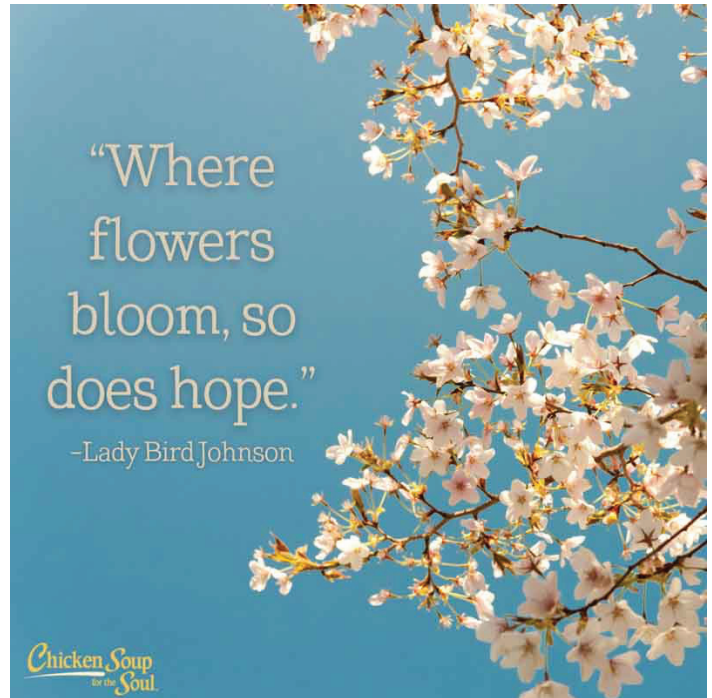


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2021 Sturgis Rally Vehicle Count - Through Day Six

STURGIS, S.D. – Vehicle traffic counts from the South Dakota Department of Transportation for vehicles entering Sturgis for the 81st Annual Sturgis Motorcycle Rally Aug. 6-15, 2021, are available and will be updated daily.

Traffic counts at nine locations entering Sturgis for the 2021 Rally are as follows:

Friday, Aug. 6: 55,326 entering. Up 11.0% from Friday last year. Down 13.2% from the 75th Rally
Saturday, Aug. 7: 67,482 entering. Up 23.1% from Saturday last year. Down 18% from the 75th Rally
Sunday, Aug. 8: 65,771 entering. Up 17.1 % from Sunday Last year. Down 27.2% from the 75th Rally
Monday, Aug. 9: 64,158 entering. Up 12.6 % from Monday Last year. Down 33.5% from the 75th Rally
Tuesday, Aug. 10: 60,626 entering. Up 15.0% from Tuesday last year. Down 28.5% from the 75th Rally
Wed., Aug. 11: 57,675 entering. Up 17.2% from Wednesday last year. Down 37.0% from the 75th Rally

Six Day Total:

2021: 371,038 Vehicles

2020: 319,698 Vehicles

2015 (75th Rally): 509,045 Vehicles



OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Highway Patrol Sturgis Rally Daily Information Compiled from 6 a.m. Saturday August 7, 2021 to 6 a.m. Thursday August 12, 2021

Item	Sturgis	Rapid City District	District Total	Last Year to Date
DUI Arrests	73	11	84	100
Misd Drug Arrests	86	22	108	162
Felony Drug Arrests	51	22	73	96
Total Citations	703	343	1046	876
Total Warnings	1955	893	2848	2209
Cash Seized	\$1862.00	\$0.00	\$1862.00	\$3296.00
Vehicles Seized	0	0	0	6
For Drug Poss.	0	0	0	6
For Serial No.	0	0	0	0
Non-Injury Accidents	13	18	31	37
Injury Accidents	20	22	42	39
Fatal Accidents	0	1	1	1
# of Fatalities	0	1	1	2

Fatal Crashes:

No fatal crashes reported.

Injury Crashes:

At 1 p.m., Wednesday, U.S. Highway 16A, mile marker 57, six miles from Keystone: A 2017 Harley-Davidson Heritage motorcycle was southbound on U.S. Highway 16A and a 2017 Harley-Davidson Heritage motorcycle was northbound on U.S. Highway 16A. Both motorcycles were traveling close to the center line and their handlebars collided, causing both motorcycles to crash. The 63-year-old male rider of the southbound motorcycle sustained minor injuries and was transported to a Rapid City hospital. He was not wearing a helmet. The 51-year-old male driver of the second motorcycle was not injured. He was wearing a helmet.

At 2:44 p.m., Wednesday, South Dakota Highway 87, mile marker 62, near Keystone: A 2019 Harley-Davidson Sportster motorcycle was northbound on South Dakota Highway 87 when the driver lost control. The motorcycle rolled into the ditch. The 64-year-old male driver received serious non-life threatening injuries and was taken to the Custer hospital. He was not wearing helmet.

At 4:38 p.m., Wednesday, U.S. Highway 14A, mile marker 47, three miles south of Sturgis: A 2006 Harley-Davidson motorcycle was westbound U.S. Highway 14 when the driver failed to negotiate a curve and the motorcycle hit a guardrail. The 53-year-old female driver sustained serious non-life threatening injuries

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and was transported to the Sturgis hospital. She was not wearing a helmet.

At 4:41 p.m., Wednesday, Wild Life Loop, mile marker 9, Custer State Park: A 2007 Harley-Davidson FLHX Street Glide motorcycle crested a hill on Wild Life Loop and the driver lost control. The 45-year-old male driver sustained serious non-life threatening injuries and was transported to the Rapid City hospital. He was not wearing a helmet.

A 6:06 p.m., Wednesday, near the intersection of Acorn Ridge Road and Interstate 90 Service Road: The driver of a 2018 Indian Motorcycle failed to negotiate a curve and went off the roadway, into a steep embankment and hit a tree. The 74-year-old female driver received minor injuries and was taken to the Spearfish hospital. She was wearing a helmet.

At 4:51 a.m., Thursday, U.S. Highway 14A, mile marker 49, two miles west of Sturgis: A 2008 Harley-Davidson XL1200 motorcycle was eastbound on U.S. Highway 14A when the driver failed to negotiate a curve. The motorcycle collided with a guard rail and the driver was thrown from the motorcycle. The 33-year-old male driver sustained serious non-life threatening injuries and was taken to the Sturgis hospital. He was not wearing a helmet. Charges are pending.

No COVID protocols for high school sports this fall

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — The pandemic-inspired safety protocols that high school athletes needed to adhere to last year will not be in place with the start of the fall sports seasons.

“We’re planning on moving forward as a normal year,” South Dakota High School Activities Association Executive Director Dan Swartos told the SDHSAA board of directors at its meeting on Thursday, Aug. 12.

Swartos did show the board the protocols for student athletes who test positive for COVID-19. “It’s essentially focused on how we treat those athletes that come down with COVID-19 infections.”

There are separate protocols for infected athletes who are asymptomatic, moderately ill, severely ill and those who show cardiopulmonary symptoms upon a return to exercise.

All infected athletes must isolate for 10 days in compliance with South Dakota Department of Health guidelines.

An athlete who is asymptomatic or has a mild illness is classified as having symptoms similar to the common cold, GI symptoms, loss of taste or smell and without fever or having a fever for less than two days.

In order to be cleared to return to play, the athlete must consult with their clinician, undergo cardiac testing if there are clinical concerns, must not exercise for three to five days while in isolation and use an individualized exercise progression based on symptoms.

To return to play, an athlete must have a normal COVID-19 test, fill out an SDHSAA return to play form and the school and student are charged with monitoring for new cardiopulmonary symptoms.

Characteristics of a moderate illness include a temperature of 100.4 degrees, chills, flu-like symptoms for more than two days, chest pain, labored breathing or palpitations.

In the case of moderate infection, the protocol includes a medical evaluation including consideration of an EKG, echo or troponin test before a return to exercise, no exercise for five to seven days from the onset of the infection and the moderate symptoms must be resolved prior to starting an individualized exercise progression.

For athletes with a moderate infection, a return to play form must be completed after a normal COVID-19 test.

Athletes with a severe illness or hospitalization must have a comprehensive medical evaluation with a recommended cardiology consult.

If cardiopulmonary symptoms occur when the athlete returns to exercise, the protocol recommends considering an EKG, echo and troponin test with a cardiology consult and no return to exercise until the evaluation is complete.

Swartos explained that contact tracing is left up to schools and that if the COVID situation becomes dire in South Dakota, the association can revert back the competition protocols it implemented last year.

Tournament management fees take a jump

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — The South Dakota High School Activities Association accomplished one of its goals by substantially raising the amount of money it will pay to schools that host state tournaments.

The action was taken by the SDHSAA Board of Directors at its meeting on Thursday, Aug. 12.

In the past, school districts have raised some concerns about the cost of hosting a state tournament, noting that the funding provided by SDHSAA can fall short of the expenses that a host school incurs. One of the board's goals was to study the issue and raise the fees paid to schools.

Seeing the biggest jumps in funding were cross-country and track and field with the fees paid to host schools jumping by \$15,000. Wrestling saw a \$13,500 increase.

"Those are the most labor-intensive events that we host," said SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos.

Overall, the association increased its payments to host schools by \$79,000 from \$87,000 to \$166,000. A recent vendor contract supplied \$70,000 of the funding.

The SDHSAA-sanctioned activities, the previous fee and the new fee include:

- A boys' golf, \$300, \$675.
- AA boys' golf, \$300, \$675.
- Soccer, \$1,500, \$2,000.
- Cheer and Dance, \$2,000, \$4,750.
- Cross-country, \$3,000, \$18,000
- Volleyball, \$10,000, \$12,250.
- Oral interp, \$200, \$575.
- One act play, \$200, \$575.
- Gymnastics, \$4,000, \$7,750.
- Wrestling, \$11,000, \$24,500.
- B girls' basketball, \$5,500, \$10,000.
- A girls' basketball, \$5,500, \$10,000.
- AA girls' basketball, \$5,500, \$10,000.
- B boys' basketball, \$8,000, \$10,000.
- A boys' basketball, \$8,500, \$10,000.
- AA boys' basketball, \$8,500, \$10,000.
- All-state choir and orchestra, \$1,500, \$1,875.
- Debate, \$200, \$575.
- B boys' and girls' golf, \$600, \$1,350.
- A girls' golf, \$300, \$675.
- AA girls' golf, \$300, \$675.
- Track and field, \$6,100, \$21,100
- Girls' tennis, \$2,000, \$4,000.
- Boys' tennis, \$2,000, \$4,000.

"We've nearly doubled what we're paying out," Swartos said.

Study will look at economic impact of state tournaments

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — The South Dakota High School Activities Association will sponsor an economic impact study to measure the impact of state tournaments on local communities. The SDHSAA board of directors took that action on Thursday, Aug. 12, as it set its goals for the coming school year.

The economic impact study would help the association as it forms a bid process in which communities would vie for the opportunity to host state tournaments and events, according to SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos.

“That gives us more of a basis to go out for bids,” Swartos said of the economic impact study.

Swartos explained that the bid process isn’t meant as a means for making more money for the association. Funds raised in the bid process would be used to help with the expenses incurred by schools that host state events.

A host school shouldn’t lose \$20,000 to host a state event while the community reaps millions of dollars, Swartos said.

The bid process was initially a part of a goal from the last school year in which the association sought more means for raising revenue for host schools. Due to a new contract with a merchandise vendor, SDHSAA was able to increase the management fees it pays to host schools by \$79,000.

Another goal held over from last year will be the implementation of girls’ softball and E-sports.

“We have a lot of people interested in the possibility of softball,” Swartos said, predicting that the board could take action on the two new sports at its November meeting with implementation in the next school year.

Swartos admitted that more work needed to be done on another goal from last year, examining modifiers for the average daily membership structure. The classification for sports is determined by a school’s average daily membership. The association’s goal is to look at modifying that structure by taking into consideration the free/reduced lunch count.

As an example, Swartos said Todd County may soon have enough students to qualify as an AA school, yet a significant number of students there qualify for reduced or free lunches.

“It is something we’re going to have to address, Swartos said.

A new goal for the coming school year is the formation of partnerships with universities, schools and professional organizations to develop the best practices for recruiting and retaining officials.

One of last year’s goals, the implementation of a new website, has been completed. Another goal, simplifying and articulating the association’s mission, vision and beliefs statements, will be ready for the board at its November meeting, Swartos said.

Huron activities director joins SDHSAA board

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — On Thursday, Aug. 12, the South Dakota High School Activities Association board of directors welcomed Huron Activities Director Terry Rotert as its newest member.

Rotert will serve for one year, completing the term of former Brookings Activities Director Randy Soma. Soma had to resign from the board when he joined the SDHSAA staff as an assistant executive director.

The other candidate for the one-year term was Spearfish Activities Director Stephanie Ornelas. An initial motion to nominate Ornelas for the position failed on a board vote of 2-5. A motion to nominate Rotert passed on a 6-1 vote.

After his appointment, Rotert joined the board meeting via Zoom.

At the meeting, board chairman Tom Culver of Avon made his annual appointments to the association's site selection committee. The committee decides which venues will host state tournaments.

Members of the committee include Culver and SDHSAA board members Barry Mann of Wakpala and Marty Weismantel of Groton. Other members of the committee are activities directors from the schools that host the most events. They include Casey Meile of Sioux Falls, Jared Vasquez of Rapid City; Dawn Seiler of Aberdeen, Craig Boyens of Watertown and Bill Freking of Brandon Valley.

The committee will meet in December to work on sites for the 2025-2026 school year.

—30—

Softball, E-sports may get their start in the next year

By Dana Hess

For the S.D. Newspaper Association

PIERRE — E-sports and girls' softball could be sanctioned for South Dakota high schools as soon as the 2022-2023 school year. At its meeting on Thursday, Aug. 12, the South Dakota High School Activities Association board of directors learned that SDHSAA staff will have proposals ready for the two sports at its November meeting.

At the meeting SDHSAA Assistant Executive Director Jo Auch said there was some difference of opinion among schools as to when the girls' softball season should take place. She said that schools were polled as to whether they were interested in adding the sport and what the preference would be for scheduling the season: in the spring, fall or summer.

South Dakota is the only state that does not offer high school girls' softball. Of those states that do, 44 offer it in the spring, four in the fall and one in the summer.

"Obviously the weather is much better in the fall," Auch said, noting that of the 25 schools that want to offer the sport, 16 preferred the spring, two the summer and seven the fall. The survey results showed that 34 schools might be interested in adding the sport and 15 said no. The 74 schools that responded to

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the survey represent a little more than half of the schools that belong to SDHSAA.

Auch said a steering committee tasked with starting the sport prefers offering girls' softball in the spring. The sport could run for eight to nine weeks and end before Memorial Day.

Board member Terry Rotert of Huron asked if there was too much of a rush to get the sport started in the spring of 2022-2023. Auch said the sport has been under consideration for three years and that the 16 schools that said yes to offering it in the spring was enough to get it started.

"We've started sports with a lot less teams than 16 and played a state tournament," Auch said.

SDHSAA Executive Director Dan Swartos said E-sports would be fairly easy to offer as it can be done through the PlayVS program offered by the National Federation of State High School Associations.

"They essentially take care of everything," Swartos said, adding that the board would need to decide on which games to sanction and whether to offer one or two seasons of the sport per school year.

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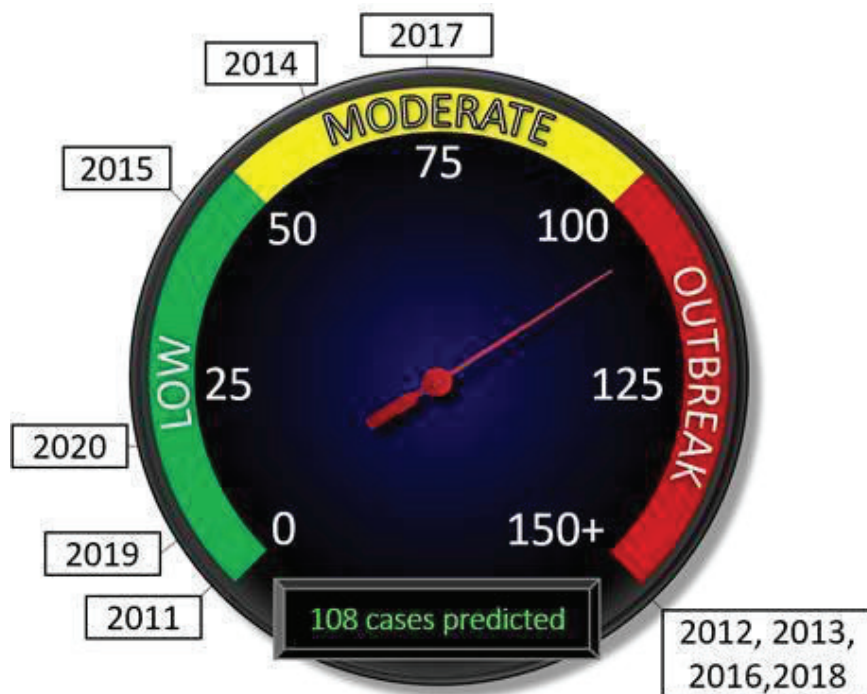
West Nile Update – South Dakota, 12 August 2021

SD WNV (as of August 11): 5 human cases reported (Davison, Douglas, Minnehaha, Union, Walworth)

6 counties with positive mosquito pools (Brookings, Brown, Codington, Hand, Hughes, Lincoln)

US WNV (as of August 10): 40 cases (AL, AZ, AR, CA, GA, ID, IL, IA, MD, NE, NY, ND, TX) and 3 deaths

WNV Prediction Model – Total Number of Cases Projected for 2021, South Dakota (as of August 2)



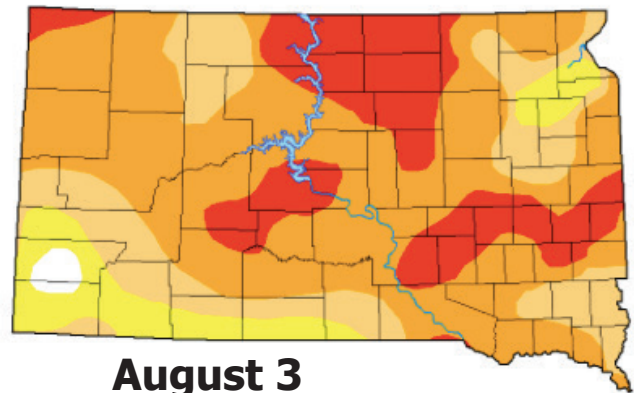
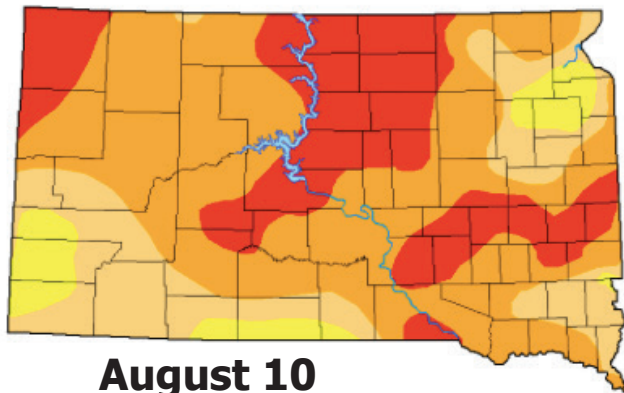
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Drought Classification



Drought Monitor



High Plains

Similar to some other regions, small scattered areas of heavy rain induced localized improvement, but most areas received little rainfall at best, leading to increasing moisture deficits and thus expansion and intensification of dryness and drought. Some improvement was noted in southwestern North Dakota, but much broader areas of deterioration were observed across eastern North Dakota and many areas from South Dakota through Nebraska and Kansas. Drought intensities of D3 and D4 now cover large portions of the Dakotas. Limited precipitation fell on Colorado and Wyoming, but decreased impacts and localized moderate rains led to 1-category improvements in central Colorado and southwestern Wyoming.

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Today



Sunny

High: 82 °F

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: 55 °F

Saturday



Sunny

High: 89 °F

Saturday Night



Mostly Clear

Low: 64 °F

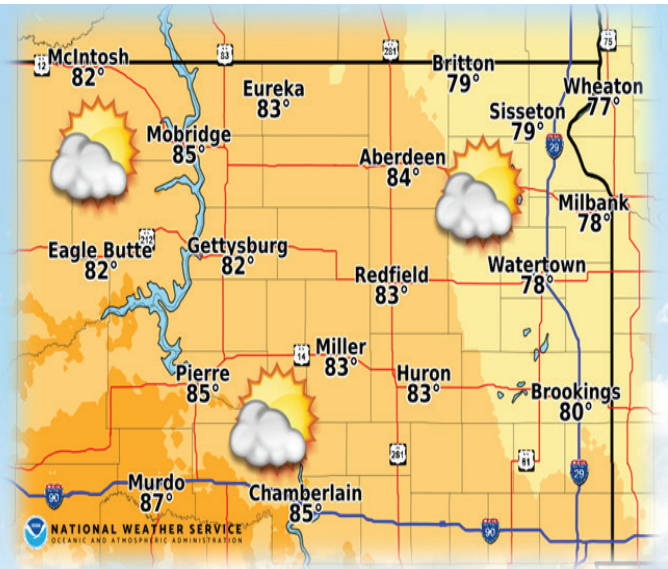
Sunday



Hot

High: 92 °F

More Pleasant Weather Today, But...



SAT Aug 14, 2021	SUN Aug 15, 2021	MON Aug 16, 2021	TUE Aug 17, 2021
84-94°	86-98°	86-98°	85-97°



Warmer, More Humid Conditions Ahead

Seasonable temperatures and northwest breezes are anticipated today, but southerly winds will usher in increased heat and humidity this weekend into early next week. The next best chance at precipitation arrives with a cold frontal passage mid next week.

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Today in Weather History

August 13, 2000: A thunderstorm set numerous prairie fires in Harding County. Over a thousand acres burned by the end of the day.

1831: The Great Barbados Hurricane was an intense Category 4 hurricane that left cataclysmic damage across the Caribbean and Louisiana in 1831. From August 11 through the 13, Bermudians were amazed to see the sun with a decidedly blue appearance, giving off an eerie blue light when it shone into rooms and other enclosed places. Ships at sea as far west as Cape Hatteras reported that "their white sails appeared a light blue colour." A month later it was learned that the astounding blue sunlight had coincided with a terrible hurricane that caused 1,477 people to lose their lives. It was assumed that the hurricane was intensive enough to cause an unusual disturbance in the higher atmospheric strata, and refraction, diffraction or absorption of light rays, to produce the blue reflection. Because the sun appeared bluish-green, Nat Turner took this as the final signal and began a slave rebellion a week later on August 21.

1987: A succession of thunderstorms produced rainfall that was unprecedented in 116 years of precipitation records at Chicago, Illinois during an 18 hour period from the evening of the 13th to the early afternoon of the 14th. The resulting flash flood was the worst ever to strike the Chicago metropolitan area, causing three deaths and water damage that amounted to 221 million dollars. O'Hare International Airport received an event total of 9.35 inches of rain in 18 hours, shattering the previous 24-hour record of 6.24 inches. For about 24 hours, the airport was only accessible from the air as all roads were blocked by high water, including the Kennedy Expressway.

1991: Stockton, California received 0.05 inch of rainfall on this day. Since 1949, this is the only measured rainfall in Stockton on August 13th.

2003: A string of days in Paris France with temperatures from the 4th to the 12th above 95°F ends when the day's high drops to 90°F. During the long, hot summer which began 25 July and has registered several days above 100°F, an estimated 14,800 have died from heat-related causes, the French government admits. Click [HERE](#) for more information from NASA's Earth Observatory.

2014: An official, New York State 24 hour precipitation record was set at Islip, NY on August 12-13 when 13.57" of rain fell. Click [HERE](#) for more information from the NWS Office in New York.

1831 - A blue sun was widely observed in the southern states. The phenomena was believed to have pre-staged Nat Turner's slave uprising. (David Ludlum)

1919 - High winds and heavy rain struck the Middle Atlantic Coast Region. In New Jersey, winds gusted to 60 mph at Atlantic City, and nine inches of rain fell at Tuckerton. The wind and rain leveled crops and stripped trees of fruit causing several million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1980 - The afternoon high at New York City was just 89 degrees. But there were fifteen days of 90 degree heat during the month, their hottest August of record. (The Weather Channel)

1985 - Hail larger than golf balls, driven by 70 mph winds, moved down crops, stripped trees, and broke windows, near Logan KS. Road graders cleared three foot drifts of hail on Kansas Highway 9 east of Logan. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Thunderstorms deluged the Central Gulf Coast States with torrential rains. Thunderstorms in Mississippi drenched Marion County with up to 15 inches of rain during the morning hours, with 12.2 inches reported at Columbia. Floodwaters swept cars away in the Lakeview subdivision of Columbia when the the Lakeview Dam broke. Flash flooding caused more than three million dollars damage in Marion County. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A dozen cities in the northeastern U.S. reported record high temperatures for the date. Lansing MI reported a record 35 days of 90 degree weather for the year, Detroit MI reported a record 37 days of 90 degree heat for the year, and Williamsport PA reported a record 38 days of 90 degree weather for the year. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Thunderstorms developing in a tropical airmass over the northeastern U.S. soaked Connecticut and Massachusetts with four to eight inches of rain over the weekend, between the 11th and 13th of the month. Hartford CT received 7.70 inches of rain. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

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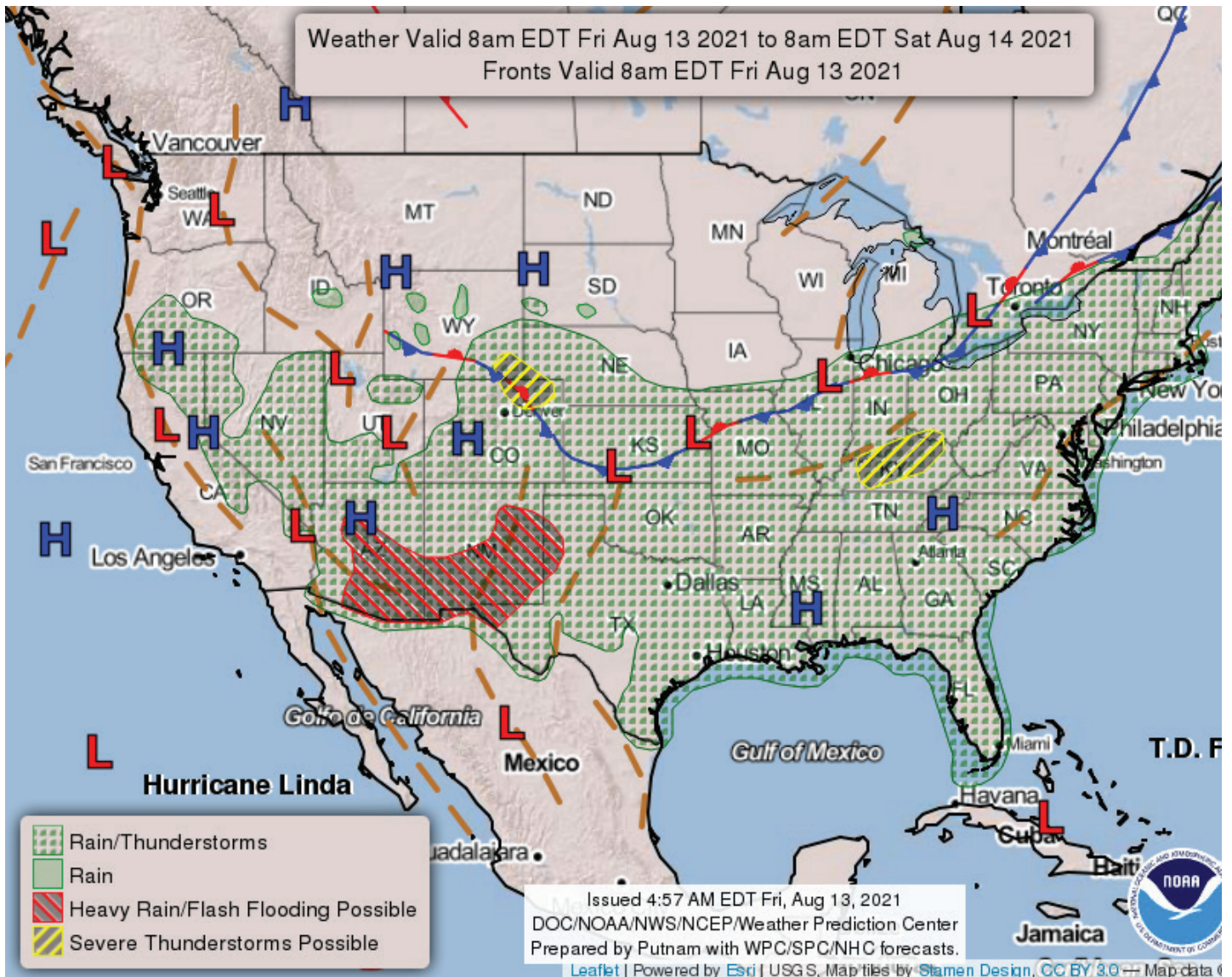
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Yesterday's Aberdeen Weather

High Temp: 86 °F at 5:47 PM
Low Temp: 52 °F at 11:26 PM
Wind: 31 mph
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 112° in 1965
Record Low: 35° in 1964
Average High: 84°F
Average Low: 57°F
Average Precip in Aug.: 0.87
Precip to date in Aug.: 1.12
Average Precip to date: 14.97
Precip Year to Date: 8.39
Sunset Tonight: 8:44 p.m.
Sunrise Tomorrow: 6:34 a.m.



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WHEN GOD DOES NOT ANSWER

We pray and we persevere. We watch and we wonder. We wait and we become weary. We know that God is there - somewhere. He has responded to our requests before. But where is He now? We stand before Him with great expectations and outstretched hands yet nothing is happening. We cannot help but ask why. He promised us that He would never leave us nor forsake us. Where is He when we need Him?

So, what happens when we pray and there is no answer? Listen to our Psalmist: "Why, O Lord, do You reject me and hide Your face from me?" He seems to have turned from confidence to confusion. This God whom he called upon constantly with outstretched arms and unflinching faith is nowhere to be found. He felt abandoned!

Remember, this also happened to Jesus. In the Garden He cried, "If there is any other way than my death on the cross to save mankind, please make it known. Why, Father, can't You come up right now with plan 'B'?" But, God was silent. Absent. Gone!

On the cross He said, "My God, my God, where are You? Why have You abandoned me? I am alone, suffering for something I didn't do and You left me to be humiliated and suffer and die." And God was silent. Absent. Gone!

The prayer of the Psalmist, much like the prayer of Jesus on the cross, does not end in immediate resolution - like many of our prayers. But that does not mean that God does not hear or does not care and will never answer our requests.

Often when we pray and do not get the results we ask for when we ask for them, God is saying: "You may not get what you asked for when you asked for it. Just trust in me and do not waiver. What I have planned for you is far better."

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to know that You are present and at work in our lives completing the plan You have designed for us. Give us patience and trust! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Psalm 88:14 Why, LORD, do you reject me and hide your face from me?

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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
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament
06/19/2021 **Postponed to Aug. 28th:** Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament
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
08/13/2021 Groton Basketball Golf Tournament
08/28/2021 Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am Olive Grove Golf Course
08/29/2021 Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)
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
10/29/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween) 5:30-7:00
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)
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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News from the Associated Press

Less emphasis on marijuana arrests at Sturgis rally

STURGIS, S.D. (AP) — The landscape appears to be changing when it comes to marijuana possession at this year's Sturgis Motorcycle Rally in South Dakota.

Meade County Sheriff Ron Merwin says his deputies are generally looking past enforcing possession of small amounts of marijuana.

"If it's a small amount, we're just overlooking it and saying, 'Hey, get rid of it,'" Merwin said. "If it's big enough for us to worry about, then we're arresting them."

Through the first five days of the rally, which began on Aug. 6, Sturgis police officers have made 15 arrests for possession of marijuana or drug paraphernalia. That compares to 61 arrests through the same period in 2020, the Rapid City Journal reported.

The Meade County Sheriff's Office recorded nine misdemeanor drug arrests, compared to 14 a year ago.

State voters overwhelmingly approved separate measures legalizing both medical and recreational marijuana in last November's general election.

The use of medical marijuana became legal in South Dakota on July 1, but the state is still developing regulations, so the issuance of permit cards for residents still weeks away.

Gov. Kristi Noem is challenging the constitutionality of legalizing recreational marijuana, with the matter currently before the state Supreme Court.

Meade said one of his officers experienced a first during this year's rally. A man arrested on an undisclosed charge and taken to the Meade County Jail was also found to possess a small amount of marijuana.

But because the man carried a valid medical marijuana card from his home state, jail officers returned the marijuana to the man instead of placing it in evidence.

Firefighters battle blaze south of Sturgis

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Wildfire crews in South Dakota tried Thursday to contain a wildfire burning at Kirk Hill about five miles southwest of the city of Sturgis.

The fire had burned approximately 80 acres (32 hectares) by early Thursday, fire officials reported. Crews worked through the night to try to establish a perimeter around the blaze using bulldozers and hand tools. Firefighters hoped to fully contain the fire Thursday by mopping up the perimeter.

Officials said cooler temperatures and higher relative humidity on Thursday would aid their efforts.

Meanwhile, the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally was expected to attract hundreds of thousands of people into the region. No evacuations were ordered.

Colorado voting officials feud over alleged security breach

By PATTY NIEBERG Associated Press/Report for America

DENVER (AP) — What began as an investigation into how election equipment passwords from a rural Colorado county got posted on a right wing blog has turned into a feud between the state's Democratic secretary of state and the county's conservative clerk.

The elections chief for the northwestern county that includes the city of Grand Junction, Mesa County Clerk and Recorder Tina Peters, escalated the dispute this week with an appearance at an event hosted by one the biggest backers of baseless election fraud conspiracies promoted by Trump supporters, My Pillow company CEO Mike Lindell.

Peters slammed the investigation of her office, claiming that Griswold is attempting a takeover of Mesa County's elections in one of Colorado's last Republican strongholds.

Colorado's Democratic Secretary of State Jenna Griswold then took her turn in the war-of-words Thursday at a news conference, when she said that Mesa County would have to replace its voting equipment and

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that Peters was responsible for the security breach.

Griswold said evidence showed that Peters' office directed staff to turn off video surveillance of its voting equipment before a May 25 software update and that the video was not turned back on until August. No elections were held during that period, but officials are required by state law to maintain video surveillance to ensure no one tampers with the equipment.

Griswold said Peters also allowed a non-employee into the office during the software update "after misleading my office on the person's employment status," she added.

Griswold's office identified the man, but refused to say anything more about who he is or why he was there. The Associated Press isn't naming him until more information becomes available about him. He has not been charged with a crime.

The dispute is the latest illustration of how the November 2020 election that is a distant memory for many remains front and center for some far-right supporters of former President Donald Trump. A Republican-led audit of Arizona ballots has been going on for months despite any evidence to support the review.

The Colorado feud started to unfold on Monday, when Griswold announced that passwords for Mesa County's voting equipment had been posted on a far-right blog and that an investigation had been launched to find out what happened.

Griswold called the event a "a serious breach" in a statement, but said it did not happen during the past election or create any risk to state elections.

On Monday, Griswold ordered Peters to hand over Mesa County's election equipment, video footage of the equipment and other relevant materials to state officials. Peters has not responded, Griswold said Thursday.

But Peters traveled to South Dakota, where she spoke Tuesday at the event hosted by Lindell, the My Pillow chief executive who has become well-known for his unwavering support of Trump and efforts to overturn the 2020 election because of widespread fraud, which a range of election officials across the country including Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, have confirmed did not take place.

"We would be a big jewel in our governor and our Secretary of State's crown to take over my office and control the way you vote," said Peters, according to an online video of her appearance.

Colorado has a Democratic governor and a Democrat-dominated Legislature and Peters called Mesa County the state's "last bastion of freedom."

At the event with Lindell, Peters said that Griswold's staff "raided" the county's office after presenting a search warrant and that state officials wouldn't let Mesa County's chief deputy clerk observe the investigation being conducted by Griswold and Dominion Voting Systems,

"After several hours, they allowed my chief deputy to come in and they go 'Oh, Look at this. Look! Look! See we found this, this, this!'" Peters said. "I don't know what they did, but I can tell you I don't trust them."

Peters' office did not respond to an email message Wednesday requesting an interview.

Griswold, in describing the investigation, said: "To be very clear, Mesa County Clerk and Recorder allowed a security breach and by all evidence at this point, assisted it."

Griswold said the majority of Colorado's election clerks are Republicans which shows "how untrue that statement is."

Griswold has been a national leader in the fight for voting rights and against misinformation, including leading a multi-state lawsuit against the U.S. Postal Service and Postmaster General for distributing flyers with misleading information to Colorado voters.

In June, she issued orders further restricting third parties from accessing voting machines — a response to what she called "sham audits." She pointed to an ongoing audit of 2020 election results in Arizona's most populous county commissioned by Arizona Senate Republicans and conducted by a Florida-based cybersecurity firm known as Cyber Ninjas. The firm is led by a chief executive officer who tweeted support for conspiracy theories claiming Trump won Arizona.

Mesa County District Attorney Dan Rubinstein said Griswold contacted his office Monday for an inquiry into potential criminal matters. Rubinstein said his investigator who handles elections was present at the clerk's office with the Secretary of State's team. Rubinstein did not comment on the specifics to avoid

compromising the investigation.

In February of 2020, Griswold's office announced a Mesa County elections investigation after nearly 600 ballots were forgotten in a drop-box outside Peters' office front door for months following the 2019 general election, a year after Peters was elected.

That event prompted an effort by Democrats to recall Peters, but they didn't get enough signatures to force a recall election.

Griswold's investigation led to heavier oversight of the Mesa election's office by requiring the county to submit a "business process" for retrieval and recording of mail ballots to be approved by Griswold's office.

Colorado's voting system has been praised by officials, including former Trump-appointed Homeland Security Secretary Kristjen Nielsen, as some of the safest in the nation. The state's election procedures were developed under both Republican and Democrat-appointed Secretary of States.

"Across the nation we are seeing a coordinated effort to undermine democracy and suppress the right to vote," Griswold said. "We will not allow Colorado or our elections system to be used as a tool to undermine confidence to set the road for voter suppression"

Health officials increase virus reporting frequency

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota health officials on Thursday returned to reporting new coronavirus cases every weekday as the state faces a resurgence of the pandemic.

Health officials reported 153 new cases Thursday as its count of active infections statewide reached 1,210. South Dakota has seen a steady resurgence of cases after the pandemic waned dramatically during the spring and early summer. The Department of Health had been reporting coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths once a week since July.

Secretary of Health Kim Malsam-Rysdon said health officials would return to reporting data on the virus every weekday.

On Thursday, hospitalizations increased to 76 patients with COVID-19. No deaths from COVID-19 were reported.

Health officials report 60% of people eligible for the vaccine have received at least one shot while 56% have completed their vaccination.

MyPillow CEO says he was attacked at symposium

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — MyPillow chief executive Mike Lindell says he was attacked in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on Wednesday night.

Lindell told attendees Thursday morning at an election fraud symposium that he's hosting in the city that he was attacked at his hotel, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported. Lindell said he was in pain and he wants everyone to know about the evil in the world. He didn't go into details about the incident.

Police spokesman Sam Clemens said in a telephone interview with The Associated Press that officers took a report Thursday morning of an assault in a hotel located near the symposium. He said the assault allegedly took place at 11:30 p.m. Wednesday. No one was taken to a hospital, Clemens said.

Clemens declined to identify the victim, citing Marsy's Law, a state constitutional amendment that protects crime victims. He also declined to release the report, saying police reports are confidential under state law and declined further comment, citing an ongoing investigation.

Lindell announced the symposium in July, saying he hoped hundreds of "cyber-forensics experts" would attend and back up his claims that voting machines were hacked to flip votes for former President Donald Trump to President Joe Biden in 2020.

Census shows South Dakota cities fueled growth

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's cities fueled the state's population growth over the last de-

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cade, according to detailed population data released Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau that will form the basis for the state's new legislative boundaries.

The state's three most populous counties — Minnehaha, Lincoln and Pennington — accounted for most of the population growth. Lincoln County, which contains parts of Sioux Falls and its surrounding communities, saw the fastest growth, increasing by 45% to 65,161 people. The trend means that legislative power will shift towards cities because each legislative district must contain roughly the same number of people.

Lawmakers tasked with drawing new boundaries for legislative districts said they will begin to pour over the data in earnest later this month. Redistricting committees, dominated by Republicans, will meet on Aug. 30.

"This data really is the foundation we will work from," said Republican Sen. Mary Duvall, the chair of the Senate Redistricting Committee.

Legislative redistricting happens every 10 years after a federal census. Lawmakers are aiming to come up with legislative districts that represent 25,333 people, with some wiggle room allowed. They are also supposed to follow current county and municipal boundaries as much as possible.

Lawmakers are working on a tighter timeline than in previous years because the pandemic delayed the Census Bureau's report. Lawmakers are planning to have draft boundaries drawn up by October, when they will hold a series of public hearings across the state. State law gives them a Dec. 1 deadline to approve the new districts.

"Normally this data is evaluated and compiled through multiple months," said Republican House Speaker Spencer Gosch, who is also the chair for the House Redistricting Committee. "It's going to be fast."

Republicans hold large majorities on both House and Senate Redistricting Committees, with Democrats grasping on to a single seat on either committee. Democrats hold about 10% of legislative seats, so proportionately, the redistricting committee is in line with the Legislature's makeup.

Democrat Rep. Ryan Cwach, the lone Democrat on the House committee, said he was hoping the boundary lines end up "fair" without any gerrymandering, a process by which voters are either divided or combined to make it more likely for one party to win future elections.

Lawmakers have indicated the most challenging areas will be cities and Native American reservations. Federal law requires the state to ensure racial minority groups receive adequate representation in state government. More than half of the population growth in Sioux Falls, the state's largest city, came from minority groups. The city's Black, Asian and Hispanic populations have nearly doubled in the last decade.

Several counties in the Black Hills on the western side of the state saw jumps in population as well. Meade and Pennington Counties reported a combined increase of 13,642 people.

"Ultimately, there will have to be more districts in those areas," said Republican Sen. Jim Bolin, vice-chair of the redistricting committee. "The rural areas will have less representation."

Taliban sweep across Afghanistan's south; take 4 more cities

By TAMEEM AKHGAR, RAHIM FAIEZ and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban completed their sweep of the country's south on Friday as they took four more provincial capitals in a lightning offensive that is gradually encircling Kabul, just weeks before the U.S. is set to officially end its two-decade war.

The latest significant blow was the loss of the capital of Helmand province, where American, British and allied NATO forces fought some of the bloodiest battles in the past 20 years. Hundreds of foreign troops were killed in the province, which is also a major opium hub.

The insurgents have taken half of the country's 34 provincial capitals in recent days, including its second- and third-largest cities, Herat and Kandahar. The Taliban now control more than two-thirds of the country just weeks before the U.S. plans to withdraw its last troops.

While the capital of Kabul isn't directly under threat yet, the losses and advances elsewhere further tighten the grip of a resurgent Taliban. The latest U.S. military intelligence assessment suggests Kabul could come under insurgent pressure within 30 days and that, if current trends hold, the Taliban could

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gain full control of the country within a few months.

In the south, the insurgents swept through the capitals of Zabul and Uruzgan provinces, in addition to Helmand's.

Attaullah Afghan, the head of the provincial council in Helmand, said that the Taliban captured Lashkar Gah following weeks of heavy fighting and raised their white flag over governmental buildings. He said that three national army bases outside of Lashkar Gah remain under control of the government.

Atta Jan Haqbayan, the provincial council chief in Zabul province, said the local capital of Qalat fell and that officials were in a nearby army camp preparing to leave.

Bismillah Jan Mohammad and Qudratullah Rahimi, lawmakers from Afghanistan's southern Uruzgan province, said local officials surrendered Tirin Kot to the Taliban. Mohammad said the governor was heading to the airport to depart for Kabul.

In the country's west, meanwhile, Fazil Haq Ehsan, head of the provincial council in Ghor province, said its capital, Feroz Koh, also fell to the insurgents.

With security rapidly deteriorating, the United States planned to send in 3,000 troops to help evacuate some personnel from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. Separately, Britain said about 600 troops would be deployed on a short-term basis to support British nationals leaving the country, and Canada is sending special forces to help evacuate its embassy.

Thousands of Afghans have fled their homes amid fears the Taliban would again impose a brutal, repressive government, all but eliminating women's rights and conducting public executions.

Peace talks in Qatar remain stalled, though diplomats are still meeting, as the U.S., European and Asian nations warned that any government established by force would be rejected.

"We demand an immediate end to attacks against cities, urge a political settlement, and warn that a government imposed by force will be a pariah state," said Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. envoy to the talks.

But the Taliban advance continued, as they pushed into the capital of Logar province, just 80 kilometers (50 miles) south of Kabul.

Hasibullah Stanikzai, the head of the Logar provincial council, said fighting was still underway inside Puli-e Alim, with government forces holding the police headquarters and other security facilities. He spoke by phone from his office, and gunfire could be heard in the background. The Taliban said they had captured the police headquarters and a nearby prison.

The onslaught represents a stunning collapse of Afghan forces after the United States spent nearly two decades and \$830 billion trying to establish a functioning state. U.S. forces toppled the Taliban in the wake of the Sept. 11 attacks, which al-Qaida planned and executed while being sheltered by the Taliban government. The Taliban fighters now advancing across the country ride on American-made Humvees and carry M-16s pilfered from Afghan forces.

Bill Roggio, a senior fellow at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said the Afghan army has rotted from within due to corruption and mismanagement, leaving troops in the field poorly equipped and with little motivation to fight. The Taliban, meanwhile, have spent a decade taking control of large swaths of the countryside.

That allowed them to rapidly seize key infrastructure and urban areas once President Joe Biden announced the timeline for the U.S. withdrawal, saying he was determined to end America's longest war.

"Whatever forces are left or remaining that are in the Kabul area and the provinces around them, they're going to be used for the defense of Kabul," Roggio said. "Unless something dramatically changes, and I don't see how that's possible, these provinces (that have fallen) will remain under Taliban control."

A day earlier, in Herat, Taliban fighters rushed past the Great Mosque in the historic city — a structure that dates to 500 BC and was once a spoil of Alexander the Great — and seized government buildings. Afghan lawmaker Semin Barekzai acknowledged the city's fall, saying that some officials there had escaped.

Herat had been under militant attack for two weeks, with one wave blunted by the arrival of warlord Ismail Khan and his forces. But on Thursday afternoon, Taliban fighters broke through the city's defensive lines.

The insurgents circulated photos and a video showing Khan in their captivity as well as video footage

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that appeared to show two Afghan military Black Hawk helicopters — provided by the U.S. — that were captured in Herat. Later on Friday, they released photos showing two alleged looters being paraded through the streets with black makeup on their faces.

In Kandahar, the birthplace of the Taliban, insurgents seized the governor's office and other buildings, witnesses said. The governor and other officials fled the onslaught, catching a flight to Kabul, the witnesses added. They refused to be named publicly as the defeat has yet to be acknowledged by the government, which has not commented on the latest advances.

The Taliban had earlier attacked a prison in Kandahar and freed inmates inside, officials said.

Earlier Thursday, the militants raised their white flags imprinted with an Islamic proclamation of faith over the city of Ghazni, which sits on a crucial north-south highway just 130 kilometers (80 miles) southwest of Kabul.

The U.N. agency for humanitarian affairs warned that civilians in southern Afghanistan faced cut-off highways and mobile phone outages. It described aid groups as being unable to determine how many people had fled as intense fighting and airstrikes continued there.

On Thursday, Nasima Niazi, a lawmaker from Helmand, criticized airstrikes targeting the area, saying civilians likely had been wounded and killed. U.S. Central Command has acknowledged carrying out several airstrikes in recent days, without providing details or commenting on the concerns over civilian casualties.

Pakistan meanwhile opened its Chaman border crossing for people who had been stranded in recent weeks. Juma Khan, the Pakistan border town's deputy commissioner, said the crossing was reopened following talks with the Taliban.

Even as diplomats met in Doha, Qatar on Thursday, the success of the Taliban offensive called into question whether they would ever rejoin long-stalled peace talks with the government in Kabul. Instead, the group could come to power by force — or the country could splinter into factional fighting like it did after the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

Census data sets up redistricting fight over growing suburbs

By DAVID A. LIEB and ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

The once-a-decade battle over redistricting is set to be a showdown over the suburbs, as new census data showed rapid growth around some of the nation's largest cities and shrinking population in many rural counties.

From Texas to Florida, some of the biggest gains reported Thursday came in states where Republicans will control the redistricting process, but often in and around cities where Democrats have been faring well in recent elections.

The new detailed population data from the 2020 census will serve as the building block to redraw 429 U.S. House districts in 44 states and 7,383 state legislative districts across the U.S. The official goal is to ensure each district has roughly the same number of people.

But many Republicans and Democrats also will be trying to ensure the new lines divide and combine voters in ways that make it more likely for their party's candidates to win future elections, a process called gerrymandering. The parties' successes in that effort could determine whether taxes and spending grow, climate-change policies are approved or access to abortion is expanded or curtailed.

Republicans need to gain just five seats to take control of the U.S. House in the 2022 elections — a margin that could potentially be covered through artful redistricting. As they did after the 2010 census, Republicans will hold greater sway in more states over the redistricting process.

"The question is going to be how creative this new data will force Republicans to get in maintaining or expanding their advantages, given an increasingly diverse, increasingly urban population," said Joshua Blank, research director of the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas.

Texas will be a major focal point in redistricting.

The Census Bureau said five of the 14 U.S. cities that grew by at least 100,000 people are located in Texas — Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio. Four of the nation's 10 fastest growing cities

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also were Texas suburbs — Frisco and McKinney near Dallas; Conroe near Houston, and New Braunfels near San Antonio. All are prime battle grounds for redistricting.

By contrast, many Texas counties outside of its metropolitan areas saw populations decline, the Census Bureau said.

Republicans, who currently hold 23 of the 36 U.S. House seats in Texas, will have full control over the redistricting process, allowing them to decide where to draw the two new seats the state is gaining. But that could be complicated because Democrats generally have fared better in Texas suburbs in recent elections.

Though Republican Donald Trump carried Texas by more than 6 percentage points in the 2020 presidential election, he and Democrat Joe Biden essentially split voters who identified as suburbanites, according to The Associated Press' VoteCast. Trump won decisively among men and Biden had a wide advantage among women in the Texas suburbs.

Hispanic residents accounted for half the population growth in Texas. In the last election, about 6 in 10 Texas Hispanic voters chose Biden over Trump, according to VoteCast.

"As the process of redistricting begins, the Legislature should be guided by the principle of fair representation for every Texan," said state Rep. Rafael Anchia, a Democratic member of the House redistricting committee and chair of the Mexican American Legislative Caucus.

Texas had been among several states that needed advance approval from the U.S. Justice Department for its redistricting plans because of a history of racial discrimination. But the U.S. Supreme Court overturned that requirement in 2013 and, in a separate ruling in 2019, said it would not get involved in disputes over alleged political gerrymandering, leaving that to state courts to decide. Lawsuits are expected to challenge redistricting maps in many states.

The GOP will control redistricting in 20 states accounting for 187 U.S. House seats, including the growing states of Texas, Florida, Georgia and North Carolina, where the governor is a Democrat, but the legislature has complete control of drawing new electoral lines.

Courts ordered multiple changes to the pro-Republican maps drawn in North Carolina after the 2010 census. Lawmakers on Thursday voted not to use election or racial data in redistricting. State Rep. Destin Hall, a Republican leading the House Redistricting Committee, said he is committed to making "significant and reasonable efforts to attempt to limit the partisan consideration."

Democrats will control redistricting in just eight states accounting for 75 seats, including New York and Illinois, where the loss of a seat in each gives them a chance to squeeze out Republican incumbents.

In 16 other states accounting for 167 U.S. House seats, districts will be drawn either by independent commissions or by politically split politicians with legislative chambers led by one party and governors of another. Six states have just one U.S. House seat, so there are no district lines to be drawn.

Outside of Texas, some of the largest growth occurred in Arizona's chief city of Phoenix, including a nearly 80% population increase in its suburb of Buckeye. But Arizona's voting districts are drawn by an independent commission, making it more difficult for Republican or Democratic officials to gain an edge in redistricting.

Census data also showed large growth in Seattle and Los Angeles and some of their suburbs. Other cities gaining at least 100,000 people included Charlotte, North Carolina; Columbus, Ohio; Denver; Jacksonville, Florida; New York; and Oklahoma City. The suburbs of Salt Lake City and Boise, Idaho, also ranked high in growth rates.

Simply because Democrats may be gaining strength in suburbs doesn't mean maps drawn by Republicans will reflect that. The party in control can divide areas of strength for the opposition, said Republican pollster David Winston.

"When you're talking about redistricting, it's different than looking at a state as a whole," said Winston, a longtime adviser to U.S. House Republican leadership.

The fastest-growing U.S. metropolitan area was The Villages in central Florida, which grew 39% from about 93,000 people to about 130,000. The largest retirement community in the nation is dominated by Republican voters and is a must-stop for GOP candidates. Though the Florida Constitution prohibits

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drawing districts to favor a political party, Republicans leaders may nonetheless try to take advantage of the new population figures. Because of its growth, Florida is gaining a U.S. House seat, giving lawmakers more leeway in line-drawing.

After the 2010 census, Republicans who controlled redistricting in far more states than Democrats drew maps that gave them a greater political advantage in more states than either party had in the past 50 years, according to a new AP analysis.

But Republicans won't hold as much power as they did last time in some key states. Republican-led legislatures will be paired with Democratic governors in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, which both had full GOP control after the 2010 census. In Michigan, a voter-approved citizens commission will handle redistricting instead of lawmakers and the governor. And in Ohio, voter-approved redistricting reforms will require majority Republicans to gain the support of minority Democrats for the new districts to last a full decade.

EXPLAINER: Why Ethiopia's war crisis is deepening by the day

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — The United States says it is sending a special envoy to Ethiopia as the fast-moving conflict in the Tigray region has spread into neighboring regions and Ethiopia's government this week called on all able citizens to stop the resurgent Tigray forces "once and for all."

The widening war in Africa's second-most populous country, with 110 million people, is also a growing humanitarian crisis. Millions of people in Tigray remain beyond the reach of food and other aid as the United Nations and U.S. say Ethiopian authorities allow just a small fraction of what's needed. And hundreds of thousands of people in the Amhara and Afar regions are displaced as Tigray forces move in, vowing to go to the capital, Addis Ababa, if needed to stop the fighting and remove the blockade on their region of 6 million people.

"It's one of these cases where we've run out of words to describe the horror of what civilians are being inflicted," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters this week. "More conflict can only lead, sadly, to more civilian pain."

Here's a look at the latest in the nine-month war and what pressure the U.S. special envoy might apply.

WHAT IS THE U.S. SEEKING IN ETHIOPIA?

The U.S. announced overnight that special envoy Jeffrey Feltman would travel to Ethiopia, neighboring Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates, a key Ethiopia ally, starting on Sunday. This is a "critical moment," White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan tweeted. "Months of war have brought immense suffering and division to a great nation, that won't be healed through more fighting. We call on all parties to urgently come to the negotiating table."

That seems highly unlikely. Ethiopia's government this year declared the Tigray People's Liberation Front, which dominated the government for nearly three decades before Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed took office in 2018, a terrorist group. The Tigray forces have set several preconditions for talks and say Abiy no longer has the legitimacy to govern. They retook much of the Tigray region in June in a dramatic turn in the war as Ethiopia's military retreated.

What began as a political dispute has now killed thousands of people.

Discussing what pressure the U.S. could apply to encourage negotiations, a congressional aide told The Associated Press that "I understand all options are on the table, from Global Magnitsky (sanctions over human rights violations) to an executive order on sanctions, to removal from (the African Growth and Opportunity Act), to more restrictive measures on assistance," as well as ways to block Ethiopia's efforts to get cash from international financial institutions. The aide spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on policy discussions.

Officials and lawmakers in Washington have signaled impatience as Ethiopian officials deny widespread human rights abuses such as gang-rapes and forced expulsions of ethnic Tigrayans or blame the Tigray forces.

The Ethiopian government's prickly dismissal of a new Amnesty International report on shocking sexual

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violence against Tigrayan women during the war “reflects the tone-deafness with which the government is handling the multiple conflicts and humanitarian crises across the country,” Senate Foreign Relations Committee ranking member Sen. Jim Risch tweeted on Thursday.

WHAT DOES ETHIOPIA'S GOVERNMENT SAY?

Ethiopia's government has repeatedly expressed frustration, alleging without evidence that the U.S., U.N. and others are taking the side of the Tigray forces or supporting the fighters with aid. It has asserted that disproportionate attention is paid to the Tigray people and not enough is done to address alleged abuses by Tigray forces in the Amhara and Afar regions.

The most urgent allegation was raised by the U.N. children's agency, which cited “credible information from partners” about deadly attacks last week on a camp for newly displaced people in Afar. A U.N. team plans to assess the scene as soon as security allows, the agency said Thursday. Ethiopia's government has blamed the Tigray forces, whose spokesman Getachew Reda denied it but said they're willing to cooperate in an independent investigation.

In the Amhara region, humanitarian groups are having trouble reaching their colleagues in Woldiya, one center of the fighting, amid a communications blackout. Now the Tigray forces have formed a military alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army, also designated by Ethiopia as a terrorist group.

On Thursday the prime minister's spokeswoman, Billene Seyoum, told reporters that the government's call to arms this week, signaling an end to a unilateral cease-fire, meant that Ethiopians are urged to stop the Tigray forces by “all means necessary.” She said this is not a result of the military's inability to take on the Tigray forces, and asserted that “in the millions, people are taking this call.”

WHAT ABOUT THE FATE OF EVERYDAY PEOPLE?

Caught in the middle are civilians, and efforts to reach them with aid are increasingly challenging because of the Ethiopian government's concern that it will end up helping the Tigray forces.

Just 10% of the aid needed for Tigray reached the region in recent weeks, the administrator of the U.S. Agency for International Development, Samantha Power, told reporters after a brief Ethiopia visit last week in which the prime minister did not meet her. USAID has estimated that up to 900,000 people in Tigray face “man-made” famine conditions while phone, internet and banking services remain cut off.

The U.N. World Food Program on Friday said at least 30 trucks a day must enter the region to address the need and what has arrived so far is a “drop in the ocean.”

Meanwhile, Ethiopia's government has suspended the operations of two major international aid groups, the Dutch section of Doctors Without Borders and the Norwegian Refugee Council, accusing them of spreading “misinformation.” This has further deterred many humanitarian workers from speaking openly, worried about retaliation. It also means efforts to respond to the crises in the Amhara and Afar regions could be affected.

“Some humanitarian organizations may now alter their public messaging campaigns or self-censor to avoid facing suspension. This would further contribute to Ethiopia's closing civic space,” the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies wrote on Thursday.

That means even less knowledge about conditions on the ground as many journalists face government-imposed restrictions, it said, adding that “civilians will suffer.”

Olympics now ended, Japan races to vaccinate as virus surges

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — The Tokyo Olympics have ended, but it's still vacation season in Japan, and many people are ignoring government pleas to avoid travel and stay away from bars and restaurants even as the coronavirus spikes at record levels.

Prime Minister Yoshihide Suga is pinning his hopes on vaccinations, which started slow but now are making good progress. How this race between shots and disease finishes may determine Suga's political future, not to mention the health of tens of thousands.

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Suga seems optimistic vaccines will win, but with only about 36% of the population fully vaccinated, experts say the virus's highly infectious delta variant is pulling ahead. They are urging the government to put more teeth in its weak state of emergency. Japan has managed the COVID-19 pandemic better than many countries, without the kind of restrictive lockdown used in other nations, but some believe that may now be needed.

Japan's daily coronavirus cases have topped 10,000 for more than a week, and the total has doubled in the past four months to exceed 1 million. Tokyo's daily caseloads tripled during the Games that ended Sunday. And as hospitals fill up, nearly 20,000 infected people are isolating at home, over 10 times more than a month ago.

On Friday, Tokyo reported 5,773 new cases, surpassing the previous record of 5,042 set last week.

Suga has stressed the progress of the vaccine rollout despite its late and slow start.

More than 80% of Japan's elderly population of 36 million have completed their vaccinations since they started getting shots in mid-April. Suga says high inoculation rates among seniors have contributed to a significant decline in the number of elderly patients, serious cases and deaths, relieving strain on the medical system.

"This clearly shows the vaccine efficacy," Suga said, pledging to accelerate vaccinations among younger people. "The most effective way to slow the infections and minimize serious symptoms would be to give everyone two shots as soon as possible."

Serious cases are now mostly among people in their 50s or younger, who are still largely unvaccinated. So far, 14 million — less than 20% of those aged 12 to 64 who are eligible for shots — have been fully vaccinated, according to Taro Kono, the minister in charge of vaccinations.

Suga said his goal of fully vaccinating all willing elderly people by the end of July has been mostly achieved. As he pushes to inoculate younger people, Suga aims to fully vaccinate 40% of all those 12 years and older by the end of August, and to complete shots for all those who wish to do so by October or November.

But vaccines alone might not be enough, experts and officials say.

"With the ongoing surge accelerated by the delta strain, it is extremely difficult to deal with the infections just by promoting the vaccines," Kono told a recent online program. He noted that young adults in their 20s and 30s account for about half of daily cases and urged them to stick to social distancing, mask wearing and handwashing.

Japan's delayed vaccinations began in mid-February, with medical workers getting the first shots. The pace, initially slowed by logistical bungling, inefficiency and shortages of vaccine supplies, dramatically picked up in May, and the number of daily shots has since risen beyond 1 million, meeting Suga's ambitious target.

Officials expect the vaccination pace will slow when young adults get their turn because of their reluctance to get jabs, in part because of false rumors about side effects. Many of them also think they are less likely to develop serious symptoms.

For Suga, who has been criticized for forcing through the Games despite strong local opposition, showcasing the relative safety of the Olympics and Japan's vaccination progress may be key to his political survival. Suga has repeatedly said there is no evidence of the virus spreading from the Olympics, and organizing officials agree. While some 400 positive cases were reported inside the Olympic "bubble" from early July until the closing ceremony, that positivity rate is only a fraction of Tokyo's overall, they say.

Suga said his government is urgently tackling the surge of infections, but his government has repeated the same set of unpopular emergency measures that mainly target bars and restaurants, requiring them not to serve alcohol and close early. Department stores, entertainment facilities and other non-essential businesses are also requested to close at 8 p.m.

Though businesses that comply receive a daily compensation of up to 200,000 yen (\$1,800) and those that defy could be fined, thousands are staying open later than 8 p.m. The authorities can stiffen the requests to orders and eventually impose fines on those who defy, but punishment is rare amid growing criticism that the measures unfairly target eateries.

Measures aimed at the public, including masking, disinfecting and avoiding non-essential trips, are only

requests, and many people still roam around, go to restaurants, gather in parks and streets to drink and commute on packed trains.

Economy Revitalization Minister Yasutoshi Nishimura, also in charge of virus measures, noted this week that large infection clusters have been detected in classrooms, department stores and "pachinko" pinball parlors, and asked that people avoid traveling during the summer vacation season.

Despite increased support for the Games thanks to a record 58 Japanese medals, post-Olympic media surveys show support ratings for Suga's government dropped below 30%.

"The government should come up with measures on the premise that people won't listen to its requests," former Osaka governor and political critic Toru Hashimoto said on a television talk show this week. "Many people think it doesn't make sense that only they have to keep restraining their activity even though the government forced through the Olympics."

The state of emergency is no longer working, some say, because measures have dragged on and people are tired of following the government requests.

"If the infections continue to escalate, we may have to start discussing the possibility of legalizing a lockdown," said Dr. Shigeru Omi, the government's top medical adviser. "Political leaders did not send a unified, powerful and clear message" to persuade the public to cooperate in order to slow the virus' spread.

In Yemen's north, Houthis face virus with outright denial

By SAMY MAGDY The Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — For three days last month, Nasser joined hundreds of others jammed into emergency rooms in Yemen's capital, Sanaa, searching for a hospital bed for his mother, who was struggling to breathe. By the time one became available, his mother was dead.

But her death certainly won't figure in the country's coronavirus numbers. Officially, there have been only four virus cases and one death in Yemen's north, according to the Houthi rebel authorities who control the capital and surrounding provinces.

It's not just a struggling health care system that's to blame for the unaccounted for deaths. In interviews with The Associated Press, more than a dozen doctors, aid workers, Sanaa residents and relatives of those believed to have died from the virus said the Houthi authorities are approaching the pandemic with such outright denial that it threatens to further endanger the already vulnerable population.

They say doctors are forced to falsify the cause of death on official papers, vaccines are seen with fear, and there are no limits or guidelines on public gatherings, much less funerals.

Nasser's mother, like many others, was buried without any precautions against the virus and the funeral was attended by hundreds. A few days later, an aunt, in her 40s, died, and two other relatives got sick and were hospitalized for over a week.

"Certainly, my aunt died from corona," said Nasser, who asked to be identified only by his first name for fear of reprisal by the Houthi authorities. "But no one tells us the truth."

The deaths came as Sanaa and other areas of northern Yemen have been experiencing a third deadly coronavirus surge, according to doctors and residents. But it's difficult to know how many have been sickened or died, beyond anecdotes from residents. The Houthi rebels have imposed an information blackout on confirmed cases and deaths from COVID-19. Testing remains sparse, or hushed.

Yemen, the Arab world's poorest country, has already been devastated by six years of civil war. The fighting pits the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels against the internationally recognized government, which is aided by a Saudi-led coalition.

The war has killed more than 130,000 people, displaced millions and created the world's worst humanitarian disaster. Aerial bombings and intense ground fighting have destroyed the country's infrastructure, leaving half the country's health facilities dysfunctional. About 18% of Yemen's 333 districts have no doctors at all. Water and sanitation systems have collapsed. Many families can barely afford one meal a day.

Amid the fighting came the COVID-19 pandemic, adding to the war's deadly toll.

"There was a big wave of COVID-19 and they (the Houthis) knew that very well," said a U.N. health official

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in Yemen, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of undermining negotiations with the rebels on vaccinations and other issues. "Isolation centers were full; the numbers were doubled three or four times."

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Houthis have not treated it with seriousness and action, said Afrah Nasser, Yemen researcher at Human Rights Watch. They even have hindered international efforts to help fight it in their areas, she said.

"Each party in Yemen has its own strategy, but the Houthi one is destructive," she said. "It's a recipe for disaster."

Dr. Adham Ismail, the World Health Organization representative in Yemen, said it was "a big achievement" to get any coronavirus vaccine at all into Houthi-controlled territories. Initially, authorities banned the shots, and then agreed to allow in only 1,000 doses. They have not held any campaigns encouraging people to get vaccinated.

The Houthis' opposition to vaccines forced doctors and other residents to seek their shots in Yemeni government-held areas. Many, including aid workers working in Houthi-held areas, registered online and traveled secretly to cities like Aden, Lahj and Taiz for vaccination.

Yemen received its first 360,000-dose shipment of the AstraZeneca vaccine from the United Nations-backed COVAX initiative in March. The shipment was the first batch of 1.9 million doses that Yemen is to receive through the end of the year. A vaccination campaign was launched in government-held areas in April.

Yemen's internationally recognized government has reported around 7,200 confirmed cases, including 1,391 deaths in areas under its control. The actual numbers, however, are believed much higher mainly because of limited testing.

A spokesman for the rebels did not answer calls seeking comment. But last year, Youssef al-Hadhari, a spokesman for the Houthi health ministry, told the AP: "We don't publish the numbers to the society because such publicity has a heavy and terrifying toll on people's psychological health."

Meanwhile, the Houthis continue holding public events, including recruitment gatherings and funerals attended by thousands for senior military officials killed in battle, as virus cases spike. All are held with no precautionary measures against the virus.

Over a dozen doctors, aid workers and residents said cases in the north are rising rapidly, with more frequent funerals, apparently of virus victims, though doctors said they've been warned not to confirm the causes of the deaths. All spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation from the rebels.

Doctors and other health care workers said the 24 isolation centers in the north have been full since mid-July. One health care worker in the Palestine hospital said dozens of patients have come every day with coronavirus-like symptoms, most in their 30s and 40s. He said many are being told to isolate at home for lack of other options.

In Sanaa cemeteries, grave diggers have found it difficult to find space for new burial plots. At one cemetery in Jarraf, one digger estimated that over 30 people were buried every day in the past two months, many of them women and elderly.

In the northern province of Ibb, two health care workers at the Jibla hospital said the facility receives nearly 50 people with Covid-19-like symptoms every day. The hospital lacks testing capacities, so doctors usually depend on other means to diagnose.

When patients die at the Jibla hospital, doctors don't tell relatives they are suspected to have been infected by the virus, for fear of being targeted afterwards. The Houthis have appointed security supervisors at hospitals to control the flow of information between medical staff and patients' families, according to health care workers.

Earlier this year, two senior Houthi officials died, apparently among the country's most high-profile virus victims. Yahia al-Shami, spent over a month in an isolation center in Sanaa before he succumbed to the virus in April and Zakaria al-Shami, transportation minister in the Houthi-run government, also caught the coronavirus and died in March, according to doctors who treated them.

The Houthi rebel authorities announced both of their deaths — but there was no mention of the cause.

Climate-fueled wildfires take toll on tropical Pacific isles

By CALEB JONES and VICTORIA MILKO Associated Press

WAIMEA, Hawaii (AP) — A metal roof sits atop the burned remains of a homestead on the once-lush slopes of Hawaii's Mauna Kea — a dormant volcano and the state's tallest peak — charred cars and motorcycles strewn about as wind-whipped sand and ash blast the scorched landscape.

Generations of Kumu Micah Kamohoalii's family have lived on these lands reserved for Native Hawaiians, and his cousin owns this house destroyed by the state's largest-ever wildfire.

"I've never seen a fire this big," Kamohoalii said. "Waimea has had fires, many of them before and some maybe a few hundred acres, but not this size."

The fire has burned more than 70 square miles (181 square kilometers) in the two weeks it has been going. But it wasn't the first time this area has burned, and won't be the last. Like many islands in the Pacific, Hawaii's dry seasons are getting more extreme with climate change.

"Everyone knows Waimea to be the pasturelands and to be all the green rolling hills. And so when I was young, all of this was always green," Kamohoalii said. "In the last 10 to 15 years, it has been really, really dry."

Huge wildfires highlight the dangers of climate change-related heat and drought for many communities throughout the U.S. West and other hotspots around the world. But experts say relatively small fires on typically wet, tropical islands in the Pacific are also on the rise, creating a cycle of ecological damage that affects vital and limited resources for millions of residents.

From Micronesia to Hawaii, wildfires have been a growing problem for decades. With scarce funding to prevent and suppress these fires, island communities have struggled to address the problem.

"On tropical islands, fires have a unique set of impacts," said Clay Trauernicht, an ecosystems and wildfire researcher at the University of Hawaii. "First and foremost, fires were very rare prior to human arrival on any Pacific island. The vegetation, the native ecosystems, really evolved in the absence of frequent fires. And so when you do get these fires, they tend to kind of wreak havoc."

But it's not just burnt land that is affected. Fires on islands harm environments from the top of mountains to below the ocean's surface.

"Once a fire occurs, what you're doing is removing vegetation," Trauernicht said. "And we often get heavy rainfall events. All of that exposed soil gets carried downstream and we have these direct impacts of erosion, sedimentation on our marine ecosystems. So it really hammers our coral reefs as well."

Pacific island reefs support local food production, create barriers to large storm surges and are a critical part of tourism that keeps many islands running.

The wet season on tropical islands also causes fire-adapted grasses to grow tall and thick, building fuel for the next summer's wildfires.

"Guinea grass grows six inches a day in optimal conditions and a six-foot tall patch of grass can throw 20-foot flame lengths," said Michael Walker, Hawaii's state fire protection forester. "So what we have here are really fast-moving, very hot, very dangerous fires."

Walker said such non-native grasses that have proliferated in Hawaii are adapted to fire, but native species and shrubs are not.

"While (these wildfires) may not compare to the size and duration of what folks have in the western United States, we burn a significant portion of our lands every year because of these grass fires, and they're altering our natural ecosystems and converting forests to grass," he said.

The latest wildfire on Hawaii's Big Island burned about 1% of the state's total land, and other islands in the Pacific such as Palau, Saipan and Guam burn even more — up to 10% in severe fire years.

On average, Guam has nearly 700 wildfires a year, Palau about 175 and Saipan about 20, according to data from 2018.

Guam, like many other places, has long used fire as a tool. Farmers sometimes use it to clear fields and hunters have been known to burn areas while poaching.

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The U.S. territory's forestry chief Christine Camacho Fejeran said fires on the island are mostly caused by arson. "So all of Guam's wildfires are human-caused issues, whether it's an intentional or an escaped backyard fire or another (cause)," she said.

On average, Fejeran said, 6,000 to 7,000 acres (2,430 to 2,830 hectares) of the island burns each year, amounting to about 5% of its land.

While no homes have been lost to recent wildfires on Guam, Fejeran believes that trend will come to an end — unless more is done to combat the fires.

The island has made some changes in fire legislation, management, education and enforcement. Arson has become a chargeable offense, but Fejeran says enforcement remains an obstacle in the tight-knit community.

Back in Hawaii, last week's blaze destroyed three homes, but the fire threatened many more.

Mikiala Brand, who has lived for two decades on a 50-acre homestead, watched as flames came within a few hundred yards (meters) of her house.

As the fire grew closer, she saw firefighters, neighbors and the National Guard racing into her rural neighborhood to fight it. She had to evacuate her beloved home twice in less than 24 hours.

"Of course it was scary," she said. "But I had faith that the strong, the brave and the talented, and along with nature and Akua, which is our name for the universal spirit, would take care."

Demonstrating the tenacity of many Native Hawaiians in her farming and ranching community, Brand said, "I only worry about what I have control over."

Down the mountain in Waikoloa Village, a community of about 7,000, Linda Hunt was also forced to evacuate. She works at a horse stable and scrambled to save the animals as flames whipped closer.

"We only have one and a half roads to get out — you have the main road and then you have the emergency access," Hunt said of a narrow dirt road. "Everybody was trying to evacuate, there was a lot of confusion."

The fire was eventually put out just short of the densely populated neighborhood, but had flames reached the homes, it could have been disastrous on the parched landscape.

"When you have high winds like we get here, it's difficult no matter how big your fire break is, it's going to blow right through," Hunt said.

While fires are becoming more difficult to fight because of dry and hot conditions associated with climate change, experts say the Pacific islands still can help prevent these blazes from causing ecological damage and property losses.

"Fire presents a pretty interesting component of kind of all these climate change impacts that we're dealing with in the sense that they are manageable," said Trauernicht, the University of Hawaii wildfire expert.

In addition to education and arson prevention, he said, land use — such as grazing practices and reforestation that reduce volatile grasses — could help.

"It's within our control, potentially, to reduce the impacts that we're seeing with fires," Trauernicht said. "Both in terms of forest loss as well as the impacts on coral reefs."

Northwest heat wave spurs help for vulnerable residents

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Oregon volunteers scrambled to hand out water, portable fans, popsicles and information about cooling shelters to homeless people living in isolated encampments on the outskirts of Portland as the Pacific Northwest sweated through another heat wave.

In an area more used to temperate weather, authorities are trying to provide relief to the vulnerable, including low-income older people and those living outdoors. They are mindful of a record-shattering heat wave in late June that killed hundreds in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia when the thermometer went as high as 116 degrees Fahrenheit (47 Celsius).

In Portland, temperatures reached 103 F (39 C) by late afternoon Thursday and more heat was expected Friday. It was hotter than Phoenix, where the desert city hit a below-normal 100 F (38 C). In Seattle,

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highs were in the 90s in a region where many don't have air conditioning. In Bellingham, Washington, on Thursday the high hit 100 F (38 C) for the first time on record.

In Portland, a nonprofit group that serves the homeless and those with mental illness used three large vans to transport water and other cooling items to homeless encampments along the Columbia River on the eastern outskirts of the city.

The effort was important because people experiencing homelessness are often reluctant to go to cooling centers, said Kim James, director of homeless and housing support for Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare.

Scott Zalitis, who was shirtless in the heat, ate lime-green popsicles handed out by the group and told volunteers that the temperature at his campsite reached 105 F (41 C) the day before. A huge cooler full of food spoiled when all the ice melted and he couldn't find any more to buy.

"It's miserable. I can't handle the heat no matter what. So, I mean, it's hard to stand. Even in the shade it's too hot," said Zalitis, who became homeless last year when the apartment where he subleased a room burned down in an electrical fire. "You want to stay somewhere that's cool, as cool as possible."

The encampment, where rusted-out cars and broken-down RVs mixed with tents and piles of garbage, was in sharp contrast to downtown Portland, where sweaty pedestrians cooled off by running through a large public fountain in a riverfront park.

Luna Abadia, 17, was out training with her cross country team from Lincoln High School in the morning when the group stopped for a few minutes at the fountain. The runners normally train at 4 p.m., but in recent weeks, they have had to shift it to 8 a.m. — and it's still oppressively hot, she said.

"It was very hot, lots of sweat. That's something we've noticed in the past week or so," Abadia said.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has declared a state of emergency and activated an emergency operations center, citing the potential for disruptions to the power grid and transportation. City and county governments have opened cooling centers, extended public library hours and waived bus fare for those headed to cooling centers. A 24-hour statewide help line will direct callers to the nearest cooling shelter and offer safety tips.

Intense heat waves and a historic drought in the American West reflect climate change that is making weather more extreme.

Abadia said changes brought on by climate change that she has noticed in her life prompted her to start a youth-run organization to get more young people involved in the issue.

"Climate change is everything I've been thinking about for the past weeks," she said. "This heat wave and the wildfires we faced here a year ago — and even now around the world — have really been a new reminder to what we're facing and, kind of, the immediate action that needs to be taken."

NY let childhood sex abuse victims sue; 9,000 went to court

By MICHAEL HILL Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — For two years, New York temporarily set aside its usual time limit on civil lawsuits in order to allow victims of childhood sexual abuse to sue churches, hospitals, schools, camps, scout groups and other institutions and people they hold responsible for enabling pedophiles or turning a blind eye to wrongdoing.

That window closes Saturday, after more than 9,000 lawsuits were filed, a deluge whose impact may be felt for many years.

Four of the state's Roman Catholic dioceses have filed for bankruptcy partly as a result of litigation unleashed by the state's Child Victims Act. Thousands of new allegations against priests, teachers, scout leaders and other authorities have intensified the already harsh light on institutions entrusted with caring for children.

And survivors of abuse have been given an outlet for their trauma and a chance at accountability once thought long lost.

"This has, ironically, been a very healing experience for me on a personal level," said Carol DuPre, 74, who sued the Roman Catholic diocese in Rochester, saying she was molested by a priest as a teen in the

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early 1960s as she counted offerings and typed up bulletins after church services.

She put the events "in a storehouse in her mind," but it still haunted her for decades. When the chance came to file a suit, it was an easy decision.

"The idea of confronting it, talking about it and dealing with it is internally setting me free."

New York is among a number of states that have in recent years established windows allowing people to sue over childhood abuse no matter how long ago it took place. Similar windows were opened in New Jersey and California.

Ordinarily, courts put deadlines on suing because of the difficulty in holding a fair trial over incidents that happened many years ago. Witnesses die or move away. Records are lost. Memories fade. But lawmakers believed that, despite those hurdles, victims deserved an opportunity for justice and might feel emboldened now to speak up about things they've kept to themselves for many years.

New York's one-year window was originally supposed to end Aug. 14, 2020, but it was extended twice amid concerns that the coronavirus pandemic and resulting court disruptions were keeping survivors from coming forward.

Barring another extension, electronic filings will be accepted until midnight Saturday, according to a state courts spokesperson.

The tsunami of litigation surprised even some of the lawyers who work regularly with alleged abuse victims.

"We thought maybe we get one hundred cases or a couple hundred cases and here we are," said attorney James Marsh, whose firm has filed about 800 cases. "We woefully miscalculated the interest there."

Plaintiffs' lawyers said potential clients were still coming forward as the deadline neared, some gaining the strength after seeing stories of others filing suits. Attorney Jeff Anderson said some survivors wait until the last minute because of the difficulty of coming forward.

And some will not have gained the strength to come forward before the window closes, said attorney Mitchell Garabedian.

"A court deadline that's been publicized encourages many victims and survivors to come forward," Garabedian said. "But to other victims and survivors, it's meaningless."

Some have struggled over whether to publicly expose old wounds.

"It was not an easy decision," said Donna Ashton, a 56-year-old Rochester-area woman who filed a lawsuit in June claiming she was abused as a teen by the musical director at a Baptist church. "You have to unearth and relive the trauma that you had when you were a young person."

She married the man at age 19 after what the lawsuit said was manipulation, grooming and abuse. The church has disputed the allegations.

"I had children with him and I had to make sure that that was OK with them and that they were OK with me coming forward with this," she said.

Thousands of the cases filed in New York involve religious institutions, according to court data.

Experts caution it's too early to estimate liability for church-related entities in the state. Though Anderson, who calls New York the "main battleground," expects it to be in the billions of dollars.

The Diocese of Rockville Centre on Long Island cited the "severe" financial burden from litigation when it became the largest diocese in the United States to declare bankruptcy last October. Half of New York's eight Roman Catholic dioceses have filed for bankruptcy, starting with the Diocese of Rochester in 2019.

"Whatever financial pain the Church suffers as a result of this crisis pales in comparison to the life-altering suffering of survivors," Dennis Poust, executive director of the New York State Catholic Conference, said in an email.

Poust said bishops are focused now on resolving the civil claims in a way that satisfies those who have been harmed while preserving the church's charitable, educational and sacramental ministries.

The bankruptcies allow dioceses to consolidate victims' lawsuits and negotiate with the claimants as a single class.

For instance, the Boy Scouts of America sought bankruptcy protection in February 2020 and last month reached an \$850 million agreement with attorneys representing tens of thousands of victims of child sex

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abuse.

Attorneys see the closing window as the start of another intense phase as individual cases are considered and bankruptcies proceed. The cut-off for new Child Victims Act filings could lead to resolutions because defendants will now know how many claims they are dealing with.

"It's still early in the process because the window hasn't closed yet," Anderson said. "And once it does, we'll see more progress."

Census data: US is diversifying, white population shrinking

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

No racial or ethnic group dominates for those under age 18, and white people declined in numbers for the first time on record in the overall U.S. population as the Hispanic and Asian populations boomed this past decade, according to the 2020 census data.

The figures released Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau offered the most detailed portrait yet of how the country has changed since 2010 and will also be instrumental in redrawing the nation's political maps.

The numbers are sure to set off an intense partisan battle over representation at a time of deep national division and fights over voting rights. The numbers could help determine control of the House in the 2022 elections and provide an electoral edge for years to come.

The data also will shape how \$1.5 trillion in annual federal spending is distributed.

The data offered a mirror not only into the demographic changes of the past decade, but also a glimpse of the future. To that end, they showed there is now no majority racial or ethnic group for people younger than 18, as the share of non-Hispanic whites in the age group dropped from 53.5% to 47.3% over the decade.

The share of children in the U.S. declined because of falling birth rates, while the share of adults grew, driven by aging baby boomers. Adults over 18 made up more than three-quarters of the population in 2020, or 258.3 million people, an increase of more than 10% from 2010. However, the population of children under age 18 dropped from 74.2 million in 2010 to 73.1 million in 2020.

"If not for Hispanics, Asians, people of two or more races, those are the only groups underage that are growing," said William Frey, a senior fellow at Brookings' Metropolitan Policy Program. "A lot of these young minorities are important for our future growth, not only for the child population but for our future labor force."

The Asian and Hispanic populations burgeoned from 2010 to 2020, respectively increasing by around a third and almost a quarter over the decade. The Asian population reached 24 million people in 2020, and the Hispanic population hit 62.1 million people.

The Hispanic boom accounted for almost half of the overall U.S. population growth, which was the slowest since the Great Depression. By comparison, the non-Hispanic growth rate over the decade was 4.3%. The Hispanic share of the U.S. population grew to 18.7% of the U.S. population, up from 16.3% in 2010.

"The 2020 Census confirmed what we have known for years — the future of the country is Latino," said Arturo Vargas, CEO of the National Association of Latino Elected and Appointed Officials Educational Fund.

The share of the white population fell from 63.7% in 2010 to 57.8% in 2020, the lowest on record, driven by falling birthrates among white women compared with Hispanic and Asian women. The number of non-Hispanic white people shrank from 196 million in 2010 to 191 million.

White people continue to be the most prevalent racial or ethnic group, though that changed in California, where Hispanics became the largest racial or ethnic group, growing from 37.6% to 39.4% over the decade, while the share of white people dropped from 40.1% to 34.7%. California, the nation's most populous state, joined Hawaii, New Mexico and the District of Columbia as a place where non-Hispanic white people are no longer the dominant group.

"The U.S. population is much more multiracial and much more racially and ethnically diverse than what we have measured in the past," said Nicholas Jones, a Census Bureau official.

Some demographers cautioned that the white population was not shrinking as much as shifting to multi-

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racial identities. The number of people who identified as belonging to two or more races more than tripled from 9 million people in 2010 to 33.8 million in 2020. They now account for 10% of the U.S. population.

People who identify as a race other than white, Black, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander — either alone or in combination with one of those races — jumped to 49.9 million people, surpassing the Black population of 46.9 million people as the nation's second-largest racial group, according to the Census Bureau.

But demographers said that may have to do with Hispanic uncertainty about how to answer the race question on the census form, as well as changes the Census Bureau made in processing responses and how it asked about race and ethnicity in order to better reflect the nation's diversity.

The data release offers states the first chance to redraw their political districts in a process that is expected to be particularly brutish since control over Congress and statehouses is at stake.

It also provides the first opportunity to see, on a limited basis, how well the Census Bureau fulfilled its goal of counting every U.S. resident during what many consider the most difficult once-a-decade census in recent memory. Communities of color have been undercounted in past censuses. The agency likely will not know how good a job it did until next year, when it releases a survey showing undercounts and overcounts.

"The data we are releasing today meet our high quality data standards," acting Census Bureau Director Ron Jarmin said.

Prospects ever fainter for bipartisan policing overhaul deal

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Prospects seem increasingly faint for a bipartisan Senate deal on overhauling policing practices as deadlocked lawmakers have fled the Capitol for August recess and political pressure for an accord eases with each passing week.

Bargainers insist they're still talking and haven't abandoned hope, though they've repeatedly blown past self-imposed deadlines. This spring, President Joe Biden pumped momentum into talks with a nationally televised address telling Congress to "get it done" by May 25, the anniversary of a Minneapolis police officer's killing of George Floyd, a Black man.

That didn't happen.

Now, Washington's focus is shifting to Biden's drive to spend trillions on social, environmental and public works programs, one of many budget showdowns that will clog Congress' autumn calendar. With next year's elections for House and Senate control edging closer, both parties are increasingly compelled to bank on issues they can use against their rivals, weakening the political will for compromise.

"We all have to make sure we don't lose this moment," Ben Crump, an attorney representing the families of Floyd and other Black victims of police shootings, said in an interview Thursday.

"Time right now is an enemy of a deal," said James Pasco, executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police, the police union.

The slow fadeout from top-tier concern to background noise illustrates how contentious issues sometimes die in Washington — not with clamorous showdown votes but a gradual realization that hey, people simply aren't talking about this any more.

Former President Donald Trump's frequent promises for highway and other infrastructure projects and former President Barack Obama's efforts to close the U.S. military prison for detained terrorism suspects at Guantanamo in Cuba both just ebbed away.

The Senate's policing talks are aimed at writing compromise legislation curbing law enforcement agencies' use of force and making them more accountable for abuses.

For months, bargainers have been stymied over Democrats' demands to make individual police officers accused of abuses liable for civil penalties. It's currently difficult to pursue such actions in all but the most egregious cases. Republicans and law enforcement groups like the Fraternal Order of Police have resisted easing those limitations.

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Negotiators are also divided over whether to ease the standards for bringing criminal cases against officers for excessive use of force.

"I had hoped that we'd be done by now, but we are still trading paper and making incremental progress," South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott, the chief Republican negotiator, told reporters this week.

Scott, who in May set a "June or bust" goal that never materialized, declined to say whether an agreement would be reached this year. He said ongoing violence like this month's slaying of a Chicago police officer "has made this a more important process, in my opinion, and a longer process."

Scott's Democratic counterpart, New Jersey Sen. Cory Booker, would say little.

"I'm just putting my head down and getting the work done as quickly as we can," he told reporters recently.

As the Senate began a brief break in June, bargainers announced they'd reached a bipartisan "framework" for an agreement. They provided no detail and never produced evidence that their outline, whatever it was, was meaningful.

The Democratic-controlled House approved a sweeping measure in March that's stalled in the evenly divided Senate. Last year, Democrats derailed a Senate GOP bill they said was too timid.

Police in the U.S. fatally shoot nearly 1,000 people annually, including a disproportionately high number of Black people, according to a database compiled by The Washington Post. Some slayings like Floyd's have sparked nationwide protests, even as many communities have revamped police procedures.

The issue played prominently in congressional campaigns last fall, with Democrats appealing to voters who want restraints on police practices while Republicans focused on fear of rising crime.

Booker was involved in a brief Senate flareup this week that illustrated the issue's ample political potency.

Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., offered an amendment to budget legislation suggesting cuts in federal aid to municipalities that vote to "defund the police," a loosely defined term from which all but the most progressive Democrats have distanced themselves. Hoping some Democrats would vote against his measure, Tuberville said opponents would be turning their backs on "the men and women in blue."

But the measure passed 99-0 after Booker delivered an impassioned, sarcastic speech saying he wanted to "hug my colleague" for giving Democrats a vote showing they opposed police defunding.

Both parties have voiced suspicions that their opponents are more interested in using policing as a campaign issue than they are in addressing police violence.

The talks have been complicated by some outside groups refusing to give ground on key issues. That's led some organizations like the bipartisan Justice Action Network, which backs criminal justice reforms, to push for an initial, less ambitious deal addressing areas of agreement, like some increased police reporting of data on use of force.

"The longer this drags on, the more concerned we are getting," said Inimai Chettiar, the network's federal affairs director.

To intensify pressure on bargainers, Crump said advocates should heed the example of progressive Rep. Cori Bush, D-Mo. Her all-night vigils outside the Capitol helped pressure Biden recently to temporarily extend a federal moratorium against evicting renters during the pandemic.

"You do any and everything possible to make them pay attention," said Crump.

Asked if Biden should be more engaged to prompt a deal, Crump said, "Hopefully, all of us can do more."

Tezlyn Figaro, senior adviser to the George Floyd Foundation, founded by the Floyd family, cited Democrats' control of the White House and Congress and expressed disappointment with bargainers' failure to meet Biden's May 25 deadline for action.

"It hasn't been done," she said. "Definitely not encouraging."

Biden eyes tougher vaccine rules without provoking backlash

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When the pace of vaccinations in the U.S. first began to slow, President Joe Biden backed incentives like million-dollar cash lotteries if that's what it took to get shots in arms. But as new

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coronavirus infections soar, he's testing a tougher approach.

In just the past two weeks, Biden has forced millions of federal workers to attest to their vaccination status or face onerous new requirements. He's met with business leaders at the White House to press them to do the same.

Meanwhile, the administration has taken steps toward mandating shots for people traveling into the U.S. from overseas. And the White House is weighing options to be more assertive at the state and local level, including potential support for school districts imposing rules to prevent spread of the virus over the objection of Republican leaders.

"To the mayors, school superintendents, educators, local leaders, who are standing up to the governors politicizing mask protection for our kids: thank you," Biden said Thursday. "Thank God that we have heroes like you, and I stand with you all, and America should as well."

But even as Biden becomes more aggressive, he has refrained from using all his powers to pressure Americans to get vaccinated. He's held off, for instance, on proposals to require vaccinations for all air travelers or, for that matter, the federal workforce. The result is a precarious balancing act as Biden works to make life more uncomfortable for the unvaccinated without spurring a backlash in a deeply polarized country that would only undermine his public health goals.

Vaccine mandates are "the right lever at the right time," said Ben Wakana, the deputy director of strategic communications and engagement for the White House COVID-19 response, noting the public's increasing confidence in the vaccines and adding that it marks a new phase in the government's campaign to encourage Americans to get shots.

Many Republicans, particularly those eyeing the party's 2024 presidential nomination, disagree and warn of federal overreaching into decisions that should be left to individuals. Biden and Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, an epicenter of the latest virus wave, have spent weeks feuding over the proper role of government during a public health crisis.

There is notable support for vaccine mandates. According to a recent poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation, 51% of Americans say the federal government should recommend that employers require their workers to get vaccinated, while 45% say it should not.

For now, Biden has required most federal workers to attest to their vaccination status under potential criminal penalties, with those who have not received a dose required to maintain social distancing, test weekly for the virus and face other potential restrictions on their work.

Health workers at the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Health and Human Services will be required to get vaccinated, and the Pentagon has announced that it intends to mandate vaccines for the military by next month.

The sharper federal approach comes as nearly 90 million eligible Americans still have not been vaccinated and as Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, says shots are the only path for the nation to contain the delta variant.

White House officials say Biden wanted to initially operate with restraint to ensure that Americans were ready for the strong-arming from the federal government. The federal moves have been carefully calibrated to encourage a wave of businesses and governments to follow suit.

Biden administration officials briefed prominent Washington trade groups, including the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable, ahead of the federal announcement in hopes their members would follow suit. White House officials have fielded dozens of calls from business executive in recent weeks about how to implement their own vaccination mandates, officials said, sharing best practices and tips for how to protect their workforces.

"Through vaccination requirements, employers have the power to help end the pandemic," White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said Thursday, naming companies, universities and local governments that have implemented them.

The new restrictions appear to be having the desired effect. The rules — combined with fresh concerns about the surging delta variant — have nearly doubled the average rate that Americans are getting newly

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vaccinated from last month to about 450,000 per day.

Zients said the White House still has no plans to develop the infrastructure for so-called vaccine passports, despite some criticism from businesses that the patchwork of local and state verification systems leaves them without a clear way to enforce mandates. The Biden administration had promised to share frameworks for verification systems, but ultimately left them all to the private sector and local governments, in part because of political sensitivities.

Still, while more severe measures — such as mandating vaccines for interstate travel or changing how the federal government reimburses treatment for those who are unvaccinated and become ill with COVID-19 — have been discussed, the administration worried that they would be too polarizing for the moment.

That's not to say they won't be implemented in the future, as public opinion continues to shift toward requiring vaccinations as a means to restore normalcy.

Lawrence Gostin, a professor of health law at Georgetown University, said Biden would likely need to continue to turn up the pressure on the unvaccinated. "He's really going to have to use all the leverage the federal government has, and indeed use pressure points," Gostin said. "And I think there are a few that he can do but he hasn't done yet."

"The country is completely fatigued with lockdowns, business closures and masking," added Gostin, "and vaccines are literally our only tool. We've tried masking, distancing, occupancy limits, even entire lockdowns now for coming along nearly two years. And the virus just keeps raging back. And the vaccines are the only thing we have now to defeat the virus. We need to use that tool and we need to use it vigorously. And I think there will be large public support for that."

Taliban take Kandahar, Herat in major Afghanistan offensive

By TAMEEM AKHGAR, RAHIM FAIEZ and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban captured two major Afghan cities, the country's second- and third-largest after Kabul, and a strategic provincial capital on Thursday, further squeezing the embattled government just weeks before the end of the American military mission in Afghanistan.

The seizure of Kandahar and Herat marks the biggest prizes yet for the Taliban, who have taken 12 of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals as part of a weeklong blitz.

The capture of the city of Ghazni, meanwhile, cuts off a crucial highway linking the Afghan capital, Kabul, with the country's southern provinces, all part of an insurgent push some 20 years after U.S. and NATO troops invaded and ousted the Taliban government.

While Kabul itself isn't directly under threat yet, the losses and the battles elsewhere further tighten the grip of a resurgent Taliban, who are estimated to now hold over two-thirds of the country and continue to press their offensive.

With security rapidly deteriorating, the United States planned to send in 3,000 troops to help evacuate some personnel from the U.S. Embassy in Kabul. Separately, Britain said about 600 troops would be deployed on a short-term basis to support British nationals leaving the country, and Canada is sending special forces to help evacuate its embassy.

Thousands of Afghans have fled their homes amid fears the Taliban will again impose a brutal, repressive government, all but eliminating women's rights and conducting public amputations, stonings and executions. Peace talks in Qatar remain stalled, though diplomats met throughout the day.

The latest U.S. military intelligence assessment suggests Kabul could come under insurgent pressure within 30 days and that, if current trends hold, the Taliban could gain full control of the country within a few months. The Afghan government may eventually be forced to pull back to defend the capital and just a few other cities in the coming days if the Taliban keep up their momentum.

The onslaught represents a stunning collapse of Afghan forces and renews questions about where the over \$830 billion spent by the U.S. Defense Department on fighting, training those troops, and reconstruction efforts went — especially as Taliban fighters ride on American-made Humvees and pickup trucks with M-16s slung across their shoulders.

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Afghan security forces and the government have not responded to repeated questions from journalists over the days of fighting, instead issuing video communiques that downplay the Taliban advance.

In Herat, Taliban fighters rushed past the Great Mosque in the historic city — which dates to 500 BC and was once a spoil of Alexander the Great — and seized government buildings. Witnesses described hearing sporadic gunfire at one government building while the rest of the city fell silent under the insurgents' control.

Herat had been under militant attack for two weeks, with one wave blunted by the arrival of warlord Ismail Khan and his forces. But on Thursday afternoon, Taliban fighters broke through the city's defensive lines and later said they were in control.

Afghan lawmaker Semin Barekzai also acknowledged the city's fall, saying that some officials there had escaped. Witnesses described seeing Taliban fighters once-detained at Herat's prison now freely moving on the streets.

It wasn't immediately clear what happened to Khan, who earlier had been described as under attack with his forces at a government building.

In Kandahar, the Taliban seized the governor's office and other buildings, witnesses said. The governor and other officials fled the onslaught, catching a flight to Kabul, the witnesses added. They declined to be named publicly as the defeat has yet to be acknowledged by the government.

The Taliban had earlier attacked a prison in Kandahar and freed inmates inside, officials said.

Earlier Thursday, the militants raised their white flags imprinted with an Islamic proclamation of faith over the city of Ghazni, just 130 kilometers (80 miles) southwest of Kabul.

Ghazni provincial council member Amanullah Kamrani alleged that the provincial governor and police chief made a deal with the Taliban to flee after surrendering. Taliban video and photos purported to show the governor's convoy freely passing by insurgents as part of the deal.

Afghan Interior Ministry spokesman Mirwais Stanekzai later said the governor and his deputies had been arrested over that alleged deal. The officials could not be immediately reached for comment.

Stanekzai also acknowledged in a video message that parts of Ghazni had fallen, though he insisted government security forces "do exist" in the city.

The loss of Ghazni — which sits along the Kabul-Kandahar Highway — could complicate resupply and movement for government forces, as well as squeeze the capital from the south.

Already, the Taliban's weeklong blitz has seen the militants seize nine other provincial capitals around the country. Many are in the country's northeast corner, pressuring Kabul from that direction as well.

In southern Afghanistan, the Taliban's heartland, heavy fighting continued in Lashkar Gah, where surrounded government forces hoped to hold onto the capital of Helmand province.

Nasima Niazi, a lawmaker from Helmand, criticized ongoing airstrikes targeting the area, saying civilians likely had been wounded and killed.

"The Taliban used civilian houses to protect themselves, and the government, without paying any attention to civilians, carried out airstrikes," she said.

With the Afghan air power limited and in disarray, aviation tracking data suggested U.S. Air Force B-52 bombers, F-15 fighter jets, drones and other aircraft were involved in the fighting across the country, according to Australia-based security firm The Cavell Group.

U.S. Air Force Maj. Nicole Ferrara, a Central Command spokeswoman, acknowledged that American forces "have conducted several airstrikes in defense of our Afghan partners in recent days." However, she declined to offer any details on the attacks or to discuss the Afghan complaints of civilian casualties.

Late Thursday night, an Afghan official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss developments, said the Taliban have also taken much of western Badghis province — but not the provincial army corps and the intelligence department. A Taliban tweet claimed the insurgents captured the seat of the provincial governor, the police headquarters and all other government offices.

Even as diplomats met in Doha, Qatar on Thursday, the success of the Taliban offensive called into question whether they would ever rejoin long-stalled peace talks aimed at moving Afghanistan toward an administration that includes members of the current Afghan government and the Taliban. Instead, the group could come to power by force — or the country could splinter into factional fighting like it did after

the Soviet withdrawal in 1989.

Extra COVID vaccine OK'd for those with weak immune systems

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MATTHEW PERRONE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. regulators say transplant recipients and others with severely weakened immune systems can get an extra dose of the Pfizer or Moderna COVID-19 vaccines to better protect them as the delta variant continues to surge.

The late-night announcement Thursday by the Food and Drug Administration applies to several million Americans who are especially vulnerable because of organ transplants, certain cancers or other disorders. Several other countries, including France and Israel, have similar recommendations.

It's harder for vaccines to rev up an immune system suppressed by certain medications and diseases, so those patients don't always get the same protection as otherwise healthy people — and small studies suggest for at least some, an extra dose may be the solution.

"Today's action allows doctors to boost immunity in certain immunocompromised individuals who need extra protection from COVID-19," Dr. Janet Woodcock, the FDA's acting commissioner, said in a statement.

The FDA determined that transplant recipients and others with a similar level of compromised immunity can receive a third dose of the vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna at least 28 days after getting their second shot. The FDA made no mention of immune-compromised patients who received the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine.

The announcement comes as the extra-contagious delta version of the coronavirus surges through much of the country, pushing new cases, hospitalizations and deaths to heights not seen since last winter.

Importantly, the FDA's decision only applies to this high-risk group, estimated to be no more than 3% of U.S. adults. It's not an opening for booster doses for the general population.

Instead, health authorities consider the extra dose part of the initial prescription for the immune-compromised. For example, France since April has encouraged that such patients get a third dose four weeks after their regular second shot. Israel and Germany also recently began recommending a third dose of two-dose vaccines.

Separately, U.S. health officials are continuing to closely monitor if and when average people's immunity wanes enough to require boosters for everyone — but for now, the vaccines continue to offer robust protection for the general population.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is expected to formally recommend the extra shots for certain immune-compromised groups after a meeting Friday of its outside advisers.

Transplant recipients and others with suppressed immune systems know they're at more risk than the average American and some have been seeking out extra doses on their own, even if it means lying about their vaccination status. The change means now the high-risk groups can more easily get another shot — but experts caution it's not yet clear exactly who should.

"This is all going to be very personalized," cautioned Dr. Dorry Segev, a transplant surgeon at Johns Hopkins University who is running a major National Institutes of Health study of extra shots for organ recipients. For some people, a third dose "increases their immune response. Yet for some people it does not seem to. We don't quite know who's who yet."

One recent study of more than 650 transplant recipients found just over half harbored virus-fighting antibodies after two doses of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines — although generally less than in otherwise healthy vaccinated people. Another study of people with rheumatoid arthritis and similar autoimmune diseases found only those who use particular medications have very poor vaccine responses.

There's little data on how well a third dose works, and if it causes any safety problems such as an increased risk of organ rejection. Wednesday, Canadian researchers reported that transplant recipients were more likely to have high levels of antibodies if they got a third dose than those given a dummy shot for comparison. Other small studies have similarly found that some transplant recipients respond to a third dose while others still lack enough protection.

Police: 6 dead, including suspected shooter, in UK city

LONDON (AP) — Police in southwest England said six people were killed, including the suspected shooter, in the city of Plymouth Thursday in a “serious firearms incident” that wasn’t terror-related.

Devon and Cornwall Police said in a statement on Twitter that several other casualties were receiving treatment following the shooting. They declared a “critical incident” but did not provide details of what occurred in the Keyham district of the city. The area has been cordoned off.

“Police have confirmed that six people have died in the shooting in #keyham in #plymouth. More people are being treated for their injuries in hospital. Just so unspeakably awful,” Plymouth Member of Parliament Luke Pollard tweeted.

Emergency services, including air ambulance and senior paramedics, responded to the incident at around 6:10 p.m. local time.

Officers found two women and two men dead, police said. Another man, believed to be the offender, was also dead at the scene. All are believed to have died from gunshot wounds. Another woman was treated at the scene for gunshot wounds, but died later in a hospital.

Johnny Mercer, one of Plymouth’s lawmakers, said in a tweet the incident is “not terror related, and neither is the suspect on the run in Plymouth.”

Devon and Cornwall Police also said it was not terrorism related.

Extra COVID vaccine OK’d for those with weak immune systems

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Chisox, Yanks go deep into corn; Field of Dreams hosts more

By DAVE CAMPBELL AP Sports Writer

DYERSVILLE, Iowa (AP) — As the bus carried the New York Yankees through the cornfields blanketing this serene, rolling farmland of northeast Iowa, Aaron Judge noticed a difference from the usual arrival in the next city.

The ride to the Field of Dreams site to play the Chicago White Sox on Thursday night had everyone's attention, like a bunch of kids who couldn't believe what they were getting to do.

"It was the first time people had their headphones out, and they were just glued to the windows, checking out the scenery," said Judge, the three-time All-Star right fielder.

"We have a lot of guys from different countries who really haven't seen the country like this, or guys from big cities who really haven't seen open fields and stuff like this, so it was pretty cool driving in and seeing everybody in town kind of standing on the side of the roads with signs and cheering us on," he said.

The made-for-TV event, delayed by a year due to the COVID-19 pandemic, had the billing as the first Major League Baseball game in this state that's usually focused on college and community sports, spotlighted by presidential campaigns and fueled by the hog and grain industry.

Judge provided a pair of picture-perfect images, launching two long drives into the cornstalks. Tim Anderson hit the eighth homer of the game, a two-run liner in the ninth inning that lifted the White Sox over the Yankees in a 9-8 thriller.

Anderson delivered a Hollywood ending, too, circling the bases as fireworks exploded. So what if it was more from "The Natural" than "Field of Dreams"?

This won't be a one-time visit, either. Commissioner Rob Manfred confirmed that the Field of Dreams game will return in August 2022, with the teams to be determined.

The made-from-scratch stadium — built to hold about 8,000 fans watch the White Sox and Yankees play in one of the most anticipated mid-August games in history — was placed next to the actual diamond where the 1989 movie starring Kevin Costner was shot outside the town of Dyersville, population 4,000.

Costner came back for this, stealing the scene with a slow, ponderous stroll into the outfield his character Ray Kinsella often took in the film before stopping to watch the real White Sox and Yankees emerge from the corn for pregame introductions.

Clutching a ball in his hand, while the original symphonic score from the movie played over the loudspeakers, Costner stepped up to a microphone and told the crowd, "It's perfect."

White Sox slugger José Abreu delivered an instant highlight in the first inning, hitting a line drive that zipped over the fence in left field and vanished into the corn.

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Judge connected for a three-run smash in the third and a two-run drive in the ninth. Neither was a can of corn — they both flew far.

There were rows upon rows of corn between the two outfields, in fact. Yes, it's the same spot where Shoeless Joe Jackson and his pals appeared — and disappeared — throughout the Academy Award-nominated film about fathers, children, culture, self-discovery, ghosts and, oh, yeah, baseball.

"As a kid you dream of the chance to play Major League Baseball and you watch certain movies or heroes in comic books and fairytales, and getting a chance to actually be at the Field of Dreams and play a game here and have family and friends here and getting a chance to represent the Yankees here, never in my life did I think I'd ever experience this," Judge said.

Major leaguers can be particular about the details when they're on a road trip, desiring to maximize comfort and minimize intrusion for optimal performance on the field, but nobody minded any of the logistical hurdles of playing this game a four-hour drive from Chicago and about a half-hour ride from the airport in Dubuque where both teams flew in.

White Sox closer Liam Hendriks was all smiles as he recounted his exploration of the white farmhouse where the Kinsella family lives in the movie that's been well-kept as a tourist attraction.

Both teams had their fill of movie reenactment moments during pregame photo ops on the original field, before retreating into the corn and returning to the regulation stadium to prepare for the game. The players were politely warned not to scrape their faces on the stalks and not to try to enter the maze — one of the fan attractions added to the site for the event — to avoid getting lost.

"Anyone who follows me on Instagram is going to be very sick of corn," said Hendriks, whose phone storage had filled up after all the photos and videos he recorded.

Judge was born three years after "Field of Dreams" was released, but his father introduced him to the movie when he was a kid and he quickly became a big fan. He noted that some of his younger teammates had not yet seen the film.

"I think one of these nights we're going to sit down and I'll have a DVD for 'em, ready to go," Judge said with a wide smile.

The film, naturally, remains a strong source of local pride, and Iowa residents were given purchasing priority when the limited amount of public tickets went on sale. The "Field of Dreams Ghost Players," many of whom were extras in the film, gathered on the movie field in the afternoon in their 1919-style uniforms in honor of Jackson's "Black Sox" team that plays a key part in the plot.

"It's given us a real identity. When you think of Dyersville, it's 'Field of Dreams,' and all the publicity we've been getting lately has just been tremendous for the town and the area," said Jude Milbert, one of the Ghost Players who developed a Globetrotters-style troupe after their involvement in the film by putting on youth clinics, doing comedy routines and traveling around the world as ambassadors of the game. They're all former college or semipro players who live in northeast Iowa.

The Ghost Players and everyone else can get ready for more next year.

"You never mess with a winning streak, but it does feel like all the teams are going to want to touch this. There's going to be hot competition to play this," Costner said before the game.

Northwest heat wave: Volunteers get water to the vulnerable

By GILLIAN FLACCUS Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. (AP) — Volunteers scrambled to hand out water, portable fans, popsicles and information about cooling shelters Thursday to homeless people living in isolated encampments on the outskirts of Portland, Oregon, as the Pacific Northwest sweated through a heat wave gripping the normally temperate region.

Authorities trying to provide relief to the vulnerable, including low-income older people and those living outdoors, are mindful of a record-shattering heat wave in late June that killed hundreds in Oregon, Washington and British Columbia when the thermometer went as high as 116 degrees Fahrenheit (47 C).

In Portland, temperatures reached 102 F (39 C) by late afternoon, and more heat was expected Friday.

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It was hotter than Phoenix, where the high in the desert city was a below-normal 100 F (38 C). In Seattle, highs were in the 90s in a region where many don't have air conditioning. In Bellingham, Washington, on Thursday the high hit 100 F (38 C) for the first time on record.

Scorching weather also hit other parts of the U.S. this week. The National Weather Service said heat advisories and warnings are in effect from the Midwest to the Northeast and mid-Atlantic through at least Friday. And in Michigan, heavy rains brought flooding, leaving nearly 1 million homes and businesses without power at one point Thursday in the hot weather.

In Portland, a nonprofit group that serves the homeless and those with mental illness used three large vans to transport water and other cooling items to homeless encampments along the Columbia River on the eastern outskirts of the city.

The effort was important because people experiencing homelessness are often reluctant to go to cooling centers, said Kim James, director of homeless and housing support for Cascadia Behavioral Healthcare.

Scott Zalitis, who was shirtless in the heat, gorged himself on lime-green popsicles handed out by the group and told volunteers that the temperature at his campsite reached 105 F (41 C) the day before. A huge cooler full of food spoiled when all the ice melted and he couldn't find any more to buy.

"It's miserable. I can't handle the heat no matter what. So, I mean, it's hard to stand. Even in the shade it's too hot," said Zalitis, who became homeless last year when the apartment where he subleased a room burned down in an electrical fire. "You want to stay somewhere that's cool, as cool as possible."

The encampment, where rusted-out cars and broken-down RVs mixed with tents and piles of garbage, was in sharp contrast to downtown Portland, where sweaty pedestrians cooled off by running through a large public fountain in a riverfront park.

Luna Abadia, 17, was out training with her cross country team from Lincoln High School in the morning when the group stopped for a few minutes at the fountain. The runners normally train at 4 p.m., but in recent weeks, they have had to shift it to 8 a.m. — and it's still oppressively hot, she said.

"It was very hot, lots of sweat. That's something we've noticed in the past week or so," Abadia said.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown has declared a state of emergency and activated an emergency operations center, citing the potential for disruptions to the power grid and transportation. City and county governments have opened cooling centers, extended public library hours and waived bus fare for those headed to cooling centers. A 24-hour statewide help line will direct callers to the nearest cooling shelter and offer safety tips.

The back-to-back heat waves, coupled with a summer that's been exceptionally warm and dry overall, are pummeling a region where summer highs usually drift into the 70s or 80s. Intense heat waves and a historic drought in the American West reflect climate change that is making weather more extreme.

"For the heat wave, at this level, it is new territory," said Dan Douthit, spokesman for the Portland Bureau of Emergency Communications. "We're known for the potential for earthquakes, we have fires, floods — but it seems like heat waves are becoming a very serious emergency."

Abadia said changes brought on by climate change that she has noticed in her life prompted her to start a youth-run organization to get more young people involved in the issue.

"Climate change is everything I've been thinking about for the past weeks," she said. "This heat wave and the wildfires we faced here a year ago — and even now around the world — have really been a new reminder to what we're facing and, kind of, the immediate action that needs to be taken."

US sending 3K troops for partial Afghan embassy evacuation

By ROBERT BURNS, MATTHEW LEE and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Just weeks before the U.S. is scheduled to end its war in Afghanistan, the Biden administration is rushing 3,000 fresh troops to the Kabul airport to help with a partial evacuation of the U.S. Embassy. The move highlights the stunning speed of a Taliban takeover of much of the country, including their capture on Thursday of Kandahar, the second-largest city and the birthplace of the Taliban movement.

The State Department said the embassy will continue functioning, but Thursday's dramatic decision to

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bring in thousands of additional U.S. troops is a sign of waning confidence in the Afghan government's ability to hold off the Taliban surge. The announcement came just hours after the Taliban captured the western city of Herat as well as Ghazni, a strategic provincial capital south of Kabul. The advance, and the partial U.S. Embassy evacuation, increasingly isolate the nation's capital, home to millions of Afghans.

"This is not abandonment. This is not an evacuation. This is not a wholesale withdrawal," State Department spokesman Ned Price said. "What this is is a reduction in the size of our civilian footprint."

Price rejected the idea that Thursday's moves sent encouraging signals to an already emboldened Taliban, or demoralizing ones to frightened Afghan civilians. "The message we are sending to the people of Afghanistan is one of enduring partnership," Price insisted.

President Joe Biden, who has remained adamant about ending the 19-year U.S. mission in Afghanistan at the end of this month despite the Taliban sweep, conferred with senior national security officials overnight, then gave the order for the additional temporary troops Thursday morning.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin spoke with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani on Thursday. The U.S. also warned Taliban officials directly that the U.S. would respond if the Taliban attacked Americans during the temporary U.S. military deployments.

Britain's ministry of defense said Thursday that it will send around 600 troops to Afghanistan on a short-term basis to help U.K. nationals leave the country. And Canadian special forces will deploy to Afghanistan to help Canadian staff leave Kabul, a source familiar with the plan told The Associated Press. That official, who was not authorized to talk publicly about the matter and spoke on condition of anonymity, did not say how many special forces would be sent.

The Pentagon's chief spokesman, John Kirby, said that in addition to sending three infantry battalions — two from the Marine Corps and one from the Army — to the airport, the Pentagon will dispatch 3,500 to 4,000 troops from a combat brigade of the 82nd Airborne Division to Kuwait to act as a reserve force. He said they will be on standby "in case we need even more" than the 3,000 going to Kabul.

Also, about 1,000 Army and Air Force troops, including military police and medical personnel, will be sent to Qatar in coming days to support a State Department effort to accelerate its processing of Special Immigrant Visa applications from Afghans who once worked for the U.S. government and feel threatened by the Taliban, Kirby said.

The 3,000 troops who are to arrive at the Kabul airport in the next day or two, Kirby said, are to assist with security at the airport and to help process the departure of embassy personnel — not to get involved in the Afghan government's war with the Taliban. Biden decided in April to end U.S. military involvement in the war, and the withdrawal is scheduled to be complete by Aug. 31.

The U.S. had already withdrawn most of its troops, but had kept about 650 troops in Afghanistan to support U.S. diplomatic security, including at the airport.

Kirby said the influx of fresh troops does not mean the U.S. is reentering combat with the Taliban.

"This is a temporary mission with a narrow focus," he told reporters at the Pentagon.

The viability of the U.S.-trained Afghan army, however, is looking increasingly dim. A new military assessment says Kabul could come under Taliban pressure as soon as September and, if current trends hold, the country could fall to the Taliban within a few months.

Price, the State Department spokesman, said diplomatic work will continue at the Kabul embassy.

"Our first responsibility has always been protecting the safety and the security of our citizens serving in Afghanistan, and around the world," Price said at a briefing, calling the the speed of the Taliban advance and resulting instability "of grave concern."

Shortly before Price's announcement, the embassy in Kabul urged U.S. citizens to leave immediately — reiterating a warning it first issued Saturday.

The latest drawdown will further limit the ability of the embassy to conduct business, although Price maintained it would still be able to function. Nonessential personal had already been withdrawn from the embassy in April after Biden's withdrawal announcement and it was not immediately clear how many staffers would remain on the heavily fortified compound. As of Thursday, there were roughly 4,200 staffers at

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the embassy, but most of those are Afghan nationals, according to the State Department.

Apart from a complete evacuation and shuttering of the embassy, Price said other contingency plans were being weighed, including possibly relocating its operations to the airport.

As the staff reductions take place over the course of the next several weeks, Price said the U.S., led by the special envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, would continue to push for a peace agreement between the Taliban and the Afghan government at talks currently taking place in Doha, Qatar.

The Taliban, who ruled the country from 1996 until U.S. forces invaded after the 9/11 attacks, have taken 12 of Afghanistan's 34 provincial capitals as part of a weeklong sweep that has given them effective control of about two-thirds of the country.

Jenner campaign: No book, TV deals in works tied to recall

By MICHAEL R. BLOOD AP Political Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Caitlyn Jenner kicked off a monthlong campaign tour Thursday in her bid to become California's next governor and raised fresh questions about her motive for entering the contest.

The former Olympian and reality TV personality sidestepped questions about whether she had lined up any lucrative book or TV deals connected to the September recall election that could remove Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom from office.

"I've never worked so hard for nothing in my life," Jenner told reporters in Los Angeles' Venice Beach neighborhood, after being asked about inking any money-making side ventures. She then steered around a second question about possible deals.

But later in the afternoon, her campaign issued a statement saying "she has not pursued any money-making ventures in connection with the campaign."

Asked why she didn't respond when asked about possible side deals in the works, the campaign said, "It's not a question she was expecting."

In her first run for office, Jenner has been shadowed by doubts about her intentions and whether she might be running a vanity campaign linked to advancing her entertainment career. She has no background in managing a vast government like California, by itself the world's fifth-largest economy.

Those questions were fanned by the disclosure that she ducked out of the country after announcing her campaign to film a reality TV program in Australia, which Jenner has said was a previously arranged commitment.

Jenner, who came out as a transgender woman in 2015 and has millions of social media followers, also skipped what so far has been the only candidate debate on Aug. 4. She scratched a planned statewide bus tour, instead opting to fly to events, her campaign said.

Meanwhile Thursday, Newsom got a lift from President Joe Biden, who issued a statement urging Californians to oppose the Sept. 14 recall. Newsom "knows how to get the job done because he's been doing it," Biden said of his fellow Democrat. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris, the former California senator, are expected to take active roles in the campaign.

Jenner's candidacy has been unconventional from the start.

Her initial website was largely devoted to seeking donations and selling campaign swag, like hats, T-shirts and wine glasses carrying her name. It took her 77 days to hold her first news conference after announcing she would enter the contest.

Despite her name recognition, she continues to be little more than an asterisk in the polls, and recent fundraising reports revealed her campaign was effectively in debt.

Asked about Jenner, former congressman Doug Ose, one of her Republican rivals, said, "I am not yet clear whether this is a serious campaign or some sort of docudrama for the purpose of monetizing it after the fact."

Another Republican in the race, real estate investor John Cox, said that "California has had its share of media candidates, and it's about time they got a businessman."

Tax filings released in July showed Jenner's earnings dropped precipitously in the last several years from

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a high of \$2.5 million in 2016, when she had her own reality TV show, to about \$550,000 in 2018 and 2019.

Until the start of her tour, the 71-year-old Jenner anchored her campaign to televised media interviews, which have included embarrassing stumbles that highlighted her inexperience, including acknowledging she wasn't deeply versed in Newsom's latest budget.

Jenner was in Venice to bring attention to the state's homelessness crisis – residential streets in the seaside neighborhood in Los Angeles are crowded with soiled tents and makeshift shelters, and residents are in an uproar over filthy conditions, drug use, crime and the city's inability to restore order.

The neighborhood once famous for its artistic community and boardwalk has fallen into "total anarchy," said 21-year Venice resident Robin Nelson, a Republican who was sitting outside a gymnasium where tents for unhoused people were just steps away.

She supports Newsom's recall – "I don't want the state to continue going the way it's going," she said – and is leaning toward supporting conservative talk radio host Larry Elder or former San Diego mayor Kevin Faulconer.

She's turned off by Jenner's past ties to former President Donald Trump.

"I don't want anyone in office who thinks that kind divisiveness is acceptable," she said, adding that Jenner "is not even on my radar."

Nichole Cruz, a Democrat and voice-over artist who lives in nearby Marina del Rey, said she is not paying much attention to news about the election and has no qualms with Newsom. And to her, Jenner is little more than a name.

"I can't say that there is much I know about her," Cruz said.

Jenner blames the homeless crisis on the high cost of living, unemployment and a lack of affordable housing, combined with mental health and drug problems for many of those on the streets. She faults Newsom for creating an "industry" around homelessness, in which state funds go to nonprofits, which turn around and fund his campaigns.

Through much of her street tour, she was trailed by about 20 reporters, photographers and TV camera operators, underscoring the value of her celebrity appeal. She was hounded by a lone heckler, who urged her to visit a nearby homeless shelter. "It's all image," the heckler shouted at her.

Newsom, aided by a record budget surplus, has proposed spending \$12 billion to get more people off the streets and into housing.

EXPLAINER: 5 takeaways from the release of 2020 census data

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

The Census Bureau on Thursday issued its long-awaited portrait of how the U.S. has changed over the past decade, releasing a trove of demographic data that will be used to redraw political maps across an increasingly diverse country. The data will also shape how \$1.5 trillion in federal spending is distributed each year.

Here are five takeaways from the latest census figures:

WHITE POPULATION DECLINED FOR FIRST TIME ON RECORD

A U.S. headcount has been carried out every decade since 1790, and this was the first one in which the non-Hispanic white population nationwide got smaller, shrinking from 196 million in 2010 to 191 million in 2020.

The data also showed that the share of the white population fell from 63.7% in 2010 to 57.8% in 2020, the lowest on record, though white people continue to be the most prevalent racial or ethnic group. In California, Hispanics became the largest racial or ethnic group, growing from 37.6% to 39.4%, while the share of white people dropped from 40.1% to 34.7%.

Some demographers cautioned that the white population was not shrinking as much as shifting to multi-racial identities. The number of people who identified as belonging to two or more races more than tripled from 9 million people in 2010 to 33.8 million in 2020. They now account for 10% of the U.S. population.

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People who identify as a race other than white, Black, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander — either alone or in combination with one of those races — jumped to 49.9 million people, surpassing the Black population of 46.9 million people as the nation's second-largest racial group, according to the Census Bureau.

But demographers said that may have to do with Hispanic uncertainty about how to answer the race question on the census form.

THE U.S. BECAME MORE URBAN

Almost all of the growth of the past 10 years happened in metropolitan areas. More people in smaller counties moved to larger counties. Around 80% of metropolitan areas saw population gains, while less than half of the smaller so-called micropolitan areas did.

Phoenix was the fastest-growing of the nation's top 10 cities. It moved from sixth to fifth, trading places with Philadelphia, which is now the nation's sixth-largest city.

DECLINE IN CHILDREN; ADULTS TAKE LARGER SHARE

The share of children in the U.S. declined because of falling birth rates, while it grew for adults, driven by aging baby boomers. Adults over age 18 made up more than three-quarters of the population in 2020, or 258.3 million people, an increase of more than 10% from 2010. However, the population of children under age 18 dropped from 74.2 million in 2010 to 73.1 million in 2020, a 1.4% decrease. Nationwide, children under age 18 now make up around 22% of the population, but it varies by region. The Northeast had the smallest proportion of people under age 18, around 20%, while the South had the largest at 22.5%.

SKYROCKETING HISPANIC AND ASIAN GROWTH

The nation's 7.4% percent growth rate over the decade, the smallest since the Great Depression, largely was propelled by a Hispanic boom. The Hispanic population grew by almost a quarter over the decade. By comparison, the non-Hispanic growth rate was 4.3%. Hispanics stood at 62.1 million residents in 2020, or 18.7% of the U.S. population, up from 16.3% in 2010. The most Hispanic growth was in Florida, Texas, New York, Illinois and California.

Meanwhile, Asian growth jumped more than a third over the decade, rising to 24 million people in 2020.

RAPID GROWTH IN UNEXPECTED PLACES, LOSSES IN PUERTO RICO AND WEST VIRGINIA

Among all U.S. metro areas, the fastest-growing one was in The Villages, the Florida retirement community built on former cow pastures. Other fast-growing areas in the U.S. were fueled by the energy boom, particularly in North Dakota, where McKenzie County was the country's fastest-growing county. Its population increased by 131% from 2010 to 2020. Nearby Williams County, North Dakota, grew by 83%.

California's Asian population soars, new census data shows

By ADAM BEAM Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (AP) — California's Asian population grew by 25% in the past decade, making it the fastest growing ethnic group in the nation's most populous state, according to new data from the U.S. Census Bureau released Thursday.

California's white population plummeted by 24% between 2010 and 2020, confirming California is one of three states — along with New Mexico and Hawaii — where whites are not the largest ethnic group.

Hispanics surpassed whites as California's largest ethnic group in 2014. The Census data show California's Hispanic population grew by 11% to 15.5 million people, making up just shy of 40% of the state's nearly 40 million residents.

But it was the Asian population that had the biggest percentage gain over the past decade. California now has more than 6 million people of Asian descent — more than the total population of most other states.

Ten years ago, none of California's 58 counties counted Asians as their largest ethnic group. Now, two

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do: Alameda County, which includes the cities of Oakland and Berkeley, and Santa Clara County, home to San Jose — the nation's 10th most-populous city — and the technology capitol of Silicon Valley.

"I think the story nationwide focuses primarily on the Hispanic population, but in California ... I think the Asian population, in particular related to the growth in the younger age groups, is sort of a major driver of factors as to why we see this large increase over the past 10 years," said Noli Brazil, a demographer at the University of California-Davis.

The data released Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau will be the foundation for redrawing 429 U.S. House districts in 44 states. Republicans need five seats to win a majority in the U.S. House of Representatives.

Data released earlier this year shows Democratic-heavy California will lose a Congressional seat for the first time in its history because its population grew at a slower rate compared to other states. But California's redistricting process will likely have less partisan drama because, unlike most states, it is led by an independent Citizens Redistricting Commission instead of the state Legislature.

There were few surprises for California in Thursday's data release. Los Angeles County remains the nation's most populous, with more than 10 million people. Eleven counties lost population, with most of them in the sparsely populated region near the Oregon border that has been devastated by wildfires in recent years.

Nine counties had double-digit percentage population growth, led by Trinity County in Northern California with 16.9% growth. Riverside County in Southern California had the largest gain in total population, adding more than 228,000 residents.

California's Asian population growth has led to growing political power for the community, including earlier this year when Gov. Gavin Newsom appointed Rob Bonta as the state's first Filipino-American attorney general.

The state Legislature now has 14 Asian Pacific Islanders, a number that will grow to 15 once a special election is held to fill an Alameda County vacancy in the state Assembly, according to Alex Vassar, an unofficial legislative historian at the California State Library.

The rise in influence has coincided with a rise in hate crimes against Asians. A report by the California Attorney General's Office in June revealed 89 hate crimes against Asians in 2020, more than double the amount in 2019. The most events were recorded in March and April of 2020, when the coronavirus pandemic was taking hold in the state.

California's new operating budget includes \$156.5 million in response to the attacks on the Asian community, with most of the money going to community organizations that provide victim services.

About \$10 million will go toward better data collection to better understand the needs and challenges of the diverse community. Robyn Rodriguez, a professor of Asian American Studies at the University of California-Davis, noted California's Asian population is "linguistically diverse" and "culturally and religiously diverse" that require better data to understand the nuances of the community.

"Asian Americans come to the United States under very different circumstances," she said. "Some are the products of war and displacement. Others are the product of immigration, of people making the choice to come here. All of these are complexities that really require some better attention."

Census shows US is diversifying, white population shrinking

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

The U.S. became more diverse and more urban over the past decade, and the non-Hispanic white population dropped for the first time on record, the Census Bureau reported Thursday as it released a trove of demographic data that will be used to redraw the nation's political maps.

The new figures offered the most detailed portrait yet of how the country has changed since 2010, and they are sure to set off an intense partisan battle over representation at a time of deep national division and fights over voting rights. The numbers could help determine control of the House in the 2022 elections and provide an electoral edge for years to come. The data will also shape how \$1.5 trillion in annual

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federal spending is distributed.

Americans continued to migrate to the South and West at the expense of the Midwest and Northeast, the figures showed. The share of the white population fell from 63.7% in 2010 to 57.8% in 2020, the lowest on record, driven by falling birthrates among white women compared with Hispanic and Asian women. The number of non-Hispanic white people shrank from 196 million in 2010 to 191 million.

White people continue to be the most prevalent racial or ethnic group, though that changed in California, where Hispanics became the largest racial or ethnic group, growing from 37.6% to 39.4% over the decade, while the share of white people dropped from 40.1% to 34.7%. California, the nation's most populous state, joined Hawaii, New Mexico and the District of Columbia as a place where non-Hispanic white people are no longer the dominant group.

"The U.S. population is much more multiracial and much more racially and ethnically diverse than what we have measured in the past," said Nicholas Jones, a Census Bureau official.

Some demographers cautioned that the white population was not shrinking as much as shifting to multi-racial identities. The number of people who identified as belonging to two or more races more than tripled from 9 million people in 2010 to 33.8 million in 2020. They now account for 10% of the U.S. population.

People who identify as a race other than white, Black, Asian, American Indian, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander — either alone or in combination with one of those races — jumped to 49.9 million people, surpassing the Black population of 46.9 million people as the nation's second-largest racial group, according to the Census Bureau.

But demographers said that may have to do with Hispanic uncertainty about how to answer the race question on the census form, as well as changes the Census Bureau made in processing responses and how it asked about race and ethnicity.

Asians were the next most populous racial group, reaching 24 million people in 2020, a jump of more than a third.

The Hispanic population boomed over the decade, growing by almost a quarter to 62.1 million residents in 2020 and accounting for almost half of the overall U.S. population growth, which was the slowest since the Great Depression. By comparison, the non-Hispanic growth rate over the decade was 4.3%.

The data "demonstrates that the Latino community is a huge and increasing part of our nation's future," said Thomas Saenz, president of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

Almost all of the growth of the past 10 years happened in metropolitan areas. About 80% of metropolitan areas saw population gains as more people in smaller counties moved to larger, more urban counties.

The share of children in the U.S. declined because of falling birth rates, while the share of adults grew, driven by aging baby boomers. Adults over age 18 made up more than three-quarters of the population in 2020, or 258.3 million people, an increase of more than 10% from 2010. However, the population of children under age 18 dropped from 74.2 million in 2010 to 73.1 million in 2020.

In addition, there is now no majority racial or ethnic group for people younger than 18, as the share of non-Hispanic whites in the age group dropped from 53.5% to 47.3% over the decade.

"If not for Hispanics, Asians, people of two or more races, those are the only groups underage that are growing," said William Frey, a senior fellow at Brookings' Metropolitan Policy Program. "A lot of these young minorities are important for our future growth, not only for the child population but for our future labor force."

The data comes from compiling forms filled out last year by tens of millions of Americans, with the help of census takers and government statisticians to fill in the blanks when forms were not turned in or questions were left unanswered. The numbers reflect countless decisions made over the past 10 years by individuals to have children, move to another part of the country or to come to the U.S. from elsewhere.

The release offers states the first chance to redraw their political districts in a process that is expected to be particularly brutish since control over Congress and statehouses is at stake.

It also provides the first opportunity to see, on a limited basis, how well the Census Bureau fulfilled its goal of counting every U.S. resident during what many consider the most difficult once-a-decade census

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in recent memory. Communities of color have been undercounted in past censuses. The agency likely will not know how good a job it did until next year, when it releases a survey showing undercounts and overcounts.

"The data we are releasing today meet our high quality data standards," acting Census Bureau Director Ron Jarmin said.

Even before it began, the headcount was challenged by attempted political interference from the Trump administration's failed efforts to add a citizenship question to the census form, a move that critics feared would have a chilling effect on immigrant or Hispanic participation. The effort was stopped by the Supreme Court.

The information was originally supposed to be released by the end of March, but that deadline was pushed back because of delays caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

The start of the 2020 census for most U.S. residents coincided with the spread of the virus last year, forcing the Census Bureau to delay operations and extend the count's schedule. Because census data is tied to where people were on April 1, 2020, the numbers will not reflect the loss of nearly 620,000 people in the U.S. who died from COVID-19.

On top of the pandemic, census takers in the West contended with wildfires, and those in Louisiana faced repeated hurricanes. Then, there were court battles over the Trump administration's effort to end the count early that repeatedly changed the plan for concluding field operations.

Back in April, the Census Bureau released state population totals showing how many congressional seats each state gets.

States that had a grip on COVID now seeing a crush of cases

By JENNIFER SINCO KELLEHER and ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

The COVID-19 surge that is sending hospitalizations to all-time highs in parts of the South is also clobbering states like Hawaii and Oregon that were once seen as pandemic success stories.

After months in which they kept cases and hospitalizations at manageable levels, they are watching progress slip away as record numbers of patients overwhelm bone-tired health care workers.

Oregon — like Florida, Arkansas, Mississippi and Louisiana in recent days — has more people in the hospital with COVID-19 than at any other point in the pandemic. Hawaii is about to reach that mark, too.

This, despite both states having vaccination levels higher than the national average as of last week. Arkansas and Louisiana were significantly below average, while Florida was about even. Mississippi, meanwhile, ranks at the very bottom for vaccination rates.

"It's heartbreaking. People are exhausted. You can see it in their eyes," said Dr. Jason Kuhl, chief medical officer at Oregon's Providence Medford Medical Center, where patients are left on gurneys in hallways, their monitoring machines beeping away. Others needing treatment for cancer or heart disease are being turned away.

In other developments, the Food and Drug Administration is expected to authorize a third COVID-19 shot for certain people with weakened immune systems, such as cancer patients and organ transplant recipients, to give them an extra dose of protection.

The U.S. is seeing the virus storming back, driven by a combination of the highly contagious delta variant and lagging vaccination rates, especially in the South and other rural and conservative parts of the country.

New cases nationwide are averaging about 123,000 per day, a level last seen in early February, and deaths are running at over 500 a day, turning the clock back to May.

For the most part during the pandemic, Hawaii enjoyed one of the lowest infection and death rates in the nation. In recent days, though, it reported record highs of more than 600 new virus cases daily.

On its worst day in 2020, Hawaii had 291 patients hospitalized with the coronavirus. Officials expect to hit 300 by the end of this week.

Despite the promising demand for COVID-19 shots early on, it took three weeks — much longer than expected — to get from 50% to 60% of the vaccine-eligible population fully vaccinated. Vaccinations have

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since plateaued. Nationally, the rate is about 59%.

The biggest hospital on Hawaii's Big Island is feeling the pressure. Out of 128 acute beds, 116 were taken Wednesday at Hilo Medical Center, and the hospital's 11 intensive care unit beds are almost always full these days, spokeswoman Elena Cabatu said.

"If someone out there has a heart attack or a sepsis or gets into a bad accident that requires intensive care, we will have to hold that person in the emergency department," Cabatu said.

"I'm surprised we landed here," she lamented. "The hope during the mass vax clinics was just so high."

Hilton Raethel, president and CEO of the Healthcare Association of Hawaii, disputed any notion that the rebound in tourism in Hawaii is largely to blame.

"The tourists have been a source for infection, but they've never been the predominant source of infection," Raethel said. "There's a lot more concern about people from Hawaii, residents who go to the South, go to Vegas, to other places, and they come back and spread it."

In Oregon, a record number of COVID-19 hospitalizations — 670 — was reported for a third straight day Thursday. ICU beds across the state remain about 90% full with COVID-19 patients occupying 177 of them, the Oregon Health Authority said. The previous peak of 622 hospitalizations came during a November surge.

"Our doctors and nurses are exhausted and rightfully frustrated because this crisis is avoidable. It is like watching a train wreck coming and knowing that there's an opportunity to switch tracks, yet we feel helpless while we watch unnecessary loss of life," said David Zonies, associate chief medical officer at Portland's Oregon Health & Science University.

Public health officials in the southern part of the state said they fear the situation will only get worse as the delta variant spreads through a region where fewer than half the residents have been fully vaccinated.

"I'm fearful that the darkest days of this pandemic may still be ahead of us," said Chris Pizzi, CEO of Providence Medical Center in Medford.

In a renewed effort to stop the spread, Gov. Kate Brown announced this week that nearly everyone will have to wear masks again in indoor public spaces, regardless of their vaccination status.

Throughout the pandemic, health officials have described Oregon as a success story, largely because of its tight restrictions, which were lifted at the end of June.

California, which is below the national vaccination rate, is also seeing alarming spikes in hospitalized COVID-19 patients. Los Angeles County, the nation's largest county, faced 1,573 hospitalizations as of Wednesday — the highest since the end of February. The city of Los Angeles is working out a possible vaccine requirement to enter indoor spaces.

Meanwhile, White House coronavirus coordinator Jeff Zients said more people are getting vaccinated in states with the highest infection rates, including Arkansas, Louisiana, Alabama and Mississippi.

"We're getting more shots in the arms in the places that need them in the most. That's what it's going to take to end this pandemic," he said.

Mississippi broke its single-day records of COVID-19 hospitalizations, intensive-care use and new coronavirus cases. The state Health Department said 1,490 people were hospitalized Wednesday and 388 were in the ICU because of COVID-19. It also confirmed 4,412 new cases. The state health officer, Dr. Thomas Dobbs, said a majority of the cases are in the unvaccinated.

In Florida, where Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis has steadfastly blocked mandatory mask-wearing, some emergency rooms are so overcrowded that doctors are sending patients home with oxygen and small, portable oxygen-monitoring devices to free up beds for sicker patients.

Texas law enforcement enlisted to end Democrats' holdout

By PAUL J. WEBER and ACACIA CORONADO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Texas Republicans enlisted the help of law enforcement for the first time Thursday to force the return of Democratic legislators who fled the state a month ago to block new voting restrictions.

The move, a significant escalation in the holdout, came a day after officers of the Texas House of Representatives served civil arrests warrants to the offices of more than 50 Democrats who have not returned

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to the Capitol since fleeing for Washington, D.C., on July 12. Some have returned to Texas but remain absent from the state House of Representatives.

"Earlier today the House Sergeant-at-Arms deputized members of Texas law enforcement to assist in the House's efforts to compel a quorum. That process will begin in earnest immediately," said Enrique Marquez, a spokesman for Republican House Speaker Dade Phelan.

He did not say which law enforcement agencies were involved or what measures they would take, but Democrats have acknowledged the possibility of facing arrest and have spent days petitioning courts in Texas for orders that would prevent them from being forced to return to the Capitol.

But in another setback, the Texas Supreme Court halted those orders Thursday. Some Democrats have previously said they would not rule out again leaving Texas — and outside the jurisdiction of state troopers — if there were no court protections in place.

"The Dems have filed some of the most embarrassing lawsuits ever seen. Time for them to get to the Capitol and do the job they were elected to do," Republican Gov. Greg Abbott tweeted.

The Texas Department of Public Safety, the state's law enforcement division, said in a statement that it did not "discuss operational specifics" and referred further questions to Phelan's office.

The NAACP had stepped in on behalf of the Texas Democrats, urging the Justice Department to investigate whether a federal crime was being committed when Republicans threatened to have them arrested.

The heightened potential of law enforcement seeking out missing lawmakers came hours after the latest high-profile act of protest by Democrats over changes to Texas' elections — a 15-hour filibuster by a state senator who was not allowed to sit or take bathroom breaks.

Democrat Carol Alvarado's filibuster only delayed Senate Republicans, who went on to approve a version of the sweeping elections bill just minutes after she ended. But because Democrats in the House are still not showing up, the bill cannot go further.

"What's wrong with drive-thru voting during a pandemic? What's wrong with 24-hour voting? Why can't we have expanded voting hours for the people who have to work late? Where is all the so-called fraud?" Alvarado said before finally putting down the microphone at her desk. "Where does it end?"

The Texas Legislature has entered uncommon territory with neither side showing any certainty over what comes next as Republicans remain determined to secure a quorum of 100 present lawmakers — a threshold they were just four members shy of reaching.

Democrats acknowledge they cannot permanently stop the GOP voting bill from passing because of Republicans' dominance in both chambers of the Texas Legislature.

Refusing to attend legislative sessions is a violation of House rules — a civil offense, not a criminal one. Sandra Guerra Thompson, director of the Criminal Justice Institute at the University of Houston Law Center, said civil arrest warrants generally involve officers finding someone and getting them to appear.

"There shouldn't be any threats to the officer's safety or to the public that would really justify any laying of hands on the person, much less the use of restraints," she said. "It really is just escorting the person."

Republicans are now in the midst of their third attempt since May to pass a raft of tweaks and changes to the state's election code that would make it harder — and even, sometimes, legally riskier — to cast a ballot in Texas, which already has some of the most restrictive election laws in the nation.

Texas is among several states where Republicans have rushed to enact new voting restrictions in response to former President Donald Trump's false claims that the 2020 election was stolen. The current bill is similar to the ones Democrats blocked last month by going to the nation's capital. It would ban 24-hour polling locations, drive-thru voting and give partisan poll watchers more access, among other things.

It was unclear how many Democrats remained in Washington, where they had hoped to push President Joe Biden and other Democrats there to pass federal legislation that would protect voting rights in Texas and beyond. Senate Democrats pledged to make it the first order of business when they return in the fall, even though they don't have a clear strategy for overcoming steadfast Republican opposition.

'Jeopardy!' champ Matt Amodio's analytic style is a winner

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By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Amid the ruckus over the new host of “Jeopardy!”, contestant Matt Amodio has methodically scooped up resounding victories and a place in the quiz show’s hall of fame.

As of Thursday, the Yale University doctoral candidate in computer science had \$547,600 in 17 games, winning in such decisive fashion — and with nervy bets — that runaway games were not uncommon.

The cash total puts him at No. 3 on the list of top winners for regular-season play, edging ahead of Jason Zuffranieri (\$532,496) and in the company of “Jeopardy!” luminaries Ken Jennings (\$2.52 million) and James Holzhauer (\$2.46 million).

Amodio said his restrained on-camera demeanor reflects his competitive focus. As for his repeated use of “What is...” instead of alternatives such as “Who is...”, that’s part of his effort to limit “unnecessary moving parts” that might undermine his play.

If Amodio’s streak holds through the season’s end on Friday, he will return Sept. 13 for the show’s 38th season. That’s when the late Alex Trebek’s successor, Mike Richards, takes over as host, his selection dismaying some “Jeopardy!” fans who’d rooted for other candidates. One of the contenders, actor Mayim Bialik, will host prime-time “Jeopardy!” programs to come.

Amodio, a native of Medina, Ohio, was self-effacing in an interview with The Associated Press, praising the contestants he’s bested and calling himself “incredibly fortunate.” He cited insight gained from the quiz-show film “Slumdog Millionaire” and offered his view on whether a photographic memory is a real thing. Remarks have been edited for clarity and brevity.

AP: How did you become so knowledgeable about so many different topics?

AMODIO: I like to read. I think that you can’t do it without reading. So on a regular basis, I just fall into a rabbit hole of Wikipedia links, (and) every article opens up 20 more things that I have questions about it. This is just how I spend my day, or my nights when I’m done working. I did change one thing for preparation for the show, though, because I don’t necessarily find culture to be super-interesting. I’m a historian at heart and I like learning about culture maybe 40 years, 50 years later. I like looking at it in the rearview mirror.

AP: Any specific categories that give you pause?

AMODIO: I feel like it’s a bit like “Slumdog Millionaire,” where every question that comes up, the guy has a personal connection about how he knows the answer. I’m not necessarily the biggest opera fan in the world, but my grandpa lives and breathes opera, so just through talking with him I found I absorbed a lot. And there are other things like that as well. I’m a really big baseball fan, less interested in other sports, but my friends have always been very big basketball, football, hockey fans. I found I had a pretty good vocabulary for that just through collateral exposure.

AP: James Holzhauer’s performance raised speculation about whether he had a photographic memory. Would you claim that for yourself?

AMODIO: From what I have read, I’m skeptical of the existence of photographic memories. Personally, I don’t think I have a different memory than any other person. I may have just a little bit better recall. When other people describe how they remember things — or more importantly, how they forget things — I can totally relate.

AP: You ring in very quickly but seem to take a long beat before answering. Is that a strategy?

AMODIO: Yes. I’m a big believer in measure twice, cut once. I’m very worried that I’m going to know it, or I’m going to think I know it, and then say it. And if I just took one extra second to pause and doublecheck my work, I would have the correct answer. So it’s just out of an abundance of caution. I’m not going to let hastiness turn into sloppiness.

AP: There’s been instances when you’ve made viewers nervous with really big bets. How do you decide when to go for it or hold back?

AMODIO: I never endanger the game. The No. 1 priority for me is being able to play the next day. So I never want to make a bet just looking for more money in a way that would risk the outcome of the game. That being said, in general, I know more than half of for example, the final (“Jeopardy!” answers). In a gambling setting, if you have a better than 50% chance, it makes sense to put all your marbles in there and in the end, in the long run, it’ll work out. Now, unfortunately, I might not get to see the long run, so

maybe it won't even out.

Britney Spears' dad will exit conservatorship, but not yet

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Britney Spears' father said in a court filing Thursday that he is planning to step down from the conservatorship that has controlled her life and money for 13 years, but his departure is not imminent.

James Spears filed legal documents saying that while there are no grounds for his removal, he will step down after several lingering issues are resolved. The document gives no timetable for his resignation from his role helping oversee his daughter's finances.

"Mr. Spears continues to serve dutifully, and he should not be suspended or removed, and certainly not based on false allegations," the filing said. "Mr. Spears is willing to step down when the time is right, but the transition needs to be orderly and include a resolution of matters pending before the Court."

Those matters include the next judicial review of the pop singer's finances, which has been delayed by months of public and legal wrangling over James' Spears role and the legitimacy of the conservatorship by Britney Spears and, in recent weeks, her new attorney.

The documents say that James Spears has been "the unremitting target of unjustified attacks" but "he does not believe that a public battle with his daughter over his continuing service as her conservator would be in her best interests."

The filing says James Spears will fight the petition to force him out, but will work with the court and Britney Spears' attorney Matthew Rosengart on the next phases.

"We are pleased that Mr. Spears and his lawyer have today conceded in a filing that he must be removed," Rosengart said in a statement. "It is vindication for Britney."

Spears said he was working on a plan to give up his role from before his daughter hired Rosengart last month.

For most of the existence of the conservatorship, which was established in 2008, James Spears oversaw his daughter's personal affairs and money. In 2019, he stepped down as the so-called conservator of her person, and maintained control of her finances.

He was nevertheless the target of much of his daughter's ire in a pair of speeches before the court in June and July, in which she called the conservatorship "abusive." Spears in her June remarks said she had been required to use an intrauterine device for birth control, take medications against her will and prevented from getting married, having another child or even riding in her boyfriend's car unsupervised.

"This conservatorship is doing me way more harm than good," the 39-year-old Spears said at the time. "I deserve to have a life."

James Spears, 69, was fighting to remain in control in court filings as recently as last week. He said the allegations in his daughter's testimony are "untested," need investigation, and involve issues that have long been out of his control.

He suggested that Jodi Montgomery, who took over for him as conservator of Britney Spears' personal affairs, deserved scrutiny if her allegations were accurate.

Rosengart said that while he welcomed the new move, he will not take the pressure of James Spears, who should not wait to step down.

"We look forward to continuing our vigorous investigation into the conduct of Mr. Spears, and others, over the past 13 years, while he reaped millions of dollars from his daughter's estate, and I look forward to taking Mr. Spears's sworn deposition in the near future," Rosengart's statement said. "In the interim, rather than making false accusations and taking cheap shots at his own daughter, Mr. Spears should remain silent and step aside immediately."

Even after James Spears' departure, the court will maintain the same control over Britney Spears that it has since the conservatorship was put in place in 2008. But he has been a lightning rod for the ire of fans in the #FreeBritney movement, whose voice have become increasingly prominent as they have been

embraced by Britney Spears and Rosengart.

And Rosengart has marked James Spears' departure as a necessary first step before ending the arrangement entirely.

The new filing adamantly defends the work of James Spears and the conservatorship, and pushes back especially against allegations made by Britney Spears' mother Lynne Spears in a recent declaration.

"When this Conservatorship was initiated 13 years ago, Britney Jean Spears was in crisis, desperately in need of help. Not only was she suffering mentally and emotionally, she was also being manipulated by predators and in financial distress," the documents say. "Mr. Spears came to his daughter's rescue to protect her, and this Court made the determination that the protection provided by a conservatorship was necessary and in Ms. Spears' best interests."

The documents say that Lynne Spears was wrong in criticizing the hiring of a psychiatrist that she said James Spears chose for their daughter, and in saying that medications he prescribed were inappropriate.

The doctor was actually chosen by Britney Spears herself, and had the approval of Montgomery, her medical team, and Britney Spears' previous attorney, the filing says. This same group, including the singer herself, approved of the medication the doctor prescribed, the filing says.

It also criticizes Lynne Spears assuming a role at all, saying she is someone Britney Spears "has avoided speaking with for most of her adult life."

Biden eyes tougher vaccine rules without provoking backlash

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When the pace of vaccinations in the U.S. first began to slow, President Joe Biden backed incentives like million-dollar cash lotteries if that's what it took to get shots in arms. But as new coronavirus infections soar, he's testing a tougher approach.

In just the past two weeks, Biden has forced millions of federal workers to attest to their vaccination status or face onerous new requirements. He's met with business leaders at the White House to press them to do the same.

Meanwhile, the administration has taken steps toward mandating shots for people traveling into the U.S. from overseas. And the White House is weighing options to be more assertive at the state and local level, including potential support for school districts imposing rules to prevent spread of the virus over the objection of Republican leaders.

"To the mayors, school superintendents, educators, local leaders, who are standing up to the governors politicizing mask protection for our kids: thank you," Biden said Thursday. "Thank God that we have heroes like you, and I stand with you all, and America should as well."

But even as Biden becomes more aggressive, he has refrained from using all his powers to pressure Americans to get vaccinated. He's held off, for instance, on proposals to require vaccinations for all air travelers or, for that matter, the federal workforce. The result is a precarious balancing act as Biden works to make life more uncomfortable for the unvaccinated without spurring a backlash in a deeply polarized country that would only undermine his public health goals.

Vaccine mandates are "the right lever at the right time," said Ben Wakana, the deputy director of strategic communications and engagement for the White House COVID-19 response, noting the public's increasing confidence in the vaccines and adding that it marks a new phase in the government's campaign to encourage Americans to get shots.

Many Republicans, particularly those eyeing the party's 2024 presidential nomination, disagree and warn of federal overreaching into decisions that should be left to individuals. Biden and Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida, an epicenter of the latest virus wave, have spent weeks feuding over the proper role of government during a public health crisis.

There is notable support for vaccine mandates. According to a recent poll from the Kaiser Family Foundation, 51% of Americans say the federal government should recommend that employers require their workers to get vaccinated, while 45% say it should not.

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For now, Biden has required most federal workers to attest to their vaccination status under potential criminal penalties, with those who have not received a dose required to maintain social distancing, test weekly for the virus and face other potential restrictions on their work.

Health workers at the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Health and Human Services will be required to get vaccinated, and the Pentagon has announced that it intends to mandate vaccines for the military by next month.

The sharper federal approach comes as nearly 90 million eligible Americans still have not been vaccinated and as Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, says shots are the only path for the nation to contain the delta variant.

White House officials say Biden wanted to initially operate with restraint to ensure that Americans were ready for the strong-arming from the federal government. The federal moves have been carefully calibrated to encourage a wave of businesses and governments to follow suit.

Biden administration officials briefed prominent Washington trade groups, including the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Roundtable, ahead of the federal announcement in hopes their members would follow suit. White House officials have fielded dozens of calls from business executive in recent weeks about how to implement their own vaccination mandates, officials said, sharing best practices and tips for how to protect their workforces.

"Through vaccination requirements, employers have the power to help end the pandemic," White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said Thursday, naming companies, universities and local governments that have implemented them.

The new restrictions appear to be having the desired effect. The rules — combined with fresh concerns about the surging delta variant — have nearly doubled the average rate that Americans are getting newly vaccinated from last month to about 450,000 per day.

Zients said the White House still has no plans to develop the infrastructure for so-called vaccine passports, despite some criticism from businesses that the patchwork of local and state verification systems leaves them without a clear way to enforce mandates. The Biden administration had promised to share frameworks for verification systems, but ultimately left them all to the private sector and local governments, in part because of political sensitivities.

Still, while more severe measures — such as mandating vaccines for interstate travel or changing how the federal government reimburses treatment for those who are unvaccinated and become ill with COVID-19 — have been discussed, the administration worried that they would be too polarizing for the moment.

That's not to say they won't be implemented in the future, as public opinion continues to shift toward requiring vaccinations as a means to restore normalcy.

Lawrence Gostin, a professor of health law at Georgetown University, said Biden would likely need to continue to turn up the pressure on the unvaccinated. "He's really going to have to use all the leverage the federal government has, and indeed use pressure points," Gostin said. "And I think there are a few that he can do but he hasn't done yet."

"The country is completely fatigued with lockdowns, business closures and masking," added Gostin, "and vaccines are literally our only tool. We've tried masking, distancing, occupancy limits, even entire lockdowns now for coming along nearly two years. And the virus just keeps raging back. And the vaccines are the only thing we have now to defeat the virus. We need to use that tool and we need to use it vigorously. And I think there will be large public support for that."

Official: Canadian PM Trudeau to call election for Sept 20

By ROB GILLIES Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau will announce Sunday he is calling a snap election for Sept. 20, an official familiar with the plans told The Associated Press.

The source, who was not authorized to talk publicly about the matter and spoke on condition of anonymity, confirmed the election date on Thursday.

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Trudeau is seeking to win the majority of seats in Parliament. His Liberal party fell just short of that two years ago and must rely on the opposition to pass legislation. Trudeau wants to capitalize on the fact that Canada is now one of the most fully vaccinated countries in the world.

Canada's prime minister is less personally popular than he once was but his government's handling of the pandemic has been widely viewed as a success. Canada has enough vaccines for every citizen and the country flattened the epidemic curve while spending hundreds of billions to prop up the economy amid lockdowns.

"Justin Trudeau's accomplishment was to preside over a government that came up with financial, health and unemployment policies that carried us through COVID. That's what he's done and what he'll run on," said Robert Bothwell, a professor of Canadian history and international relations at the University of Toronto.

Daniel Beland, a politics professor at McGill University in Montreal, noted that Trudeau was criticized for a slow start in acquiring vaccines but is now benefiting from having more than enough for every eligible Canadian.

"They want to exploit this moment," Beland said.

Beland also said Trudeau is taking advantage of a weak opposition.

"Trudeaumania is over. If the Liberals get a majority government it will be in part because of the weakness of the opposition parties. The conservatives are divided," he said.

The 49-year-old Trudeau, the son of the late iconic Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, became the second youngest prime minister in Canadian history when he was first elected with a majority of seats in Parliament in 2015. He reasserted liberalism in 2015 after almost 10 years of Conservative Party government in Canada, but scandals combined with high expectations damaged his brand.

His father served as prime minister from 1968 to 1984 with a short interruption and remains one of the few Canadian politicians known in other countries.

The election comes as chief public health officer Dr. Theresa Tam says Canada is now in the midst of a fourth wave of COVID-19, driven by the Delta variant. Ontario, Canada's largest province, reported more than 500 cases on Thursday. It's the highest case total since mid-June.

"Now is not the time for an election," opposition Conservative party leader Erin O'Toole said this week. "Health, economy and the well being of our country needs to be paramount. And I've asked Mr. Trudeau to put that first. I'm worried that the Liberals will put their political interests ahead of the national interest,"

Bothwell said it will show Trudeau isn't a good party leader if the Liberals don't win a majority and are regulated to another minority government.

"It's his election to call. It's his responsibility. If he mucks it up he would be expected to depart whether he would do it on election night or six months on. I think at that point the knives would start to come up," Bothwell said.

The Liberals currently have 155 seats in the 338-seat House of Commons, while the Conservatives have 119.

The Quebec-based Bloc Québécois have 32, the leftist NDP 24 and the Greens have two. There are also five independents and one seat is vacant.

Census shows less white Texas ahead of redistricting fight

By ACACIA CORONADO Report for America/Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — Four of the nation's 10 fastest-growing municipalities are suburbs of Texas' big cities, census data released Thursday shows, meaning the second largest state in the U.S. could play a big part in the redistricting battle for control of Congress.

Texas also grew less white and more urban over the past 10 years, following the same overall trend seen across the country.

The new data culled from the 2020 census is coming more than four months later than expected due to delays caused by the coronavirus pandemic. The redistricting numbers states use for redrawing congressional and legislative districts show where white, Asian, Black and Hispanic communities grew over the

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past decade. It also shows which areas have gotten older or younger and the number of people living in dorms, prisons and nursing homes. The data covers geographies as small as neighborhoods and as large as states.

An earlier set of data released in April provided state population counts and showed the U.S. had 331 million residents last year, a 7.4% increase from 2010. That dataset determined that Texas will pick up two additional U.S. House seats — bringing its total to 38, and two more electoral votes, for a total of 40, making it's already large footprint on national politics even bigger.

Ballooning populations in metropolitan areas comes as many of Texas' rural areas have shrunk, similar to other parts of the U.S.

That — plus the state's increasingly younger and more diverse demographics — will be important elements to consider in the GOP-controlled process of redrawing the boundaries from which state and federal lawmakers are elected, according to Joshua Blank, research director of the Texas Politics Project at the University of Texas at Austin.

"The nature of the population growth in the state and the fact that it is not evenly distributed throughout means we will have to see a lot of changes to the political maps in order to accommodate the change of the population growth," Blank said.

Republicans hold a majority of the state's Congressional and Statehouse seats in both chambers, and they will have full control over the redistricting process.

For now, Republicans and Democrats find themselves at loggerheads. House Democrats walked off the job more than a month ago to block voting restrictions, and that has stopped the Legislature's work on all bills.

Rep. Jim Murphy, who leads the Texas House Republican Caucus, said the pressure is on his Democratic colleagues to come back to work, and then the state's redistricting committee could meet.

"I really want the people of Texas to be able to participate in this process — it's critical — but without a few more Democrats the people of Texas are going to be left out of that process," Murphy said.

If that committee is unable to meet, Murphy said, redistricting lines would be up to the courts and taken up in the next regular legislative session, set for 2023 — after midterm congressional elections.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has said he will continue to call special sessions on voting bills until the Legislature gets the job done. He has also pointed to scheduling a special session for redistricting.

Laws also exist "to protect the equality of the vote between individuals and also to protect groups that have historically been discriminated against," Blank said.

Drawing politically advantageous district lines is known as gerrymandering.

State Rep. Rafael Anchía, a Democrat, is chair of the Mexican American Legislative Caucus and a member of the House redistricting committee. He said in a statement that he called on his colleagues to "embrace diversity" in redrawing the maps.

"Gerrymandering blocks fair maps that reflect today's Texas. Today, while Latinos make up 40 percent of the Texas population, we only represent 25 percent of the Texas House," Anchía said.

Since 2010, Texas has grown by nearly 4 million people — roughly the entire population of neighboring Oklahoma and more than any other state in sheer numbers. Texas is now home to 29 million residents, second in size only to California.

That growth saw five Texas cities — Austin, Dallas, Fort Worth, Houston and San Antonio — gain 100,000 people over the past decade. Frisco and McKinney near Dallas; Conroe near Houston, and New Braunfels near San Antonio are among the 10 fastest growing cities in the U.S.

Democrats generally have fared better in growing Texas suburbs in recent elections. A recent analysis by The Associated Press showed that a decade ago, Republican politicians used census data to draw voting districts that gave them a greater political advantage in more states than either party had in the past 50 years.

Fires charring range set up ranchers for hardship in US West

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By MATTHEW BROWN and CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LAME DEER, Mont. (AP) — Wildfires tearing through Montana and elsewhere in the U.S. West are devouring vast rangeland areas that cattle ranchers depend upon, setting the stage for a potential shortage of pasture as the hot, dry summer grinds on.

On the Northern Cheyenne Indian Reservation, firefighters and local authorities scrambled to save hundreds of homes in the path of a fire that started Sunday and exploded across more than 260 square miles (673 square kilometers) in just a few days, triggering evacuation orders for thousands of people.

Some ranchers stayed behind to help fight it. Yet as flames charred mile after mile of rangeland and forest, they could do little to protect cattle pastures that are crucial to economic survival for families on the remote reservation.

As the fire raged across rugged hills and narrow ravines, tribal member Darlene Small helped her grandson move about 100 head of cattle to a new pasture, only to relocate them twice more as the flames from the Richard Spring fire bore down, she said Thursday. An extreme drought that's blanketing the West has made matters worse by stunting vegetation untouched by fire.

"They've got to have pasture where there's water. If there's no water, there's no good pasture," Small said. Particularly hard hit were some ranchers already depending on surplus grass after a fire burned them off their normal pasture last year, she said.

Meanwhile, California's Dixie Fire — which started July 13 and is the largest wildfire burning in the nation — threatened a dozen small communities in the northern Sierra Nevada even though its southern end was mostly corralled by fire lines.

The fire has burned 790 square miles (2,000 square kilometers), destroyed about 550 homes and nearly obliterated the town of Greenville last week. It was 30% contained.

The Montana blaze was primed over the last several days by swirling winds and hot temperatures. It has spread in multiple directions, torching trees and sending off embers that propelled the flames across the dry landscape.

The fire crept within about a mile (3.2 kilometers) of the eastern edge of the evacuated town of Lame Deer Wednesday night, Northern Cheyenne Tribe spokesperson Angel Becker said. It passed over a highway where officials had hoped to stop it, putting the southern portion of the reservation at increased risk, officials said.

As it closed in on the east side of town and a second fire ignited to the west, tribal officials late Wednesday urged residents who did not heed an earlier evacuation order to flee. Buses moved people to a school about 15 miles (24 kilometers) away and to a shelter set up on the nearby Crow Indian Reservation.

Lame Deer, a town of about 2,000 people, is home to the tribal headquarters and several subdivisions.

"We had some people who refused, but the majority of our elders and women and children definitely left with that last push," Becker said.

With 40-foot (12-meter) flames visible from parts of Lame Deer, firefighters worked into early Thursday morning to keep the fire from destroying houses. None were reported lost, but officials continued assessing the damage. More than a dozen sheds and other outbuildings were lost, they said.

As smoke choked the air, rancher Jimmy Peppers sat on his horse east of town, watching an orange glow intensify over the site of his house as the night wore on.

"I didn't think it would cross the highway, so I didn't even move my farm equipment," said Peppers, who spent the afternoon herding his cattle onto a neighbor's pasture closer to town.

Also ordered to leave were about 600 people in and around Ashland, a small town just outside the reservation. It remained under an evacuation order, but officials said the danger appeared to have eased for now.

Around the perimeter of Lame Deer, crews were building fire breaks and conducting intentional burns — or "burnouts" — in hopes of lessening the amount of fuel available on the ground, fire spokesperson Jeni Garcin said. Officials were cognizant of the need to protect pastureland, she said.

"We fully recognize the value of grass around here," Garcin said. "There's enough lost in this fire that we will be very strategic about how we do any of these burnouts."

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Extreme drought conditions have left trees, grass and brush bone-dry throughout many Western states, making them ripe for ignition.

At the same time, California and some other states face flows of monsoonal moisture that were too high to bring real rain but could create thunderstorms that bring the risk of dry lightning and erratic winds.

In Northern California, a number of wildfires and the threat of more prompted three national forests to close down the Trinity Alps Wilderness Area, a 780-square mile (2,000-square kilometer) area of granite peaks, lakes and trails, into November.

Climate change has made the region warmer and drier in the past 30 years and will continue to make the weather more extreme and wildfires more destructive, according to scientists. The more than 100 large wildfires in the American West come as parts of Europe are also burning.

New research indicates wildfire smoke may be part of a vicious cycle making clouds rain less, which makes it hotter and plants drier and easier to catch fire.

Scientists flew a research plane into smoky skies six times in the U.S. West in 2018 and found five times the water droplets, but they were half the size, according to a study in Wednesday's Geophysical Research Letters. The smaller droplets aren't big enough to fall as rain, said study lead author Cynthia Twohy, a cloud physicist at NorthWest Research Associates.

This is not the main cause for the lack of rain, but "it could be a factor," Twohy said. "The clouds are being affected. We saw that pretty clearly."

The study has worrisome implications that drought and fire can cause more drought and fire.

The main cause of the drought — a huge factor in worsening wildfires — is natural weather changes with some possible climate change, said Park Williams a hydrology and fire scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, who wasn't part of the research.

Larry Heinzerling, AP executive and bureau chief, dies at 75

By JOHN DANISZEWSKI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Larry Heinzerling, a 41-year Associated Press news executive and bureau chief who played a key role in winning freedom for hostage Terry Anderson from his Hezbollah abductors in Lebanon, has died after a short illness. He was 75.

Heinzerling, who passed away at home in New York on Wednesday night, served as AP bureau chief in South Africa during a time of popular revolt against apartheid and in West Germany before the fall of the Berlin Wall. He was deputized by then-AP President and Chief Executive Officer Lou Boccardi to seek contacts with governments and international intermediaries to obtain the release of Anderson, the AP bureau chief in Beirut who had been kidnapped by the extremist group in 1985.

He worked behind the scenes for nearly seven years to win Anderson's release in 1991.

At AP headquarters in New York, Heinzerling was director of AP World Services and later deputy international editor. He was the son of the late Lynn Heinzerling, a Pulitzer Prize-winning foreign correspondent for the AP in Europe and Africa.

"Larry followed in the footsteps of his illustrious AP correspondent father but he walked his own widely admired path — reporter, editor, bureau chief, headquarters executive and, in one painful period in AP history, my personal envoy as we searched across the world for the key to freedom for Terry Anderson," Boccardi said in an email Thursday.

"Larry epitomized the enduring values of honor, trust, grace under pressure and talent. He was a joy to have in the AP family."

Brian Carovillano, AP vice president and co-managing editor, said: "Larry was a rock of the AP, someone who believed completely in our mission and the power and importance of eyewitness journalism. He also did as much as anyone to help transform this company into the global organization it is today. His impact on AP and its journalism will endure."

Heinzerling grew up partly in Elyria, Ohio, and partly overseas in Johannesburg, Geneva and London among other cities where his father was posted. His father was a World War II correspondent for AP

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and won his Pulitzer in 1961 for coverage of the 1960 Congo crisis as the country emerged from Belgian colonial rule.

Heinzerling graduated from Ohio Wesleyan College before joining the AP in Columbus in 1967, simultaneously acquiring a master's degree in international journalism at Ohio State.

After a stint at AP's New York international desk, Heinzerling was posted to sub-Saharan Africa, first in 1971 to Lagos, Nigeria, recently torn by civil war as West Africa correspondent, and then to Johannesburg as South African bureau chief in 1974. There he covered the 1976 Soweto uprising and ongoing cycles of violence and repression as the white minority government sought to maintain its racist system of apartheid.

In 1978, Heinzerling was named bureau chief in Frankfurt, West Germany, overseeing AP's newsgathering from central Europe and directing the large AP German service, then the second-largest news agency in Germany. Berlin was a divided city and East-West tensions seethed in Europe and in the country struggling to overcome the legacy of World War II.

His acumen at running a complex news and business operation resulted in his being called back to New York in 1983 to become deputy director and then director of World Services, the department that managed all of AP's non-U.S. businesses and the distribution of news and photos outside of the United States.

When Anderson was kidnapped in March 1985, one of a string of hostage-takings by Iranian-backed Hezbollah militants, Heinzerling became the AP's point man in secret, backdoor diplomacy to find a way to persuade the kidnappers to let Anderson go. In later years, he declined to talk about his efforts, honoring the promises of secrecy he made at that time.

"Larry Heinzerling was an extraordinary man in a great many ways. He was a special person for me both for his efforts on my behalf during my captivity, and the friendship we enjoyed after my return," Anderson said. "He also happened to be an excellent journalist, and a kind and gentle man. I will miss him, as will we all."

Ian Phillips, AP's director of international news, agreed.

"Larry was the type of boss you loved to work for," Phillips said. "He had a contagious laugh that would resonate around the newsroom and elicit smiles even on the toughest of days. He had high standards, but also knew how to bring a sense of fun to the workplace and was held in such high regard by all. He had a global perspective and delighted in sharing stories from when he worked in the field in Africa and Europe."

Within the AP, Heinzerling was known for fostering dozens of careers over the decades, and tributes to him poured in from around the world at news of his passing. Longtime AP writer Maureen Johnson in London recalled when he hired her in 1977 in South Africa.

"Larry was clever, a born journalist, a skilled linguist — and much else. He was kind, amusing, courageous and to me, who counted for nothing in the scope of his career, totally supportive. He gave me a crack at the many world class stories which Southern Africa served up at the time: the ending of Rhodesia's bloody civil war and with it the collapse of white minority rule; the last years of apartheid strung with famous names: the Mandelas, Steve Biko, P.W. de Klerk."

"He remained for me a guiding light," she said.

Sally Buzbee, AP's former executive editor, said Heinzerling was known to AP journalists around the globe for his commitment to front-line journalism and wide knowledge of the world.

"He never lost his optimism, despite covering many terrible things, and his smile, friendliness and that optimism were appreciated by everyone he worked with," said Buzbee, who is now executive editor of the Washington Post.

Retiring from the news cooperative as deputy international editor for world services in 2009, Heinzerling spoke of his career.

"I have had a wonderful career at AP and in no small way it has been my life," he wrote. "I am thankful for a magical childhood in Europe and Africa as the son of an AP foreign correspondent, and I am even more grateful for the many exciting professional opportunities and adventures AP has offered me over the past 40 years. Where else can you travel the world, report historical events, work with great people every day in a common cause and be proud of what you do?"

Heinzerling is survived by his wife of 20 years, Ann Cooper, the former director of the Committee to

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Protect Journalists and a retired Columbia Graduate School of Journalism professor.

After retirement, he and Cooper volunteered around the world to build homes for Habitat for Humanity and he taught journalism and mentored students as an adjunct assistant professor at Columbia's journalism school and its school of public and international affairs.

More recently Heinzerling was completing a history of the AP in Germany during and after Hitler's rule: "Newshawks in Berlin: Nazi Germany, The Associated Press, And the Pursuit of News," with an AP colleague, investigative researcher Randy Herschaft. Set mostly in wartime Berlin, the book examines how the AP covered Nazi Germany with news and photos from inside the Third Reich throughout World War II.

Heinzerling's illness emerged suddenly in late June, after the couple finished a cross-country car trip to visit her son and his stepson Artyom (Tom) Keller in California. Heinzerling was diagnosed with cancer shortly after, complicated by an attack of pneumonia last week.

Cooper, Keller, and Heinzerling's two children, Kristen Heinzerling and Benjamín Heinzerling, were with him at his death. Other survivors include their spouses, Thomas Minty and Gabriela Lopez Heinzerling; two more stepchildren, Andreas Klohn and Eva Klohn; and five grandchildren. A son, Jesse Heinzerling, passed away earlier.

Republicans take to mask wars as virus surges in red states

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Top Republicans are battling school districts in their own states' urban, heavily Democratic areas over whether students should be required to mask up as they head back to school — reigniting ideological divides over mandates even as the latest coronavirus surge ravages the reddest, most unvaccinated parts of the nation.

Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida has issued an executive order threatening to cut funding from school districts that defy a statewide ban on classroom mask mandates. He's now suggesting his office could direct officials to withhold pay from superintendents who impose such rules anyway.

South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster is threatening to withhold funding to schools in his state's capital of Columbia over masking rules, while Texas Gov. Greg Abbott has vowed to enforce a similar order against mask mandates — despite large school districts around the state, including Dallas and Austin, promising to go ahead with classroom face covering requirements.

Even the Republican gubernatorial candidate in the purple state of Virginia has decried school mask mandates in the name of parental rights.

The posture comes with some clear political incentives for Republicans. The party's base has opposed mask rules for more than a year and long recoiled at the word "mandate." Still, some within the GOP's own ranks have begun to warn of the safety and political risks involved in making schools — and children's health — the chief battleground for an ideological fight.

"It's very visceral," said Brendan Steinhauser, a Republican strategist in Texas. "We're approaching this very tribalistically, very angrily, very politically," he said, adding that both sides are digging in "instead of trying to get together, I believe, at the most local level possible, and saying, 'Hey, let's try and work out what's best.'"

The issue has packed local school meetings and sparked heated exchanges. Video of a meeting in Tennessee's Williamson County showed angry parents chanting "No more masks" and following mask supporters to the parking lot to shout obscenities. First-term U.S. Rep. Madison Cawthorn, R-N.C., recently showed up to denounce masking rules approved by county school board members in his district, calling them "nothing short of psychological child abuse."

It all comes as some Democrat-run states are moving in the opposite direction, reimposing masking rules for classrooms and other public spaces after easing them in recent months, when it seemed the pandemic might be waning.

That's consistent with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommendations that children mask up in school. A recent report by the American Academy of Pediatrics and the Children's Hospital Association

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found that nearly 4.3 million U.S. COVID-19 cases have affected children. That's about 14% of all cases nationwide, though the report said hospitalization and death among children is "uncommon."

In Florida, which has seen cases and hospitalizations rise sharply, some school districts are suing to oppose DeSantis' order. Others, like Leon County, which includes the state capital of Tallahassee, plan to require students to wear masks regardless. Superintendent Rocky Hanna said in a letter to the governor that his district sought "the flexibility and the autonomy to make the decisions for our schools."

"Unfortunately, it has become well-politicized," Hanna said in announcing his decision, adding that if "things went sideways" as school begins anew "and heaven forbid we lost a child to this virus, I can't just simply blame the governor of the state of Florida."

Jasmine Burney-Clark, founder of Equal Ground Education Fund, which has spent months helping facilitate vaccinations for Floridians, said "school boards across the state are saying, 'We're going to call your bluff, and we're going to require mask mandates for our students.'"

"You're not taking the lead so, if you want schools to open, here's what you need to do," Burney-Clark said districts are telling DeSantis.

President Joe Biden on Thursday said masking in schools "isn't about politics. This is about keeping our children safe." He also praised as "heroes" superintendents and other local officials "who are standing up to the governors politicizing mask protection."

Some note the push for bans against mask mandates runs counter to the traditional Republican political ethos of limited government and "local control," or leaving decision-making on things like community ordinances and schools up to officials in the area.

U.S. Sen. Bill Cassidy, R-La., said he opposes DeSantis' orders against school mask mandates, saying on CNN Sunday, "The local official should have control here."

One Republican governor has backtracked. Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson called the state's lawmakers into special session to consider loosening a ban on mask mandates he now says he regrets having signed in April. A judge has already temporarily blocked the ban.

But not all school districts are pushing mask mandates, either. After Kentucky Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear ordered masking rules in his state's schools, some superintendents applauded. One offered a voicemail call to parents that blasted the governor as a "liberal lunatic" and added that "the professional opinion of your superintendent doesn't matter. The opinion of your school board doesn't matter."

In Virginia, Democratic Gov. Ralph Northam announced Thursday a mask mandate for K-12 schools. He pointed to a state law passed in March that requires following federal guidance. Republican gubernatorial candidate Glenn Youngkin, who has vowed not to mandate masks in schools if elected, responded in a statement, "We must respect parents' right to decide what is best for their own children."

Unlike DeSantis, Abbott and many other leading Republicans, Youngkin has prioritized his business experience as a former private equity manager more than his loyalty to former President Donald Trump — little surprise in a state Biden carried by 10 percentage points. Still, his comments show that mask opposition has grown beyond ardent pro-Trumpers.

Monmouth University polling released last week found that 73% of Republicans oppose bringing back masking and social distancing guidelines, while 85% of Democrats support doing so. Independents were more deeply divided, with 42% in support and 55% opposed.

"It's expanded beyond the people you initially see at the Trump rallies," Patrick Murray, Monmouth's polling director, said of Republican mask opposition. But he also noted that so much of the party has now absorbed the former president's message that "all of those people who were considered moderate Republicans in the past have become, on almost every issue now, nearly lockstep with whatever the Donald Trump position is."

Support for masks in classrooms may be higher. A Gallup survey in late July found that 57% of parents with school-age children favor mask mandates for unvaccinated students — whose ranks dominate elementary schools because vaccines are only available for people age 12 and over.

A May poll by the RAND Corporation found that such attitudes break sharply along racial lines. Some 86% of Black parents, 78% of Hispanic parents and 89% of Asian parents said mask mandates for adults

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and children needed to be in place for them to feel safe in sending their children to school, compared with 53% of white parents who felt that way.

RAND senior policy researcher Heather Schwartz, the study's lead author, said one possible reason for the differences could be that parents in rural areas, which tend to be whiter, are more likely to oppose anti-COVID measures. Another may be the virus having killed minority Americans at higher rates than whites, she said.

The same survey found that 26% of white parents and 29% of rural parents felt schools should fully return to normal this fall. Schwartz said some of those respondents wrote things like "the government doesn't need to tell us what to do" in their responses.

"There's a sort of general masking attitude that's spilling over into schools," Schwartz said, "rather than the reverse."

More than 9,000 anti-Asian incidents since pandemic began

By TERRY TANG Associated Press

The frequency of anti-Asian incidents — from taunts to outright assaults — reported in the United States so far this year seems poised to surpass last year despite months of political and social activism, according to a new report released Thursday.

Stop AAPI Hate, a national coalition that became the authority on gathering data on racially motivated attacks related to the pandemic, received 9,081 incident reports between March 19, 2020, and this June. Of those, 4,548 occurred last year, and 4,533 this year. Since the coronavirus was first reported in China, people of Asian and Pacific Islander descent have been treated as scapegoats solely based on their race.

Lawmakers, activists and community groups have pushed back against the wave of attacks. There have been countless social media campaigns, bystander training sessions and public rallies. In May, President Joe Biden signed the bipartisan COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act, expediting Justice Department reviews of anti-Asian hate crimes and making available federal grants. Those supporters should not feel discouraged because the data hasn't shifted much, Stop AAPI Hate leaders said.

"When you encourage hate, it's not like a genie in a bottle where you can pull it out and push it back in whenever you want," said Manjusha Kulkarni, co-founder of Stop AAPI Hate and executive director of the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council. "There's too much perpetuating these belief systems to make them go away."

Several factors contributed to the data, from an increase in incidents to a greater desire to report, according to Kulkarni. As the economy opened up more in the past few months, it meant more public interactions and opportunities to attack, she said. Also, a bump in reporting typically occurs after a high-profile incident like the March 16 Atlanta-area spa shootings that left six Asian women dead.

"There, too, is where we saw some that were incidents that had taken place weeks or months before, but they just were either not aware of our reporting center or didn't take the time to report," Kulkarni said.

The reports aggregated by Stop AAPI Hate are from the victims themselves or someone reporting on their behalf, like an adult child. Overall, the report found verbal harassment and shunning — interactions that don't qualify legally as hate crimes — make up the two largest shares of total incidents. Physical assaults made up the third. But their percentage of the incidents this year increased from last year — 16.6% compared to 10.8%.

More than 63% of the incidents were submitted by women. Roughly 31% took place on public streets, and 30% at businesses.

Many Asian Americans and others blame former President Donald Trump for ratcheting up the danger by talking about the virus in racially charged terms. While Biden has demonstrated allyship, there is concern that a U.S. investigation into the origins of COVID-19 could lead to more hostility and treatment of Asian Americans as enemy foreigners.

"We understand that other nation-states are competitors to the United States, and a number of them do have authoritarian regimes," Kulkarni said. "But the ways in which we talk about the people and the

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ways in which blame is assigned somehow looks different for communities of color than it does for, say, the Russian government or the German government.”

Many of the headline-making attacks over the past year and a half have been against elderly Asian people on both coasts. In most of those cases, a senior was beaten, kicked, shoved or even stabbed out of nowhere. Several such incidents have been caught on video.

A U.S. Census survey released earlier this month found Asian American households were twice as likely as white households to admit they didn't have enough food throughout the pandemic because they were afraid to go out — not due to affordability or transportation issues. In contrast, other racial groups' households said they were experiencing food insecurity because of the pandemic. Asian American respondents didn't say specifically if it was fear of racial attacks that kept them at home.

Anni Chung, president and CEO of San Francisco-based Self-Help for the Elderly, says the seniors they help were hit by a “second virus that is a hate virus.” The nonprofit provides food and programs to more than 40,000 older adults in the Bay Area, most of them Asian. The organization went from transporting a pre-pandemic load of 400 meals daily to over 5,000 per day. Last year, they gave out 963,000 meals overall compared with 436,000 typically.

“Sometimes when we talk to seniors, they say this hatred drove them to be stuck in their house even worse than the pandemic,” Chung said.

For them, the fear is more than a headline but something in their own backyard.

“One of our clients was on the bus. Right before the man got off the bus, he just punched her,” Chung said. “She said no one — not the bus driver and a number of Chinese on the bus — went to her care.”

Giving into that fear means seniors have missed important things like doctor's appointments or exercise routines at the park. So, in June, with some funding from the city, Self-Help for the Elderly expanded a volunteer escort service to accompany seniors on errands or outings around Chinatown and other neighborhoods. It had more than 200 requests that month.

The onslaught of verbal and physical assaults has drawn more skepticism than sympathy from some. Peter Yu, a Republican U.S. Senate candidate in Colorado who is also Chinese American, came under fire last month for characterizing anti-Asian hate crimes as exaggerated.

“I would welcome him to look at the data and see there has been a significant increase,” Kulkarni said. “This may be a situation when people refuse to see racism or misogyny. I think they're just really refusing to see reality and how unfortunately, in the U.S, we have allowed those forces to prevent people from living their lives.”

Cuomo exit isn't stopping push for answers on nursing homes

By MATT SEDENSKY AP National Writer

Sexual harassment allegations cost New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo his job. Now, many want to see him answer for a scandal that cut to the heart of his reputation as a pandemic hero and may have had life-and-death consequences — his administration's handling of outbreaks in nursing homes.

Months before a blistering investigation found Cuomo sexually harassed 11 women, the same attorney general concluded that the administration understated the true death toll in nursing homes by thousands and that fatalities may have been fueled by a state order that effectively forced such homes to accept recovering COVID-19 patients.

Whatever action may lie ahead on the harassment claims, families of the more than 15,000 New Yorkers who died in nursing homes say they want accountability, too, and are urging state lawmakers and the U.S. Justice Department to keep investigating Cuomo after he leaves office.

“The nursing home people and their families have not had a day of reckoning,” said Vivian Zayas, who blames Cuomo for her mother's death in a West Islip, New York, nursing home.

“This not a victory yet,” she said. “A victory is when the whole nursing home scandal is blown open.”

New York's Assembly had been moving toward impeachment of Cuomo before the Democrat announced his resignation, and his handling of nursing homes was set to be a part of that, with more than a half-

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million pages of evidence gathered.

Lawmakers are now weighing whether they can and should push forward with impeachment once Cuomo is out of office in two weeks. One member of the Judiciary Committee said impeachment would amount to "vengeance." Other members of the committee have pushed to at least issue a report.

"If he committed a crime, just because he resigns those investigations are not going to go away," said Assembly member Ron Kim, a Democrat from Queens, whose uncle died in a nursing home. "Justice for the women is the first step. Getting the justice for the families who lost loved ones is a longer journey because it involves a whole ecosystem."

Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul, who will become governor after Cuomo's departure, vowed her administration will be "fully transparent" when it comes to releasing data on nursing home deaths.

A federal investigation could also bring answers. The Trump Justice Department began requesting nursing home records from New York a year ago and widened its inquiry last summer after a report by The Associated Press found the state's official toll of COVID-19 deaths in long-term care facilities was probably a significant undercount.

A narrow Justice Department inquiry into possible civil rights violations at government-run nursing homes ended without triggering a full-blown investigation. But broader examinations by federal prosecutors remain alive, three people familiar with the matter told the AP on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the investigation publicly.

Its focus includes whether the state intentionally manipulated data on nursing home deaths and whether Cuomo and his aides provided the Justice Department with false or incomplete information, which could constitute a federal crime, one of the people said.

Early in the probe, the Cuomo administration was not cooperative with prosecutors and for months did not produce documents and other requested data, the people said.

A Justice Department spokesperson did not respond Wednesday to requests for comment on the status of the investigation.

Among those who have been interviewed in the probe are Kim and another lawmaker who drew Cuomo's ire for calling attention to the nursing home crisis, state Sen. Gustavo Rivera, who said he sat through three hours of questioning in May.

Rivera was flying to a conference on Tuesday as Cuomo was speaking and found himself having to muffle his delight as he watched the resignation unfold on a seatback TV. The Bronx Democrat who chairs the Senate's Health Committee said Cuomo's decisions on nursing homes were an instance of the governor "doing something to make himself look good."

As the virus engulfed New York in the early days of the pandemic, Cuomo did indeed look good, gaining a national audience for his tell-it-like-it-is daily briefings in which he lectured, cheerleaded and cajoled his constituents to stay "New York tough."

Many hailed him as a counterweight to the ineffective COVID-19 response they saw coming from the White House under President Donald Trump. Cuomo went on to write a book about leadership in a crisis.

That resolute image prevailed even as some of the governor's apparent missteps began gaining notice.

Early in the pandemic, the administration moved to free up hospital space by issuing a directive barring nursing homes from refusing people just because they had COVID-19. The directive was ultimately reversed but was blamed by advocates for spreading the virus and contributing to deaths.

After the administration refused to release data and answer questions about the policy for nine months, AP obtained records this year showing more than 9,000 recovering coronavirus patients in New York state were released from hospitals into nursing homes under the order, more than 40% higher than what the state health department previously disclosed.

New York Attorney General Letitia James' report in January noted that while Cuomo's directive was in line with federal guidance, it "may have put residents at increased risk of harm in some facilities."

But the Cuomo administration has long contended that infected nursing home employees — not recovering COVID-19 patients — were the real drivers of infections and that it was incumbent upon nursing homes under state law to refuse COVID-19 patients if they were not equipped to care for them safely.

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The administration also tallied nursing home deaths in a way that was out of step with nearly every other state: It counted only those residents who died on nursing home property, not those who succumbed after being sent to a hospital.

After James' report came out, the Cuomo administration finally released data that confirmed what many suspected: The official death count was off by 50 percent, a difference of more than 4,200 victims.

A top aide to the governor, Melissa DeRosa, tried to explain the administration's delays in releasing data on deaths by saying officials "froze" over worries the information was "going to be used against us" by Trump's Justice Department.

Cuomo's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment Thursday on the investigations.

Grace Colucci, whose father died of COVID-19 at a hospital after being released from a nursing home, found her immediate happiness about Cuomo's resignation dissolve into tears. She said she is fearful he will evade any real punishment for what she believes he did that cost the sick and old their lives.

"I'm afraid that they won't find out why it happened," Colucci said. "This may all be brushed under the rug."

203 cases of COVID-19 linked to Chicago's Lollapalooza

By SOPHIA TAREEN Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Chicago health officials on Thursday reported 203 cases of COVID-19 connected to Lollapalooza, casting it as a number that was anticipated and not yet linked to any hospitalizations or deaths.

"Nothing unexpected here," Department of Public Health Commissioner Dr. Allison Arwady said at a news conference. "No sign of a 'superspreader event'. But clearly with hundreds of thousands of people attending Lollapalooza we would expect to see some cases."

The four-day music festival, which started two weeks ago, drew about 385,000 people to a lakefront park. Critics questioned holding the event during the pandemic. Footage showed tightly packed crowds at concerts and on public transportation with few masks in sight. Last year's festival was canceled because of COVID-19.

But Mayor Lori Lightfoot and other officials have defended the decision, saying there were safety protocols in place. Festival goers had to show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test and city officials said about 90% were vaccinated.

Arwady said the number of positive cases included those who tested positive after or during Lollapalooza, which could include people who might have arrived already infected. For instance, 13 Chicago residents who tested positive reported attended Lollapalooza on or after the day their symptoms began.

She said the city was still investigating cases, but did not expect it to make a major impact on COVID-19 infection rates.

"We would have seen a surge if we were going to see a surge at this point," she said.

Among those who tested positive, city officials said 138 were Illinois residents from outside Chicago, 58 were from the city and seven were from out of state. Nearly 80% of those who tested positive were under 30, and about 62% were white, Arwady said.

Japan mayor apologizes for biting athlete's gold medal

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — A Japanese mayor apologized Thursday for biting the Olympic gold medal of a softball player who had paid a courtesy visit after Japan beat the United States in the final.

Nagoya mayor Takashi Kawamura had praised pitcher Miu Goto during the Aug. 4 visit, but his eyes were glued to her medal. He asked her to put it around his neck. Kawamura then pulled down his face mask and bit into it.

"I'm really sorry that I hurt the treasure of the gold medalist," Kawamura told reporters Thursday.

The mayor said the medal was undamaged, though he offered to pay for the cost of a new one.

Goto, however, has accepted the International Olympic Committee's offer of a replacement, according

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to Japanese media reports.

The medal bite has become a staple of Olympic photo-ops — but for the winners themselves, not others. The scene broadcast on television prompted thousands of complaints to city hall. Some Olympians said they treat their medals as treasures and that it was outrageous for Kawamura to bite one.

"I would cry if that happened to me," Naohisa Takato, who won gold for Japan in judo, said in a tweet. "I handle my own gold medal so gently not to scratch it."

Yuki Ota, a silver-medal winning fencer, said the mayor's action was disrespectful to athletes and was a bad idea for COVID-19 measures.

Goto reportedly considered keeping the original but eventually accepted the IOC offer of a replacement.

Days of hot weather grip Southern Europe, North Africa

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Stifling heat kept its grip on much of Southern Europe on Thursday, driving people indoors at midday, spoiling crops, triggering drinking water restrictions, turning public libraries into cooling "climate shelters" and complicating the already difficult challenge firefighters faced battling wildfires.

In many places, forecasters said worse was expected to come.

In Italy, 15 cities received warnings from the health ministry about high temperatures and humidity with peaks predicted for Friday. The cities included Rome, Florence and Palermo, but also Bolzano, which is usually a refreshing hot-weather escape in the Alps,

The local National Health Service offices in Rome and Bologna telephoned older residents who live alone to see if they needed groceries or medicines delivered so they wouldn't venture out in the searing heat.

The Italian air force, which oversees the national weather service, said the interior parts of the islands of Sardinia and Sicily could expect to see temperatures upwards of 40 degrees Celsius (104 F) by Friday. By early afternoon on Thursday in Rome, the city famous for its ornamental as well as strategically placed sidewalk drinking fountains sizzled in 38 C (100 F) heat.

"I drink a lot of water, more water, more water and more water," said Hank Heerat, a tourist from the Netherlands cycling down the broad boulevard flanking the Roman Forum.

At the ancient Colosseum, Civil Protection volunteers distributed hundreds of bottles of water to visitors.

In Serbia, the spell of hot, dry weather prompted four municipalities to declare an emergency after Rzav River levels plummeted, endangering water supplies. Authorities imposed drinking water restrictions affecting some 250,000 people, while the army brought in water tanks for public use.

"We have a period of severe drought, we cannot take any more water from the river," Zoran Barac, the head of a local water supply utility, told state broadcaster RTS.

In Spain, the national weather service warned temperatures could hit 44 C (111 F) in some areas in coming days. Parts of the northeastern Catalonia region were forecast to reach 42 C (107.6 F) on Thursday.

Authorities in Barcelona, the Catalan capital, designated 162 museums, libraries, schools and other public places around the city as "climate shelters." The sites offered an escape from the heat, cool drinking water and staff trained in dealing with heatstroke.

The surge in temperatures, due to a mass of hot, dry air from Africa, was expected to ease starting on Monday on the Iberian peninsula.

While Southern Europe is known for sunny, hot summers, climate scientists say there's little doubt climate change from the burning of coal, oil and natural gas is driving extreme events such as heat waves, droughts and wildfires, which they say are likely to happen more frequently as Earth warms.

A German tourist in Rome concurred.

Because of climate change, "temperatures are very high. So I think it's a better option is to reduce the carbon dioxide from the cars and travel more with the metro," said Philippe Kutaski near the Colosseum in Rome.

As in past years, Croatia's Adriatic Sea resorts were hosting hundreds of thousands of tourists. But those stepping out of the sea sweltered as temperatures reached 39 C (102 F) on the coast on Wednesday.

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Crops and farm animals were suffering from days of extremely high temperature, too.

The Italian agriculture lobby Coldiretti said Thursday that 20% of the tomato crop in Italy's south was lost due to torrid heat and humidity. Italy exports nearly 2 billion euros (\$2.4 billion) worth of tomatoes and tomato products like canned or bottled sauce throughout the world.

Dairy farmers in southern Italy estimated that the heat wave meant cows were eating less, producing 20% less milk and drinking double the usual amount of water.

While much attention has focused on southern Europe's heat crisis, it was even hotter on the North African shore of the Mediterranean Sea. Temperatures hit 50 C (122 F) in Tunisia, a record high for the country. The last previous high was 48.2 C (nearly 119 F) in 1968.

In Algeria, most of the regions of the north of the country have been placed on alert for heat waves. Fires ravaging mountain forests and villages in Algeria's Berber region have killed at least 65 people, including 28 soldiers.

Blazes have devoured forest and brush areas in Greece and in southern Italy for days.

In Italy, temperatures in the mid-40s C (over 110 F) in inland parts of Sardinia, Calabria and Sicily made for ripe fire conditions. But long spells of drought also were blamed. By the start of summer in Italy, vegetation had already withered from lack of rain and "essentially became fuel" for wildfires, Italian Civil Protection official Luigi D'Angelo told Italian state TV.

Back-to-back price hikes, wholesale costs up 1% in July

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Inflation at the wholesale level jumped a higher-than-expected 1% in July, matching the rise from the previous month, and dimming hopes that the upward trajectory of prices would begin to slow.

Prices at the wholesale level over the past 12 months are up a record 7.8%, the largest increase in that span of time in a series going back to 2010.

And the back-to-back monthly increases in the producer price index, which measures price pressures before they reach consumers, were the most sizeable since a 1.2% rise in January, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

The latest data on rising producer prices comes a day after the U.S. reported that there was some evidence of slowing in price hikes at the retail level. Consumer prices in July rose 0.5%, compared with a 0.9% jump in June. Over the past year retail prices are up a notable 5.4%, the same 12-month gain posted in June with both months recording the largest annual gain since 2008.

July's 1% wholesale price uptick exceeded the 0.6% gain many economists had expected and signaled the price surge that has lifted the cost of everything from airline tickets and hotels to food and gasoline, has pushed prices well above the 2% target for annual gains set by the Federal Reserve.

Core inflation at the wholesale level, which excludes volatile food and energy costs, also rose 1% in July. Core prices over the past 12 months are up 6.2%.

"Price metrics continue to be impacted by pandemic-related effects including strong demand and supply constraints," said Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "The reopening impact should diminish over coming months but there is less certainty about supply dislocations, which could be exacerbated due to spread of the delta variant."

Nearly three-fourths of the 1% July increase in wholesale prices were generated by the rising cost of services, which rose 1.1%. There were hefty gains in margins for autos and auto parts, which jumped 11.2%. Retail prices for new cars and used cars have been rising sharply in recent months as a computer chip shortage shuts down auto plants.

The price of goods at the wholesale level rose 0.6%, led by a 2.6% increase in energy prices, the biggest energy gain since a 5% increase in March.

Food costs actually fell 2.1%, the first price drop for food since December.

HHS joins vaccine trend, orders shots for its health workers

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal Health and Human Services Department is requiring employees who provide care or services for patients to get their COVID-19 shots, officials announced Thursday.

The order from Secretary Xavier Becerra will affect more than 25,000 clinicians, researchers, contractors, trainees and volunteers with the National Institutes of Health, the Indian Health Service, and the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps. It applies to employees who regularly interact with patients or whose duties could put workers in contact with patients.

"Requiring our HHS health care workforce to get vaccinated will protect our federal workers, as well as the patients and people they serve," Becerra said in a statement.

From the Pentagon to the Department of Veterans Affairs and the state of California, and from Google to United Airlines, government agencies and large companies are requiring employees to get vaccinated as the aggressive delta variant sweeps across the land, prompting worries that COVID-19 could drag down the economic recovery.

HHS has more than 80,000 employees. Those not covered by Becerra's order would fall under President Joe Biden's recent policy change that requires federal workers and contractors to attest to their vaccination status and imposes regular COVID-19 testing and certain workplace restrictions on the unvaccinated. But this is short of a direct order to get vaccinated.

While vaccination is nearly universal among physicians, the same can't be said for other people working in health care settings. Facilities such as nursing homes and hospitals are labor-intensive operations relying on support staff for everything from clerical duties to transporting patients, and their vaccination rates often mirror the surrounding communities.

The decision by HHS follows the VA order last month that its health care workers get vaccinated and the recent announcement by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin that U.S. service members will be required to get their COVID-19 shots in order to maintain military readiness.

Despite widespread availability of effective vaccines at no cost to patients, only about half the U.S. population is fully vaccinated. New COVID-19 cases have surged past 100,000 a day, a level not seen since the deadly wave of the fall and winter gained momentum last November.

Hardest hit in this latest wave are states with low levels of vaccination and high resistance to government public health directives. But no area of the country is immune. The delta variant is highly efficient at spreading, allowing it to become the dominant coronavirus strain in the U.S. in a matter of weeks.

Employers have broad leeway to require their workers to get vaccinated as a "condition of employment," similar to other rules governing the workplace. Under federal law, workers with religious objections or a medical condition may be entitled to exemptions, as long as that doesn't disrupt the workplace.

The new requirement at HHS will provide for similar medical and religious accommodations.

Officials noted that the employees affected are already required to get annual flu shots and other routine vaccinations. But the Food and Drug Administration still has not issued a full approval for the coronavirus vaccines, only emergency use authorization. That's thought to be contributing to some people's reluctance to get vaccinated, although more than 190 million shots have been administered in the United States. with few reported cases of serious side effects and mounting evidence of effectiveness.

Hochul: I'll run for governor after finishing Cuomo's term

By KAREN MATTHEWS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Lt. Gov. Kathy Hochul, who will serve out the remainder of Andrew Cuomo's term after he steps down amid sexual harassment allegations, said Thursday she plans to run for governor in her own right next year.

"Yes I will. I fully expect to," Hochul said in an interview with NBC's "Today" show. "I am prepared for this. I have led a life working in every level of government, from Congress to local government. I am the most prepared person to assume this responsibility and I'm going to ask the voters at some point for

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their faith in me again but right now I need their faith, I need their prayers and I need their support to make sure we get this right.”

Hochul, a Buffalo Democrat who has served as Erie County clerk and served one term in Congress before winning election as lieutenant governor in 2014, will become the first woman to be New York’s governor when Cuomo’s resignation becomes official on Aug. 24.

Hochul deflected questions about whether the state Assembly should proceed with impeachment proceedings despite Cuomo’s impending exit, telling NBC, “I don’t believe it’s my position to weigh in on that situation.”

Asked whether there should be mask mandates in schools to contain the spread of COVID-19, Hochul said she does not yet have the authority to make that call, but said, “I believe that there’ll end up being mask mandates.”

While the governor cannot mandate mask wearing across the state’s public schools, the state Health Department can issue guidance strongly recommending that school districts require face coverings.

Hochul stressed that she plans to work with school district officials as well as parents and teachers on the issue of mask requirements.

Hochul said she would draw on federal CDC recommendations and all available COVID-19 data but added, “also, we need be talking to the school districts as well. That hasn’t happened in the past and it’s the way I think it should be. To find out what’s their anxiety. Why there’s any objection to this.”

Cuomo announced Tuesday that he would resign rather than face a likely impeachment trial after Attorney General Letitia James released a report concluding he sexually harassed 11 women and describing a toxic work environment in his administration.

Cuomo, 63, denies that he touched anyone inappropriately and said his instinct was to fight back against the harassment claims. But he said it was best for him to step aside so the state’s leaders could “get back to governing.”

The 62-year-old Hochul, who gave her first news conference as governor in waiting on Wednesday, reiterated that she will not tolerate harassment in her administration.

“I want to make sure that there’s a message that I’m tough,” Hochul said Thursday. “I’m not going to put up with anything that crosses the line or even comes close to the line because this should be an environment where all people, women, members of the LGBTQ community, anyone, is free of harassment that they can come to work, work for the people of New York state, focused and get the job done.”

US jobless claims near pandemic low as economy strengthens

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell for a third straight time last week, the latest sign that employers are laying off fewer people as they struggle to fill a record number of open jobs and meet a surge in consumer demand.

Thursday’s report from the Labor Department showed that jobless claims fell to 375,000 from 387,000 the previous week. The number of applications has fallen steadily since topping 900,000 in early January as the economy has increasingly reopened in the aftermath of the pandemic recession.

Filings for unemployment benefits have traditionally been seen as a real-time gauge of the job market’s health, but the measure’s reliability has deteriorated during the pandemic. In many states, the weekly figures have been inflated by fraud and by multiple filings from unemployed Americans as they navigate bureaucratic hurdles to try to obtain benefits.

Those complications help explain why the pace of applications remains comparatively high. Before the pandemic paralyzed the economy in March 2020, unemployment applications were running at about 220,000 a week.

Many states, for example, require self-employed and gig workers to first seek conventional unemployment benefits — and be turned down — before they can apply through a program that was set up last year to provide jobless aid to them for the first time. That program, and a \$300-a-week federal supplemental

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unemployment benefit, will expire nationwide in the first week of September. About 22 states, mostly led by Republican governors, have already canceled both programs.

A total of about 12 million people are receiving unemployment benefits, down sharply from the previous week's figure of nearly 13 million. That drop reflects that more Americans are being hired and no longer receiving benefits. Another factor is the cancellation in many states of the federal program for the self-employed and a separate program for the long-term jobless.

For now, nearly 8.7 million people continue to receive aid through those programs and will lose their benefits when those programs expire nationwide on Sept. 6.

So far at least, there has been little sign that the delta variant has depressed hiring or prompted layoffs. In July, employers added a substantial 943,000 jobs, the government said last week, and the unemployment rate sank from 5.9% to 5.4%. Average hourly earnings jumped a sharp 4% in July from a year earlier, indicating that employers have felt compelled to raise pay. Still, that report was based on a survey that was conducted in mid-July, before a surge in COVID-19 delta cases took off.

On Monday, the government reported that employers posted more than 10 million available jobs in June, the most on records dating back to December 2000. That meant there were more open jobs than there were unemployed people that month. Yet those figures, too, predate the recent spike in COVID cases.

But credit card spending on airline tickets has fallen 20% from a mid-July peak, according to economists at JPMorgan Chase, suggesting that in response to the increase in infections, consumers may be starting to slow their travel spending, which had jumped in recent months.

And after returning to pre-pandemic levels for much of June and July, restaurant traffic dropped about 10% below that level in the past week, according to restaurant software provider OpenTable.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Aug. 13, the 225th day of 2021. There are 140 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On August 13, 1910, Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, died in London at age 90.

On this date:

In 1521, Spanish conqueror Hernando Cortez captured Tenochtitlan (teh-natch-teet-LAHN'), present-day Mexico City, from the Aztecs.

In 1704, the Battle of Blenheim was fought during the War of the Spanish Succession, resulting in a victory for English-led forces over French and Bavarian soldiers.

In 1846, the American flag was raised in Los Angeles for the first time.

In 1860, legendary sharpshooter Annie Oakley was born in Darke County, Ohio.

In 1889, William Gray of Hartford, Conn., received a patent for a coin-operated telephone.

In 1932, Adolf Hitler rejected the post of vice chancellor of Germany, saying he was prepared to hold out "for all or nothing."

In 1942, Walt Disney's animated feature "Bambi" had its U.S. premiere at Radio City Music Hall in New York, five days after its world premiere in London.

In 1961, East Germany sealed off the border between Berlin's eastern and western sectors before building a wall that would divide the city for the next 28 years.

In 1967, the crime caper biopic "Bonnie and Clyde," starring Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway, had its U.S. premiere; the movie, directed by Arthur Penn, was considered shocking as well as innovative for its graphic portrayal of violence.

In 2003, Iraq began pumping crude oil from its northern oil fields for the first time since the start of the war. Libya agreed to set up a \$2.7 billion fund for families of the 270 people killed in the 1988 Pan Am bombing.

In 2004, TV chef Julia Child died in Montecito, California, two days short of her 92nd birthday.

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In 2017, in a statement, the White House said President Donald Trump “very strongly” condemned individual hate groups such as “white supremacists, KKK and neo-Nazis;” the statement followed criticism of Trump for blaming the previous day’s deadly violence at a white supremacist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, on “many sides.”

Ten years ago: Seven people were killed when a stage collapsed at the Indiana State Fair during a powerful storm just before a concert was to begin. In the Republican presidential race, Rep. Michele Bachmann won the Iowa straw poll; Texas Gov. Rick Perry officially declared his candidacy. In eastern Pakistan, al-Qaida gunmen kidnapped an American development expert, Warren Weinstein. (Weinstein was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Jan. 2015.)

Five years ago: Violence erupted in Milwaukee following the fatal shooting of Sylville Smith, a 23-year-old Black man, by a Black police officer, Dominique Heaggan-Brown, who was later acquitted of first-degree reckless homicide. Michael Phelps closed out the Rio Olympics with another gold medal, the 23rd of his career. Kenny Baker, who played R2-D2 in the “Star Wars” movies, died in Preston, England, at age 81.

One year ago: Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp said he was dropping a lawsuit against the city of Atlanta over the city’s requirement to wear masks in public and other coronavirus restrictions; Kemp had sought to block local governments from requiring that masks be worn. In an interview on Fox Business Network, President Donald Trump acknowledged that he was starving the U.S. Postal Service of money in order to make it harder to process an expected surge of mail-in ballots. Israel and the United Arab Emirates announced that they were establishing full diplomatic relations in a deal brokered by the U.S.; it required Israel to halt its plan to annex occupied West Bank land sought by the Palestinians.

Today’s Birthdays: Former U.S. Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders is 88. Actor Kevin Tighe is 77. U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen is 75. Opera singer Kathleen Battle is 73. High wire aerialist Philippe Petit is 72. Hockey Hall of Famer Bobby Clarke is 72. Golf Hall of Famer Betsy King is 66. Movie director Paul Greengrass is 66. Actor Danny Bonaduce (bahn-uh-DOO’-chee) is 62. TV weatherman Sam Champion is 60. Actor Dawnn (correct) Lewis is 60. Actor John Slattery is 59. Actor Debi Mazar is 57. Actor Quinn Cummings is 54. Actor Seana Kofoed is 51. Country singer Andy Griggs is 48. Actor Gregory Fitoussi is 45. Country musician Mike Melancon (Emerson Drive) is 43. Actor Kathryn Fiore is 42. Former White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders is 39. Actor Sebastian Stan is 39. Actor Eme Ikwuakor (IK’-wah-ker) is 37. Pop-rock singer James Morrison is 37. Actor Lennon Stella is 22.