines at the pump have made it difficult to gain control of the narrative.

The Biden administration's message that the problem was a supply crunch rather than a gas shortage,

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while accurate, didn't satisfy Americans who couldn't find gas to fill their cars, according to Doug Heye, a Republican strategist based in Washington.

"You have Republican division over the House Republican Conference and you had a hearing yesterday where people were basically denying what happened on Jan. 6," Heye said. "If you want to push a conservative message, the Biden administration just did you a favor."

Misinformation surges amid India's COVID-19 calamity

By DAVID KLEPPER and NEHA MEHROTRA Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — The man in the WhatsApp video says he has seen it work himself: A few drops of lemon juice in the nose will cure COVID-19.

"If you practice what I am about to say with faith, you will be free of corona in five seconds," says the man, dressed in traditional religious clothing. "This one lemon will protect you from the virus like a vaccine."

False cures. Terrifying stories of vaccine side effects. Baseless claims that Muslims spread the virus. Fueled by anguish, desperation and distrust of the government, rumors and hoaxes are spreading by word of mouth and on social media in India, compounding the country's humanitarian crisis.

"Widespread panic has led to a plethora of misinformation," said Rahul Namboori, co-founder of Fact Crescendo, an independent fact-checking organization in India.

While treatments such as lemon juice may sound innocuous, such claims can have deadly consequences if they lead people to skip vaccinations or ignore other guidelines.

In January, Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared that India had "saved humanity from a big disaster by containing corona effectively." Life began to resume, and so did attendance at cricket matches, religious pilgrimages and political rallies for Modi's Hindu nationalist party.

Four months later, cases and deaths have exploded, the country's vaccine rollout has faltered and public anger and mistrust have grown.

"All of the propaganda, misinformation and conspiracy theories that I've seen in the past few weeks has been very, very political," said Sumitra Badrinathan, a University of Pennsylvania political scientist who studies misinformation in India. "Some people are using it to criticize the government, while others are using it to support it."

Distrust of Western vaccines and health care is also driving misinformation about sham treatments as well as claims about traditional remedies.

Satyanarayan Prasad saw the video about lemon juice and believed it. The 51-year-old resident of the state of Uttar Pradesh distrusts modern medicine and has a theory as to why his country's health experts are urging vaccines.

"If the government approves lemon drops as a remedy, the ... rupees that they have spent on vaccines will be wasted," Prasad said.

Vijay Sankeshwar, a prominent businessman and former politician, repeated the claim about lemon juice, saying two drops in the nostrils will increase oxygen levels in the body.

While Vitamin C is essential to human health and immunity, there is no evidence that consuming lemons will fight off the coronavirus.

The claim is spreading through the Indian diaspora, too.

"They have this thing that if you drink lemon water every day that you're not going to be affected by the virus," said Emma Sachdev, a Clinton, New Jersey, resident whose extended family lives in India.

Sachdev said several relatives have been infected, yet continue to flout social distancing rules, thinking a visit to the temple will keep them safe.

India has also experienced the same types of misinformation about vaccines and vaccine side effects seen around the world.

Last month, the popular Tamil actor Vivek died two days after receiving his COVID-19 vaccination. The hospital where he died said Vivek had advanced heart disease, but his death has been seized on by vaccine opponents as evidence that the government is hiding side effects.

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Much of the misinformation travels on WhatsApp, which has more than 400 million users in India. Unlike more open sites like Facebook or Twitter, WhatsApp — which is owned by Facebook — is an encrypted platform that allows users to exchange messages privately.

The bad information online “may have come from an unsuspecting neighbor who is not trying to cause harm,” said Badrinathan, the University of Pennsylvania researcher. “New internet users may not even realize that the information is false. The whole concept of misinformation is new to them.”

Hoaxes spread online had deadly results in 2018, when at least 20 people were killed by mobs inflamed by posts about supposed gangs of child kidnappers.

WhatsApp said in a statement that it works hard to limit misleading or dangerous content by working with public health bodies like the World Health Organization and fact-checking organizations. The platform has also added safeguards restricting the spread of chain messages and directing users to accurate online information.

The service is also making it easier for users in India and other nations to use its service to find information about vaccinations.

“False claims can discourage people from getting vaccines, seeking the doctor’s help, or taking the virus seriously,” Fact Crescendo’s Namboori said. “The stakes have never been so high.”

‘Great day for America’: Vaccinated can largely ditch masks

By ZEKE MILLER and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a major step toward returning to pre-pandemic life, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention eased mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people on Thursday, allowing them to stop wearing masks outdoors in crowds and in most indoor settings.

“Today is a great day for America,” President Joe Biden said during a Rose Garden address heralding the new guidance, an event where he and his staff went without masks. Hours earlier in the Oval Office, where Biden was meeting with vaccinated Republican lawmakers, he led the group in removing their masks when the guidance was announced.

“If you are fully vaccinated, you no longer need to wear a mask,” he said, summarizing the new guidance and encouraging more Americans to roll up their sleeves. “Get vaccinated — or wear a mask until you do.”

The guidance still calls for wearing masks in crowded indoor settings like buses, planes, hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters, but it will help clear the way for reopening workplaces, schools and other venues — even removing the need for social distancing for those who are fully vaccinated.

“We have all longed for this moment — when we can get back to some sense of normalcy,” Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, said at an earlier White House briefing.

The CDC and the Biden administration have faced pressure to ease restrictions on fully vaccinated people — those who are two weeks past their last required COVID-19 vaccine dose — in part to highlight the benefits of getting the shot. The country’s aggressive vaccination campaign has paid off: U.S. virus cases are at their lowest rate since September, deaths are at their lowest point since last April and the test positivity rate is at the lowest point since the pandemic began.

Walensky said the long-awaited change is thanks to the millions of people who have gotten vaccinated and is based on the latest science about how well those shots are working.

“Anyone who is fully vaccinated can participate in indoor and outdoor activities — large or small — without wearing a mask or physically distancing,” Walensky said. “If you are fully vaccinated, you can start doing the things that you had stopped doing because of the pandemic.”

The new guidance is likely to open the door to confusion, since there is no surefire way for businesses or others to distinguish between those who are fully vaccinated and those who are not.

“Millions of Americans are doing the right thing and getting vaccinated, but essential workers are still forced to play mask police for shoppers who are unvaccinated and refuse to follow local COVID safety measures,” said Marc Perrone, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union. “Are they now supposed to become the vaccination police?”

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Walensky and Biden said people who are not fully vaccinated should continue to wear masks indoors. "We've gotten this far — please protect yourself until you get to the finish line," Biden said, noting that most Americans under 65 are not yet fully vaccinated. He said the government was not going to enforce the mask wearing guidance on those not yet fully vaccinated.

"We're not going to go out and arrest people," added Biden, who said he believes the American people want to take care of their neighbors. "If you haven't been vaccinated, wear your mask for your own protection and the protection of the people who also have not been vaccinated yet."

On Capitol Hill, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she is not changing the rules requiring masks on the House floor.

"No," Pelosi told CNN. "Are they all vaccinated?"

Recent estimates have put the percentage of unvaccinated lawmakers in the House at 25%.

That ambiguity over who is and isn't vaccinated led Lawrence Gostin, a public health law expert at Georgetown University, to declare the CDC guidance "confusing and contradictory."

"The public will not feel comfortable in a crowded indoor space if they are unsure if the maskless person standing next to them is or is not vaccinated," he said.

The announcement came as many states and communities have already been lifting mask mandates amid improving virus numbers and as more Americans have been shedding face coverings after getting shots.

Dan Witte, a 67-year-old musician from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, stopped wearing a mask after receiving the vaccine two months ago and recently rejoined his band playing gigs at crowded bars and weddings. He was encouraged by the CDC's new guidance, but said it just confirmed his trust that the vaccines offered protection from spreading infections.

"I went right from being hypervigilant for almost a year to being right in the crowd without a mask," Witte said.

To date more than 154 million Americans, nearly 47% of the population, have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, and nearly 119 million are fully vaccinated. The rate of new vaccinations has slowed in recent weeks, but with the authorization Wednesday of the Pfizer shot for children ages 12 to 15, a new burst of doses is expected in the coming days.

"All of us, let's be patient, be patient with one another," Biden said, acknowledging some Americans might be hesitant about removing their masks after more than a year of living in a pandemic that has killed more than 584,000 people in the U.S. and more than 3.3 million people worldwide.

The CDC's announcement that Americans could begin to shed one of the most visible symbols of the pandemic stood in stark contrast to other nations, with much of the world still struggling to contain the virus amid global disparities in vaccinations.

Just two weeks ago, the CDC recommended that fully vaccinated people continue to wear masks indoors in all settings and outdoors in large crowds.

Walensky said that evidence from the U.S. and Israel shows the vaccines are as strongly protective in real world use as they were in earlier studies and that so far they continue to work even though some worrying mutated versions of the virus are spreading.

The more people continue to get vaccinated, the faster infections will drop — and the harder it will be for the virus to mutate enough to escape vaccines, she stressed, urging everyone 12 and older who is not yet vaccinated to sign up.

And while some people still get COVID-19 despite being vaccinated, Walensky said, that's rare. She cited evidence that those infections tend to be milder, shorter and harder to spread to others. If people who are vaccinated do develop COVID-19 symptoms, they should immediately put their mask back on and get tested, she said.

There are some caveats. Walensky encouraged people who have weak immune systems, such as from organ transplants or cancer treatment, to talk with their doctors before shedding their masks. That's because of continued uncertainty about whether the vaccines can rev up a weakened immune system as well as they do normal, healthy ones.

The new guidance had an immediate effect at the White House, which has taken a cautious approach

to easing virus restrictions. Staffers were informed that masks are no longer required for people who are fully vaccinated.

First lady Jill Biden, who was traveling in West Virginia, told reporters that "we feel naked" as she and her party removed their face coverings. Then she paused. "I didn't mean it that way!"

Israel threatens Gaza ground invasion despite truce efforts

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel on Thursday said it was massing troops along the Gaza frontier and calling up 9,000 reservists ahead of a possible ground invasion of the Hamas-ruled territory, as the two bitter enemies plunged closer to all-out war. Egyptian mediators rushed to Israel for cease-fire efforts but showed no signs of progress.

The stepped-up fighting came as communal violence in Israel erupted for a fourth night, with Jewish and Arab mobs clashing in the flashpoint town of Lod. The fighting took place despite a bolstered police presence ordered by the nation's leaders.

The four-day burst of violence has pushed Israel into uncharted territory — dealing with the most intense fighting it has ever had with Hamas while simultaneously coping with the worst Jewish-Arab violence inside Israel in decades. A late-night barrage of rocket fire from Lebanon that landed in the sea threatened to open a new front along Israel's northern border.

Saleh Aruri, an exiled senior Hamas leader, told London-based satellite channel Al Araby early Friday that his group has turned down a proposal for a three-hour lull to allow for more negotiations toward a full cease-fire. He said Egypt, Qatar and the United Nations were leading the truce efforts.

Also early Friday, the Israeli military said air and ground troops struck Gaza in what appeared to be the heaviest attacks yet. Masses of red flames illuminated the skies as the deafening blasts from the outskirts of Gaza City jolted people awake. The strikes were so strong that screams of fear could be heard from people inside the city, several kilometers away.

"I said we would extract a very heavy price from Hamas," Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a videotaped statement. "We are doing that, and we will continue to do that with heavy force."

The fighting broke out late Monday when Hamas, claiming to be the defender of Jerusalem, fired a barrage of long-range rockets toward the city in response to what it said were Israeli provocations. Israel quickly responded with a series of airstrikes.

Since then, Israel has attacked hundreds of targets in Gaza. The strikes set off scores of earth-shaking explosions across the densely populated territory. Gaza militants have fired nearly 2,000 rockets into Israel, bringing life in the southern part of the country to a standstill. Several barrages targeted the seaside metropolis of Tel Aviv, some 70 kilometers (45 miles) away.

Gaza's Health Ministry said the death toll has climbed to 109 Palestinians, including 28 children and 15 women, with 621 people wounded. The Hamas and Islamic Jihad militant groups have confirmed 20 deaths in their ranks, though Israel says that number is much higher. Seven people have been killed in Israel, including a 6-year-old boy.

In Washington, President Joe Biden said he spoke with Netanyahu about calming the fighting but also backed the Israeli leader by saying "there has not been a significant overreaction."

He said the goal now is to "get to a point where there is a significant reduction in attacks, particularly rocket attacks that are indiscriminately fired into population centers." He called the effort a "a work in progress."

Thursday's visit by Egyptian officials marked an important step in the cease-fire efforts.

Egypt often serves as a mediator between Israel and Hamas, and it has been a key player in ending past rounds of fighting. The officials met first with Hamas leaders in Gaza before holding talks with Israelis in Tel Aviv, two Egyptian intelligence officials said. They spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to the media. Hamas' exiled leader, Ismail Haniyeh, was also in touch with the Egyptians, the group said.

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Despite those efforts, the fighting only intensified. Israeli aircraft pummeled targets in Gaza throughout the day. And late Thursday, Israel fired tank and artillery shells across the border for the first time, sending scores of terrified residents fleeing for safety.

The airstrikes have destroyed scores of buildings, including three high rises. Israel says the buildings housed Hamas militants or facilities, but civilians were inside as well.

In the northern Gaza Strip, Rafat Tanani, his pregnant wife and four children were killed after an Israeli warplane reduced the building to rubble, residents said.

Sadallah Tanani, a relative, said the family was "wiped out from the population register" without warning. "It was a massacre. My feelings are indescribable," he said.

Israel has come under heavy international criticism for civilian casualties in Gaza fighting. It says Hamas is responsible for endangering civilians by hiding and launching rockets from civilian areas.

Late Thursday, Israel's Defense Minister Benny Gantz ordered the mobilization of an additional 9,000 reservists.

The chief military spokesman, Brig. Gen. Hidai Zilberman, said troops were massing along the Gaza border for a possible ground operation. He said tanks, armored vehicles and artillery were being prepared "for mobilization at any given moment."

Hamas showed no signs of backing down. It launched several intense barrages of rockets throughout the day and fired its most powerful rocket, the Ayyash, nearly 200 kilometers (120 miles) into southern Israel. The rocket landed in the open desert but briefly disrupted flight traffic at the southern Ramon airport. Hamas also launched a drone that Israel said it quickly shot down.

Hamas military spokesman Abu Obeida said the group was not afraid of a ground invasion, saying any invasion would be a chance "to increase our catch" of dead or captive soldiers.

The fighting cast a pall over the Muslim holiday of Eid al-Fitr, normally marked by family gatherings and festive meals. Instead, the streets of Gaza were mostly empty.

Hassan Abu Shaaban tried to lighten the mood by passing out candy to passers-by but acknowledged "there is no atmosphere" for celebrating. "It is all airstrikes, destruction and devastation," he said. "May God help everyone."

The current eruption of violence began a month ago in Jerusalem, where heavy-handed Israeli police tactics during Ramadan and the threatened eviction of dozens of Palestinian families by Jewish settlers ignited protests and clashes with police. A focal point of clashes was Jerusalem's Al-Aqsa Mosque, built on a hilltop compound that is revered by Jews and Muslims.

Israel regards Jerusalem in its entirety as its capital, while the Palestinians want east Jerusalem to be the capital of their future state.

The violent clashes between Arabs and Jews in Israel resulted in scenes not witnessed in more than two decades.

The confrontations erupted again late Thursday. Jewish and Arab mobs battled in the central city of Lod, the epicenter of the troubles, for a fourth consecutive night, despite a state of emergency and heavy police presence. A Jewish man was shot and seriously wounded, and Israeli media said a second Jewish man was shot.

In the Tel Aviv neighborhood of Jaffa, an Israeli soldier was attacked by a group of Arabs and hospitalized in serious condition.

The fighting deepened a political crisis that has sent Israel careening through four inconclusive elections in just two years. After March elections, Netanyahu failed to form a government coalition. Now his political rivals have three weeks to try to do so.

Those efforts have been greatly complicated by the fighting. His opponents include a broad range of parties that have little in common. They would need the support of an Arab party, whose leader has said he cannot negotiate while Israel is fighting in Gaza.

Naftali Bennett, leader of a small right-wing party, was quoted as saying he did not believe an alternate coalition could be formed in the current atmosphere.

Opposition leader Yair Lapid, who is leading the coalition-building efforts, said the country was facing an "existential threat" and urged Bennett to join him to help rescue the country.

"We are on the brink of the abyss," he said.

Police: 9 wounded in Providence, Rhode Island, shooting

By WILLIAM J. KOLE Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Nine people were wounded Thursday evening in Rhode Island's capital in what police there believe to be the largest shooting in city history.

Of the nine, three had serious injuries and were "maybe critical," Providence Police Chief Col. Hugh T. Clements told reporters at the scene.

He said multiple guns were used and it involved an "ongoing feud" involving two groups known to authorities. He said the shooting began with gunfire emanating from a vehicle, targeting a home. A person or people inside the home then returned fire. He described the participants as "young men."

The shooting took place just before 7 p.m. in the southeastern neighborhood of Washington Park, which Clements described as a typically quiet neighborhood.

Clements said an estimated several dozen shots were fired. Evidence markers showing where more than a dozen shell casings littered the ground could be seen in the distance. Police sealed off the area.

No arrests have been made. Clements stressed the investigation was in its early stages. Detectives were at the hospital interviewing the victims, who are between the ages of 19 and 25. Further details about their identities were not released.

He said police have made strides to get guns off the streets and thus called the shooting "very disappointing." The suspects and the victims "might be one and the same," he said, without providing further details.

"There'll be names you may recognize; we certainly know from police work," Clements told reporters.

Providence Mayor Jorge Elorza also addressed media at the scene, fielding questions in both English and Spanish.

"I've spoken with a number of the neighbors, and everyone is shaken," he said, adding that he's promised extra patrols and security in the neighborhood for the coming days.

Prior to this shooting, Providence had seen 19 gunshot victims and seven homicide victims by gunfire in 2021, Clements said.

Elorza also exhorted city residents to stop using gun violence to settle feuds, and criticized the ready availability of guns.

"This has to stop," Elorza said. "The young people involved, believing that the way to solve their disputes is with a handgun — I mean, that can't be the way."

Street racing surges across US amid coronavirus pandemic

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

Jaye Sanford, a 52-year-old mother of two, was driving home in suburban Atlanta on Nov. 21 when a man in a Dodge Challenger muscle car who was allegedly street racing crashed into her head-on, killing her.

She is one of the many victims of a surge in street racing that has taken root across America during the coronavirus pandemic, prompting police crackdowns and bills aimed at harsher punishments.

Experts say TV shows and movies glorifying street racing had already fueled interest in recent years. Then shutdowns associated with the pandemic cleared normally clogged highways as commuters worked from home.

Those with a passion for fast cars often had time to modify them, and to show them off, said Tami Eggleston, a sports psychologist who participates in legal drag racing.

"With COVID, when we were separated from people, I think people sort of bonded in their interest groups," said Eggleston, who is also the provost of McKendree University, a small college in suburban St. Louis. "So that need to want to socialize and be around other people brought the racers out."

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But people have been killed as packs of vehicles, from souped-up jalopies to high-end sports cars, roar down city streets and through industrial neighborhoods.

Street racers block roads and even interstates to keep police away as they tear around and perform stunts, often captured on videos that go viral. The snarl of engines and traffic tie-ups have become huge annoyances.

Georgia is among the states fighting back with new laws.

Last week, Gov. Brian Kemp signed a bill named for Sanford that mandates at least 10 days of jail time for all drag racing convictions. It also requires people convicted a third time within five years to forfeit their vehicles.

"This illegal activity is very dangerous," the Republican governor said at a bill-signing ceremony. "Our goal is simple: to protect every family in every community."

In New York City, authorities received more than 1,000 drag racing complaints over six months last year — a nearly five-fold increase over the same period in 2019.

"Illegal street racing puts lives at risk and keeps us up at night," said New York state Sen. Brad Hoylman. "While there's been less traffic during the pandemic, some drivers have used this as an opportunity to treat our streets like a NASCAR speedway."

The Democratic lawmaker has introduced legislation that would authorize New York City to operate its speed cameras overnight and on weekends in hot spots for illegal street racing. The Senate Transportation Committee recently unanimously approved the measure, setting it up for a floor vote.

In Mississippi, Republican Gov. Tate Reeves signed into law in March a bill that allows state troopers to respond to incidents in cities. On New Year's Eve, drivers blocked traffic on an interstate highway in Jackson, the state capital, for an hour while they spun out and did donuts, etching circles in the pavement.

Even though the highway patrol headquarters was nearby, troopers couldn't respond because they were prohibited from handling incidents in cities with over 15,000 people. That prohibition will be lifted when the new law takes effect July 1.

In Arizona, the state Senate has passed a bill to impose harsher penalties. It now awaits a House vote. Under an ordinance approved in March by the Phoenix City Council, police can impound a car involved in street racing or reckless driving for up to 30 days.

Meanwhile, the death toll climbs. On the night of May 2, a 28-year-old woman was killed in Phoenix when a street racer crashed into her car. A man was arrested on suspicion of manslaughter.

Police in Albuquerque, New Mexico, handed out thousands of tickets for speeding and racing since a crackdown began in October.

"Racing up and down our streets is so deadly, especially while more kids, seniors, pedestrians and cyclists are out during this pandemic," said Albuquerque Mayor Tim Keller.

Street racing in an industrial neighborhood of Portland, Oregon, scares people who work there. A motorcyclist was killed last month in a crash that police said apparently involved racing. Business owners on April 2 wrote to the mayor and city commissioners, asking them to take action.

After weekends of racing and stunts, a road there and its 2-mile (3.2 kilometer) straightaway are littered with alcohol containers. Spray-painted lines mark start and finish lines. Parking lots are scarred by circular tire tracks or completely eroded in places by spinning tires.

Portland police say they're too overwhelmed to do much about it.

"The city of Portland has experienced an enormous increase in our shooting rate, a staggering amount of volatile demonstrations, while our staffing numbers have dwindled," said acting Lt. Michael Roberts, who is tasked with addressing illegal street racing. "We often do not have the bandwidth to address the street racer calls."

Bizarrely, two police cars drag raced through a residential Washington, D.C., neighborhood last month. They wound up crashing into each other. One officer was fired. That former officer and another officer, now under suspension, were charged last week with reckless driving and other traffic offenses, the Washington Post reported.

In Denver, police have deployed a helicopter to track races, closed lanes often used by racers and sent

officers to places where racers meet. On April 3, a mother was killed when a street racer broadsided her car in downtown Denver.

In one of the most notorious incidents, hundreds of street racers clogged a stretch of interstate in nearby Aurora on March 7 while they raced and cruised. Police warned other motorists to stay away amid reports of guns being brandished and fireworks going off.

The events have given more urgency to a long-standing effort by the Colorado State Patrol to lure street racers to a safer environment. The agency's "Take it to the Track" program features weekly contests at Bandimere Speedway, in the foothills west of Denver.

"You can bring out whatever you have, be it a supercar or mom's minivan, grandpa's Buick," Trooper Josh Lewis said at the racetrack last week. "And you can race a cop, and do so legally."

Lewis then beat a Toyota SUV on the quarter-mile track, reaching 88 mph (142 kph) in his Dodge Charger.

Ray Propes, 58, started street racing when he was 16 but now prefers Bandimere Speedway for its traction and safety.

"You don't have to worry about accidents, animals, kids, birds, anything," he said.

Philly health official forced to resign over MOVE cremations

By CLAUDIA LAUER and MARK SCOLFORO Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — Philadelphia's top health official was compelled to resign Thursday after the city's mayor learned partial human remains from the 1985 bombing of the headquarters of a Black organization had been cremated and disposed of without notifying family members.

Mayor Jim Kenney said Health Commissioner Dr. Thomas Farley made the decision regarding remains of the MOVE bombing victims several years ago.

The announcement of Farley's ouster came by design on the 36th anniversary of the MOVE bombing, after Kenney consulted victims' family members. Among the 11 slain when police bombed the organization's headquarters, causing a fire that spread to more than 60 row homes, were five children.

A lawyer who accompanied MOVE members to a meeting with Kenney, Michael Coard, described their reaction as "outraged, enraged, incensed, but mostly confused."

In a statement released by the mayor's office, Farley said that in early 2017 he was told by the city's medical examiner, Dr. Sam Gulino, that a box had been found containing materials related to MOVE bombing victims' autopsies.

"In the box were bones and bone fragments, presumably from one or more of the victims," Farley said.

It is a standard procedure to retain specimens after an autopsy ends and the remains are turned over to the decedent's next-of-kin, Farley said.

"Believing that investigations related to the MOVE bombing had been completed more than 30 years earlier, and not wanting to cause more anguish for the families of the victims, I authorized Dr. Gulino to follow this procedure and dispose of the bones and bone fragments," Farley said.

The decision was his alone, and other top city officials were not consulted, he said.

After recent reports that local institutions had remains of MOVE bombing victims, Farley said he reconsidered his actions and notified higher-ups. Kenney said Farley told him about what occurred late Tuesday, took responsibility and resigned from the \$175,000-a-year job he'd held for five years.

"I profoundly regret making this decision without consulting the family members of the victims and I extend my deepest apologies for the pain this will cause them," Farley wrote.

Kenney said Farley's decision lacked empathy. Gulino has also been put on leave pending an investigation, Kenney said.

"I had the opportunity to meet with members of the Africa family and apologize for the way this situation was handled, and for how the city has treated them for the last five decades," Kenney said in a statement. MOVE members adopted the surname of the group's founder, John Africa.

Kenney later told reporters that he had a long and difficult meeting with victims' family members and agreed to publicly disclose the matter on the bombing anniversary at their request.

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Coard said MOVE, a group that members describe as a family and an organization, plans to respond to Kenney after deliberating among themselves about what they consider to be a just result. A lawsuit is possible, Coard said.

"They had a lot of questions about why this happened, questions about, is this standard operating procedure? Questions like, who made the ultimate decisions?" Coard said. "It's one thing to lose a box of remains. It's another thing to intentionally destroy a box of remains. Who does that?"

He called it the "ultimate desecration."

"Obviously it's going to be someone they're familiar with, but they want to know, hey, was this my mother, father, sister, brother, niece, nephew? Who was this?" Coard said.

Kenney said the remains had been kept in a storage room. The volume of remains was unclear, and Kenney said he hoped to determine where and how they were disposed of. The city has hired a law firm to investigate and has agreed to include lawyers for the victims' families in the process.

Late Thursday, a crowd gathered at an intersection near the block of Osage Avenue in West Philadelphia where the bombing happened. Dressed all in white, MOVE members read a minute-by-minute account of the bombing and the confrontation that led up to it: Philadelphia police, attempting to serve warrants on four members and evict the rest of the Black back-to-nature group from its headquarters, dropped a bomb from a helicopter, igniting fuel for a generator stored on the roof.

Members on Thursday recounted alleged comments from the city emergency officials directing first responders to let the house burn. Fire department leaders later said they were scared their firefighters could face gunfire if they attempted to get to the home in the middle of the block. The fire quickly spread, displacing more than 250 people.

The city appointed a commission to investigate the decisions that led to the bombing, and in 1986 it issued a report calling the decision to bomb an occupied row house "unconscionable." MOVE survivors were awarded a \$1.5 million judgment in a 1996 civil lawsuit.

City officials claimed at the time that neighbors had filed complaints, saying there were issues with sanitation, vermin and noise at odd hours. But documents gathered by the commission and in the research into the bombing, showed city officials, including the mayor, had designated the group as a terrorist organization. Group members maintained they had been targeted since the 1978 eviction attempt where a police officer was killed and called the complaints explanation a lie.

As Mike Africa Jr. addressed a group gathered to commemorate the 36th anniversary of the bombing, he described getting the call from city officials who wanted to talk about the destruction of the remains that MOVE members had not known existed.

He said the news came a month after the group had learned the remains of two children killed in the bombing had been given to an anthropologist at the University of Pennsylvania and used in teaching lessons without the permission of family members.

Some in attendance Thursday shouted "shame," and "grave robber."

What insurrection? Growing number in GOP downplay Jan. 6

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — What insurrection?

Flouting all evidence and their own first-hand experience, a small but growing number of Republican lawmakers are propagating a false portrayal of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, brazenly arguing that the rioters who used flagpoles as weapons, brutally beat police officers and chanted that they wanted to hang Vice President Mike Pence were somehow acting peacefully in their violent bid to overturn Joe Biden's election.

One Republican at a hearing Wednesday called the rioters a "mob of misfits." Another compared them to tourists. And a third suggested the sweeping federal investigation into the riot — which has yielded more than 400 arrests and counting — amounts to a national campaign of harassment.

It's a turn of events that House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, another target of the rioters, called "appalling" and "sick," and it raises the possibility that the public's understanding of the worst domestic attack on

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Congress in 200 years — an attack that was captured extensively on video — could become distorted by the same kinds of disinformation that fueled former President Donald Trump's false claims of a stolen election. It was the lie about the election that motivated the rioters in the first place.

"I don't know of a normal day around here when people are threatening to hang the vice president of the United States or shoot the speaker, or injure so many police officers," said Pelosi, who has pushed for a bipartisan commission to investigate the riots.

The hearing Wednesday was supposed to be the latest dive by congressional investigators into the chaos of Jan. 6 — the missed warning signs, confusion and delays that allowed the rioters to terrorize the Capitol for an entire afternoon. But several Republicans used their rounds of questioning not to pepper the witnesses with questions, but to downplay the brutal assault on America's seat of democracy.

"Let's be honest with the American people — it was not an insurrection, and we cannot call it that and be truthful," said Rep. Andrew Clyde, a Republican from Georgia serving his first term.

Clyde said one video feed of the rioters looked like they were on a "normal tourist visit." Those in the video, taken in Statuary Hall, were able to enter the building after rioters broke through glass, pummeled officers and busted through the doors as lawmakers were frantically evacuated. They were headed to the House chamber where they tried to beat down the doors with lawmakers still inside.

Clyde wasn't the only Republican making that argument. Arizona Rep. Paul Gosar portrayed a woman who was shot and killed by Capitol Police as she tried to break through a door next to the House chamber as a martyr. He said Ashli Babbitt was "executed" and noted she was an Air Force veteran who was wearing an American flag. The Department of Justice decided after an investigation not to charge the police officer who shot her.

The Justice Department, Gosar said at one point, is "harassing peaceful patriots across the country" as federal prosecutors file charges against hundreds of people who stormed the Capitol and participated in the riot. The massive investigation, one of the largest in American history, remains ongoing with federal agents continuing to serve search warrants and attempting to locate dozens of other people still being sought for questioning.

Georgia Rep. Jody Hice also painted the rioters as the victims, noting that they were four of the people who died, including Babbitt. The other three suffered medical emergencies while part of the crowd laying siege to the Capitol. "It was Trump supporters who lost their lives that day, not Trump supporters who were taking the lives of others," Hice said.

A fifth person, Capitol Police Officer Brian Sicknick, collapsed immediately after the insurrection and died the next day. Video shows two men spraying him and another officer with a chemical, but the Washington medical examiner said Sicknick suffered a stroke and died from natural causes. The men have been charged with assaulting the officers.

Two other officers took their own lives in the days afterward, and dozens more were hurt — including one officer who had a heart attack and others who suffered traumatic brain injuries and permanent disabilities. The union that represents the Capitol Police said some of the officers may never return to work.

The attempt to defend the insurrectionists came on the same day that House Republicans voted to oust Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney from their leadership team for repeatedly rebuking Trump for his false claims that the election was stolen. Cheney voted with Democrats to impeach Trump for telling his supporters hours before the Jan. 6 attack to "fight like hell" to overturn Biden's win. Trump's lies about widespread election fraud were rebuked by numerous courts, election officials across the country and his own attorney general.

Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin, who led the Democrats' impeachment prosecution and sits on the Oversight Committee, said after the hearing that he believes that Republicans were "emboldened and emancipated" by Cheney's ouster earlier in the day.

"They have declared themselves to be on the side of Donald Trump and the 'big lie,' and the 'big lie' now has spread outwards to include denial of what happened on Jan. 6," Raskin said.

Timothy Naftali, a professor of history and public service at New York University, says it is "deeply cynical" to set aside the insurrection as if it didn't happen. He compares it to political elites in Southern states

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after the Civil War who failed to examine its causes, which he says prevented racial reconciliation and healing and still affects the country to this day.

"Political amnesia never helps," Naftali said. "It's a source of poison."

Given the extensive record of the attack, captured in video and photos seen the world over, defending the insurrectionists required some creative omissions. One point Clyde emphasized was that the rioters never made it to the House floor — even though they tried, only to be held back by police officers with guns drawn. Some lawmakers were taking cover in the gallery of the chamber as they tried to beat down the doors.

"I can tell you the House floor was never breached and it was not an insurrection," Clyde said. "This is the truth."

The mob did break into the Senate minutes after senators had evacuated, some carrying zip ties and tactical equipment. They rifled through desks and hunted for lawmakers, yelling "where are they?" They walked into Pelosi's office, stealing a laptop and calling out her name while some of her staff huddled quietly under furniture.

Other Republicans — some quietly, some publicly — have made clear they don't agree with their colleagues.

"I was there," said Utah Sen. Mitt Romney, who was caught in security video being diverted away from the rioters by a police officer. "What happened was a violent effort to interfere with and prevent the constitutional order of installing a new president. And as such, it was an insurrection against the Constitution. It resulted in severe property damage, severe injuries and death."

Illinois Rep. Mike Quigley, another Democratic member of the Oversight panel, says the Republican denials are wishful thinking that reverberates with their most partisan voters.

"These folks passionately want what they want to be true," Quigley said after the hearing. "So it's no longer I'll believe it when I see it. It's I'll see it when I believe it."

Conservatives seize on gas crunch to blame Biden, stir base

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

A graphic calling the East Coast fuel supply crunch "Biden's Gas Crisis." A tweet speculating that gas stations running dry was an "INSIDE JOB." A meme depicting the president and vice president cheering about the "Green New Deal" in front of a snaking line at a fuel station.

These and thousands of other social media posts along with conservative websites and commentators this week misleadingly painted President Joe Biden and his administration as catalysts of chaos — who not only mishandled the temporary shutdown of the nation's largest fuel pipeline on Friday — but engineered it.

In reality, a ransom-seeking cyberattack, not a Biden executive order or energy policy, triggered the shutdown that drove residents of states such as North Carolina to panic-buy so much gas that nearly 70% of service stations in the state remained without fuel on Thursday afternoon.

Biden spoke about the hack Thursday as he sought to assuage fears around the supply crunch, reassuring the public that his administration had helped get the Colonial Pipeline back online Wednesday and that remaining outages at gas stations were a "temporary situation" that panic-buying would only exacerbate.

Still, some of the most widely shared tweets discussing the gas crunch between Friday and Wednesday lobbed criticism toward the president, according to the media intelligence firm Signal Labs. Posts surfaced by Signal blamed the president for the outages, criticized his response and condemned him for canceling plans for the Keystone XL oil pipeline — though that project, which would have built a crude oil pipeline, would have had no impact on the current situation.

Misleading narratives targeting Biden began picking up speed on Monday, the day North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper became the first of several governors to declare a state of emergency over the disruption.

"Wouldn't it be weird if the CYBER-ATTACK that shutdown the United States' top fuel line was an INSIDE JOB to pretend Joe Biden isn't responsible for the insane increase in gas price.." read a widely shared tweet by former Florida congressional candidate Chuck Callesto.

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"People can't complain about gas prices if there's no gas to buy," read the caption of an image depicting a sinister Biden with his fingers interlaced, retweeted by U.S. Rep. Lauren Boebert, a Republican from Colorado.

Other posts claimed the long gas lines across the Southeast U.S. were a harbinger of America's future under Democrats, casting Biden as a socialist in a strategy that Republicans have frequently turned to in recent years.

"Gas shortages now, food shortages tomorrow?" tweeted Fox Nation host Tomi Lahren. "Wow ... starting to feel like socialism is on the way...."

In another narrative, posts equated Biden to former President Jimmy Carter who saw his presidency crumble as a result of the 1979 fuel shortage. A statement from former President Donald Trump on Wednesday, amplified by conservative websites including Breitbart News, branded a laundry list of national and global challenges as Biden's fault.

"Jimmy mishandled crisis after crisis, but Biden has CREATED crisis after crisis," Trump wrote. "First there was the Biden Border Crisis (that he refuses to call a Crisis), then the Biden Economic Crisis, then the Biden Israel Crisis, and now the Biden Gas Crisis."

Fox News Channel's Sean Hannity on Tuesday first broadcast the graphic of Biden smiling with the words "Biden's Gas Crisis," a term that later gained momentum on Facebook and Twitter.

Recent world events have challenged the Biden administration in its economic goals. Over the past week, it has faced a disappointing monthly jobs report, worrisome signs of inflation and escalating violence in Israel with deaths that could foreshadow a war in the Middle East. All the while, Biden is still attempting to vaccinate the nation against the coronavirus, distribute hundreds of billions of dollars in economic aid and negotiate his own infrastructure and families plans that total a combined \$4 trillion.

Higher energy prices often have political fallout, complicating reelection campaigns for incumbents outside oil-producing regions.

With gas prices already rising as COVID-19 restrictions loosen and Americans travel more, the pipeline's shutdown has created an even worse public relations problem for Biden. Fuel hoarding and lines at the pump have made it difficult to gain control of the narrative.

The Biden administration's message that the problem was a supply crunch rather than a gas shortage, while accurate, didn't satisfy Americans who couldn't find gas to fill their cars, according to Doug Heye, a Republican strategist based in Washington.

"You have Republican division over the House Republican Conference and you had a hearing yesterday where people were basically denying what happened on Jan. 6," Heye said. "If you want to push a conservative message, the Biden administration just did you a favor."

'Great day for America': Vaccinated can largely ditch masks

By ZEKE MILLER and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a major step toward returning to pre-pandemic life, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention eased mask-wearing guidance for fully vaccinated people on Thursday, allowing them to stop wearing masks outdoors in crowds and in most indoor settings.

"Today is a great day for America," President Joe Biden said during a Rose Garden address heralding the new guidance, an event where he and his staff went without masks. Hours earlier in the Oval Office, where Biden was meeting with vaccinated Republican lawmakers, he led the group in removing their masks when the guidance was announced.

"If you are fully vaccinated, you no longer need to wear a mask," he said, summarizing the new guidance and encouraging more Americans to roll up their sleeves. "Get vaccinated — or wear a mask until you do."

The guidance still calls for wearing masks in crowded indoor settings like buses, planes, hospitals, prisons and homeless shelters, but it will help clear the way for reopening workplaces, schools and other venues — even removing the need for social distancing for those who are fully vaccinated.

"We have all longed for this moment — when we can get back to some sense of normalcy," Rochelle

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Walensky, director of the CDC, said at an earlier White House briefing.

The CDC and the Biden administration have faced pressure to ease restrictions on fully vaccinated people — those who are two weeks past their last required COVID-19 vaccine dose — in part to highlight the benefits of getting the shot. The country's aggressive vaccination campaign has paid off: U.S. virus cases are at their lowest rate since September, deaths are at their lowest point since last April and the test positivity rate is at the lowest point since the pandemic began.

Walensky said the long-awaited change is thanks to the millions of people who have gotten vaccinated and is based on the latest science about how well those shots are working.

"Anyone who is fully vaccinated can participate in indoor and outdoor activities — large or small — without wearing a mask or physically distancing," Walensky said. "If you are fully vaccinated, you can start doing the things that you had stopped doing because of the pandemic."

The new guidance is likely to open the door to confusion, since there is no surefire way for businesses or others to distinguish between those who are fully vaccinated and those who are not.

"Millions of Americans are doing the right thing and getting vaccinated, but essential workers are still forced to play mask police for shoppers who are unvaccinated and refuse to follow local COVID safety measures," said Marc Perrone, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers International Union. "Are they now supposed to become the vaccination police?"

Walensky and Biden said people who are not fully vaccinated should continue to wear masks indoors.

"We've gotten this far — please protect yourself until you get to the finish line," Biden said, noting that most Americans under 65 are not yet fully vaccinated. He said the government was not going to enforce the mask wearing guidance on those not yet fully vaccinated.

"We're not going to go out and arrest people," added Biden, who said he believes the American people want to take care of their neighbors. "If you haven't been vaccinated, wear your mask for your own protection and the protection of the people who also have not been vaccinated yet."

On Capitol Hill, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she is not changing the rules requiring masks on the House floor.

"No," Pelosi told CNN. "Are they all vaccinated?"

Recent estimates have put the percentage of unvaccinated lawmakers in the House at 25%.

That ambiguity over who is and isn't vaccinated led Lawrence Gostin, a public health law expert at Georgetown University, to declare the CDC guidance "confusing and contradictory."

"The public will not feel comfortable in a crowded indoor space if they are unsure if the maskless person standing next to them is or is not vaccinated," he said.

The announcement came as many states and communities have already been lifting mask mandates amid improving virus numbers and as more Americans have been shedding face coverings after getting shots.

Dan Witte, a 67-year-old musician from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, stopped wearing a mask after receiving the vaccine two months ago and recently rejoined his band playing gigs at crowded bars and weddings. He was encouraged by the CDC's new guidance, but said it just confirmed his trust that the vaccines offered protection from spreading infections.

"I went right from being hypervigilant for almost a year to being right in the crowd without a mask," Witte said.

To date more than 154 million Americans, nearly 47% of the population, have received at least one dose of COVID-19 vaccine, and nearly 119 million are fully vaccinated. The rate of new vaccinations has slowed in recent weeks, but with the authorization Wednesday of the Pfizer shot for children ages 12 to 15, a new burst of doses is expected in the coming days.

"All of us, let's be patient, be patient with one another," Biden said, acknowledging some Americans might be hesitant about removing their masks after more than a year of living in a pandemic that has killed more than 584,000 people in the U.S. and more than 3.3 million people worldwide.

The CDC's announcement that Americans could begin to shed one of the most visible symbols of the pandemic stood in stark contrast to other nations, with much of the world still struggling to contain the

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virus amid global disparities in vaccinations.

Just two weeks ago, the CDC recommended that fully vaccinated people continue to wear masks indoors in all settings and outdoors in large crowds.

Walensky said that evidence from the U.S. and Israel shows the vaccines are as strongly protective in real world use as they were in earlier studies and that so far they continue to work even though some worrying mutated versions of the virus are spreading.

The more people continue to get vaccinated, the faster infections will drop — and the harder it will be for the virus to mutate enough to escape vaccines, she stressed, urging everyone 12 and older who is not yet vaccinated to sign up.

And while some people still get COVID-19 despite being vaccinated, Walensky said, that's rare. She cited evidence that those infections tend to be milder, shorter and harder to spread to others. If people who are vaccinated do develop COVID-19 symptoms, they should immediately put their mask back on and get tested, she said.

There are some caveats. Walensky encouraged people who have weak immune systems, such as from organ transplants or cancer treatment, to talk with their doctors before shedding their masks. That's because of continued uncertainty about whether the vaccines can rev up a weakened immune system as well as they do normal, healthy ones.

The new guidance had an immediate effect at the White House, which has taken a cautious approach to easing virus restrictions. Staffers were informed that masks are no longer required for people who are fully vaccinated.

First lady Jill Biden, who was traveling in West Virginia, told reporters that "we feel naked" as she and her party removed their face coverings. Then she paused. "I didn't mean it that way!"

Pipeline hack fuels gas crunch; US suspects Russian origins

By TOM FOREMAN JR., JEFF MARTIN and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

CLEMONS, N.C. (AP) — Motorists found gas pumps shrouded in plastic bags at tapped-out service stations across more than a dozen U.S. states Thursday while the operator of the nation's largest gasoline pipeline reported making "substantial progress" in resolving the computer hack-induced shutdown responsible for the empty tanks.

About 70% of North Carolina's gas stations were still without fuel amid panic-buying and about half the stations in Virginia, South Carolina and Georgia were tapped out, GasBuddy.com reported. Washington, D.C., was among the hardest-hit locations, with 73% of stations out, the site's tracking service showed.

President Joe Biden said Thursday that U.S. officials do not believe the Russian government was involved in the hack of the Colonial Pipeline, which stretches from Texas to New Jersey. But he added, "We do have strong reason to believe that the criminals who did the attack are living in Russia. That's where it came from."

A cyberattack by hackers who lock up computer systems and demand a ransom to release them hit the pipeline on Friday. The hackers did not take control of the pipeline's operations, but Colonial shut it down to contain the damage.

The U.S. was in direct communication with Moscow about the need to take action against ransom networks, Biden said. The FBI has said the ransomware belonged to a criminal syndicate known as DarkSide.

After restarting operations Wednesday, Georgia-based Colonial Pipeline said in a Thursday update that gasoline deliveries were underway in all of its markets. It will take "several days" for things to return to normal, and some areas may experience "intermittent service interruptions during this start-up period," the company said.

The Northeast has seen fewer shortages since those states get more of their gas supplies from ocean tankers and other sources. The Colonial Pipeline delivers about 45% of the gasoline consumed on the East Coast, but there were no gasoline shortages, according to government officials and energy analysts, just delays in delivering the fuel from Gulf Coast refineries.

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"We are not out of the woods yet, but the trees are thinning out," Richard Joswick, global head of oil analytics at S&P Global Platts, said.

Gas stations should be back to normal next week, though, if the pipeline restart goes as planned and consumers are convinced that they no longer need to panic-buy fuel, Joswick said. He estimated that full recovery for the East and Gulf coasts would take at least a couple of weeks.

In Virginia, however, the pipeline shutdown still produced palpable effects Thursday. Stephen Brich, the Virginia Department of Transportation highways commissioner, said the agency is limiting nonessential travel and asking its employees to continue working remotely as a conservation strategy. The decision impacts about 4,000 workers.

Workers are still responding to emergency issues such as potholes, malfunctioning traffic signals and bridge issues. There are sufficient supplies of unleaded and diesel fuel to maintain services for several more weeks, Brich said.

The run on gas also prompted an urgent warning in the state that people should never siphon gasoline off by mouth with hoses, an advisory that followed calls in recent days about people who were poisoned. One man sucked gasoline into his lungs, causing significant distress, Dr. Chris Holstege, the medical director of the Blue Ridge Poison center at UVA Health, said.

The governors of both Virginia and North Carolina declared states of emergency to help ensure access to gasoline. Other governors urged people not to hoard supplies.

"There is available fuel supply in and around our state, and it will take time for tankers to move that supply to the stations that are experiencing shortages," North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper said. He reiterated calls for residents not to make any unnecessary trips to the pump, and at least five school systems in the state announced they would temporarily shift to remote learning due to the scarce fuel.

The search for working gas pumps has frayed the nerves of some drivers. Two people were charged with assault after spitting in each other's faces over spots in a line at a Marathon station in Knightdale, North Carolina, on Tuesday afternoon, authorities said.

The shutdown even affected hikers long the Appalachian Trail, which stretches from Georgia to Maine. They depend on cars and vans to access the trail and get supplies.

"Everybody's out here buying from the same gas pumps, so the lines are long, some are out — you've really got to look for it," said Ron Brown, who operates Ron's Appalachian Trail Shuttles.

In Georgia, racetracks and other entertainment venues rely on many fans who drive from surrounding states such as Alabama, Florida and Tennessee, and the concern is that higher gas prices — or shortages — might keep fans at home.

"Fuel prices do affect the amount of people who come, especially long distances," said Sydney Marshall, general manager of the South Georgia Motorsports Park in Adel, Georgia, and the Orlando Speed World Dragway in Florida. "It's definitely a concern of mine because if there's a gas shortage, people aren't going to be able to get here."

Inside one network cashing in on vaccine disinformation

By MICHELLE R. SMITH and JOHNATAN REISS Associated Press

The couple in the website videos could be hawking any number of products.

"You're going to love owning the platinum package," Charlene Bollinger tells viewers, as a picture of a DVD set, booklets and other products flashes on screen. Her husband, Ty, promises a "director's cut edition," and over 100 hours of additional footage.

Click the orange button, his wife says, "to join in the fight for health freedom" — or more specifically, to pay \$199 to \$499 for the Bollingers' video series, "The Truth About Vaccines 2020."

The Bollingers are part of an ecosystem of for-profit companies, nonprofit groups, YouTube channels and other social media accounts that stoke fear and distrust of COVID-19 vaccines, resorting to what medical experts say is often misleading and false information.

An investigation by The Associated Press has found that the couple work closely with others prominent

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in the anti-vaccine movement — including Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and his Children's Health Defense — to drive sales through affiliate marketing relationships.

According to the Bollingers, there is big money involved. They have said that they have sold tens of millions of dollars of products through various ventures and paid out \$12 million to affiliates. Tens of thousands of people ponied up cash for an earlier version of their vaccine video series, they said.

"This is a disinformation industry," said Dorit Reiss, a professor at the University of California Hastings College of the Law, who specializes in vaccine policy. Reiss said that unlike other multi-level marketing businesses, in which products are sold through low-level sub-sellers, the anti-vaccination industry is sustained by grassroots activists.

"They have many, many passionate believers that serve as sales people of the misinformation on the ground," she said. "For the top, it's a product. For the people below, they passionately believe it. They're very sincere. And it comes across."

The Bollingers and others were already in the business of selling vaccine disinformation before the coronavirus began its inexorable march across the globe. But the pandemic presented the couple and others a huge opportunity to expand their reach.

The Bollingers aligned themselves with right-wing supporters of former President Donald Trump — establishing a Super PAC to push what they call "medical freedom," participating in the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and promoting lies like the assertion that the election was stolen from Trump.

On the afternoon of Jan. 6, the Bollingers held a rally a few blocks from the Capitol. As emergency vehicles screamed past, responding to the invasion and the ransacking of the building, Charlene Bollinger celebrated from the stage. She called it an "amazing day" and led a prayer for the people she called "patriots." Meanwhile, Ty Bollinger stood at the doors of the Capitol, waiting to get in.

The couple's social media accounts have been identified as among the top vaccine misinformation super spreaders by organizations such as NewsGuard, which analyzes the credibility of websites, and The Center for Countering Digital Hate, which monitors online disinformation. They have more than 1 million followers on Facebook, and Charlene Bollinger said in a video conversation with Kennedy posted last year on their Super PAC's website that their email list has "a couple million" people on it.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate said that from December 2019 to May 2021, five of the Bollingers' biggest social media accounts gained 117,273 followers.

Public health experts say the spread of such disinformation undermines the effort to immunize enough of the population to stop the pandemic. A recent AP-NORC poll shows about 1 in 5 Americans are hesitant to get vaccinated. U.S. Surgeon General Vivek Murthy said last month that misinformation and disinformation circulating online about COVID-19 present a "clear and present danger" to people who need to be protected and who could get vaccinated.

The Bollingers declined interview requests and did not respond to a list of questions emailed to them by the AP about their business and political activities and backgrounds. Ty Bollinger later complained on an Internet show that "journos-terrorists" and "mainstream media whores" were about to release a "hit piece" on him and his wife.

Ty Bollinger began their business several years ago with books and DVDs such as "Cancer: Step Outside the Box" and "The Truth About Cancer," which medical experts say included unproven information about alternatives to chemotherapy and cancer prevention. The company even sells a series that purports to show "the truth" about pet cancer.

Ty Bollinger describes himself as a "medical researcher" on bios posted on his website and in at least one book. He holds degrees in accounting and taxation from Baylor, but the AP could find no indication that he has any scientific or medical training, and he declined to answer questions about his credentials.

In 2017, in what Ty Bollinger has called a "natural progression," the business expanded its work into vaccines. The couple styled themselves as "vaccine safety advocates," while they simultaneously minimized the threat of diseases such as measles. They also published articles questioning whether life-saving vaccines work and claimed unvaccinated children are healthier. Decades of research has shown that the

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opposite is true.

When coronavirus hit, the business pivoted again, producing and marketing false or baseless information about COVID-19.

The Tennessee couple has been promoting "The Truth About Vaccines 2020" at least since April 2020, and updated it in the fall. Their false and unsubstantiated claims about the virus and its vaccines run the gamut, from assertions that COVID cases are overreported and adverse reactions to vaccines are underreported, to theories about 5G wireless signals being linked to the virus, all ideas that medical experts said are flat-out wrong.

Among the materials they have produced is a 78-page "Coronavirus Field Guide" offering unsubstantiated claims that COVID-19 is "man-made," when there's no data to support that. In addition to books and DVDs, some of which cost hundreds of dollars, they sell an "Insiders Legacy Membership" that costs \$5 per month, or \$47 per year, for a "premium monthly newsletter."

The Bollingers' more recent Facebook posts focus on subjects such as ketogenic diets and the nutritional benefits of mangoes, while their most strident anti-vaccination content is reserved for the messaging app Telegram or their own website.

On Telegram, they spread misinformation — including the claim that the COVID-19 vaccine "is a killer" — and link public health efforts to fight COVID-19 to the "Deep State."

On their "Truth About Cancer" website, to which their vaccine website often links, they recently posted an article containing false claims. Among them: "it looks as though the new vaccines are 67% MORE LIKELY to kill you than the virus itself." In studies of hundreds of thousands of people the vaccines were proven to be safe and effective at preventing severe disease and death, and those results have been confirmed as tens of millions of vaccines have been administered.

"We don't trust these vaccines," they said in the post. "We don't trust the 'authorities' who are working so hard to administer hundreds of millions of doses over the next 2 months. And we're 100% willing to gamble that the vaccine is much more dangerous than the virus."

Below the post, commenter after commenter said they were swayed.

"Thank you so much for all the information you provide us! I will not get the vaccine!" one commenter wrote. Another said she had received the first dose and asked for counsel on how to refuse the second. A third shared that she was being treated for cancer and her doctor said she should not be afraid, but that she was "terrified to get the vaccine."

While the Bollingers describe themselves as "advocates," they are running a for-profit business. It's not clear how much money they have made from their vaccine-related marketing efforts, or from their business more broadly, but there are some clues.

The Bollingers' company, TTAC Publishing LLC, filed a trademark infringement lawsuit last year in which it stated that TTAC had secured over \$25 million in customer transactions since 2014. The lawsuit, which calls the company an "industry leader specializing in the marketing of information relating to health care" and cancer, does not say how much of that was profit.

Dun & Bradstreet, which provides estimates for company revenues, has two listings for TTAC Publishing. The first, at its former address in Nevada, estimates sales and revenue at \$2.9 million last year. For the one listed at TTAC's current address in Tennessee, Dun & Bradstreet estimated \$76,000 in sales in 2020. Experian reported in 2020 that the company had \$179,000 in sales from its Nevada corporate address. In February, Experian reported TTAC's revenue at \$202,000.

On applications for government loans during the pandemic, TTAC Publishing said it had 16 employees in May 2020. That number stood at 27 when their second loan was approved in February 2021.

On their website, the Bollingers explained that they make some of their money via affiliate marketing. In "The Truth About Vaccines Affiliate Center" page, which was taken down this month after the AP asked about information posted on it, the couple laid out how they paid people to drive followers, which they refer to as leads, and sales on their site.

Affiliate marketing is a widely used practice in which people are recruited to spread the word about a

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product. Affiliates are granted unique IDs, which can be used in links to track who referred a customer to a website, and who deserves the commission if the customer buys something.

People who signed up as an affiliate for the "Truth About Vaccines 2020" video series would receive a unique affiliate ID, which could then be used in a link to share in social media posts or mailing lists.

"We recommend sending at least 3 emails to get the highest conversions and commissions," said the page, which was a part of the Truth About Cancer website as recently as May 7. "The earlier you mail and share on social media, the more you'll make."

The AP took screenshots before it was taken down, and the page is still available in the Internet Archive.

In an October contest for the launch of new episodes of their vaccine videos, the couple said they were "giving away \$40,000+ in prize money!" For one part of the contest, only those who generated at least 2,500 total leads would qualify, while for another, those who generated at least \$10,000 in sales qualified. First prize for both was a \$5,000 bonus.

According to the page, affiliates "earn 40% commissions on all digital products and 30% on all physical product sales."

Several people and groups prominent in the anti-vaccine movement were listed on the page as affiliates. Perhaps best known among them was Kennedy's nonprofit, Children's Health Defense. Kennedy himself was listed as an "expert" on the page, and in addition, was listed in a version captured by the Internet Archive in spring 2020 as ranking among the Top 10 for the series' "Overall Sales Leaderboard."

Kennedy has been working with the Bollingers for several years, said Laura Bono, executive director of Children's Health Defense. Being an affiliate, she said, meant only that the group "shared their materials" and that "It doesn't mean there's a business relationship."

"We shared their information. Then people can choose to purchase, or not, their videos. So we just shared with our list. Like you would anything else," Bono said.

Still, the AP examined social media posts made by Children's Health Defense and found several instances when it posted links to the Bollingers' site using a unique "affiliate ID" including at least five Facebook posts plugging "The Truth About Vaccines 2020" between April and October 2020.

Arunesh Mathur, a computer science expert at the Center for Information Technology Policy at Princeton University, who studies affiliate marketing, confirmed the links included codes used in a popular affiliate system, Post Affiliate Pro. The Bollingers' 'Affiliate Center' said they used the platform to track sales.

Bono said the Bollingers had donated \$10,000 to Children's Health Defense in December 2019. She denied that Kennedy and Children's Health Defense ever received money from the Bollingers for leads, but also said they had received what she called a "negligible" amount in donations from the Bollingers after people followed their links to the site and chose to buy. She estimated the amount at about \$1,000 and declined to clarify.

"No. 1, I don't know it, and No. 2, I don't think it's any of your business," Bono said. "I don't think it's against the law if a company gives money if it's a charitable donation, right?"

She said Kennedy was likely listed as No. 4 on the "Overall Sales Leaderboard" because he shared the Bollinger's link on his Instagram account, which had over 800,000 followers when it was banned in February for spreading misinformation about vaccine safety and COVID-19.

"His followers could choose to click on the link and go watch. Afterward, they could choose to purchase," Bono wrote in an email. The Truth About Vaccines "did provide a small stipend to (Children's Health Defense), not to Mr. Kennedy, for sharing the link. I am unsure of that total."

Children's Health Defense paid Kennedy, its chairman and chief legal counsel, \$255,000 in 2019, according to the most recent publicly available IRS filings.

If Children's Health Defense has received a "negligible" amount on its affiliation with the Bollingers, others have received substantial amounts. In a lawsuit brought last year, Jeff Hays, a former affiliate who promoted "The Truth About Cancer," said he earned around \$240,000 in commissions from 2015 to 2018.

In an archived version of the Truth About Vaccines Affiliate Center web page, captured by the Internet Archive in April 2018, the company states that 25,000 people purchased its first iteration of the "The Truth

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About Vaccines" video series. It said that since the company launched in 2014, it had paid affiliate partners "more than \$12 million for sharing our events with their audiences through email, Facebook, Twitter, etc.," and that "our affiliates have consistently earned an average of over \$2 per click."

Experts say such financial connections among anti-vaccination activists remain largely unknown to people who consume their content, many of whom are simply looking for information and end up falling down a rabbit hole of misinformation.

Many of the people who push vaccine disinformation emphasize that their audience should not trust pharmaceutical companies or "Big Pharma," because they are making lots of money off of vaccines, said Erica DeWald, of the advocacy group Vaccinateyourfamily.org. But those purveyors of disinformation are also making money, said DeWald, who has tracked the Bollingers, Kennedy and others in the industry.

"I definitely think people are being misled. They think that folks are doing this out of the goodness of their heart," she said. "I think there's an assumption that people are making money, right? If you're selling products, of course you make money. But I think they don't realize how much money they're making."

Super-spreaders of vaccine disinformation such as the Bollingers and Kennedy have exploited their relationships with other groups to access new markets, said Imran Ahmed of the Center for Countering Digital Hate.

"Once you start to look at it through the industry lens, it suddenly starts to make sense as to why they're doing all this stuff," he said.

For example, Ahmed said, Kennedy has worked to appeal to African Americans, while the Bollingers have targeted the MAGA movement and far right.

"It's a great market of people that also mistrust the government," Ahmed said of the MAGA movement. "Once someone follows one conspiracy theory, they're likely to follow another."

With COVID, a disparate group of radical, fringe conspiracy theorists have come together around the idea that government can't be trusted, is trying to kill you and is using the vaccine to do it, Ahmed said.

The Bollingers last year founded a political action committee called United Medical Freedom Super PAC, which raised more than \$60,000 in donations, according to reports Ty Bollinger filed with the Federal Election Commission. A chiropractor who has been featured as an "expert" in their videos donated multiple times, twice in the amount of \$1,776 -- a phrase that later became a rallying cry for insurrectionists as they stormed the Capitol. Super PACs can raise unlimited money from individuals and corporations to spend on independent political activities

In a video posted on the Super PAC website 10 months ago, Charlene Bollinger explained to Kennedy that anti-vaccine influencers have to band together, "Because we know the other side, they're working together. They're very efficient. They've got their agendas," she said.

"And we're going to be supporting specifically you, Children's Health Defense. We believe in what you're doing Bobby," she said. "And so, we're going to continue to highlight you. Highlight Children's Health Defense and help you in any way that we can. So that's how we win."

Bono declined to say whether Kennedy agrees with the Bollingers' support of the insurrection or whether he regrets aligning himself with the couple, but said that Kennedy has "chosen peaceful and thoughtful methods of providing information" to lawmakers and others. Children's Health Defense, she said, "doesn't condone any lawbreaking or violence of any kind."

Bono told the AP that she didn't think Children's Health Defense had ever received a donation from the United Medical Freedom Super PAC, saying "I've never heard of it."

One person it has supported is Roger Stone. United Medical Freedom paid the conservative political consultant, lobbyist and adviser to then-President Donald Trump more than \$11,000 on Dec. 18. Stone told the AP that the money was for an appearance he made at a rally in Nashville in October.

Stone also was billed as the keynote speaker for the event the Bollingers held near the U.S. Capitol the afternoon of the Jan. 6, promoted as the "MAGA Freedom Rally D.C.," which blended anti-vaccine "health freedom" activism with "Stop the Steal" rhetoric. Stone said he was supposed to speak at 3:40 p.m. but decided not to go because of the violence at the Capitol that day.

"I had no interest in going up to the capitol under those circumstances," Stone said, adding that he was

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never supposed to be paid for speaking at the Jan. 6 event.

Video of the event was livestreamed but has since been made private. However, video posted online in various places shows it lasting for hours. Charlene Bollinger was emcee, calling for Congress to "Stop the Steal" as the rally kicked off following Trump's speech that day.

Several people prominent in the anti-vaccine movement spoke, including Mikki Willis, who made the conspiracy movie "Plandemic." He told the crowd he had just left the chaos at the Capitol.

"Our proud patriots just pushed through a line of riot police peacefully, as peacefully as that could happen, and are now at the stairs, at the doors of the Capitol," Willis said from the stage. "And it was a beautiful thing to see."

Charlene Bollinger cheered the Capitol breach.

"The Capitol has been stormed by patriots, we're here for this reason, we are winning." She added: "We are at war."

Later that day, Ty Bollinger told the online "Robert Scott Bell Show" that he had been "maced" that day and had been among the people who crowded at the doors of the Capitol in an attempt to get inside, though he said he did not enter.

He called then-Vice President Mike Pence a "traitor," called the people who got inside the building "patriots" and said "today, people's true colors are being made known."

The Bollingers show the convergence of "right-wing world with anti-vaccine and other sorts of anti-COVID, COVID conspiracy theory, anti-public health, health freedom all in one," said Richard Carpiano, a professor of public policy and sociology at University of California, Riverside, who studies vaccine disinformation campaigns.

"At the end of the day, you have these activists trying to win over followers," he said. "For them, it's money-making."

EXPLAINER: Ohio offers \$1M weekly prize as vaccine incentive

By ANDREW WELSH-HUGGINS Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine has made many newsworthy statements in his long political career, but perhaps none has generated such an immediate and intense response as announcing a weekly \$1 million prize and full-ride college scholarships to entice more Ohioans to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

The plan unveiled Wednesday by the Republican governor drew criticism from some Democratic and GOP lawmakers who said it isn't appropriate to use federal pandemic dollars for a contest. But Andy Slavitt, President Joe Biden's senior COVID-19 advisor, said anything that draws attention to vaccines is a good thing.

"In general, I think we like the idea of contests," Slavitt told CNN.

DeWine says he understands people may think he's crazy and consider the concept a waste of money. But he said Wednesday the real waste is a loss of life to the virus now that the vaccine is available.

Beginning May 26, the lottery will provide a \$1 million prize each Wednesday for five weeks.

HOW WILL THE OHIO VACCINE INCENTIVE WORK?

DeWine said details are still being ironed out, but in short, Ohioans age 18 and older who have received at least one dose of the vaccine can get into the drawing one of two ways. Those who are registered voters in the Secretary of State's database will be entered automatically. A website will be available for people to enter if they're not in the elections system.

Each week, names of potential winners will be drawn and their eligibility verified, including whether they've been vaccinated, DeWine spokesman Dan Tierney said. Then their names will be announced during the Ohio Lottery Wednesday evening broadcast, he said.

Vaccinated Ohioans under 18 will be entered into a similar drawing for full college scholarships, including tuition and room and board.

The state Health Department will administer the drawings with help from the Ohio Lottery Commission.

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Winners will pay taxes.

The money will come from the Health Department's unspent coronavirus relief funds. Ohio already distributed \$5.9 billion in federal pandemic funds, and is now in line to receive nearly \$5.4 billion in aid from Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, amounts dwarfing the lottery payouts.

CAN THE PRIZE WORK TO BOOST VACCINATIONS?

The lottery is unlikely to change the minds of those who question the vaccine's safety or are adamantly against getting the shot, said Jane Risen, a behavioral science professor at the University of Chicago who studies judgement and decision-making.

But for those who are worried about side effects or don't want to take time off work, a \$1 million prize could be persuasive, she said.

"We know people pay attention to lotteries and big prizes," she said. "Even though the chances are small, people focus on the prize rather than the probability of winning."

There's also the fear of missing out, Risen said.

"When we get into these giant jackpots, you see people who would never buy a lottery ticket buying them," she said.

WHAT DO LAWMAKERS THINK OF THE VACCINE INCENTIVES?

In the past year, DeWine faced intense criticism from members of his own party over Ohio's continued health orders. While they welcomed the tandem news Wednesday that the state's mask mandate and other orders would end June 2, they also expressed skepticism at the lottery announcement.

"I do not support using gameshow gimmicks with our federal tax dollars," said Rep. Jon Cross, a Republican from Kenton in northern Ohio.

On the other side of the aisle, Rep. Emilia Sykes of Akron, the top House Democrat, questioned the use of federal funds for the lottery.

"Using millions of dollars in relief funds in a drawing is a grave misuse of money that could be going to respond to this ongoing crisis," she said.

In Washington, Biden press secretary Jen Psaki said: "The Department of Treasury has comprehensive guidelines, but does not typically opine on each individual program or creative approach by different states."

Beset by virus, Gaza's hospitals now struggle with wounded

By ISABEL DEBRE and FARES AKRAM Associated Press

GAZA CITY, Gaza Strip (AP) — Just weeks ago, the Gaza Strip's feeble health system was struggling with a runaway surge of coronavirus cases. Authorities cleared out hospital operating rooms, suspended nonessential care and redeployed doctors to patients having difficulty breathing.

Then, the bombs began to fall.

This week's violence between Israel and Gaza's Hamas rulers has killed 103 Palestinians, including 27 children, and wounded 530 people in the impoverished territory. Israeli airstrikes have pounded apartments, blown up cars and toppled buildings.

Doctors across the crowded coastal enclave are now reallocating intensive care unit beds and scrambling to keep up with a very different health crisis: treating blast and shrapnel wounds, bandaging cuts and performing amputations.

Distraught relatives didn't wait for ambulances, rushing the wounded by car or on foot to Shifa Hospital, the territory's largest. Exhausted doctors hurried from patient to patient, frantically bandaging shrapnel wounds to stop the bleeding. Others gathered at the hospital morgue, waiting with stretchers to remove the bodies for burial.

At the Indonesia Hospital in the northern town of Jabaliya, the clinic overflowed after bombs fell nearby. Blood was everywhere, with victims lying on the floors of hallways. Relatives crowded the ER, crying out for loved ones and cursing Israel.

"Before the military attacks, we had major shortages and could barely manage with the second (virus) wave," said Gaza Health Ministry official Abdelatif al-Hajj by phone as bombs thundered in the background.

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"Now casualties are coming from all directions, really critical casualties. I fear a total collapse."

Gutted by years of conflict, the impoverished health care system in the territory of more than 2 million people has always been vulnerable. Bitter division between Hamas and the West Bank-based Palestinian Authority and a nearly 14-year blockade imposed by Israel with Egypt's help also has strangled the infrastructure. There are shortages of equipment and supplies such as blood bags, surgical lamps, anesthesia and antibiotics. Personal protection gear, breathing machines and oxygen tanks remain even scarcer.

Last month, Gaza's daily coronavirus cases and deaths hit record highs, fueled by the spread of a variant that first appeared in Britain, relaxation of movement restrictions during Ramadan, and deepening public apathy and intransigence.

In the bomb-scarred territory where the unemployment rate is 50%, the need for personal survival often trumps the pleas of public health experts. While virus testing remains limited, the outbreak has infected more than 105,700 people, according to health authorities, and killed 976.

As cases climbed last year, stirring fears of a health care catastrophe, authorities set aside clinics just for COVID-19 patients. But that changed as airstrikes pummeled the territory.

Nurses at the European Hospital in the town of Khan Younis, frantically needing room for the wounded, moved dozens of virus patients in the middle of the night to a different building, said hospital director Yousef al-Akkad. Its surgeons and specialists, who had deployed elsewhere for the virus, rushed back to treat head injuries, fractures and abdominal wounds.

If the conflict intensifies, the hospital won't be able to care for the virus patients, al-Akkad said.

"We have only 15 intensive care beds, and all I can do is pray," he said, adding that because the hospital lacks surgical supplies and expertise, he's already arranged to send one child to Egypt for reconstructive shoulder surgery. "I pray these airstrikes will stop soon."

At Shifa, authorities also moved the wounded into its 30 beds that had been set aside for virus patients. Thursday night was the quietest this week for the ICU, as bombs had largely fallen elsewhere in Gaza. Patients with broken bones and other wounds lay amid the din of beeping monitors, intercoms and occasional shouts by doctors. A few relatives huddled around them, recounting the chaotic barrage.

"About 12 people down in one airstrike. It was 6 p.m. in the street. Some were killed, including my two cousins and young sister. It's like this every day," said 22-year-old Atallah al-Masri, sitting beside his wounded brother, Ghassan.

Hospital director Mohammed Abu Selmia lamented the latest series of blows to Gaza's health system.

"The Gaza Strip is under siege for 14 years, and the health sector is exhausted. Then comes the coronavirus pandemic," he said, adding that most of the equipment is as old as the blockade and can't be sent out for repairs.

Now, his teams already strained by virus cases are treating bombing victims, more than half of whom are critical cases needing surgery.

"They work relentlessly," he added

To make matters worse, Israeli airstrikes hit two health clinics north of Gaza City on Tuesday. The strikes wreaked havoc on Hala al-Shawa Health Center, forcing employees to evacuate, and damaged the Indonesian Hospital, according to the World Health Organization. Israel, already under pressure from an International Criminal court investigation into possible war crimes during the 2014 war, reiterated this week that it warns people living in targeted areas to flee. The airstrikes nonetheless have killed civilians and inflicted damage on Gaza's infrastructure.

The violence also has closed a few dozen health centers conducting coronavirus tests, said Sacha Bootsma, director of WHO's Gaza office. This week, authorities conducted some 300 tests a day, compared with 3,000 before the fighting began.

The U.N. Relief and Works Agency, or UNRWA, ordered staff to stay home from its 22 clinics for their safety. Those now-closed centers had also administered coronavirus vaccines, a precious resource in a place that waited months to receive a limited shipment from the U.N.-backed COVAX program. Those doses will expire in just a few weeks and get thrown away, with "huge implications for authorities' ability to mobilize additional vaccines in the future," Bootsma said.

For the newly wounded, however, the virus remains an afterthought.

The last thing that Mohammad Nassar remembers before an airstrike hit was walking home with a friend on a street. When he came to, he said, "we found ourselves lying on the ground."

Now the 31-year-old is hooked up to a tangle of tubes and monitors in the Shifa Hospital surgical ward, with a broken right arm and a shrapnel wound in his stomach.

For Muslims in America, Eid al-Fitr comes as pandemic eases

By MARIAM FAM and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

For Qassim Abdullah, this year's Islamic holiday of Eid al-Fitr marked a bit of a milestone: Now fully vaccinated, the 66-year-old finally felt comfortable enough to return to his mosque for the Eid prayer on Thursday, his first time back since the start of the pandemic.

"It's overwhelming and exciting," the Maryland resident said. "It's very nice to see the community. ...It's just a beautiful feeling."

There were changes: He wore two masks and didn't stand shoulder-to-shoulder with other worshippers as he normally would have during prayers. But Eid still felt more celebratory than last year.

"It is definitely much better," he said. "I don't think it is very close to normal (yet) but it's going that way. At least we're going out of our houses."

Eid al-Fitr marks the end of the holy month of Ramadan when Muslims abstain from food and drink from sunrise to sunset. Traditionally, people gather for prayers, visit family and friends and huddle together around festive meals.

Once again, Muslims are seeking ways to balance the holiday's rituals with coronavirus concerns. But for those in America, even as they observe precautions, this year's Eid comes as the pandemic eases its grip in the country amid ongoing efforts to put vaccine shots into more arms and chart a path back to normalcy.

It's a contrast with many in other countries who are celebrating Eid al-Fitr in a subdued mood for a second year as the pandemic again forces varying restrictions.

In Utah, Dunia Wafai said her community's Eid celebrations are inching closer to normal.

Before the pandemic, she said, her family would dress up, go to the mosque for morning prayer and socialize with other congregants and friends.

When the coronavirus put a halt to that, Wafai's family, like many, got creative. They hosted a COVID-19-safe drive-by celebration and handed out popcorn, cotton candy and goody bags to people in their cars.

This year, she and her family are participating in communal Eid prayers and will be hosting a socially distanced celebration in their backyard on the weekend.

"To have people come and socialize and gather together, eat food together — this is really one of the biggest pleasures for us after this month long of fasting," she said. "Eid is a really big deal for us."

At The Islamic Center of East Lansing, Michigan, the Eid al-Fitr celebration typically draws 4,000 to 5,000 people, so many that the center moves the event to a nearby convention center in neighboring Lansing, the state capital. Last year that was replaced by a virtual ceremony.

The center held Eid prayers Thursday with some changes. Masks were required, and people's temperatures were taken at the door. Worshippers were asked to bring their own prayer rugs and bags for their shoes. Blue tape in the shape of an "X" marked the socially distanced spaces in which worshippers were to place their prayer rugs. And attendees had to pre-register.

"Families have been very eager to bring their kids to the prayers," said Thasin Sardar, an Islamic Center trustee. "Up until now we've been telling people not to bring kids below 13 years of age, but for the Eid, we made an exception."

Doughnuts were available in the center's lobby and children doled out sweets from large bags in the parking lot as worshippers headed back to their cars. Some posed for pictures to mark the moment.

"People are overjoyed," Sardar said. "The sense of community has been rebuilt today."

In Philadelphia, the Masjidullah mosque held the Eid prayer with safety protocols such as temperature checks. It's also offering to-go meals and toys and hosting an outdoor "Eid Bazaar" with vendors.

"There are some people who have got vaccinated who are like, 'Let's go back to normal mode,' and then

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you have others that are still not vaccinated or still, even if vaccinated, are cautious," imam Idris Abdul-Zahir said before the holiday.

Normally Masjidullah partners with other mosques to hold one big Eid prayer that draws thousands, but not this year to avoid crowding.

"Eid is a time to see people you perhaps may have not seen throughout the year," Abdul-Zahir said. "Because we are not all together the way we normally are, it's going to be somewhat bittersweet. But again, we're thankful for the ability to come together in some capacity."

In Bergen County, New Jersey, more than 2,000 people gathered at a park to mark Eid. Ather Usmani, president of Darul Islah mosque, said his organization worked closely with the county to get permission for the event.

"It's a huge, huge difference from the last year," Usmani said before the start of Eid, adding that it helps that many have been vaccinated with the encouragement of the mosque's leadership.

"We are instructing people not to embrace, not to hug, just say, 'Hello, hi,' from 6 feet apart."

The schedule also included a remembrance of community members who died of the virus.

"It's been tough for several families, and we will pray for the people who are still sick, and the message is for unity for the community," Usmani said.

For 14-year-old Reem Kirja who lives in Iowa City, Eid normally means buying new clothes, receiving traditional cash gifts, eating out, going to a trampoline park or an arcade after prayers.

"It means a day where I can just relax and just remember that I'm so happy to be a Muslim and I'm so proud to be a Muslim."

Now she has even more reason to celebrate. The eighth grader has been advocating for years for Eid to be a day off from school, and last month district officials approved two days off next school year to accommodate Eid al-Fitr and the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur, according to the Iowa City Press-Citizen.

The decision sent a message, Kirja said, "that we, as a community, welcome everyone that lives here."

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Twin MDs battle entrenched racism in the medical world

By LINDSEY TANNER AP Medical Writer

The inseparable sisters always stood out — identical twins from Twinsburg, Ohio, whip-smart students from the side of town with unpaved streets and no sidewalks, excluded from the gifted track because

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they were Black.

Their friends were white and a classmate's comment still stings: "I don't even think of you as Black." I said, "Thank you." And I felt pride," Brittani James recalls, shuddering.

"I believed we were special. I believed other people in our neighborhood weren't as good as us," she said.

The twins were indeed special — they won free rides to the Ivy League, earned medical degrees at prestigious universities, and have thrived in a profession where they are vastly outnumbered by virtue of their skin color.

But their mission now is to dismantle the entrenched bigotry behind that classmate's backhanded remark.

At 33, James and her twin, Brandi Jackson, have taken on the medical establishment in pioneering work to eliminate racism in medicine.

"We're teaching how to see it and how to undo it," Jackson said.

James, a family medicine doctor, and Jackson, a psychiatrist, have developed anti-racist coursework used in two Chicago medical schools. They've co-founded the Institute for Antiracism in Medicine, where physicians can earn continuing medical education credit for taking classes on how their profession has made Black patients sicker.

There's more. They're seeking federal legislation to require hospitals to reveal outcomes by race, with penalties for those where Black patients consistently fare worse. They've helped created an online support group to help like-minded, stressed-out Black doctors heal and strategize.

They've even hatched a plan to create black coats for doctors. That's not as radical as it might sound -- black coats were the tradition in the 19th century.

Their latest achievement? Helping lead a charge against the American Medical Association and the influential research journal it publishes.

The twins are riding a wave and they got there by "learning to breathe underwater." That's how Jackson describes adapting to "this constant oppressive pressure" of racism.

"I remember being young and being told in school that I can't be smart, because of where I'm from, being told your hair is ugly," she said. "You learn to live with the kind of pain that comes just for being. Just for walking down the street. You can't name it when you're that young. It does something to your psyche."

It can break you, and Jackson and James have had fragile moments of self-doubt. But the pandemic year has fueled their resolve. They say the relentless toll on people of color from the coronavirus and video-documented police violence have laid bare the damage caused by structural racism.

"It is literally killing us," James said.

In recent steps that critics labeled mostly symbolic, the AMA has made an effort to come to grips with its racial history. The group excluded Black doctors from its ranks for over 100 years, and even today, just 5% of all U.S. physicians are Black.

Within the past few years, the nation's largest doctors' group hired Dr. Aletha Maybank as its first chief health equity officer and declared racism a public health threat. In February, it removed a statue displayed at its Chicago headquarters of Dr. Nathan Davis, AMA's founder, who promoted racist policies.

But later that month, a podcast hosted by the AMA's flagship medical journal caused a stir. The tweet promoting the podcast read, "No physician is racist, so how can there be structural racism in health?"

It was, Maybank said, "a gut punch."

The sisters' institute started a petition in response, demanding that the journal diversify its mostly white editorial staff and ensure that medical research relating to race and racism gets published. The effort has garnered more than 8,800 signatures so far.

AMA suspended the journal's chief editor and a deputy editor resigned.

AMA also agreed to meet last month to hear demands for change from several Black physicians, including James and New York cardiologist Dr. Raymond Givens, another leading AMA critic.

The doctors will be looking to hear how AMA plans to address their concerns at a second meeting, but James says the AMA's anti-racism plan — in the works long before the sisters' activism — makes her op-

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timistic. In an 83-page document released Tuesday, AMA vowed to dismantle structural racism inside its own ranks and within the U.S. medical establishment with steps that include diversifying its own staff and collaborating with outside groups.

The group reached out to James and other physicians to discuss the plan — a hopeful sign, she said. “We still have to hold their feet to the fire,” she said.

Part of the problem is doctors’ deeply embedded identity as healers and “good people,” Jackson said. “It’s hard when you’re indoctrinated in that culture to stop and say, ‘Are we really doing good?’”

A racial imbalance in medical leadership perpetuates the problem, James said -- those making decisions and policies don’t look like the populations they serve.

James treats patients at a clinic on Chicago’s South Side and teaches at the University of Illinois-Chicago. Jackson has taught at Rush Medical College and is the behavioral health director at a Chicago health network that treats LGBTQ and other underserved patients.

Working with students, medical residents and colleagues, they strive to highlight the harm caused by the disproven idea that there are biological differences in Black people that contribute to health disparities.

Some examples:

--The longstanding myth that Black people somehow have a higher tolerance for pain, perpetuated during slavery times, has often led to undertreatment.

--Medical school instruction on skin diseases typically shows how they appear on white skin, not Black or brown, leading to missed diagnoses.

--In psychiatry, impulsive, disruptive behavior in white children is often labeled attention deficit disorder, a diagnosis that often guarantees classroom accommodations. Identical behavior in Black kids is more often labeled conduct disorder, leading to detention rather than accommodations “unless they have a really sharp parent who advocates the hell out of it,” Jackson said.

--A commonly used algorithm for kidney function gauges it differently in Black patients, potentially leading to undertreatment of kidney disease. Rush University Medical Center is among several U.S. health systems that recently stopped using that algorithm.

The sisters’ message isn’t new, said Dr. David Ansell, a physician at Rush who has worked with their institute. But their timing is uncanny -- coming at the convergence of a deadly pandemic that has highlighted racial health inequities, a rise in white supremacy, and civil unrest over police brutality.

At such a moment, he said, the sisters can make a difference.

Their curiosity in science and medicine started young. James remembers taking “field notes” while spying on people. Jackson remembers turning their mother’s blue bead case into a bug hospital.

“We emptied it and would go under rocks in search of potato bugs, worms. We gave each their own compartments ... then would examine them and took notes when they appeared sluggish.” Once, they sprinkled salt on a snail to dry it out when it seemed “too moist. He just curled up and died. I still feel bad about the snail,” Jackson said.

Their parents were hard-working and supportive, but the twins didn’t tell them when they were accepted at Cornell University, knowing the cost was prohibitive. They broke the news when they landed full scholarships.

It was during a college summer program that James for the first time saw a Black doctor. She stared. “It was like a unicorn,” but it planted a seed.

They separated for medical school -- Northwestern for Jackson, University of Michigan for James. Surrounded by rich white kids and professors, James struggled.

“It was this huge feeling like I don’t belong here. None of the professors look like you, what you’re learning about people like you is racist and you’re getting tested on it.”

She left school for a year and sank into a deep depression until getting involved in volunteer community health work. Colleagues there encouraged her to go back. In low moments, James says she draws on the strength of ancestors.

“I’m not being bombed. I’m not being hosed,” she said. “You have to keep getting up.”

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Now, she and her sister serve as mentors to other medical students from nontraditional backgrounds. Medical resident Shan Siddiqi is a Canadian Muslim whose parents are from Pakistan. He works under James' guidance at a clinic where James says "the sickest of the sick" go for treatment, patients with chronic illnesses worsened by poverty, stress from living in violent neighborhoods and now COVID-19. Siddiqi said he's impressed by her compassion, taking the time to treat them as humans and helping them overcome challenges to getting medication or specialty care.

Jordan Cisneros, a third-year medical student who Jackson has mentored at Rush Medical College, says her guidance has helped him get through a tough year. His father died from COVID-19 in January and George Floyd's televised death last May felt personal.

"I've had run-ins with police. I've had run-ins with racism. I've seen things firsthand," he said.

In a Zoom class last year, Jackson brought up Floyd's death and broke down crying. "It's very taboo to cry in medicine," but Jackson made it seem OK to show emotion and vulnerability, he said.

The sisters are extremely close, often finishing each other's sentences, but there are differences too.

James is married to a white physician, a guy she thought was a math nerd when they met but is now her partner in battle. She tears up when asked what she wishes for their 1 1/2-year-old daughter, Lillian.

"I don't want her to have to live in a box like I did," James said. "I want her to raise her voice so she knows it's OK to be everything that she is, especially when the world is trying so hard to make Black and brown girls small and not heard."

Jackson is single, loves to cook in her spare time and thinks like a scientist in the kitchen, marveling at how a humble carrot can transform into something sublime with just a little butter and brown sugar.

James wears her passion on her sleeve and pours her soul into Twitter, calling out racism every time she sees it. Jackson says she has no appetite for Twitter wars and "tries to be the one who is grounding. I want to come at it with a loving, calm energy," she said.

The sisters are hitting their stride in 2021; Jackson calls it the year of Black women: Michelle Obama helped pave the way, now there's Vice President Kamala Harris.

"It moves me to tears that all of my ancestor Black women who never got to see the day ... that they were in vogue and their voice was listened to," she said. "It is Black women's lives that survive and keep surviving."

Desperate for workers, US restaurants and stores raise pay

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economic Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. restaurants and stores are rapidly raising pay in an urgent effort to attract more applicants and keep up with a flood of customers as the pandemic eases.

McDonald's, Sheetz and Chipotle are just some of the latest companies to follow Amazon, Walmart and Costco in boosting wages, in some cases to \$15 an hour or higher.

The pay gains are, of course, a boon to these employees. Restaurants, bars, hotels and stores remain the lowest-paying industries, and many of their workers ran the risk of contracting COVID-19 on the job over the past year while white-collar employees were able to work from home.

Still, the pay increases could contribute to higher inflation if companies raise prices to cover the additional labor costs. Some businesses, however, could absorb the costs or invest over time in automation to offset higher wages.

States and cities are easing business restrictions as COVID-19 deaths and cases plummet, and in places like Florida, Nevada, and Texas, restaurant traffic is above or near pre-pandemic levels, according to OpenTable, a software provider to the industry.

Many companies say they are struggling to find workers.

"Customers are coming back faster than restaurants can staff up," said Josh Bivens, research director at the left-leaning Economic Policy Institute. "By raising pay, they are able to get more workers in the door."

In April, even as overall hiring slowed, a category that includes restaurants, hotels and entertainment

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venues hired more new workers than it did the previous month, a sign the extra pay is working.

McDonald's on Thursday said it will raise pay for workers in its 650 company-owned stores to an average of \$15 an hour by 2024. Entry-level employees will make \$11 an hour. The company is urging its 14,000 franchised restaurants to make the same changes.

Also on Thursday, Amazon said it will pay new hires \$17 an hour, as it seeks to add 75,000 new workers. The online giant said it is offering a \$100 bonus for new hires who have been vaccinated.

And Sheetz, a mid-Atlantic convenience store chain, said Monday it is giving its 18,000 employees a \$2-an-hour raise and an additional \$1 an hour for the summer.

Across the restaurant industry, the pay gains have largely returned overall wages to the same growth trend they were on before the pandemic, Bivens said. He expects the increases to climb above that trend in the coming months.

Consumer prices rose 0.3% at restaurants in April, far less than their labor costs that month. That suggests many restaurants are accepting smaller profits rather than passing on the costs to customers, Bivens said. Restaurant prices have risen 3.8% in the past year, which is above pre-pandemic levels.

Worries about higher inflation have dominated financial markets after consumer prices jumped 4.2% in April compared with a year earlier, the biggest gain in 13 years. But the rise was driven largely by soaring used car prices and more expensive airline tickets, not higher labor costs.

In a sign that companies in general are struggling to add workers, the number of available jobs in the U.S. shot to 8.2 million at the end of March. Yet employers added just 266,000 jobs in April, far fewer than the previous month.

Some of the unemployed are reluctant to return to work for fear of contracting COVID-19, while many women have left the workforce to take care of children who are still in online school. Because of an extra \$300 in unemployment aid, some of the jobless are receiving more in benefits than they earned at their old jobs.

Gad Levanon, a labor economist at the Conference Board, a business research group, said labor shortages will probably be temporary, which suggests pay won't necessarily keep rising at the same pace.

"The fear of COVID is probably going to decline, schools are probably going to open in September, the extra unemployment benefits will end in September," he said. "So we will see some easing in labor shortages."

Even with the recent wage gains, weekly pay averaged just \$477.40 in April in a category that includes restaurants, bars, hotels, amusement parks and other entertainment venues.

That partly reflects the many part-time workers in the industry, some of whom prefer shorter schedules. But others would probably work more if they could.

Fight for \$15 and a Union, a labor group that is trying to unionize fast food workers, said that the increases aren't enough and that it will continue to demand a starting wage of \$15 per hour for all McDonald's workers.

"Clearly, McDonald's understands that in order to hire and retain talented workers, something needs to change," McDonald's employee and union organizer Doneshia Babbitt said in a statement. "Now, they're raising pay for some of us and using fancy math tricks to gloss over the fact that they're selling most of us short."

Fight for \$15 is planning strikes in 15 cities next Wednesday ahead of the fast food giant's annual shareholder meeting.

US jobless claims fall to 473K as more GOP governors bar aid

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell last week to 473,000, a new pandemic low and the latest evidence that fewer employers are cutting jobs as consumers ramp up spending and more businesses reopen.

The decline — the fourth in the past five weeks — coincides with a rash of states led by Republican

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governors that have blamed expanded jobless benefits for a slowdown in hiring and are acting to cut off the additional aid.

Thursday's report from the Labor Department showed that applications declined 34,000 from a revised 507,000 a week earlier. The number of weekly jobless claims — a rough measure of the pace of layoffs — has fallen significantly from a peak of 900,000 in January.

Last week's unemployment claims marked the lowest level since March of last year, when the viral pandemic erupted across the economy. The decline in applications is coinciding with a steadily improving economy. More Americans are venturing out to shop, travel, dine out and congregate at entertainment venues. The reopening has proceeded so fast that many businesses aren't yet able to staff up as quickly as they would like.

In April, employers added 266,000 jobs, far fewer than expected. The surprisingly tepid gain raised concerns that businesses may find it hard to quickly add jobs as the economy keeps improving and that regaining pre-pandemic employment levels could take longer than hoped.

In Thursday's report on jobless claims, the government said nearly 16.9 million people were receiving unemployment aid during the week of April 24, the latest period for which data is available. That is up from 16.2 million in the previous week and suggests that hiring wasn't strong enough last month to pull people off unemployment.

The rise in unemployment recipients occurred mostly in California and Michigan, where more than 600,000 people were added to the federal jobless benefit program that was set up for gig workers and contractors.

The hiring slowdown has led to a political backlash against several federal expansions to unemployment benefits, including an extra \$300 in weekly benefits paid for by the federal government, on top of state payments that average about \$320. The supplement was included in President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion stimulus measure, approved in March, and is set to expire the week of Sept. 6.

But so far, 12 states — all with GOP governors — have announced that they will stop paying the extra benefit as soon as June or July. In Tennessee, for example, Gov. Bill Lee said the state will stop issuing the payment July 3. In Missouri, Gov. Mike Parson said on Twitter that it will end June 12.

The 12 states will also end their participation in two federal benefit programs: one that has made gig workers and the self-employed eligible for assistance for the first time, and a second that provides extra weeks of aid. Together, those programs cover 12.5 million people nationwide.

On Thursday, Arizona said it will stop paying the additional \$300 July 10, though it will continue with the two federal benefit programs.

Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey is also throwing in a sweetener: A \$2,000 bonus paid to workers who get and keep a full time job for at least 10 weeks. Part-time workers will get \$1,000.

Businesses have cited the extra \$300 as a reason they are struggling to hire. An analysis by Bank of America economists found that people who had earned up to \$32,000 in their previous jobs can receive as much or more income from jobless aid. Some unemployed people say the extra benefit allows them to take more time to look for work, which can make hiring harder.

There are other factors that help explain why many people who are out of work might be reluctant to take jobs. Some worry that working in restaurants, hotels or other services industries will expose them to the virus, according to government surveys. In addition, many women, especially working mothers, have had to leave the workforce to care for children who are still in online school for at least part of the week.

The Century Foundation, a think tank, estimates that the move by the 12 states will cut off benefits for 895,000 people. In addition to Tennessee and Missouri, the other states are: Alabama, Arkansas, Idaho, Iowa, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, South Carolina, Utah and Wyoming.

In some states, the impact will fall the hardest on African-Americans, the Century Foundation calculates. Half the unemployment benefit recipients in Alabama and South Carolina are Black; in Mississippi, two-thirds are.

Biden earlier this week disputed the notion that the \$300 payment is to blame for the drop-off in hiring last month. But he also urged the Labor Department to work with states on renewing requirements that recipients of unemployment aid must search for jobs and take a position if offered.

The job search rule was suspended during the pandemic, when many businesses were closed and employment opportunities were few. A majority of states have now reinstated it.

"Anyone collecting unemployment, who is offered a suitable job must take the job or lose their unemployment benefits," Biden said.

Radical rabbi's followers rise in Israel amid new violence

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — In the 1980s, Rabbi Meir Kahane's violent anti-Arab ideology was considered so repugnant that Israel banned him from parliament and the U.S. listed his party as a terrorist group.

Today, his disciples march through the streets by the hundreds, chanting "Death to Arabs" and assaulting any they come across. This week, they took part in a wave of communal violence in Jerusalem and mixed cities across Israel in which Arabs and Jews viciously attacked people and torched cars.

On Thursday evening, there was more ethnic strife. In Tel Aviv, two Jewish men attacked a journalist covering a gathering of ultranationalists. In the central Israeli city of Lod, a Jewish man was shot and seriously wounded by an Arab man. In Jaffa, an Israeli soldier was attacked by a group of Arabs and was hospitalized in serious condition.

Israelis shocked by the violence have cast the right-wing extremism as a nasty aberration or a reaction to Palestinian violence. But to Arab citizens, who make up 20% of Israel's population, the heirs of Kahane are a natural outgrowth of a discriminatory system — normalized by some mainstream leaders who largely share their views.

Admirers of Kahane were elected to parliament in March as allies of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party, and one of the most prominent has become a fixture on Israeli TV.

Their resurgence has injected another element of volatility to the conflict. It's also part of a broader shift to the right in Israel, where Kahane's disciples are hardly alone in adopting a hard line toward the Palestinians and trafficking in anti-Arab rhetoric.

Right-wing parties that support Jewish settlements and oppose Palestinian independence won a large majority of seats in March, and Netanyahu and other right-wing leaders have often cast Israel's Arab minority as a fifth column — unless they needed their votes.

During his lone term in parliament in the mid-1980s, before he was banned, Kahane was shunned by colleagues, including the Likud, and frequently gave speeches to an empty chamber. His racist agenda called for banning intermarriage between Arabs and Jews, stripping Arabs of their Israeli citizenship, and the mass expulsions of Palestinians. At one point, he was suspended for waving a noose at an Arab lawmaker.

Kahane was banned from running in 1988, and two years later, he was assassinated by an Egyptian-American in New York. But his hate-filled ideology has remained influential in Israel.

In 1994, Kahane follower Baruch Goldstein opened fire in a holy site in the occupied West Bank city of Hebron, killing 29 Muslim worshippers and wounding over 100. That led both Israel and the U.S. to label his Kach movement and an offshoot, Kahane Lives, as terrorist groups.

In March, another admirer of the late rabbi, who for years had hung a picture of Goldstein on his living room wall, was elected to Israel's parliament.

Itamar Ben-Gvir joined the Knesset as part of Religious Zionism, a bloc of far-right parties that came together at Netanyahu's prodding so none would fall below the electoral threshold.

Since then, Ben-Gvir has made frequent media appearances, displaying a cheerful demeanor and a knack for deflecting criticism as he banters with TV and radio hosts.

It's working: Ifat, a research firm, says Ben-Gvir is the third most interviewed politician on Israeli TV and radio, behind Netanyahu and Naftali Bennett, another right-wing politician.

"He's a good speaker and he knows how to play the game," said Shuki Friedman, an expert on Israel's far right at the Israel Democracy Institute. "On one hand, he is addressing his supporters. ... On the other hand, he knows not to make mainstream Israelis too angry."

He has staged provocative visits to Arab areas and been a near-constant presence on the sidelines of

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recent clashes, rallying ultranationalist supporters to confront Palestinians and assert "Jewish Power" — the name of his party.

Last week, he set up an outdoor parliamentary "office" in an Arab neighborhood of east Jerusalem where Jewish settlers are trying to expel Palestinians from their homes, setting off a melee. He later called for police to use live fire against Palestinian protesters at the Al-Aqsa Mosque compound, a site sacred to Jews and Muslims.

A long-range Hamas rocket, fired at Jerusalem on Monday, disrupted the Jerusalem Day parade, which celebrates Israel's annexation of east Jerusalem.

The mob violence erupted the next day. A Telegram channel displaying the Kahanist emblem — a yellow fist inside a black Star of David — swelled from a few hundred members to more than 6,000.

It was used to organize a crowd in the Tel Aviv suburb of Bat Yam on Wednesday that pulled an Arab from his car and beat him severely. The attack horrified Israelis and was widely condemned, including by far-right politicians. Israeli media reported the country's police chief blamed Ben-Gvir for inciting a Jewish "intifada," the Arabic term used to refer to two Palestinian uprisings.

As a lawyer with a long history of defending Jewish extremists accused of attacking Arabs, Ben-Gvir has been careful not to run afoul of laws against incitement. He calls Kahane "righteous and holy," but has tried to distance himself by saying he doesn't agree with everything the rabbi said.

Ben-Gvir first became a national figure when he famously broke a hood ornament off then-Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's car in 1995.

"We got to his car, and we'll get to him too," he said, just weeks before Rabin was assassinated by a Jewish extremist opposed to his peace efforts with the Palestinians.

Israel has shifted even more to the right since then, driven by the failure of peace efforts, repeated rounds of violence and demographic shifts. Ben-Gvir's supporters are largely religious and ultra-Orthodox Jews, who tend to have large families.

Netanyahu hoped to tap into that by assembling a far-right bloc with Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich, another ultranationalist. Ironically, they foiled Netanyahu's plan by blocking his outreach to a small Arab party needed to secure a parliamentary majority.

Dan Meridor, a former justice minister and Likud heavyweight who helped lead efforts to ban Kahane from parliament in 1988, believes Netanyahu made a grave error in rehabilitating his followers.

"You can just see the dramatic and very harmful change the Likud went through when they legitimized the Kahanists," he said. "It changed very tragically to me."

Palestinian citizens of Israel, on the other hand, view Ben-Gvir as the latest in a long line of Israeli politicians — including Netanyahu — who have treated them as second-class citizens, if not enemies of the state. It's one of many grievances they point to in explaining the recent protests and clashes with police.

Diana Buttu, a lawyer and analyst who is a Palestinian citizen of Israel, says it's easy for Israelis to dismiss the Kahanists as a fringe group.

"But if you step back and look at this country through the eyes of a Palestinian, you see that at every single political level, in every single political party, there's been some form of anti-Palestinian racism."

Chrissy Teigen apologizes to Courtney Stodden for harassment

By The Associated Press undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Chrissy Teigen has apologized for harassing a then-teenage Courtney Stodden online years ago.

"Not a lot of people are lucky enough to be held accountable for all their past (expletive) in front of the entire world. I'm mortified and sad at who I used to be. I was an insecure, attention seeking troll," Teigen tweeted Wednesday in a long thread.

She continued: "I have worked so hard to give you guys joy and be beloved and the feeling of letting you down is nearly unbearable, truly. These were not my only mistakes and surely won't be my last as hard as I try but god I will try!!"

The 35-year-old Teigen, with more than 13 million followers on Twitter, was in her mid-20s when she

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harassed Stodden. That included tweets urging Stodden to end their life. Stodden is a reality TV personality who identifies as non-binary and uses the pronoun "they."

Stodden told the Daily Beast that Teigen's harassment and that of many others came as they faced intense media criticism at age 16 for marrying 51-year-old Doug Hutchison in 2011. The two divorced last year. The marriage led to international fame for the young model and singer-songwriter from Washington state, including TV appearances on "Celebrity Big Brother" and her own "Courtney."

Stodden accepted Teigen's apology in a post on Instagram, with reservations.

"All of me wants to believe this is a sincere apology, but it feels like a public attempt to save her partnerships with Target and other brands who are realizing her 'wokeness' is a broken record," Stodden said.

Teigen has a line of cookware called Cravings. She's a model and cookbook author who's married to R&B crooner John Legend.

Company: Ex-Trump lawyer raiding nonprofit for personal use

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

Former Trump attorney and self-proclaimed "Kraken releaser" Sidney Powell has told prospective donors that her group, Defending the Republic, is a legal defense fund to protect the integrity of U.S. elections.

But the company suing Powell over her baseless claims of a rigged presidential election says the true beneficiary of her social welfare organization is Powell herself.

Dominion Voting Systems claims Powell has raided Defending the Republic's coffers to pay for personal legal expenses, citing her own remarks from a radio interview. The Denver-based voting technology vendor sued Powell and others who spread false claims that the company helped steal the 2020 election from Donald Trump.

"Now, Powell seeks to abuse the corporate forms she created for her law firm and fundraising website to hide funds that she raised through her defamatory campaign, shielding those funds from the very company that was harmed by the defamatory campaign," Dominion lawyers wrote in a May 5 court filing.

The dispute shines a light on how Trump allies continue to support, spread and allegedly profit from lies about fraud in the 2020 election. Although the election is settled, and all major court challenges have been dismissed, Powell's legal defense fund continues to raise money, with help from conspiracy-minded supporters like QAnon adherents.

Her group will receive a cut of proceeds from ticket sales for a Memorial Day weekend conference in Dallas called the "For God & Country Patriot Roundup," the event's website says. Some leading purveyors of far-right conspiracy theories are headliners, including Powell, pro-Trump attorney Lin Wood and former national security adviser Michael T. Flynn.

Event organizer John Sabal, known as "QAnon John" to followers of the QAnon conspiracy theory, declined to explain the decision to financially support Powell's nonprofit, also known as DTR, but said the money isn't for her personal benefit.

"As far as I know, DTR is benefiting a bunch of different causes. Those I will not speak on, but you can talk to her about that," he said.

Powell didn't respond to interview requests, but one of her attorneys said she denies Dominion's accusations. Powell's personal legal bills are covered by her malpractice carrier, and her nonprofit has a proper corporate structure with a board of directors, said her lawyer, Howard Kleinhendler.

"She does not have unfettered control over its funds or how the funds are spent," Kleinhendler wrote in an email. "DTR intends to comply with all federal and state filing requirements when they are due. At that time you as well as the rest of the world will see the necessary financials."

Trump and his allies filed more than 50 lawsuits in multiple states over the election and lost at every turn. Powell and Rudy Giuliani were among the lawyers behind the cases claiming a conspiracy by Democrats, despite Republican state leaders, and Trump's own attorney general and other administration officials, publicly stating there was no major election fraud. Powell appeared with Giuliani at a press conference and made multiple TV appearances.

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But after Powell threatened to “blow up” Georgia with a “biblical” court filing, the Trump legal team distanced itself from her, saying she was not working on their behalf. She later made the comment on how she would release “the Kraken,” an apparent reference to the film “Clash of the Titans” in which Zeus gives the order to release the mythical sea monster.

In a November interview, Powell noted she was not being paid by the Trump campaign but “by the people of the United States of America.”

Tickets for the Dallas conference cost \$500 for general admission and \$1,000 for VIP passes. The event’s website doesn’t name other beneficiaries or specify how much money goes to Powell’s nonprofit. Much of the conference was supposed to be held at a complex called Gilley’s Dallas, but Sabal said the venue canceled his booking after news coverage of the event’s QAnon connections.

QAnon followers believe Trump has been secretly fighting a cabal of Satan-worshipping “deep state” enemies, prominent Democrats and Hollywood elites operating a child sex trafficking ring.

Logan Strain, a conspiracy theory researcher who co-hosts the “QAnon Anonymous” podcast, said Powell has appeared on QAnon promoters’ YouTube channels and is viewed as a “hero of the republic” among QAnon followers. It wouldn’t surprise Strain if Powell is trying to harness the movement as a fundraising source.

“There is a great deal of money to be made in promoting and catering to QAnon,” he said. “This is why a lot of people suspected it was sort of a money-making grift, at least in part, from the beginning.”

Defending the Republic describes itself as a 501(c)4 nonprofit, but it isn’t listed in an IRS database of tax-exempt organizations. Groups recognized by the IRS as a 501(c)(4) are exempt from paying taxes on income, including donations, but those donations aren’t tax deductible as charitable contributions.

Powell’s website says donors can mail checks to an address in West Palm Beach, Florida, that corresponds with a UPS Store. Under the same address, Defending the Republic Inc. registered in February with Florida’s Division of Corporations as a nonprofit formed for “social welfare purposes.”

Records link other leading conspiracy theorists from Trump’s orbit to Powell’s nonprofit. Powell, Wood, Flynn and Flynn’s brother, Joseph, were named as directors of Defending the Republic in December 2020 filings with the Texas secretary of state’s office.

Joseph Flynn said in a text message that he’s no longer a director but declined to explain why.

“We are not interested in talking to the fake news media,” Flynn wrote.

Wood recalls Powell asking him to serve as a director, but said he hasn’t done any work on the nonprofit.

“She didn’t follow up with me about it,” he said,

Articles of incorporation filed in Florida in February listed MyPillow founder and CEO Mike Lindell as a director. But Lindell said he asked to be removed as a director of Defending the Republic after less than one week because he decided to form his own legal defense fund. Lindell is also being sued by Dominion.

“I went on my own because I don’t have time for other people’s stuff. I want to focus on what I’m doing,” Lindell said.

Defending the Republic’s chairman and CEO is former Overstock CEO Patrick Byrne, whose comments about the “deep state” led to his resignation from the company in 2019.

To support its claim that Powell is using nonprofit money for her personal legal defense, Dominion cited her remarks during a Dec. 29 appearance on “The Rush Limbaugh Show.” Powell told the radio show’s guest host that listeners could go to her website to donate to the nonprofit “that is working to help defend all these cases and to defend me now that I’m under a massive attack from the attorney general of Michigan and the city of Detroit and everything else.”

Michigan’s governor, attorney general and secretary of state — all Democrats — have urged state bar officials in Texas and Michigan to permanently disbar Powell for ethical violations over election lawsuits.

Meanwhile, Eric Coomer, Dominion’s security director, has filed a separate defamation suit in Colorado against Powell, her law firm, Defending the Republic and others. Another voting technology firm, Smartmatic USA Corp., sued Powell in New York over her bogus election-fixing claims.

Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, asked a federal court to order Powell and other lawyers who challenged Wisconsin’s election results to cover \$106,000 in state legal fees. Powell called it a frivolous

request. A judge hasn't resolved the dispute yet.

Dominion sued Powell in federal court on Jan. 8, seeking over \$1.3 billion in damages against her, her law firm and her fundraising website. The company claimed Powell treated Defending the Republic "as her personal funds, redirecting them to the law firm she controls and dominates ... and raiding them to pay for her personal legal defense."

A nonprofit organized under Section 501(c)(4) of the tax code, as Defending the Republic claims to be, can engage in some political activities provided that's not its primary activity. Unlike political committees, tax-exempt social welfare groups don't have to disclose donors. Forms notifying the IRS of a group's intent to operate as a 501(c)(4) aren't public records, according to an IRS spokesman.

Samuel Brunson, a tax law professor at Loyola University in Chicago, said the IRS bars 501(c)(4) groups from spending money for the benefit of private individuals. Doing that could jeopardize its tax-exempt status, he added.

"In general, the IRS doesn't police it very closely," Brunson said.

Missouri governor drops voter-approved Medicaid expansion

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — Missouri Gov. Mike Parson dropped plans Thursday to expand the state's Medicaid health care program to thousands of low-income adults after the Republican-led Legislature refused to provide funding for the voter-approved measure.

The Republican governor said his administration had withdrawn a request to expand coverage that had been submitted to the federal Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services in compliance with a constitutional amendment passed by voters last August.

He noted that the state's \$35 billion budget approved by lawmakers last week didn't provide the funding he had requested for an expansion of Medicaid, which is known in Missouri as MO HealthNet.

"Without a revenue source or funding authority from the General Assembly, we are unable to proceed with the expansion at this time and must withdraw our State Plan Amendments to ensure Missouri's existing MO HealthNet program remains solvent," Parson said Thursday.

The decision is likely to trigger a lawsuit from supporters of Medicaid expansion.

"This is going to end up in court — the governor knows it's going to end up in court," said Richard von Glahn, policy director for Missouri Jobs With Justice, one of the organizations supporting Medicaid expansion.

Missouri Hospital Association spokesman Dave Dillon expressed disappointment over Parson's decision and said the association would coordinate with other Medicaid expansion supporters about the best way to proceed with litigation.

Democratic lawmakers denounced Parson's decision. House Minority Leader Crystal Quade said Parson had broken his promise to uphold the constitution. Senate Minority Leader John Rizzo said in a written statement that the governor was "caving to the new Authoritarian Republican Regime that doesn't respect the outcome of elections."

Though the federal government would fund the vast majority of a Medicaid expansion, some Republican lawmakers said the state cannot afford its share of the long-term costs under the terms of a law signed by President Barack Obama in 2010.

The Missouri director of the conservative advocacy group Americans for Prosperity, which sued unsuccessfully last year to knock the amendment off the ballot, said Parson's decision would "protect Missouri taxpayers from unsustainable and reckless government spending."

The constitutional amendment passed by voters required Parson's administration to submit a plan to federal officials to expand Medicaid by March 1, which he did. The ballot measure stated that people ages 19-65 earning up to 138% of the federal poverty level — less than \$17,774 annually for an individual or \$37,570 for a family of four — "shall be eligible" and "shall receive coverage" for Medicaid benefits starting July 1.

The amendment did not change existing eligibility standards for children and seniors, and it did not say

how to pay for the expansion that is projected to cover about 275,000 people.

Parson had opposed Medicaid expansion at the ballot box, but he said he would uphold the will of voters and so included \$1.9 billion in federal and state funding for it in the budget he proposed to lawmakers earlier this year.

While dropping the expansion plan Thursday, Parson referenced a June 2020 state appeals court ruling that the ballot measure didn't direct or restrict the Legislature's ability to decide how to fund Medicaid.

Although the Legislature didn't include specific funding for the expansion, Democrats and some health care advocates contend the additional low-income adults could be covered from the general pool of funds that was allotted for Medicaid.

"Cancer patients cannot wait for legal battles to access the life-saving coverage that Medicaid expansion provides," said Emily Kalmer, the Missouri government relations director for the society's Cancer Action Network.

The Legislature's refusal to add money for the Medicaid expansion is not the first time that Missouri lawmakers have sought to undo measures passed by voters. Last year, legislators placed a measure on the ballot to reverse key parts of a redistricting measure approved by voters in 2018. Voters approved the lawmakers' revised version. A decade ago, the Legislature also revised a voter-approved measure imposing regulations on dog-breeding businesses.

West Virginia trial puts spotlight on sprawling opioid cases

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

A corner of West Virginia wrenched by opioid addiction is getting the chance to argue in a courtroom that some of the corporate giants it blames for a public health crisis that left hundreds of people dead deserve to be held accountable.

The city of Huntington and surrounding Cabell County sued the nation's three largest opioid distributors. No matter the outcome of the federal court trial that opened this month, the verdict is expected to resonate well beyond the industrial region.

The trial in West Virginia, as well as legal proceedings underway in California, could set the stage for resolutions to similar lawsuits brought by thousands of local governments across the United States. Opioid overdoses have been linked to the deaths of nearly 500,000 Americans since 2000 and reached a record of nearly 50,000 in 2019.

Yet the sprawling nature of litigation over the addiction epidemic around the country means it could take years to wrap up, years to get money to communities to expand treatment and to make up for some of the economic losses caused by the crisis.

The trajectory of the lawsuits is unlikely to mirror the one of the lawsuits that states brought against the tobacco industry during the 1990s. The landmark litigation over what cigarette companies knew about the health risks of smoking resulted in a few sweeping settlements that distributed money to nearly every state, while the opioid cases involve a variety of plaintiffs suing companies up and down the pharmaceutical chain in state and federal courts.

Instead, the lawsuits arising from the use of powerful prescription painkillers could evolve more like the litigation over the cancer risk linked to asbestos, which also involved many corporate players and ended up stretching on for decades.

The Huntington and Cabell County case could lead the distributors that filled orders for OxyContin, generic oxycodone pills and other painkillers to agree to settlements elsewhere in the U.S. Other lawsuits target opioid manufacturers, pharmacies, and even the marketing and consulting firms that helped drugmakers promote the addictive medications.

University of Georgia law professor Elizabeth Burch expects many companies named in the various lawsuits will have to pay up eventually, regardless of the results of individual trials. But rulings for the plaintiffs could speed things up, she said.

"A win really helps the plaintiffs and creates momentum," Burch said.

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State attorneys general, local governments and other entities have filed thousands of lawsuits over the last five years aimed at making segments of the drug industry pay for the lives lost or derailed by addiction. Before April, only one opioid case brought by a government had reached trial; in 2019, an Oklahoma judge ordered Johnson & Johnson to pay the state \$465 million. The company is appealing.

Other cases were settled before reaching trial.

For activists, settlements do not equal accountability. They want payments for victims or their families and a detailed accounting of what companies did to spark the crisis. Some also want to see individual company officials charged with crimes.

"You can murder one person and go to jail for life. You murder hundreds of thousands? You just put up some money and you don't go to jail," said Cynthia Munger, a Wayne, Pennsylvania, resident whose son is in recovery from opioid addiction. "Where's the justice in that?"

Most of the pending civil lawsuits focused on drugmakers and distribution companies, but some also target pharmacy chains and more peripheral players.

This year, the consulting firm McKinsey & Company settled with most states for nearly \$600 million for its role in advising OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma and others on selling opioids. Massachusetts sued the marketing firm Publicis Health earlier this month, accusing it of designing deceptive marketing schemes to help Purdue sell more OxyContin.

Two major opioid manufacturers — Purdue Pharma and the generic drugmaker Mallinckrodt — are using bankruptcy court to pursue universal settlements. In the Purdue case, state attorneys general are split over whether the proposed deal is sufficient to hold responsible members of the wealthy Sackler family who own the company. Under the proposal, they would give up Purdue Pharma and pay nearly \$4.3 billion in cash.

Close to 3,000 lawsuits filed in federal courts have been consolidated under the supervision of U.S. District Court Judge Dan Polster of the Northern District of Ohio. Polster has scheduled a trial for later this year in Cleveland over claims against pharmacy chains. He also pushed for broad settlements while agreeing to hold federal trials across the country.

The West Virginia case against the national distribution companies — AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health and McKesson — is the first of those cases to go to trial. From 2015 to 2020, more than 700 people died of opioid overdoses in Cabell County, which has a population of under 100,000.

An expert witness for the county and Huntington city used data compiled by the federal government to show that pharmaceutical distributors shipped nearly 128 million doses of prescription opioids to the county from 2006 to 2014 — or more than 140 per resident a year.

The companies say the shipments increased along with quotas set by the U.S. Drug Enforcement Agency and came from orders from pharmacies to fill prescriptions. The distributors are expected to call witnesses on their behalf in the coming weeks.

In California, a state judge is holding a trial on claims from Los Angeles, Orange and Santa Clara counties and the city of Oakland against four drugmakers. Next month, a case brought by the state of New York and two counties against opioid manufacturers and distributors is scheduled to be the first to go before a jury.

Joanne Peterson, who founded the Massachusetts support network Learn to Cope after seeing siblings struggle with addiction, said activists like her are keeping tabs on all the cases on behalf of people who have been killed or injured by opioids.

"They've lost everything, They've lost homes, they've lost their children. Children have lost parents," she said.

Jeffrey Simon, a Dallas-based lawyer whose firm is representing more than 50 local governments in opioid cases, said the verdicts in the initial trials will be raised in ongoing settlement talks but may not be the key factor in persuading companies to propose universal payouts instead of taking their chances in trial after trial.

"The distributors and manufacturers have known for some time that they can't be going from pillar to post, from one trial to the next," said Simon, who also helps lead a committee of lawyers suing in state

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court in Texas.

Some of the companies have indicated they see settling as in their best interests, in part because that route would likely not cost as much as losing in court repeatedly. The three national drug distribution companies, along with Johnson & Johnson, made public last year that they were offering a total of \$26 billion over 18 years to settle all the cases they face, with the money going to abate the crisis.

Lawyers for some governments are eager to accept, but significant details remain to be worked out, including how governments that don't agree to the settlement would be handled.

Having a series of individual judgements rather than big settlements also could be bad for the public, because the money to address the addiction crisis would end up flowing mostly to the first places to get their cases to trial, with little left over for the others.

"Protracted litigation in thousands of cases will never lead to a fair resolution for millions of people in our country who are suffering," Laura Brewer, a spokeswoman for North Carolina Attorney General Josh Stein, said in an email.

Some proms are back, with masks, testing and distancing

By MICHAEL CASEY and CEDAR ATTANASIO Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — A minor league baseball stadium. A negative coronavirus test and absolutely no slow dancing.

Those are just a few of the unusual requirements for a high school prom happening in Manchester, New Hampshire, later this month, one of many school districts across the country struggling to navigate holding the formal dance in the second year of the pandemic.

Students only found out early this month that the proposal to hold prom May 28 at the New Hampshire Fisher Cats stadium had been approved, after some school board members expressed reservations the event could spread the coronavirus. Along with socially-distanced dancing, students are also being encouraged to get vaccinated before the dance.

"It would be awesome if we could all have a prom and be together. I mean I haven't seen some of my classmates in over a year," said Allison Hermann, a senior who is among the Central High School students who helped plan the prom.

"This is one of the only times that we all get to share together. Just being a high school senior is very symbolic so the fact we haven't gotten the chance to be together yet is really sad," she added.

School districts across the country are weighing whether they can safely hold an event that many seniors consider a capstone to their high school careers.

Schools from Miami to Charlotte to El Paso have already cancelled prom over safety concerns. The Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has described proms as a high-risk activity due to the singing and dancing and has recommended that districts scrap proms and come up with alternative celebrations for seniors.

Some students and parents are forging ahead to organize their own celebrations if the school has opted not to. Those schools going ahead — albeit with a laundry list of restrictions — cite rising vaccination rates and a drop in coronavirus cases in their districts.

Some holding proms are requiring a negative coronavirus test to attend while others are encouraging students to get vaccinated before they slip into their gowns and tuxedos. Most are requiring masks and putting strict restrictions on dancing or who can attend.

In Florida, Sarasota County schools are allowing a prom but with no dancing and limiting the event to seniors. Several schools, including Fletcher High School in Duval County, are requiring students to quarantine for 10 days after the event. Many districts are holding their dances outdoors, including one on yacht and another in a football stadium.

At Elmbrook Schools outside of Milwaukee, Superintendent Mark Hansen said he worked with teachers, students and parents to come up with a process to "restore some level of normalcy for school events that have been lost for over a year."

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The two Elmbrook high schools are requiring a negative COVID-19 test to attend its two proms and students are encouraged to stick with their friends "to prevent any outbreak from having a dramatic impact on our ability to continue operations."

Hansen said no cases were reported from the first prom that happened May 8. The second prom takes place this weekend.

An outdoor prom in Exeter, New Hampshire, on June 4 will rotate students on and off the dance floor under an outdoor tent with no touching allowed. And they are only serving water, no food.

"We are really trying to make it as safe as possible. The last thing we want is to spread COVID," Liz Morse, an Exeter High School science teacher and senior class adviser, said. "Everyone is making concessions and people are being pretty gracious about it."

Some districts are holding alternative events with student support like outdoor movie nights or dinners, in an effort to recognize the significance of the event for seniors. But prom cancellations elsewhere have left many students, and their parents, frustrated and angry.

In Manor, Texas, the school had set a date, time and venue for high school senior Jesenia Correa's prom. She even had her dress picked out — a glamorous long burgundy dress with a dramatic slit and spaghetti straps. But the administration abruptly reversed themselves because of safety concerns and canceled the event.

"I'm honestly mad that we aren't having prom," Correa said. "I do feel like I'm being robbed of a milestone, especially since the school managed to do so many other things in spite of COVID."

In Frederick, Maryland, Presley Winer is attending an alternative prom with dancing this weekend that was planned by the parents after her school canceled prom.

"It felt like a milestone that won't happen again in my life and it made me feel sad knowing one of the most rewarding parts of senior year was being stripped away from me and others," said the 18-year-old senior.

Some southern New Mexico students held an unsanctioned prom, after being told their official event wouldn't allow slow dancing. After El Paso districts cancelled prom, Grace Gardens, a large venue in the city, threw a dance for this year's seniors and students who graduated last year. The outdoor, mask-optional prom at the 125,000 square foot venue last Friday, featured three dance floors and drew around 2,000 students.

Many students packed together shoulder to shoulder dancing to club hits and bachata, a Caribbean partner dance. Some, though, tried to avoid the denser crowds, wore masks and tried to socially distance.

Eugenio Vasquez, 18, of Jackson, Mississippi, attended the prom with his long-distance girlfriend who is a student at a local high school.

"It was an amazing night. Especially for someone who is not a party animal, I really enjoyed myself," he said.

Gaetz associate expected to plead guilty in federal case

By MICHAEL BALSAMO and MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A key figure in the federal investigation of Republican Rep. Matt Gaetz is expected to plead guilty to criminal charges next week.

Joel Greenberg will appear Monday in federal court in Orlando, Florida, for a change of plea hearing, according to court documents. He had been working for weeks toward a deal with federal prosecutors who are investigating sex trafficking and public corruption allegations.

The plea potentially escalates the legal and political jeopardy the Florida congressman is facing and signals that Greenberg could potentially serve as a witness in the Justice Department's investigation into Gaetz.

Federal prosecutors are examining whether Gaetz and Greenberg paid underage girls or offered them gifts in exchange for sex, according to people familiar with the matter. Gaetz has vehemently denied the allegations and any wrongdoing and insists he will not resign his seat in Congress.

Investigators have also been looking at whether Gaetz and his associates tried to secure government

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jobs for some of the women, the people said. They are also scrutinizing Gaetz's connections to the medical marijuana sector, including whether his associates sought to influence legislation Gaetz sponsored.

The people had knowledge of the investigation but spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because they were not allowed to publicly discuss the ongoing investigation.

Greenberg's legal problems began last summer when he was arrested on charges of stalking a political opponent. He mailed fake letters to the school where his opponent taught, signed by a nonexistent "very concerned student" who alleged the teacher had engaged in sexual misconduct with another student, according to an indictment filed against him.

Greenberg was charged in August with sex trafficking a girl between ages 14 and 17 and using a state database to look up information about the girl and other people with whom he was engaged in "sugar daddy" relationships, according to the indictment.

Charges on allegations he embezzled \$400,000 from the Seminole County tax collector's office were added last month, according to the indictment.

US agents encounter more single adults crossing border

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

LA JOYA, Texas (AP) — Parents emerge from the brush into a baseball field, carrying exhausted children. Border Patrol agents dictate orders: Families with young children in one line and unaccompanied children in another. The smallest of three lines is for single adults.

The scene Tuesday night in La Joya, a town of about 4,000 people, plays out nightly in Texas' Rio Grande Valley, presenting Joe Biden with one of the most serious challenges of his young presidency — high numbers of migrants crossing the U.S.-Mexico border to seek asylum. April was the second-busiest month on record for unaccompanied children encountered at the border, following March's all-time high.

But while asylum-seeking families and children dominate public attention, single adults represent a growing number of border encounters, nearly two of every three in April. They are less likely to surrender to authorities than families and children, making them less visible.

The Border Patrol's 173,460 total encounters in April were up 3% from March, marking the highest level since April 2000. The numbers, released Tuesday, are not directly comparable because most of those stopped were quickly expelled from the country under federal pandemic-related powers that deny rights to seek asylum. Being expelled carries no legal consequences, so many people try to cross multiple times.

Single adults — more than half of them from Mexico — drove the increased activity. The Border Patrol had 108,301 such encounters in April, up 12% from March. Nearly nine of 10 adult encounters ended in expulsions under pandemic-related authority that began under former President Donald Trump and continued under Biden.

Biden, however, exempts unaccompanied children from expulsion, allowing them to stay in the U.S. while pursuing asylum claims. Families with young children are also often released in the U.S. while their cases wind through the bottlenecked immigration courts.

Some current and former border enforcement officials say massive attention on families and unaccompanied children consumes agents' time and has created an opening for single adults and drug smugglers to elude authorities.

Michael Fisher, the Border Patrol chief from 2010 to 2015, said some agency leaders have told him that agents are spending 40% less time patrolling and more on "processing, doing meals" and duties related to the increased numbers of children.

"The line is very thin right now, and the cartels exploit that," he said.

While agents try to count how many people elude capture, Fisher thinks it would be "a guess at best" in the Rio Grande Valley, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings. Its often thick brush has traditionally not had many sensors, and many families and children cross in large groups. The Border Patrol's most trusted method of counting how many people get away relies on observing tiny human traces: dusty footprints, torn cobwebs, broken twigs, overturned pebbles.

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The Trump administration frequently flew Mexican adults far from the border in hopes of deterring them from crossing again, but recidivism has remained unusually high. The Border Patrol says 29% of people expelled in April had been expelled before.

Hoping to recalibrate staffing, the Border Patrol Academy recently graduated its first class of employees devoted to preparing court documents, freeing up more agents to work in the field. They are assigned to the busiest corridors in Texas but their limited numbers mean they're unlikely to make much immediate impact.

Meanwhile, authorities encountered 17,171 children traveling alone in April, down 9% from 18,960 in March but well above the previous high of 11,475 reported in May 2019 by the Border Patrol, which began publishing numbers in 2009.

Border Patrol encounters with families fell in similar proportion to unaccompanied children — down 10% to 48,226 from 53,406 in March.. Barely one in three family encounters resulted in expulsion.

In La Joya, a 15-year-old girl said she left her native Honduras without her parents or siblings in hopes of an education and eventually a job to help her family back home. She traveled for a month and a half and arrived at the baseball field with a larger group of migrants, sporting a black T-shirt with a phrase in English she did not understand: "Women Move Mountains."

"I wanted a better future for me and my family. I want to study and work," she said, adding that her uncle and aunt in New York offered to open their home to her.

The Associated Press is not using the girl's name. It does not normally name children without permission from their parents, and the identity of her parents could not be obtained.

Nearby, two sisters from Honduras, ages 14 and 16, undid their buns and removed the laces of their pink sneakers after an agent ordered them to place the laces and hair ties and other property like phones and bracelets in a plastic bag.

Rudys Acuña, 29, said he left Nicaragua for political reasons. He carried his 4-year-old son on his shoulders as he awaited orders from agents.

"Sometimes you are really forced to leave your country. It's not that you want to," he said.

When will COVID-19 vaccines be widely available globally?

By VICTORIA MILKO AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — When will COVID-19 vaccines be widely available globally?

Experts say it could be 2023 or later before the shots are widely available in some countries.

The United States, Israel and the United Kingdom are among the nations where about half or more of the population has gotten at least one shot. In some countries, including South Africa, Pakistan and Venezuela, less than 1% of people have been vaccinated. In nearly a dozen countries — mostly in Africa — there have been no jabs at all.

The differences reflect a mix of factors including purchasing power, domestic production capacity, access to raw materials and global intellectual property laws.

The U.S. has supported waiving intellectual property protection for the vaccines. But it's not clear whether there will be global agreement on the issue and, if so, whether that would help speed up production.

COVAX, a U.N.-backed project to ensure vaccine access globally, has run drastically behind schedule due in part to export bans and stockpiling by some countries.

In April, researchers at Duke University said that, even with assistance from COVAX, many countries would not be able to reach 60% coverage until 2023 or later.

"The U.S., European and other wealthy nations long ago pre-ordered nearly all the doses available and now other countries, even with the money to buy, are at the back of line waiting," said Matthew Kavanagh, a global health policy expert at Georgetown University.

China and Russia are among those that have committed to donating vaccines to other nations. Other countries including the U.S. and U.K. aren't yet sharing their stockpiles, though they've committed to doing so. Still, global scarcity is expected to continue for years to come.

"There is simply not enough vaccine to go around," Kavanagh said.

Back to square one? Trump decision still weighs on Facebook

By BARBARA ORTUTAY and MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writers

Suppose you were Mark Zuckerberg, recently ordered by an advisory board to decide how long former President Donald Trump should stay banned from Facebook. How do you make that decision without alienating key constituencies — advertisers, shareholders, users, lawmakers and others — while staying true to your own sense of what Facebook should be?

It's a hypothetical exercise, but one that illustrates the high-wire act Facebook's leadership now has to pull off.

Facebook's quasi-independent oversight board last week said the company was justified in suspending Trump because of his role in inciting deadly violence at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6. But it told Facebook to specify how long the suspension would last, saying that its "indefinite" ban on the former president was unreasonable.

The ruling, which gives Facebook six months to comply, effectively postpones any possible Trump reinstatement and puts the onus for that decision squarely back on the company — the exact scenario Zuckerberg was likely trying to avoid in the first place.

For years, he and other Facebook executives have insisted that Facebook should not be the "arbiter of truth" and that as a tech company it shouldn't be making decisions on thorny societal matters such as free speech. Zuckerberg has stated publicly numerous times that he supports government regulation, although the rules Facebook wants aren't always the same as those regulators might seek.

The company said this week it has no updates on its plans for Trump's accounts beyond what it said last week, when it said it will review the board's decision and "determine an action that is clear and proportionate." It plans to respond to the board's recommendations within 30 days of the decision.

Here are some of the constituents that could have strong and wildly different reactions to Facebook's ultimate decision.

USERS

Facebook has more than 2.7 billion users worldwide — most of them outside of the U.S. For most, Trump's presence or absence on the platform is unlikely to greatly influence whether they should stay or they should go. Most people remain on Facebook even if they're not entirely happy with it, studies show.

While some users are leaving Facebook — often citing the toxicity of political conversations and the platform's broader actions against hate speech and misinformation — enough are staying (and joining) for the company to report rising user numbers quarter after quarter. For those who've left, even a decision to keep Trump off the platform forever is unlikely to make a difference.

Younger social media users are more likely to be liberal and, based on Pew Research studies, are more likely to use newer social media platforms that are still growing in the U.S. such as TikTok or Snapchat. In other words, if Facebook wants to keep expanding Instagram, its platform most popular with that demographic, banning Trump permanently is unlikely to hurt.

While many Americans might look to Facebook's final decision as a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" on Trump, the approach the company takes could also affect its relationship with users around the world and their local and national political leaders, said David Kaye, a former United Nations special rapporteur on free speech.

"What kind of platform does Facebook want to present to the world?" asked Kaye, now a law professor at the University of California at Irvine. "A platform that cares about its users, cares about offline harm, and devotes resources to solving problems about offline harm? Or do they want to be known as the place that facilitates ethnic cleansing?"

U.S. POLITICIANS AND REGULATORS

Whatever Facebook decides will probably enrage one side of the political aisle.

That could be even messier if Trump decides to run for president again in 2024, since he'd once again

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be a major political figure. Facebook isn't bound by the U.S. First Amendment, which prevents the government from muzzling free speech, so it can technically do whatever it wants under its rules. But a private company banning a major party candidate from its service could be complicated and might invite further scrutiny from antitrust enforcers over its power.

Of course, Twitter banned Trump permanently without a backward glance, and it's still standing. Its shares, which briefly dipped after it announced the Trump ban in January, have since recovered. But a permanent silencing of the former president on Facebook would still anger Trump and his supporters.

Since before Trump was even elected, a vocal and growing set of conservative politicians have pushed the narrative, with no proof, that Facebook and other tech companies are biased against conservatives. A permanent ban would further cement this belief, possibly pushing sympathetic users to other, smaller platforms.

On the other hand, allowing Trump on Facebook again could fuel the push by some civil rights advocates to seek stricter rules against harmful misinformation — perhaps in ways that could hurt Facebook's business model, which thrives on any kind of engagement.

SHAREHOLDERS AND ADVERTISERS

Facebook holds so much sway over how online advertisers reach consumers that whether Trump is on or off the platform is unlikely to matter much to them, said Cathy Taylor, of the London-based World Advertising Research Center.

"There's not many places for them to go to spend their ad dollars," she said. "They kind of are backed into being on Facebook whether they like it or not."

Taylor said major marketers did get the company's attention last summer when they launched a boycott pushing Facebook to take a stronger stand against hate speech, but those big brands — from Starbucks to Unilever — still accounted for less than 1% of Facebook's revenue in the U.S.

The company's stock is trading close to last week's record high, despite some skittishness due to regulatory pressure on Facebook's plans for an Instagram aimed at children. Its advertising revenue is soaring, thanks in large part to a boost in online ads during the pandemic. Revenue grew 48% to \$26.17 billion in the first three months of this year — a pace more typical for startups than for massive global corporations.

And as long as Facebook profits from advertising spending, the company's shareholders will stay happy, too.

"Facebook in particular has tons of small and mid-sized businesses that don't even enter into these big political conversations," Taylor said. "There's no sign that anything is changing with these social media sites based on whether or not Donald Trump is on the platform."

Colleges pushed anew for reparations for slavery, racism

By PHILIP MARCELO Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — For Brown University students, the Ivy League college's next step in its yearslong quest to atone for its legacy of slavery is clear: Pay up.

Nearly two decades after the Providence, Rhode Island, institution launched its much-lauded reckoning, undergraduate students this spring voted overwhelmingly for the university to identify the descendants of slaves that worked on campus and begin paying them reparations.

At the University of Georgia, community activists want the school to contribute to Athens' efforts to atone for an urban renewal project that destroyed a Black community in the 1960s to make way for college dorms.

And at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., there's growing dissatisfaction among some slave descendants about the Catholic institution's pioneering reparations efforts.

Nearly a year after the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police sparked the latest national reckoning on racism, student and community activists from New England to the Deep South are demanding institutions take more ambitious steps to atone for past sins — from colonial-era slavery to more recent campus expansion projects that have pushed out entire communities of color.

"There's been a shift in America," said Jason Carroll, who was student council president during the spring

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referendum at Brown University. "We're at a different place. Just a few years ago, it was controversial to say 'Black Lives Matter.'"

The 22-year-old Maryland native, who graduated this month, argues Brown has taken nearly every conceivable step to atone for its past — save for making slave descendants whole.

The school released an exhaustive historical report in 2006 and followed it up with the dedication of a slavery memorial in 2014, among other efforts. An "Anti-Black Racism" task force is expected to deliver recommendations soon for how the school can further promote racial equity. But university spokesperson Brian Clark stressed it's not clear whether the panel, which was formed following last summer's racial unrest, will address reparations.

"There's real trauma and pain here," said Carroll, who is descended from Carolina slaves. "This shouldn't just be an academic question. There are real families that have been burdened and harmed by this — and probably still are."

Students at Harvard are similarly calling for reparations after years of headline-grabbing announcements from the school, including dropping the law school emblem, which was derived from the crest of a slave-owning family. A panel looking at the university's slave legacy plans to release its findings and recommendations later this year.

At the University of Chicago, students are frustrated that the university continues to distance itself from its slavery ties, even as it touts efforts to advance racial equity and justice, said Caine Jordan, a graduate student who co-authored a recent report on the school's fraught racial history.

Last year, the university removed markers honoring U.S. Sen. Stephen Douglas, but maintained the Mississippi slave plantation owner donated land to an older version of the school and had "no connection" to the current one.

"All of it rings hollow if you're founded on Black pain, and you're not willing to acknowledge that," Jordan said.

A university spokesperson declined to respond, but said University President Robert Zimmer will provide an update soon on the school's racial equity efforts.

In Athens, Georgia, students and community groups complain the University of Georgia has largely stayed silent on the city's recent efforts to atone for the displacement of some 50 Black families to make way for new dorms for the school in the 1960s.

Earlier this year, Mayor Kelly Girtz signed a resolution acknowledging the taking of the homes under eminent domain, and setting into motion a process to provide "equitable redress." Student groups rallied Wednesday to call attention to the issue, among other racial justice demands.

"UGA has got to do more. It's got to come to the table and acknowledge what it did," said Hattie Whitehead Thomas, a 72-year-old Athens resident who grew up in the destroyed Linnentown neighborhood.

The university responded in part that the dorms have housed tens of thousands of students "from all races and socioeconomic backgrounds — providing those students with the transformational benefits of a higher education."

In Virginia, a new law mandates the state's five public colleges provide "tangible benefits" for slave descendants.

Cauline Yates, a descendant of one of Thomas Jefferson's slaves, said she hopes the law compels the flagship University of Virginia, which Jefferson founded, to provide academic scholarships and economic development projects for descendants.

"It's time for them to stand up and honor our ancestors," said the 67-year-old Charlottesville resident, who works at the university and co-founded the advocacy group Descendants of Enslaved Communities at UVA.

Brian Coy, a university spokesperson, said it's premature to say how UVA will meet the new reparations requirement. But he noted the school has already met the first provision of the law — to honor and identify the slaves — with its Memorial to Enslaved Laborers dedicated last month.

Back at Georgetown, the Jesuit university's reparations efforts are meant to atone for the local Jesuit province selling around 272 slaves to settle the school's debts in the 1800s.

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Ruth McBain, a Georgetown spokesperson, said the university hopes to award the first grants from a new \$400,000-a-year fund for community-based projects benefiting slave descendants sometime this year, and will work with the campus and descendant communities on that effort.

The recent launch of a \$1 billion "racial reconciliation" foundation by the Jesuit order that founded the university is another "important step in building trust and partnership" with the descendant community, she added.

But one of the main concerns among descendants and students is how committed funds will be spent — and whether descendants will truly have adequate say in the process — according to Shepard Thomas, who graduated from Georgetown last year and was among the first to benefit from the school's new legacy admission status for descendants of the 272.

"The fear is that the university will use these funds for their own purposes," the 23-year-old New Orleans native said. "The university is trying to control the narrative, and we're trying to prevent that."

Davarian Baldwin, an American studies professor at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, isn't optimistic many colleges will ultimately meet the demands of students and activists, even with the renewed activism.

"Universities will do as little as they can get away with," he said.

Indeed, at Brown, university leaders have long touted the 2007 launch of an endowment to benefit the Providence public school system as a key part of its slavery atonement.

But the university only fully funded its \$10 million pledge to the troubled, state-run school district last year after the mayor and others complained.

Carroll also argues the effort, while laudable, has nothing to do with compensating Black communities for slavery. The school district, after all, is overwhelmingly Latino.

"That's not really a solution," he said. "In a way, it's even more insulting."

NBA creates social justice award, named for Abdul-Jabbar

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar appreciates what today's NBA players are doing in their attempts to make the world better, how they're using their voices and platforms as conduits for change.

And going forward, one of those players will be rewarded by a trophy bearing Abdul-Jabbar's name.

The NBA announced Thursday the creation of a new award — the Kareem Abdul-Jabbar Social Justice Champion Award — to recognize players who are making strides in the fight for social justice. Each NBA team will nominate one player for consideration; from there, five finalists will be selected and ultimately one winner.

"I'm really proud of what the NBA has been doing all along in terms of activism and their efforts for equality and inclusion," Abdul-Jabbar said in an interview with The Associated Press. "I think they've done a great job. I've always felt that was something important and teaming up with them to be involved in this award is very meaningful."

The winning player will receive \$100,000 for the charity of his choice; the other four finalists will receive \$25,000 apiece, also for charity.

"In addition to being one of our greatest players, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar has devoted much of his life to advocating for equality and social justice," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said in a release announcing the award's creation. "With this new award, we are proud to recognize and celebrate NBA players who are using their influence to make an impact on their communities and our broader society."

Abdul-Jabbar has spent most of his life as an activist in one form or another. He met Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for the first time as a 17-year-old. He famously attended what was called The Cleveland Summit in June 1967 where he, Bill Russell, Jim Brown and other prominent Black athletes came together to talk with Muhammad Ali about his being a conscientious objector to the Vietnam War. He has worked to help economically depressed areas improve schools as well.

Being involved was in his blood, Abdul-Jabbar said. His great-uncle, John Alcindor, was a physician in England during World War I — treating war veterans for free and becoming known as the "Black Doctor

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of Paddington.”

“I think it’s just really a family tradition and something that makes sense,” Abdul-Jabbar said. “When you see something wrong you have to speak out about it and try to effect some change.”

And he applauds NBA players for doing that now, after they’ve spoken out repeatedly on matters such as police brutality.

“All of these needs, they have to start with small steps,” Abdul-Jabbar said. “I mean, we can’t just take a big, huge giant step. That usually ends up being a step in the wrong puddle. So, we’ve got to take our time and understand that we need to take all these little steps to get to where we need to go — where there’s justice. We don’t want to make policemen’s jobs impossible. But we don’t want police just arbitrarily killing people. It’s going to take some effort, but we can get there.”

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, May 14, the 134th day of 2021. There are 231 days left in the year.

Today’s Highlight in History:

On May 14, 1955, representatives from eight Communist bloc countries, including the Soviet Union, signed the Warsaw Pact in Poland. (The Pact was dissolved in 1991.)

On this date:

In 1643, Louis XIV became King of France at age 4 upon the death of his father, Louis XIII.

In 1787, delegates began gathering at the State House in Philadelphia to draw up the United States Constitution; the convention did not achieve a quorum of seven states until May 25.

In 1796, English physician Edward Jenner inoculated 8-year-old James Phipps against smallpox by using cowpox matter.

In 1804, the Lewis and Clark expedition to explore the Louisiana Territory as well as the Pacific Northwest left camp near present-day Hartford, Illinois.

In 1863, Union forces defeated the Confederates in the Battle of Jackson, Mississippi.

In 1940, the Netherlands surrendered to invading German forces during World War II.

In 1948, according to the current-era calendar, the independent state of Israel was proclaimed in Tel Aviv by David Ben-Gurion, who became its first prime minister; U.S. President Harry S. Truman immediately recognized the new nation.

In 1961, Freedom Riders were attacked by violent mobs in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama.

In 1987, film star Rita Hayworth died in New York at age 68.

In 1998, singer-actor Frank Sinatra died at a Los Angeles hospital at age 82. The hit sitcom “Seinfeld” aired its final episode after nine years on NBC.

In 2001, the Supreme Court ruled 8-0 that there is no exception in federal law for people to use marijuana for medical purposes.

In 2008, the Interior Department declared the polar bear a threatened species because of the loss of Arctic sea ice. Justine Henin (EH’-nen), 25, became the first woman to retire from tennis while atop the WTA rankings.

Ten years ago: At New York’s John F. Kennedy International Airport, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, head of the International Monetary Fund and potential candidate for president of France, was removed from a Paris-bound plane and charged with sexually assaulting a Manhattan hotel maid, Nafissatou Diallo (na-fee-SAH’-too dee-AH’-loh). (Strauss-Kahn later resigned; the charges against him were eventually dropped.)

Five years ago: A charter bus headed to a casino in rainy conditions crashed north of Laredo, Texas, killing eight people and injuring 44 others.

One year ago: The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned doctors about a serious rare inflammatory condition in children linked with the coronavirus. Carnival Corp., the world’s largest cruise company, said it would lay off hundreds of employees due to the coronavirus pandemic. Producers of the

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big-budget musical "Frozen" announced that the show would not reopen when Broadway theaters were allowed to restart. Phyllis George, a former Miss America who became a female sportscasting pioneer on CBS's "The NFL Today" and served as the first lady of Kentucky, died at the age of 70.

Today's Birthdays: Photo-realist artist Richard Estes is 89. Actor Dame Sian Phillips is 88. Former Sen. Byron Dorgan, D-N.D., is 79. Movie producer George Lucas is 77. Guitarist Gene Cornish is 77. Actor Meg Foster is 73. Movie director Robert Zemeckis is 70. Rock singer David Byrne is 69. Actor Tim Roth is 60. Rock singer Ian Astbury (The Cult) is 59. Rock musician C.C. (aka Cecil) DeVille is 59. Actor Danny Huston is 59. Rock musician Mike Inez (Alice In Chains) is 55. Fabrice Morvan (ex-Milli Vanilli) is 55. R&B singer Raphael Saadiq is 55. Actor Cate Blanchett is 52. Singer Danny Wood (New Kids on the Block) is 52. Movie writer-director Sofia Coppola (KOH'-pah-lah) is 50. Former Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen is 49. Actor Gabriel Mann is 49. Singer Natalie Appleton (All Saints) is 48. Singer Shanice is 48. Actor Carla Jimenez is 47. Rock musician Henry Garza (Los Lonely Boys) is 43. Alt-country musician-singer Ketch Secor is 43. Rock singer-musician Dan Auerbach is 42. Rock musician Mike Retondo (Plain White T's) is 40. Actor Amber Tamblyn is 38. Facebook co-founder Mark Zuckerberg is 37. Actor Lina Esco is 36. NFL player Rob Gronkowski is 32. Actor Miranda Cosgrove is 28.