Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Oct. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 092 ~ 1 of 85

Upcoming Events

Thursday, Oct. 7
10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.: Flu Shot Clinic at Groton Area
1 p.m.: NEC Cross Country Meet at Webster
4 p.m. to 8 p.m.: Parent/Teacher Conferences
5 p.m.: Junior High Football hosting Webster Area
Friday, Oct. 8 - NO SCHOOL
8 a.m. to Noon: Parent/Teacher Conferences
10 a.m.: Lake Region Marching Festival in Groton
Noon to 3:30 p.m: Faculty Inservice
Saturday, Oct. 9
Soccer Second Round Playoffs
Volleyball at Redfield Tourney
Pumpkin Fest in Groton
Monday, Oct. 11
No School - Native American Day
Tuesday, Oct. 12
12:43 p.m. to 2:43 p.m.: PSAT Pre-Administration
Volleyball at Tiospa Zina (7th/C match at 5 p.m., 8th/JV at 6 p.m., varsity to follow)
7 p.m.: School Board Meeting
Wednesday, Oct. 13
Elementary School LifeTouch Pictures, 8 a.m. to 11 a.m.
PSAT Testing for sophomores and juniors during first hour
Thursday, Oct. 14
High School LifeTouch Pictures, 8 a.m. to 11 a.m.
3:30 p.m.: Region 1A cross Country Meet in Webster
4:00 p.m.: Junior High Football Jamboree in Groton
Volleyball hosts Milbank (7th/C match at 65 p.m., 8th/JV at 6 p.m. with varsity to follow

Friday, Oct. 15
7 p.m.: Football at Sisseton
Saturday, Oct. 16
Oral Interp at Florence
State Soccer in Sioux Falls
JV Volleyball Tourney in Milbank

Help Wanted

Applications will be accepted for skating rink manager and attendants for the City of Groton. Contact City Hall 397-8422 for an application or print one online at http://city.grotonsd.gov/. EOE.

Service Notice: Lois Pasch

Graveside services for Lois Pasch, 97, of Groton will be 10:30 a.m., Saturday, October 9th at Union Cemetery, Groton. Rev. Larry Johnson will officiate.

Lois passed away October 5, 2021 at Wheatcrest Hills in Britton.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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

At the end of day yesterday, which is the latest update I have, we were at 43,925,355 total cases in the US in this pandemic. That means before we talk next we'll hit 44 million. I keep hoping the next million is the last one, but still no chance of that. Our seven-day new-case average is still over 100,000 at 101,668, which means about every nine to 10 days, we'll hit a new mark. That is profoundly depressing; but we should note that at least the new-case number is decreasing.

So we are seeing a real decline in new cases; we don't know that this will continue (and I've grown gun-shy on this point, having been wrong so many times before). But it really does look like a real thing. New cases have dropped by 35 percent in the last month. We've talked before about the two-month cycle (most recently in Update #469 posted September 23 at https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5131924053490626), and this looks like another one. We can't be sure it is, but it's looking good for that. There have been theories advanced that this is simply due to seasonality or changes in social behaviors, but none of that is a sure thing. This is looking like a combination of the characteristics of the virus and the characteristics of human behavior. Whatever the cause, we are seeing a decline pretty much on schedule for the two-month thing, first in cases and then with hospitalizations and deaths following. Maybe today's declines will not persist, however with the increase in vaccination, the upcoming authorization of vaccination for younger children, aged 5-11, and the increase in the number of people who have been infected, there is reason to feel hope. Dr. Scott Gottlieb, former FDA commissioner, told the New York Times, "Barring something unexpected, I'm of the opinion that this is the last wave of infection." Wouldn't that be grand? I am currently working very hard to keep my optimism tamped down; I've been burned more than once in this thing. Still . . . .

Hospitalizations are also in decline by some 20 percent over the past two weeks. The current average is 73,020, much reduced from our recent peak of some 103,000 as recently as last month. Despite the overall decrease in hospitalizations, Alaska's hospital are still in crisis. They came late to the pandemic party, protected for months by geographic isolation and low population density; but B.1.617.2 or Delta, the variant first identified in India, seems to have a way of finding you wherever you are. According to the New York Times, testing supplies are depleted, emergency rooms are overwhelmed, patients are being treated in hallways, and doctors are rationing oxygen. Dr. Steven Floerchinger at Providence Alaska Medical Center in Anchorage told the Times, "We are taxed to the point of making decisions of who will and who will not live." No one wants to be there.

Overwhelmed hospitals in other states have the option to transfer patients to other facilities in neighboring states; Alaska doesn't have neighboring states. I'm going to let the Times tell the rest of this story:

"While much of the nation's hospital system is stressed, it's easier in the lower 48 contiguous states to transfer patients to medical facilities in neighboring cities or across state lines.

"Some hospitals in Alaska are operating under 'crisis standards of car'" that allow them to ration health care to attend to the neediest patients or share limited resources among those in their hospital beds.

"That means doctors in some places have had to make difficult triage decisions. When Providence Alaska Medical Center was hit with a deluge of coronavirus patients on a recent night, doctors had to decide whether the last spot in the intensive care unit should go to one of the Covid patients in the emergency room or to someone from an isolated town who needed to be flown in for emergency surgery.

"Dr. Floerchinger gathered with his colleagues for an agonizing discussion. They had a better chance of saving one of the patients in the emergency room, they determined. The other person would have to wait.

"That patient died."

Deaths are also finally on the decline as well. We're pretty steadily below 2000, which is an accomplishment, but we're sort of stuck around 1800. Today's seven-day average is 1808, which still represents a whole lot of funerals. This is down from almost 3000 last month, so we are moving in the right direction.

Since they're going to be the key to success in our endeavor to get past this pandemic, this is probably a good time for an update on vaccinations in the US. As of Sunday, 56 percent of the population [65.4 percent of eligible people (12 and up)] have been fully vaccinated. Fifteen states have still not reached half of their residents: Idaho, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Missouri, Arkansas, Louisiana, Indiana, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, West Virginia, South Carolina, and Georgia. While our focus has to be on getting vaccine into everyone, we will note that 5.3 million people have received a third dose since mid-August. For those who are still on the "They're-too-new" bandwagon, consider that more than a billion people have received these vaccines with very little in the way of serious adverse effects, whatever the talking heads on outrage-TV have ben telling you. Might be time to update your talking points.

We should also note that people with disabilities have been disproportionately unvaccinated despite their overall willingness to receive the vaccines and their disproportionate risk of severe disease, hospitalization, and death. They've had access issues including difficulty getting an appointment online, difficulty getting to a vaccination site, hours at vaccination sites that didn't fit their work schedules, and not knowing where to go. It will be important to reduce these barriers for this willing population. Here's another reason not to just dismiss everyone who is unvaccinated as a refusenik. There are many reasons people have been unable to access vaccination, and we'd do well to address their obstacles. We need every single soul we can get on board.

We talked in the past week about molnupiravir, that promising antiviral from Merck that can halve the number of people who are hospitalized or die from Covid-19. Something to keep in mind, despite the drug's promise, is that it is not a substitute for vaccination. Consider this: The drug has to be given in the earliest days of the infection when symptoms have only recently started. A course of treatment is likely to run around $700. Everyone gets colds or allergy symptoms, most of us more than once a year. So we need to think about how this drug is likely to be used. If you're unvaccinated, every case of the sniffles could be Covid-19, right? That could happen a couple or a dozen times per year. How many times should we spend $700 treating you, just in case, when you could have had $50 worth of vaccine and been largely protected? We need to think about what constitutes a wise use of resources, and I don't know that pouring a few thousand dollars per year per refusenik down the gaping maw of anti-science delusion is wise or sustainable. Someone, after all, is paying for all this, even if it's "free" to the recipient. Maybe if you're unvaccinated, you should pay for this out of pocket. Fair?

I'll also mention here that vaccination lowers the infection, hospitalization, and death rate far more than this new drug does. If I were a betting person, I'd place most of my money on vaccines.

A research group at Kaiser Permanente Medical Centers, in an article published Monday in JAMA Network, has assessed the risk for myocarditis in young men after receiving a second dose of the mRNA vaccines, both the one from Moderna and the one from Pfizer/BioNTech. They analyzed medical records for 2.4 million of their members 18 and older who had received one of these vaccines by July 20, identifying 13 hospitalizations for confirmed myocarditis after a second dose. None of the cases had a history of heart problems, so this doesn't appear to be related to a prior heart problem. None of them were readmitted after the initial hospitalization for the condition, so they all went home and stayed there—good news. This means the second dose raised the risk for this rare complication to (a still very rare) 5.8 cases per million second doses in men and so far no one's died. It doesn't seem super-likely anyone's going to die from this in the future either, although we cannot completely rule that out either.

This highest risk appears to be in young males. The CDC's estimate is that for each million boys, ages 12 to 17, there might be up to 70 cases of myocarditis. Those million vaccinations would prevent 5700 infections 215 hospitalizations, and two deaths in that same population. While we would, of course, prefer zero risk, life seldom works like that; and even as the grandmother of a male who is soon to join this age group, I believe this looks like a reasonable risk profile. I will encourage him to be vaccinated on his upcoming birthday.

It's apparently stupid claims week again: There was a YouTube video, originally in Thai, that presented the Sae-Vee method (Sae-Vee is purportedly the inventor of the method). It involves use of the antibiotic amoxicillin to cure your Covid-19; you are instructed as to the importance of mixing the antibiotic with water to help your body absorb it better. Better yet, the successful application of this treatment also immunizes you against future infection. This seems incredible, really—as in not believable. There's a reason for that. You will likely be unable to access this video; it seems to be getting disabled as quickly as it pops up, which is a very good thing. There is, of course, no truth to either claim. Months and months ago, we talked about why antibiotics never work on viral infections. (See my Update #25 posted March 20, 2020, at https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3443290772353971.) That rule has not changed; antibiotics still don't work on viral infections. Not even amoxicillin, and not even when mixed with water to aid absorption. Nope.

You know, I don't think members of the Ivermectin Fan Club for the most part are trying to kill people (even though that is in fact what they're doing: I think there are a lot of true believers in addition to the folks who are just cashing in on that one. But this new sort of nonsense looks to me like it must be deliberate—like the plan is to end up with some dead people. I do not get that. I would think that, if you got your jollies out of killing folks, you'd want to be there to watch them die; otherwise, what's the point?

Here's a good rule of thumb: If you hear about a miracle cure or a little-known method for preventing infection and it's being reported in a YouTube video instead of a scientific journal, then it's not a miracle cure or a little-known method for preventing infection: It's a hoax. Real scientists doing reputable research never write up their findings for YouTube, and your random non-scientist (or humble country doctor) is not going to stumble across some previously-overlooked miracle cure and prove it works without doing real, reputable science—which will (you should be able to spot the theme here) not be reported via YouTube. Even if you think everything is a conspiracy for keeping Big Pharma rich, you can trust me on this. That is not how science is done.

In other stupid-claims news, there's the one about how the new antiviral drug Pfizer's just started in mid-to-late-stage trials, PF-07321332, isn't a new drug at all. As the story goes, it is really just ivermectin, only with the "establishment's" approval this time. The Pfizer drug is listed as a protease inhibitor. I can't find a lot of additional information about it, but I'm going to guess it prevents viral proteins from assuming functional form. Here's how I think it works: SARS-CoV-2 has a circular piece of genetic material (RNA), so when this is transcribed to make the proteins needed to assemble new viruses, a long strand of amino acids is produced that contains all of the viral proteins in a single long string. You may remember from our earlier conversations that proteins, in order to function properly, need to fold and bend into specific shapes that actually determine their function; they can't do this while all connected together, end-to-end that way. (Those earlier conversations were Update #46 posted April 9, 2020, at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3496698563679858&set=a.347346695281743 and Update #377 posted March 6, 2021, at https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4500262516656786.) The way this particular virus solves this problem is to use viral enzymes called proteases that snip apart the individual proteins from this long strand so that the proteins can do their folding and bending thing and assume a functional shape.

Turns out protease inhibitors are a pretty effective way to interfere with viral replication; a virus whose enzymes are inactivated is pretty much dead in the water—can't be replicated. Ivermectin, on the other hand (which you will recall is targeted at parasites), works by stimulating the release of neurotransmitters (chemicals that carry nerve impulses from cell to cell) in the parasite, which causes paralysis of the entire parasite or of its gut so that it effectively starves to death. There are some other cell processes ivermectin can interfere with, and it was those some researchers had hoped would make it useful against Covid-19, but so far, as we've discussed repeatedly, we haven't been able to get enough of it into the relevant tissues for this effect to show up. We can say for sure, however, that Pfizer's protease inhibitor is not ivermectin, not even close.

For the record (sigh!), neither is molnupiravir. Another crazy rumor being amplified by all the usual suspects is that this drug is repackaged ivermectin. Since Merck makes both, the theory goes that this is a way for the company to make a lot more money selling a "new" drug for $700 per course of treatment as opposed to an old drug like ivermectin for a few dollars at best. The only thing wrong with this theory is that molnupiravir isn't ivermectin either. Really. It is a nucleoside analog that tricks your cell into using defective building blocks to make viral RNA for the new viruses it's been coopted into constructing. This is a bigger reach than the Pfizer antiviral claims above.

Last stupid claim for today: That the "approved" Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine with its shiny new trade name of Comirnaty is not the same stuff as the "experimental" version labeled "Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19" that was being given under EUA. This would mean, of course, that "they" are sneaking something nefarious into this new version, something the FDA did not approve—or, alternatively, that there was something nefarious in the old version that has been sneakily removed before it is found out. Where did this theory come from? Well, when the FDA licensed this vaccine, the manufacturer, as is usual, gave it a trade name; that happens upon licensing. I think the peg these conspiracy-theorist folks are hanging their stories on is that the new license is for Comirnaty, and this is what the new labels will show. However, the already-produced vials of this vaccine cannot legally be relabeled as Comirnaty, so they were left with their original label that has the old EUA designation of "Pfizer/BioNTech COVID-19." This means the EUA for these already-produced vials had to be extended to cover them with their old label until they are used; since there were hundreds of thousands (maybe millions) of doses of the old-label stuff lying around, the only alternative would have been to discard them, which is unconsionable. While all of these labeling rules may seem silly to those of us not in the business, this series of events is not a concept too difficult for adults to follow—unless you want to find something sinister in all of that. In less-fraught times, this would have—and undoubtedly has—passed as unremarkable.

There was a death last month from that unusual blood clotting disorder, thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS) in a woman who had recently been vaccinated with the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine. This is the fourth such death in the US associated with that vaccine. The disorder is characterized by blood clotting with low platelet counts and has symptoms including, according to the CDC, "severe or persistent headaches or blurred vision, shortness of breath, chest pain, leg swelling, persistent abdominal pain, . . . easy bruising or tiny blood spots under the skin beyond the injection site." The risk occurs in the few weeks following vaccination and is greatest in females from 18 to 49 years in age. The disorder is occurring at the rate of 7 cases per million vaccinated women in this age group and at a far lower rate in other groups. It is treatable with non-heparin anticoagulants.

AstraZeneca announced on Tuesday that they are applying for emergency use authorization (EUA) for their new combination long-acting antibody intended to protect against Covid-19. These are monoclonal antibodies modified in such a way that they can sort of "hide" from our immune response; that's important because these are foreign proteins which would normally elicit an immune response that will destroy them

within a couple of months. (For the science nerds in the crowd, they've reduced Fc receptor and complement (C1q) binding on the antibodies which inhibits the immune response to these foreign proteins.) The company says it expects this modification will approximately triple their durability and result in up to 12 months of protection, which would be a pretty big deal.

In the clinical trial of almost 5200 unvaccinated and previously uninfected participants, 75 percent of whom had co-morbidities including those that are reported to cause a reduced immune response to vaccination, the drug, administered as a single intramuscular injection, was well-tolerated and reduced the risk of developing symptomatic infection by 77 percent over the 25 cases observed. There were no cases of severe disease or related deaths in the treatment arm of the study. This is almost certainly going to be vastly more expensive than vaccine, so it is not a substitute for vaccination; but it could be an important supplement to it. The drug would be enormously helpful in those who cannot be vaccinated and those who are unable to respond to vaccination with protective immunity. The company says the antibody treatment could be used in conjunction with vaccine in those with weakened immune responses.

And that's all for tonight. Take care, and we'll talk again in a few days.

FEMA Has Approved More Than $36 Million in Funding for COVID-19 Support for South Dakota

DENVER – FEMA has approved more than $36 million in total assistance to South Dakota as of October 1, supporting the state's fight against COVID-19 over the last 18 months. The assistance was authorized under the major disaster declaration issued for South Dakota on April 5, 2020.

Earlier this year, following new guidance from President Biden, FEMA increased reimbursement from 75 percent to 100 percent funding for projects related to the pandemic response, retroactive to January 20, 2020.

This federal funding was received by the state and distributed to South Dakota tribes, counties, cities, individuals, and other state and local partners.

A total of nearly $28 million was provided by FEMA to reimburse other agencies that provided staffing or resources to augment state efforts. The Department of Defense, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and U.S. Department of Labor all supported COVID-19 operations in South Dakota.

FEMA also contributed more than $820,000 for Crisis Counseling to assist individuals and communities in recovering from the psychological effects of the pandemic through outreach and educational services.

Another $4.2 million has been approved for FEMA Funeral Assistance, which delivers funding to families for pandemic related funeral expenses incurred after January 20, 2020. Those in need of such aid can call FEMA's COVID-19 Funeral Assistance Helpline at 844-684-6333 or (TTY) 800-462-7585. The helpline is open Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Eastern Time (7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Mountain Time). At this time, there is no deadline to apply for COVID-19 Funeral Assistance for families who have lost a loved one.

South Dakota also has been allocated nearly $3.3 million from FEMA's Hazard Mitigation Grant Program to invest in mitigation planning and projects that reduce risks from natural disasters.

Deadline approaching for disabled veteran property tax program

PIERRE, S.D., -- The Nov. 1, 2021 deadline for eligible disabled veterans to apply for property tax relief is approaching.

The South Dakota Department of Revenue's Disabled Veteran's Program exempts the first $150,000 of valuation on an eligible applicant's property. The program also applies to surviving spouses of disabled veterans if they have not remarried. Once approved, this exemption will automatically continue until the property changes ownership or is not owner occupied.

To qualify for the program, applicants must meet both of the following criteria:
The veteran must be rated as permanently and totally disabled as a result of a service-connected disability.
The veteran or a surviving spouse, who is not remarried, must own and occupy the property.

Applicants will be required to provide proof of their eligibility to receive the exemption, which may be obtained by calling the Sioux Falls VA Regional Office at 1-800-827-1000.

If approved, applicants will receive their first reduction in their property taxes payable in 2023. Applications can be accessed from their county Director of Equalization or on the Department of Revenue's website at https://dor.sd.gov/individuals/taxes/property-tax/relief-programs/#veterans. If you have questions, feel free to call our Property Tax Agents at 1-800-829-9188 (Option 2).

Redfield Volleyball Tourney

Saturday
9 a.m. Groton Area vs. Warner
9:45 a.m.: Groton Area vs. Belle Fourche
Then the teams are re-pooled with action resuming at noon.

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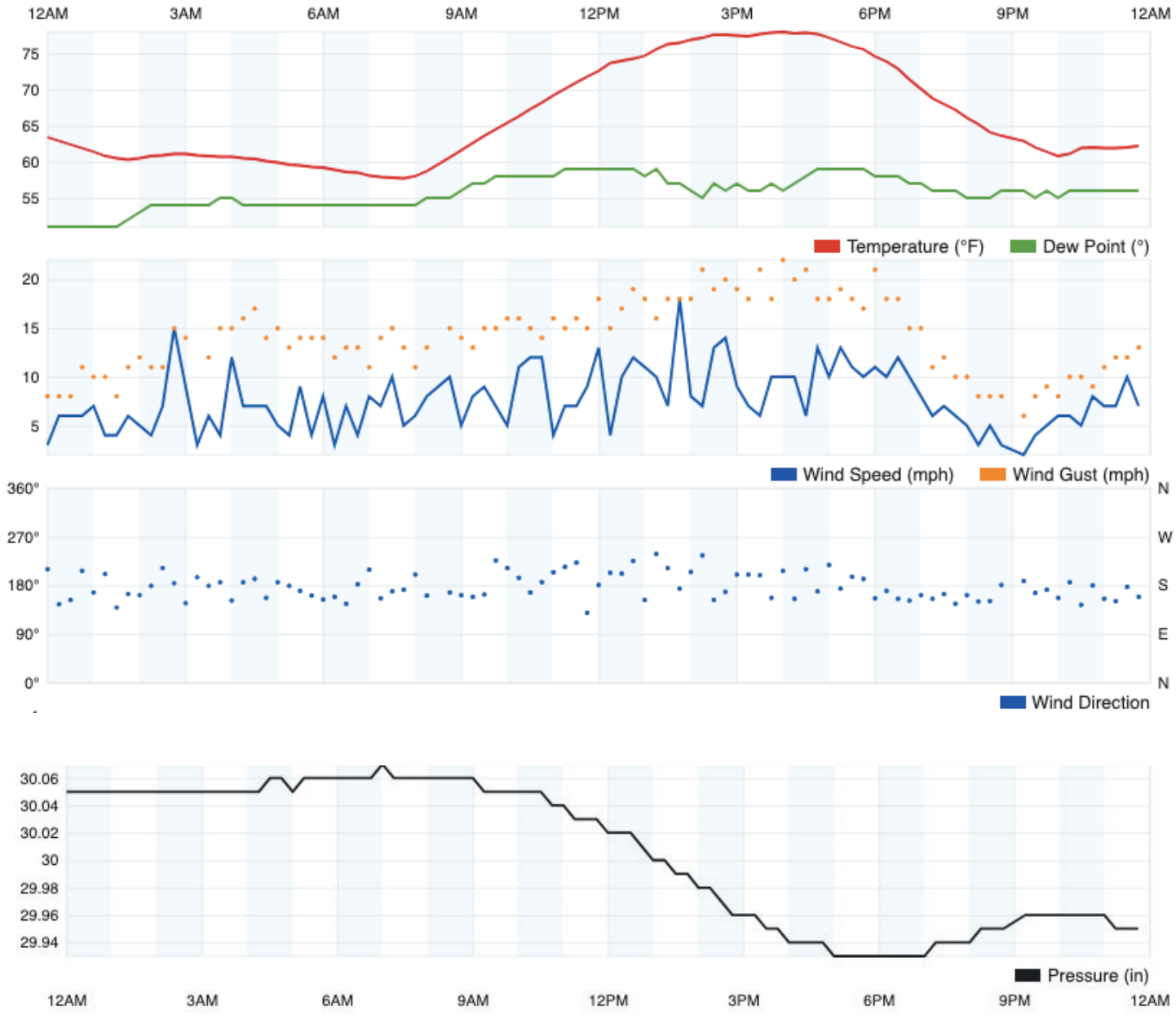
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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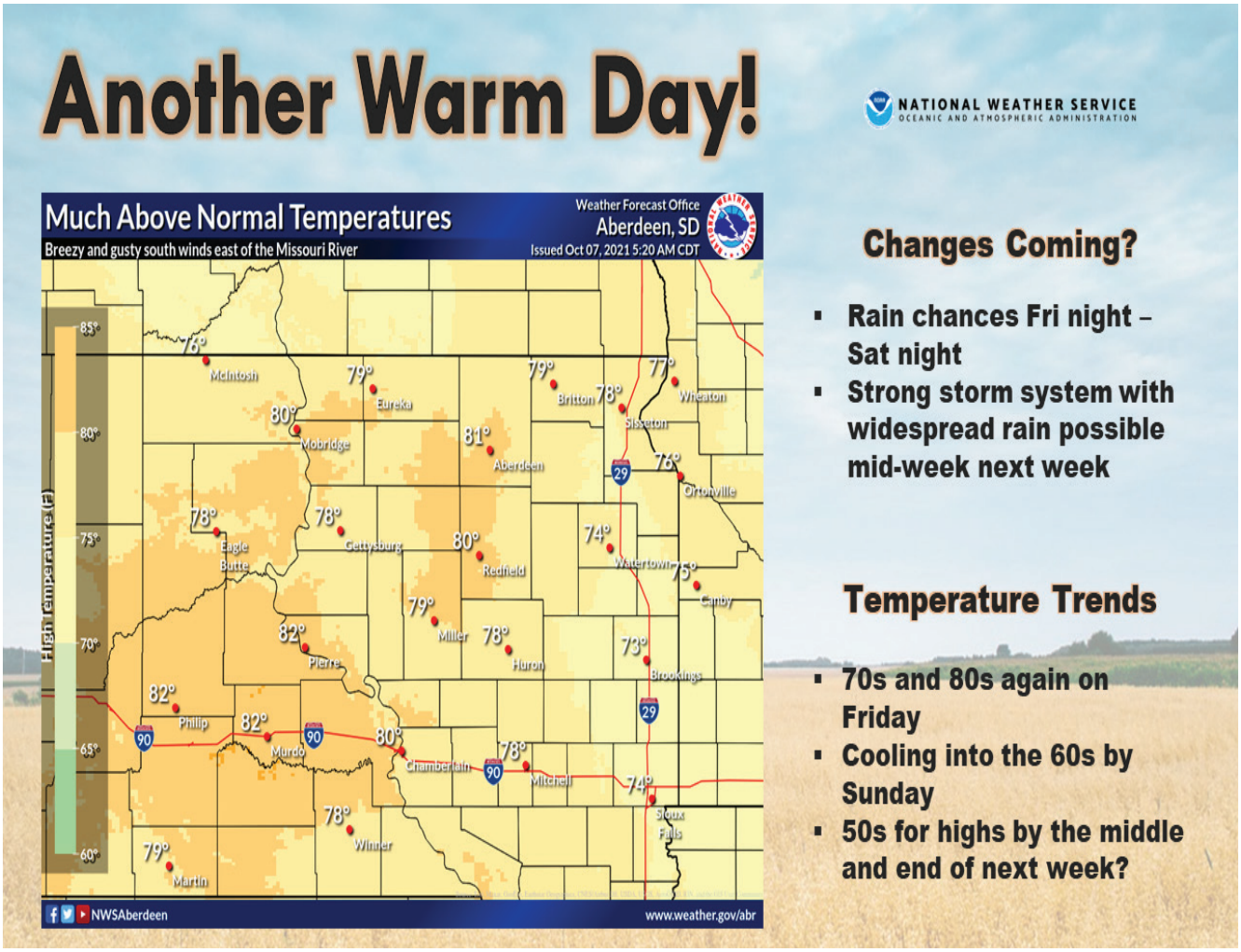
Today	Tonight	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
				
Mostly Sunny and Breezy	Partly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Slight Chance Showers then Chance T-storms	Showers
High: 81 °F	Low: 54 °F	High: 82 °F	Low: 55 °F	High: 71 °F



Another warm day is on tap for Thursday. Friday will also be mild before a cooler, more unsettled, pattern develops this weekend into next week.

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Today in Weather History

October 7, 1970: On October 7th through the 10th, 1970, a record-breaking early season snowstorm hit parts of southern South Dakota. Snowfall of 5 to 9 inches was typical across the southwest and south-central on the 7th. Late on October 8th and into the 9th of 1970, the state's southeast portion was hit. The 5 inches that fell in Sioux Falls is the earliest significant snow on record for the area.

The heavy snows also affected portions of Kansas, Nebraska, western Iowa, and western Minnesota. Amounts of up to 7 inches were recorded in northwest Iowa. The heavy, wet snow snapped many tree branches and downed power lines. Sioux City recorded their heaviest snow for so early in the season. The snow was very wet and heavy but melted quickly over the next several days.

1825: Raging forest fires in the Miramichi region of New Brunswick, Canada, destroy over 3 million acres of forest. As many as 500 people were killed. The blaze has been partly attributed to unusually hot weather in the fall and summer of 1825, coupled with outdoor fires by settlers and loggers.

1849: High winds swept the passengers of the St. John out to sea. This resulted in a loss of 143 people.

1959: The Soviet spacecraft, Luna 3, captured the first images of the far side of the Moon. The first image was taken at 3:30 UTC on the 7th of October.

2016: Hurricane Matthew was off the northeast coast of Florida. Matthew brought intense rainfall to the Carolinas on the 8th and 9th.

2017: A tornado touched down near Jenner in Alberta, Canada.

2018: Only 8 hours after becoming a depression, the National Hurricane Center upgraded the system to Tropical Storm Michael. Tropical storm force winds and torrential downpours were affecting portions of the coastal east-central Yucatan Peninsula.

1970 - Widespread flooding took place across Puerto Rico. Rainfall amounts for the day ranged up to seventeen inches at Aibonito. A slow moving tropical depression was responsible for six days of torrential rains across the island. Totals in the Eastern Interior Division averaged thirty inches, with 38.4 inches at Jayuya. Flooding claimed eighteen lives, and resulted in 62 million dollars damage. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1981 - Seattle, WA, received four inches of rain in 24 hours, a record for the city. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - It was another hot day in the southwestern U.S. Tucson, AZ, hit 101 degrees for the second day in a row to again equal their record for the month of October. Phoenix AZ reported a record high of 103 degrees, and Blythe CA and Yuma AZ tied for honors as the hot spot in the nation with afternoon highs of 108 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Morning fog in the central U.S. reduced the visibility to near zero at some locations. Morning lows of 28 degrees at Rockford IL and 24 degrees at Waterloo IA were records for the date. Afternoon highs of 92 degrees at Hollywood FL and Miami FL were records for the date. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Morning thunderstorms in central Texas drenched San Antonio with 3.10 inches of rain in six hours causing local flooding in northeastern sections of the city. Temperatures dipped below the freezing mark from the Northern Rockies to the Upper Mississippi Valley. (The National Weather Summary)

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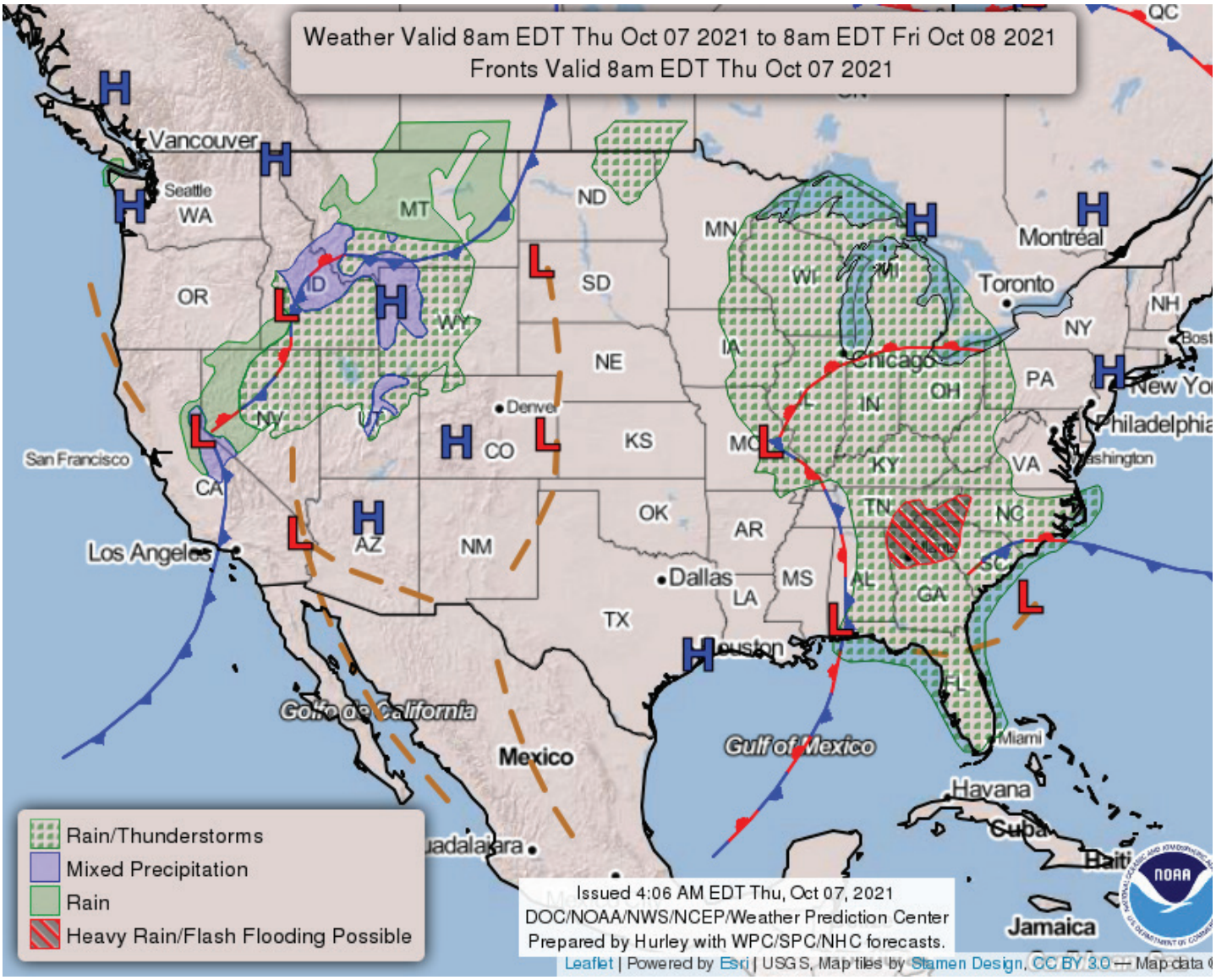
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 78 °F at 3:51 PM
Low Temp: 58 °F at 7:42 AM
Wind: 22 mph at 4:00 PM
Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 91° in 1909
Record Low: 14° in 2012
Average High: 65°F
Average Low: 38°F
Average Precip in Oct.: 0.54
Precip to date in Oct.: 0.28
Average Precip to date: 18.87
Precip Year to Date: 15.70
Sunset Tonight: 7:02:43 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:38:42 AM



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NEEDED: EXAMPLES

It's not unusual to hear someone say, "But I don't want to be a role model." But that's not the way it is. All of us are, at one time or another, a model who someone will try to imitate for one reason or another. David made this observation a long time ago.

"My eyes will be on the faithful in the land," he said. When David looked for a role model, he did not look for one who was famous or powerful, one who had wealth or riches, he looked for one who was "faithful to the Lord." He was committed to build his life on God's principles - principles that were eternal and everlasting. So, he searched for those who had God's purposes and plans in their minds and hearts as evidenced by their lives: those who were obedient to God. And when he found them, he surrounded himself with them and even invited them to "dwell" with him.

Someone once asked John Rockefeller, "How did you become so successful?" He looked at them sternly and said, "Because I surround myself with successful people!"

Here we find a great lesson for life: If we want to achieve great things for God, we must surround ourselves with people who have done or are doing great things for God. We cannot become more than we are for God if we associate with and follow the examples of those who do not care much for God or do not have loving and serving God at the very center of their lives.

David expressed his need for being surrounded by the "faithful." He knew that "He whose walk is blameless will minister to me." Think of all he accomplished for God.

Prayer: Lord, may we be careful to choose friends who will encourage us to be faithful to You in all that we do. May we follow leaders who follow You. Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: My eyes will be on the faithful in the land, that they may dwell with me; the one whose walk is blameless will minister to me. Psalm 101:6

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2021 Community Events

Cancelled Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/17/2021 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
Cancelled 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)
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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Thursday, Oct. 07, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 092 ~ 14 of 85

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined
PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Wednesday:
Dakota Cash
05-09-10-17-21
(five, nine, ten, seventeen, twenty-one)
Estimated jackpot: $127,000
Lotto America
11-26-40-44-49, Star Ball: 10, ASB: 3
(eleven, twenty-six, forty, forty-four, forty-nine; Star Ball: ten; ASB: three)
Estimated jackpot: $3.15 million
Mega Millions
Estimated jackpot: $60 million
Powerball
01-17-52-58-64, Powerball: 1, Power Play: 10
(one, seventeen, fifty-two, fifty-eight, sixty-four; Powerball: one; Power Play: ten)
Estimated jackpot: $20 million

EXPLAINER: The Texas abortion law's swift impact, and future

By PAUL J. WEBER and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A federal judge on Wednesday ordered Texas to suspend a new law banning most abortions, which had already put a strain on clinics and patients in the month since it took effect.

U.S. District Judge Robert Pitman, an appointee of President Barack Obama, granted the Biden administration a temporary hold on the law.

But that doesn't mean abortion services in Texas will instantly resume, because doctors still fear that they could be sued without a more permanent legal decision.

In the wording of the new law, abortions in Texas are prohibited once medical professionals can detect cardiac activity, usually around six weeks and before some women know they're pregnant. Enforcement is left up to private citizens who are deputized to file civil lawsuits against abortion providers, as well as others who help a woman obtain an abortion in Texas.

Supporters of the law known as Senate Bill 8 were preparing for a ruling that favors the Justice Department's challenge but believe the measure — the strictest abortion law in the nation — will ultimately be upheld. Texas officials swiftly told the court Wednesday of their intention to seek a reversal.

Here are some questions and answers about what's next and the impact so far:

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WHAT HAS BEEN THE IMPACT?

Abortion providers say the ramifications have been punishing and "exactly what we feared."

More than 100 pages of court filings in September offered the most comprehensive glimpse at how the near-total ban on abortion in Texas has played out. Physicians and executives at Texas' nearly two dozen abortion clinics described turning away hundreds of patients, and some who showed up for appointments could not proceed because cardiac activity had been detected.

One Planned Parenthood location in Houston normally performed about two dozen abortions daily, but in the 10 days after the law took effect, the clinic had done a total of 52. Clinics in nearby states, meanwhile, say they are struggling to meet surging demand and care for their own residents is being delayed to accommodate women making long trips from Texas.

At a Planned Parenthood clinic in Oklahoma City, at one point more than 60% of the 219 appointments

over the following next two weeks were for women from Texas. Doctors say recent patients from Texas have included rape victims, as SB8 makes no exceptions in cases of rape or incest.

Most Texas abortion providers say they are complying with SB8. One San Antonio doctor who became the first to publicly reveal he performed an abortion in defiance of the new law, was sued Sept. 20, but not by abortion opponents. Former attorneys in Illinois and Arkansas say they sued the doctor in hopes of getting a judge to invalidate the law.

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WHAT WAS THE LANDSCAPE IN TEXAS BEFORE?

More than 55,000 abortions were performed last year in Texas, which already had some of the nation's strictest abortion laws, including a ban after 20 weeks of pregnancy.

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SINCE THE JUDGE SIDED WITH CLINICS, HOW SOON COULD THEY REOPEN?

It could be done quickly, abortion providers say, but how soon is likely to depend on several factors.

Abortion providers in Texas have experience when it comes to abruptly ramping up operations again. In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic last year, abortions in Texas were all but banned for weeks under orders by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott that postponed surgeries "not immediately medically necessary."

But providers were reporting staffing issues and worried some clinics would permanently shutter. A decade ago, Texas had more than 40 abortion clinics, but more than half of them closed for good during a protracted legal battle over a 2013 law that was ultimately overturned by the Supreme Court.

Amy Hagstrom Miller, president of Whole Woman's Health, said some of the 17 physicians at her four clinics were ready to resume normal abortion services if the law was put on hold. Preparations began last week when some doctors gave patients found to have cardiac activity information to comply with another restriction — requiring a 24-hour waiting period before an abortion — so that they would be ready to be called back.

But the majority of her physicians, Hagstrom Miller said, remain wary and fear lawsuits absent a permanent court ruling. Clinic staff are also worried. "Of course, we understand that," she said.

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WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The Biden administration filed its lawsuit in early September and then asked for the temporary restraining order to put SB8 on hold while the lawsuit proceeds.

Texas Right to Life, the state's largest anti-abortion group and a driver of the new law, has cheered the fact that it has stopped abortions every day that it has been in effect.

Pitman's ruling to grant a temporary hold doesn't decide the constitutionality of the law, though whether the administration's lawsuit — which calls it "clearly unconstitutional" — was likely to succeed is a factor in putting the law on hold.

Texas could quickly file paperwork officially asking the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to reinstate the law. That New Orleans-based appeals court, which oversees Texas, is a conservative-leaning panel with a track record of staying lower-court rulings from Austin.

The law has already made one trip to the Supreme Court. The justices voted 5-4 not to intervene to prevent it from taking effect, but they said further challenges were possible. With the Biden administration's challenge underway, the law could return to the justices quickly.

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HOW ARE OTHER STATES RESPONDING?

After Texas' law went into effect Republican lawmakers in at least half a dozen states said they would consider introducing bills using the Texas law as a model, hoping it provides a pathway to enacting the kind of abortion crackdown they have sought for years. Those states include Arkansas, Florida, Indiana, Mississippi, North Dakota and South Dakota.

Meanwhile, two dozen state attorneys general, all Democrats, submitted a brief in the Biden administration's lawsuit saying a substantial reduction of abortion access in one state would result in health care systems being burdened elsewhere. They asked Pitman to block enforcement of the law.

The City Council in Portland, Oregon, briefly considered a boycott of Texas businesses because of the new law but instead decided to set aside $200,000 to fund reproductive care.

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Gresko reported from Washington.

Fed up by pandemic, US food workers launch rare strikes

By DEE-ANN DURBIN and GRANT SCHULTE undefined

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A summer of labor unrest at U.S. food manufacturers has stretched into fall, as pandemic-weary workers continue to strike for better pay.

Around 1,400 workers at Kellogg Co.'s U.S. cereal plants walked off the job this week, saying negotiations with the company over pay and benefits are at an impasse. Meanwhile, in Kentucky, a strike by 420 workers against Heaven Hill Distillery is in its fourth week.

The actions come on top of strikes earlier this summer by 600 workers at a Frito-Lay plant in Topeka, Kansas, and 1,000 workers at five Nabisco plants across the U.S. In June, Smithfield Foods narrowly avoided a strike by thousands of workers at a plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The number of actions is unusual. Kellogg says this is the first time its U.S. cereal workers have gone on strike since 1972. Nabisco workers last walked off the job in 1969.

But after a difficult 18 months, which saw many workers putting in 12-hour shifts and mandatory overtime to meet pandemic demand, employees are in no mood to compromise.

"We're drawing a line in the sand," said Rob Long, a production mechanic who has worked at Kellogg's Omaha plant for 11 years. Kellogg workers are also striking in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

Long said he and others are upset about a two-tiered system of employees that gives fewer benefits and less pay to newer workers, creating a wedge within the ranks. Long said the company wants to get rid of a provision that currently caps the lower tier of workers at 30% of the workforce.

After decades of watching companies chip away at pay and benefits, food workers sense that they have a rare upper hand in the wake of the pandemic, says Patricia Campos-Medina, the executive director of The Worker Institute at ILR Cornell.

Labor shortages mean companies can't easily find replacements for food-production workers, she said. And the pandemic put a spotlight on the essential __ and sometimes dangerous __ nature of their work.

"Workers in general are demanding that companies invest more in the workforce and not just use the profits for the shareholders," she said.

Campos-Medina said the trend is not only happening with unionized workers like those at Kellogg, who are members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Union. Non-union fast food workers have walked off the job in dozens of U.S. cities seeking a $15 minimum wage. And workers at three Starbucks stores in Buffalo, New York, are trying to unionize.

The strikes come as food companies are still trying to get back to normal levels of production. Kellogg's cereal sales had been anemic for years, for example, as families shifted to portable breakfast items like nutrition bars. But when schools closed and kids were home last year, U.S. cereal sales shot up 7%. So far this year, they're down 7.7%.

Kris Bahner, Kellogg's senior vice president for global corporate affairs, says the company's compensation and benefits are already among the industry's best. The company, which is based in Battle Creek, Michigan, says its longer-term employees made an average of $120,000 last year and $118,000 in 2019, and its proposed contract would shift newer workers to those higher wage rates over six years.

"We are disappointed by the union's decision to strike," she said. Kellogg began negotiating a new four-year contract on Sept. 8.

But workers on the picket line in Omaha say they're routinely working 74- to 84-hour weeks to earn that money. Some workers said they've endured 12-hour shifts seven days a week throughout the pandemic, with only a few minutes' notice about mandatory overtime.

"We do make good money, but we've given up a lot," said Dan Jourdan, a packing machine operator

who has worked at Kellogg since 2001. "If we worked just 40 hours a week, we'd make nowhere near that kind of wage."

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Durbin reported from Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Denver men guilty in 2016 shooting on Pine Ridge Reservation

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Two Denver men accused in the fatal shooting of a man on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation nearly five years ago have been convicted in the case, federal authorities said Wednesday.

A jury last Thursday found Francisco Villanueva, 43, and Adan Corona, 35, guilty of numerous charges, including first degree premediated murder, in the Oct. 16, 2016, death of Vincent Von Brewer III. Prosecutors said earlier that Brewer was killed while the defendants were trying to kidnap him to collect on a drug debt.

Villanueva and Corona allegedly shot Brewer 15 times as he attempted to flee.

The two men each face life in prison without parole. A sentencing date has not been scheduled.

South Dakota board to review Noem's meeting with daughter

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota's attorney general said Wednesday he has asked the state's Government Accountability Board to review questions about whether Gov. Kristi Noem improperly interfered in a state agency's evaluation of her daughter's application for a real estate appraiser license.

The board, which was created in 2017 to review allegations of misconduct from state officials, is a panel of four retired judges appointed by the governor; the current panel includes one Noem appointee.

Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg said in a statement that he made the referral "in response to questions and concerns from a number of legislators and citizens who reached out to me."

The Associated Press reported last week that Noem held a meeting last year that included both her daughter and a state employee who was overseeing her daughter's application to become a certified real estate appraiser. It happened shortly after the state agency moved to deny her daughter the license in July 2020.

Noem's daughter eventually received her license four months later. Afterward, the state employee who directed the agency was allegedly pressured to retire by Noem's Cabinet secretary. The state employee, Sherry Bren, eventually received a $200,000 payment from the state to withdraw the complaint and leave her job.

The Republican governor, who has positioned herself for a run for higher office, dismissed the report as a political attack, saying she never asked for special treatment for her daughter.

Although Ravnsborg and Noem are both Republicans, they have become political enemies after the governor called for him to resign following a car crash in which he struck and killed a man walking on a highway. The Legislature will meet next month to consider whether to move forward with his impeachment.

Ravnsborg last week also referred a call to investigate the governor's use of the state airplane to the Government Accountability Board.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. October 4, 2021. `

Editorial: A Do-Over On Social Studies Standards

Late last week, Gov. Kristi Noem hit the reset button on an effort to revise South Dakota's social studies standards after the end product of the recent process drew criticism from several sides, even from those who were tasked with crafting those standards.

This most likely won't end the controversies, but for now, starting over is the best course.

Since this effort began several months ago, one specter hovering over it was Noem's intent to come up

with something that closely mirrored the 1776 Project proposed by former President Donald Trump a year ago. The mission of that project was to, in effect, promote America's greatness while mostly glossing over some of the more problematic terrain such as the role of racism in this country.

The group tasked with writing South Dakota's new social studies standards began its work several months ago. According to former Yankton High School teacher Paul Harens, who was part of that group, they were told by a Department of Education (DOE) representative that the state was criticized the last time the standards were redrawn for not being inclusive enough in terms of Native American culture and history. The DOE rep advised them, "'I would like to see every group have at least one standard for the Native Americans,'" Harens told the Press & Dakotan

The group did its work with that in mind, he said, including the crafting of a preamble to serve as a mission statement for its efforts and submitted the final document in late June.

But when those proposed standards were released several weeks later, they had been greatly revised. Harens said only two sentences of the preamble had been kept, with the rest rewritten. Also, "they eliminate(d), I think it was, three-fourths of the Native American standards," he said. "We were told to do one thing. We did it, and they took it away. That's why we were so shocked."

Harens said efforts to find out who authorized those changes have made little headway. But he said the fact that the final document closely mirrors the 1776 Project recommendations — which he said "white-washes" U.S. history and "massively skip(s) over the indigenous population in the United States" — likely offers some guidance.

"It's basically the 1776 Project or comments that (Noem) has made," Harens said. "Somebody had to tell the Department of Education to make those changes, and it wasn't somebody in the Department of Education. I don't know who it was, but I can make a guess."

The uproar over this has been quite strong, and Noem, who had earlier put a delay on the process, pulled the plug last week and announced a do-over.

"Our focus remains the same: ensuring that South Dakota students learn a true and honest account of American and South Dakota history," the governor said.

But how it will be done over remains to be seen. Many education officials were unhappy with the final proposal issued, while some conservative entities have been critical of what are viewed as liberal efforts in crafting the document. Also, Noem took to social media recently and said "radical education activists" were trying to impose a left-wing agenda. "Restoring honest & true American & South Dakota history in our schools won't be easy but we must win," she said in words that were echoed in last week's statement.

So, you can see where this might be headed.

It seems that the best place to start, or re-start, this process is to follow the DOE's original advice: Be inclusive. We can't shunt the Native American aspect of the state's history to a back burner. Indigenous views need to be well represented on whatever group is formed to write these standards.

"We've made enough mistakes in education," Harens said. "Let's not make another one."

Revising the standards should be seen as an effort to cultivate some constructive honesty in the educational process, and that needs to be the mission going forward.

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Black Hills Pioneer. October 1, 2021.

Editorial: Big Brother is watching

The federal government wants to know how much money flows in and out of your bank account annual.

Federal officials say the prospective reporting requirements are being considered as a revenue offset for Congress' $3.5 trillion reconciliation bill, as the Treasury estimates the system will generate $460 billion over a decade. The proposal last appeared in negotiations for the $1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure package that passed the Senate in August and is still awaiting a vote in the House.

The proposal, if enacted, would require banks to report to the IRS detailed information on your bank account deposits and withdrawals on an annual basis.

Bankers say these new reporting requirements will create unnecessary and expensive burdens. It could

also raise the cost of tax preparation for small businesses.

But, most importantly, it raises very serious questions about Americans' right to privacy.

Some information about this issue on social media have been inaccurate. This move may be supported by President Joe Biden and directed by the U.S. Treasury, but the Treasury cannot declare any changes to law, as that is a legislative power that belongs to Congress.

And even if the proposal is adopted, banks would not provide access to individual transactions, just the total amount flowing in and out of an account annually.

Federal officials, including the President, say the proposal is being introduced to provide for more comprehensive financial account reporting to "improve tax compliance."

The latest IRS estimates show a tax gap of $166 billion per year between the tax owed by businesses (not counting large corporations) and the tax actually paid. Federal officials say requiring comprehensive reporting on money flowing in and out of accounts "will enhance the effectiveness of IRS enforcement measures and encourage voluntary compliance."

That means that if the total debits (funds flowing out of the account) and credits (funds flowing into the account) equal at least $600 — including deposited paychecks or money transferred from finance apps like Cash App or PayPal — banks would have to report those figures to the IRS.

Interestingly, banks already are required to submit currency transaction reports when a deposit or withdrawal is $10,000 or more.

Under this proposal, the banks would not report details on individual transactions, like how the money was spent, only the total amount of money flowing in and out of the applicable accounts.)

Having that information, they say, will help the IRS flag under-reported income and target enforcement activities on tax evaders.

We're all for paying our fair share of taxes, but we don't believe the federal government should overburden banks and small businesses with more regulations, especially in an economy that is still recovering from a globally and locally disruptive pandemic.

For a supposed way to capture more dollars from big corporate America, it sure looks like a total invasion of privacy about what's happening in private citizens' accounts.

END

Flush with COVID-19 aid, schools steer funding to sports

By COLLIN BINKLEY and RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — One Wisconsin school district built a new football field. In Iowa, a high school weight room is getting a renovation. Another in Kentucky is replacing two outdoor tracks — all funded by the billions of dollars in federal pandemic relief Congress sent to schools this year.

The money was part of a $123 billion infusion intended to help schools reopen and recover from the pandemic. But with few limits on how it can be spent, The Associated Press found that some districts have used large portions for athletics projects they couldn't previously afford.

Critics say it violates the intent of the legislation, which was meant to help students catch up on learning after months of remote schooling. But schools argue the projects support students' physical and mental health, one of the objectives allowed by the federal government.

Rep. Bobby Scott, the top Democrat on the U.S. House education committee, said the money shouldn't be used to fund athletics at the expense of academics.

"The purpose is clear: It's to open safely, stay open safely and deal with learning loss," Scott said. "These are targeted resources needed to address the fact that a lot of children just didn't achieve much for about a year."

In some parts of the country, exercise companies say they're seeing surging demand from schools eager to spend their pandemic relief. Some companies are contacting coaches and superintendents to suggest upgrades.

It's impossible to know exactly how many schools are using the federal money on athletics. Districts

are required to tell states how they're spending the money, but some are using local funding for sports projects and then replacing it with the federal relief — a maneuver that skirts reporting requirements.

The funding was part of the American Rescue Plan signed in March by President Joe Biden that sent money to schools, giving larger shares to those with higher poverty.

Schools have wide flexibility in how they use the money but only three years to spend it, a deadline that has led some to look for quick purchases that won't need funding after the federal money is gone.

When school officials in Whitewater, Wisconsin, learned they would be getting $2 million in pandemic relief this year, they decided to use most of it to cover their current budget, freeing up $1.6 million in local funding that's being used to build new synthetic turf fields for football, baseball and softball.

Athletics officials in the district of 1,800 students said the project was needed to replace fields that are prone to heavy flooding.

Two school board members objected, with one raising concerns that just $400,000 was being used to address student learning loss — the minimum to meet a federal requirement to use at least 20% for that purpose.

The board approved the plan, and the new football field had its grand opening in September. The district's superintendent, Caroline Pate-Hefty, declined to comment.

In the Roland-Story Community School District in Iowa, there were no objections when the school board voted in May to use $100,000 in pandemic relief on a high school weight room renovation. That allowed the district to double its weightlifting platforms to 12 and add new flooring with customized school branding.

Superintendent Matt Patton called it a "major health and safety improvement," saying the new floors can be disinfected more easily. He said most of the district's federal aid went to other costs, including a full-time mental health therapist, new special education teachers and expanded summer learning options.

The school board in East Lyme, Connecticut, recently approved a plan to put some of its federal relief toward annual operating costs, freeing $175,000 to renovate a baseball field with poor drainage.

In September, the Pulaski County school board in Kentucky allocated $1 million in pandemic aid to resurface two outdoor tracks.

Among education advocates, the athletics spending is seen as a breakdown at all levels of government.

Federal officials failed to provide clear funding guidelines, while state education departments didn't police their schools' spending, said Terra Wallin, an associate director of the Education Trust. She also questions whether districts spending on athletics have really considered what's best for students.

Wallin said the U.S. Education Department should issue new guidance and intervene before more districts make similar decisions.

In a statement, the Education Department said it has made clear the funding must be used on "reasonable and necessary" expenses responding to the pandemic. It said there's "ample evidence" of districts using the relief to keep schools safe, including by increasing access to vaccines, implementing virus testing and improving ventilation systems.

"We continue to strongly encourage every district to use these funds to help address these issues, including by using our Return to School Roadmap and by providing guidance on how to use these funds," the department said.

So far, athletic spending has generated little pushback from states, which are responsible for making sure districts spend the funding appropriately. In August, education officials in Illinois rejected a school's plan to use federal money on a football field. But other states say it isn't their place to challenge spending decisions.

Iowa's education department approved the weight room project in Roland-Story, saying the federal guidelines allow "capital expenditures for special purpose equipment."

Meanwhile, fitness companies are ramping up sales pitches.

Chad May, CEO of Commercial Fitness Equipment in Eugene, Oregon, said he's averaging five new school projects every week. So far, his company has taken on $25 million in weight room updates funded with pandemic aid, he said.

The high school weight room overhaul in Story City, Iowa, is being done by Push Pedal Pull, a South Dakota company that's taking on similar projects elsewhere in Iowa and Nebraska.

Luke Reiland, a company representative in Ames, Iowa, said he's been calling schools to let them know the funding can be used for those kinds of costs.

"I think a lot of these small schools are trying to use this money to really upgrade a bunch of stuff, and I am just trying to get my piece of the pie," he said.

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AP Education Writer Binkley reported from Boston.

Firefighters making progress on Rapid City area fire

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Firefighters are making progress in containing a fire that's burned nearly 1.5 square miles northwest of Rapid City.

The so-called Auburn Fire is now 50% contained, according to fire officials. Evacuated residents of the Marvel Mountain area were allowed to return to their homes Tuesday night, although the neighborhood remains closed to the general public.

Incident Commander Rob Powell with South Dakota Wildland Fire says the strong wind, high temperatures and shortage of resources have been a struggle for firefighters.

"We don't really have a lot of hand crews available nationally. Our helicopters and air tankers are in short supply since we still have big fires in California sucking up a lot of resources," Powell said. "Here in South Dakota, the Black Hills especially, we have fire seasons pretty much year round. With as dry as it is, everything is flashy, everything is receptive to a little spark that flies off of anything."

The fire was initially reported Monday afternoon near the Auburn Hills neighborhood with high wind gusts and dry grass fueling its spread.

A helicopter and heavy air tanker jet aircraft were called in Tuesday afternoon to dump water and fire retardant on the flare-up as crews continued to attack the fire on the ground, the Rapid City Journal reported.

There have been no serious injuries and no structures have burned, officials said.

Rapid City Fire Department, volunteer departments from across Pennington and Meade counties, Ellsworth Air Force Base fire crews, South Dakota Wildland Fire, the Bureau of Reclamation, and the U.S. Forest Service are all fighting the Auburn Fire.

Tanzanian Abdulrazak Gurnah awarded Nobel literature prize

By DAVID KEYTON and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

STOCKHOLM (AP) — U.K.-based Tanzanian writer Abdulrazak Gurnah was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature on Thursday for works that explore the legacies of imperialism on uprooted individuals.

The Swedish Academy said the award was in recognition of his "uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents"

Born on Zanzibar in 1948, Gurnah moved to Britain as a teenage refugee after an uprising on the Indian Ocean island in 1968.

Recently retired as a professor of post-colonial literature at the University of Kent, he is the author of 10 novels, including "Paradise," which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 1994, "BY the Sea" and "Desertion."

Anders Olsson, chairman of the Nobel Committee for literature, called him "one of the world's most prominent post-colonial writers."

He said Gurnah's characters "find themselves in the gulf between cultures ... between the life left behind and the life to come, confronting racism and prejudice, but also compelling themselves to silence the truth or reinventing a biography to avoid conflict with reality."

Gurnah, whose native language is Swahili but who writes in English, is only the sixth Africa-born- writer to be awarded the Nobel for literature.

The prestigious award comes with a gold medal and 10 million Swedish kronor (over $1.14 million). The prize money comes from a bequest left by the prize's creator, Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel, who died in 1895.

Last year's prize went to American poet Louise Glück for what the judges described as her "unmistakable poetic voice that with austere beauty makes individual existence universal."

Glück was a popular choice after several years of controversy. In 2018, the award was postponed after sex abuse allegations rocked the Swedish Academy, the secretive body that chooses the winners. The awarding of the 2019 prize to Austrian writer Peter Handke caused protests because of his strong support for the Serbs during the 1990s Balkan wars.

On Monday, the Nobel Committee awarded the prize in physiology or medicine to Americans David Julius and Ardem Patapoutian for their discoveries into how the human body perceives temperature and touch.

The Nobel Prize in physics was awarded Tuesday to three scientists whose work found order in seeming disorder, helping to explain and predict complex forces of nature, including expanding our understanding of climate change.

Benjamin List and David W.C. MacMillan were named as laureates of the Nobel Prize for chemistry Wednesday for finding an easier and environmentally cleaner way to build molecules that can be used to make compounds, including medicines and pesticides.

Still to come are prizes for outstanding work in the fields of peace and economics.

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Read more stories about Nobel Prizes past and present by The Associated Press at https://www.apnews.com/NobelPrizes

US-China challenge: Easing tensions despite differences

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — In a relationship as fraught as America's and China's, just an agreement that talks were productive was a sign of progress.

Nine months into Joe Biden's presidency, the two sides finally appear to be trying to ease tensions that date from the Trump administration — though U.S. complaints about Chinese policies on trade, Taiwan and other issues are little diminished.

A closed-door meeting in Zurich on Wednesday between senior Chinese foreign policy adviser Yang Jiechi and White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan was not accompanied by the public acrimony on display at earlier meetings.

After the six-hour talks, the U.S. disclosed an agreement in principle for a virtual summit between Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping by the end of the year. The two have talked by phone twice since Biden became president in January but not held a formal meeting.

Major differences divide what are by many measures the world's two most powerful nations as they jostle for what each sees as its rightful place in the world order. Some differences over regional security and trade and technology may be irreconcilable, but successful talks could manage them and prevent any spillover that impedes cooperation in other areas such as climate change.

"I don't think this marks the turnaround and somehow we'll have a golden era, but maybe we've found the floor, or a floor, in which the relationships won't sink any deeper," said Drew Thompson, a former U.S. defense official who managed military-to-military relations with China, Taiwan and Mongolia.

Thompson, a visiting fellow at the National University of Singapore, said the meeting in Zurich went "spectacularly well" compared to a March meeting in Alaska that Yang and Sullivan attended and other U.S.-China meetings in the last three years.

Zhao Kejin, a professor of international relations at Tsinghua University in Beijing, described the current direction as an attempt to ease tensions and said a Xi-Biden meeting could cap those efforts.

"Compared to the tense relations during the Trump administration, the current relationship is moving

toward mitigation," he said. "As far as how far it will move, we will wait and see."

One thorn in the relationship was removed two weeks ago when U.S. prosecutors reached a deal with a Chinese telecom executive that brought an end to prolonged extradition proceedings in Canada and allowed her to return to China.

Shortly after, two Canadians held by China for more than two years were released, and two Americans who had been blocked from leaving China were allowed to return to the United States.

And earlier this week, Chinese state media highlighted remarks by Biden's top trade official, Katherine Tai, that she plans frank conversations with her Chinese counterparts on resolving a tariff war. The U.S. administration, though, has not said whether it will accede to Chinese demands to roll back the tariffs, which were levied under former President Donald Trump.

There is little sign of any easing up in regional security, where China's territorial and strategic ambitions in the western Pacific are running into pushback from the U.S. military and its allies.

China flew a record number of military planes south of Taiwan over a four-day period in the past week, which the U.S. called risky and destabilizing. The flights came as the U.S. and five other countries carried out joint naval maneuvers with three aircraft carriers northeast of Taiwan. China describes such exercises as a provocation.

Biden is also under pressure from human rights activists and Republicans to maintain a firm line on China even as his administration seeks cooperation on climate change and on getting North Korea to end its nuclear weapons program.

U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican and frequent critic, tweeted Wednesday that Biden is "dangerously delusional" if he thinks he can get a climate deal by playing down "great-power competition" with China.

Beijing residents were cautious about the future of relations, but some said it is better for the two sides to be talking than not. They blamed a hostile U.S. stance for the state of relations, echoing the position of the Chinese government.

"I don't have a good impression of the U.S.," said He Taiqin. "I feel the country is overbearing and aggressive."

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Associated Press video producer Olivia Zhang contributed to this report.

Strong earthquake in southwest Pakistan kills at least 23

By KATHY GANNON and ABDUL SATTAR Associated Press

QUETTA, Pakistan (AP) — A powerful earthquake collapsed at least one coal mine and dozens of mud houses in southwest Pakistan early Thursday, killing at least 23 people as the death toll continued to creep higher. At least another 200 people were injured, an official said.

The death tally was expected to rise even further as crews searched in the remote mountainous area, said Suhail Anwar Shaheen, the local deputy commissioner.

At least four people were killed when the coal mine in which they were working collapsed, said Shaheen, citing coal miners in the area. As many as 100 homes also collapsed, burying sleeping residents inside.

In one case, a mother died along with her two young sons when their home collapsed, said Wali Muhammad, a relative. Nearby, the body of an 8-year old girl was found beneath the rubble of her home.

The epicenter of the 5.9 magnitude quake was about 15 kilometers (9 miles) north-northeast of Harnai in Baluchistan province, according to the U.S. Geological Survey. The initial measurement of the quake's strength was 5.7 magnitude. It struck about 9 kilometers (5.5 miles) below the Earth's surface; shallower quakes tend to cause more damage.

The area, about 100 kilometers (60 miles) from Quetta, the provincial capital, is dotted with coal mines, which has Shaheen worried the death toll could rise. It struck in the early morning while scores of miners were already at work, he said.

Pakistan's military was deployed to the earthquake area to airlift dozens of injured from mountain peaks.

At least nine critically injured people were taken to the provincial hospital in Quetta. Search and rescue teams have arrived in the mountains, an army statement said.

Concern has grown about scores of coal miners who might be trapped. Homes lay in heaps of mud and straw. Residents of small mountain villages were seen wandering stunned among the rubble.

"Women, children, everyone, was running here and there," said resident Ghulam Khan. "We were scared and we didn't know what to do."

Ambulances soon arrived to transport the injured to the hospital in Harnai.

Doctors treated patients outside the hospital as 4.6 magnitude aftershocks continued into the morning hours. Children with bloodied bandages were in stretchers outside the hospital as ambulances brought more wounded.

"So far we have treated more than 200 casualties," said Manzoor Ahmed, medical superintendent of the Harnai district hospital. The small rural facility has been taxed to the limit, he said. As many as 15 bodies were brought there.

By early afternoon Thursday, funerals were being held in small villages dotting the mountainside.

Most of the population in the area live in sunbaked mud houses, many of which collapsed. Rescue efforts were underway, but Shaheen said it would take hours just to reach many of the hardest-hit areas.

Witnesses in the area said residents were wrapped in blankets against the cold, sitting on the side of the road waiting for the aftershocks to subside and for help to arrive.

The area is remote and already the autumn nighttime temperatures are chilly.

Pakistan's southwestern Baluchistan lies on a seismically active region, according to the provincial disaster management authority. The worst earthquake, in 1935, destroyed the provincial capital of Baluchistan and killed more than 35,000 people. Since then, scores of earthquakes have rattled the province, Pakistan's least populated, with just 12 million people.

Pakistan is a nation of 220 million people, 60 percent of whom live in the country's eastern Punjab province.

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Gannon reported from Islamabad

Alabama swamped, child died in floods from slow-moving front

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (AP) — Flash flood warnings were in effect Thursday for a swath of the southeastern U.S. after a stalled weather front drenched Alabama, leaving high water that covered roads, swamped a Piggly Wiggly, unleashed sewage and forced water rescues. A child's death was blamed on the floods.

As much as 6 inches (15 centimeters) of rain fell in about a day as the low-pressure system lingered over Alabama and the Florida Panhandle. The forecast called for particularly intense rain Thursday in parts of metro Birmingham, which were under a flash flood watch, but meteorologists predicted another wet day for most of the state and parts of Florida.

The Marshall County coroner's office tweeted early Thursday that a child died as a result of the flash flooding in Arab, in northeast Alabama.

The rain caused havoc in places across north Alabama, submerging cars in metro Birmingham and parts of the Tennessee Valley. Rescue crews helped motorists escape as low visibility and standing water made travel life-threatening in some areas.

In south Alabama near the Florida line, water covered streets in the flood-prone Escambia County towns of Brewton and East Brewton, inundating businesses in a shopping center with several feet of water.

As much as 3 feet (1 meter) of water was inside the community's main grocery store, Piggly Wiggly, and two schools had to cancel classes, said Escambia Sheriff Heath Jackson.

"We're hoping that the rain is going to stop so we can get some of this water … out of here and we can start getting into these businesses that have taken on water to see what we can do to help them," Jackson told WKRG-TV.

To the south, in Baldwin County, as much as 250,000 gallons (946,000 liters) of waste water overflowed from sewage systems along Mobile Bay, officials said.

With rainfall totals already ranging from 2 inches (5 centimeters) to as much 6 inches across the state this week, forecasters said another 3 inches (8 centimeters) of rain was possible, with the heaviest rains to the north.

Severe storms and a few isolated tornadoes from a slow-moving low pressure system were a threat, mainly in the afternoon, forecasters said. The National Weather Service issued a tornado watch for northeastern Alabama, northwestern Georgia and southern Tennessee.

Rains should end in Alabama by late Thursday as storms move eastward. Flash flood warnings were in effect through Friday along the weather front, stretching from the Florida Panhandle through northern Georgia and mountainous regions of the eastern Tennessee and the western Carolinas.

Congress foresees short-term debt fix amid perilous standoff

By KEVIN FREKING and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican and Democratic leaders edged back from a perilous standoff over lifting the nation's borrowing cap, with Democratic senators signaling they were receptive to an offer from Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell that would allow an emergency extension into December.

McConnell made the offer late Wednesday shortly before Republicans were prepared to block legislation to suspend the debt limit until December of next year and as President Joe Biden and business leaders ramped up their concerns that an unprecedented federal default would disrupt government payments to millions of people and throw the nation into recession.

The emerging agreement sets the stage for a sequel of sorts in December, when Congress will again face pressing deadlines to fund the government and raise the debt limit before heading home for the holidays.

A procedural vote — on the longer extension the Republicans were going to block — was abruptly delayed late Wednesday and the Senate recessed so lawmakers could discuss next steps. Democrats emerged from their meeting more optimistic that a crisis would be averted.

"Basically, I'm glad that Mitch McConnell finally saw the light," said Bernie Sanders, the independent senator from Vermont. The Republicans "have finally done the right thing and at least we now have another couple months in order to get a permanent solution."

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., added that, assuming final details in the emergency legislation are in order, "for the next three months, we'll continue to make it clear that we are ready to continue to vote to pay our bills and Republicans aren't."

Unsurprisingly, McConnell portrayed it very differently.

"This will moot Democrats' excuses about the time crunch they created and give the unified Democratic government more than enough time to pass standalone debt limit legislation through reconciliation," he said.

Congress has just days to act before the Oct. 18 deadline when the Treasury Department has warned it would quickly run short of funds to handle the nation's already accrued debt load.

McConnell and Senate Republicans have insisted that Democrats would have to go it alone to raise the debt ceiling and allow the Treasury to renew its borrowing so that the country could meet its financial obligations. Further, McConnell has insisted that Democrats use the same cumbersome legislative process called reconciliation that they used to pass a $1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill and have been employing to try to pass Biden's $3.5 trillion measure to boost safety net, health and environmental programs.

McConnell said in his offer Wednesday that Republicans would still insist that Democrats use the reconciliation process for a long-term debt limit extension. However, he said Republicans are willing to "assist in expediting" that process, and in the meantime Democrats may use the normal legislative process to pass a short-term debt limit extension with a fixed dollar amount to cover current spending levels into December.

While he continued to blame Democrats, his offer will also allow Republicans to avoid the condemnation they would have gotten from some quarters if a financial crisis were to occur.

Earlier Wednesday, Biden enlisted top business leaders to push for immediately suspending the debt limit, saying the approaching deadline created the risk of a historic default that would be like a "meteor" that could crush the economy and financial markets.

At a White House event, the president shamed Republican senators for threatening to filibuster any suspension of the $28.4 trillion cap on the government's borrowing authority. He leaned into the credibility of corporate America — a group that has traditionally been aligned with the GOP on tax and regulatory issues — to drive home his point as the heads of Citi, JP Morgan Chase and Nasdaq gathered in person and virtually to say the debt limit must be lifted.

"It's not right and it's dangerous," Biden said of the resistance by Senate Republicans.

His moves came amid talk that Democrats might try to change Senate filibuster rules to get around Republicans. But Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., reiterated his opposition to such a change Wednesday, likely taking it off the table for Democrats.

The business leaders echoed Biden's points about needing to end the stalemate as soon as possible, though they sidestepped the partisan tensions in doing so. Each portrayed the debt limit as an avoidable crisis.

"We just can't wait to the last minute to resolve this," said Jane Fraser, CEO of the bank Citi. "We are, simply put, playing with fire right now, and our country has suffered so greatly over the last few years. The human and the economic cost of the pandemic has been wrenching, and we don't need a catastrophe of our own making."

The financial markets have yet to fully register the drama in Washington, though there are signs that they are getting jittery, said Adena Friedman, CEO of the Nasdaq stock exchange.

Stock prices rose after news of McConnell's offer came out.

Ahead of the White House meeting, the administration warned that if the borrowing limit isn't extended, it could set off an international financial crisis the United States might not be able to manage.

"A default would send shock waves through global financial markets and would likely cause credit markets worldwide to freeze up and stock markets to plunge," the White House Council of Economic Advisers said in a new report. "Employers around the world would likely have to begin laying off workers."

The recession that could be triggered could be worse than the 2008 financial crisis because it would come as many nations are still struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic, the report said. It was first obtained by The New York Times.

To get around the standoff taking place in the Senate, Biden indicated in off-the-cuff comments Tuesday Democrats were weighing a change to Senate rules.

"It's a real possibility," Biden told reporters outside the White House.

But Manchin, who has for months resisted pressure from liberal activists to change the filibuster so that Democrats can advance legislation on other issues such as voting rights, appeared unmoved.

"I think I've been very clear," Manchin told reporters. "Nothing changes." He implored Schumer and McConnell to work together to resolve the impasse.

Getting rid of the filibuster rule would lower the typical 60-vote threshold for passage to 50. In the split 50-50 Senate, Vice President Kamala Harris could then break a tie, allowing Democrats to push past Republicans. But to succeed in changing the rules, all Democratic senators would need to be on board.

Once a routine matter, raising the debt limit has become politically treacherous over the past decade or more, used by Republicans, in particular, to rail against government spending and the rising debt load.

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AP Business Writer Stan Choe in New York contributed to this report.

Biden, a convert to mandates, making economic case for shots

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is wielding his weapon of last resort in the nation's fight against COVID-19, as he champions vaccination requirements across the country in an effort to force the roughly 67 million unvaccinated American adults to roll up their sleeves.

It's a tactic he never wanted to employ — and had ruled out before he took office — but one that he feels he was forced into by a stubborn slice of the public that has refused to get the lifesaving shots and

jeopardized the lives of others and the nation's economic recovery.

In coming weeks, more than 100 million Americans will be subject to vaccine requirements ordered by Biden — and his administration is encouraging employers to take additional steps voluntarily that would push vaccines on people or subject them to onerous testing requirements.

Forcing people to do something they don't want to do is rarely a winning political strategy. But with the majority of the country already vaccinated and with industry on his side, Biden has emerged as an unlikely advocate of browbeating tactics to drive vaccinations.

Biden on Thursday takes that message to Chicago, where he will visit a suburban construction site run by Clayco, a large building firm that is set to announce a new vaccinate-or-test requirement for its workforce. The company is taking action weeks ahead of a forthcoming rule by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration that will require all employers with more than 100 employees to require that their staffs be vaccinated or face weekly testing for the coronavirus.

White House officials said Biden will encourage other businesses to follow suit, by taking action ahead of the OSHA rule and to go even further by requiring shots for their employees without offering a test-out option.

Biden is also set to meet with the CEO of United Airlines, Scott Kirby, whose company successfully implemented a vaccine mandate — with no option for workers to be tested instead. Less than 1% have failed to comply and risk termination.

But Biden's mandates have "worked spectacularly well," said Lawrence Gostin, a public health expert at Georgetown University's law school. He added that the president's rules have also had a "modeling effect" for cities, states and businesses. That's what the White House intended.

U.S. officials began anticipating the need for a more forceful vaccination campaign by April, when the nation's supply of shots began to outpace demand. But political conditions meant immediate steps to require shots would have likely proved counterproductive.

The idea of mandatory vaccination faced pushback from critics who argue it smacks of government overreach and takes away people's rights to make their own medical decisions.

So first, officials engaged in a monthslong and multibillion-dollar education and incentives effort to persuade people to get the vaccines of their own accord.

It wasn't enough.

By midsummer, the more transmissible delta variant of the virus was eroding months of health and economic progress and the rate of new vaccinations had slowed to a trickle. Biden's strategy shifted from inducement to compulsion, with a slow, and deliberate heightening of vaccination restrictions.

"It's a good political strategy, but it also is a good public health strategy, because once you have a lot of people that have already been vaccinated. then mandates become more acceptable," said Gostin.

It started with a vaccination requirement for federal frontline health workers serving veterans in VA hospitals. Then the military, followed in steady succession by all healthcare workers reimbursed by the government, all federal workers, and then the more than 80 million Americans who work at mid- and large-size companies.

Nearly 100 million adult Americans were unvaccinated in July — a figure that has been cut by a third since federal, state and private-sector mandates have been imposed.

In conjunction with the president's trip to Chicago, the White House was releasing a report outlining the early successes of vaccine mandates at driving up vaccination rates and the economic case for businesses and local governments to implement them. It points to everything from reduced employee hours to diminished restaurant reservations in areas with fewer vaccinations, not to mention markedly reduced instances of serious illness and death from the virus in areas with higher vaccination rates.

Millions of workers, the White House notes, say they are still unable to work due to pandemic-related effects, because their workplaces have been shuttered or reduced service, or because they're afraid to work or can't get child care.

"The evidence has been overwhelmingly clear that these vaccine mandates work," said Charlie Anderson, director of economic policy and budget for the White House COVID-19 response team. "And so now, I

think it's a good time to lift up and say, 'Now's the time to move, if you haven't yet.'"

While mandates are the ultimate tool to press Americans to get vaccinated, Biden has resisted — at least thus far — requiring shots or tests for interstate or international air travel, a move that legal experts say is within his powers. But officials said it was still under consideration.

"We have a track record, and I think it's clear, that shows that we're pulling available levers to require vaccinations," said Jeff Zients, the White House COVID-19 coordinator. "And we're not taking anything off the table."

Remnants of Black church uncovered in Colonial Williamsburg

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

WILLIAMSBURG, Va. (AP) — The brick foundation of one of the nation's oldest Black churches has been unearthed at Colonial Williamsburg, a living history museum in Virginia that continues to reckon with its past storytelling about the country's origins and the role of Black Americans.

The First Baptist Church was formed in 1776 by free and enslaved Black people. They initially met secretly in fields and under trees in defiance of laws that prevented African Americans from congregating.

By 1818, the church had its first building in the former colonial capital. The 16-foot by 20-foot (5-meter by 6-meter) structure was destroyed by a tornado in 1834.

First Baptist's second structure, built in 1856, stood there for a century. But an expanding Colonial Williamsburg bought the property in 1956 and turned it into a parking lot.

First Baptist Pastor Reginald F. Davis, whose church now stands elsewhere in Williamsburg, said the uncovering of the church's first home is "a rediscovery of the humanity of a people."

"This helps to erase the historical and social amnesia that has afflicted this country for so many years," he said.

Colonial Williamsburg on Thursday announced that it had located the foundation after analyzing layers of soil and artifacts such as a one-cent coin.

For decades, Colonial Williamsburg had ignored the stories of colonial Black Americans. But in recent years, the museum has placed a growing emphasis on African-American history, while trying to attract more Black visitors.

The museum tells the story of Virginia's 18th century capital and includes more than 400 restored or reconstructed buildings. More than half of the 2,000 people who lived in Williamsburg in the late 18th century were Black — and many were enslaved.

Sharing stories of residents of color is a relatively new phenomenon at Colonial Williamsburg. It wasn't until 1979 when the museum began telling Black stories, and not until 2002 that it launched its American Indian Initiative.

First Baptist has been at the center of an initiative to reintroduce African Americans to the museum. For instance, Colonial Williamsburg's historic conservation experts repaired the church's long-silenced bell several years ago.

Congregants and museum archeologists are now plotting a way forward together on how best to excavate the site and to tell First Baptist's story. The relationship is starkly different from the one in the mid-20th Century.

"Imagine being a child going to this church, and riding by and seeing a parking lot … where possibly people you knew and loved are buried," said Connie Matthews Harshaw, a member of First Baptist. She is also board president of the Let Freedom Ring Foundation, which is aimed at preserving the church's history.

Colonial Williamsburg had paid for the property where the church had sat until the mid-1950s, and covered the costs of First Baptist building a new church. But the museum failed to tell its story despite its rich colonial history.

"It's a healing process … to see it being uncovered," Harshaw said. "And the community has really come together around this. And I'm talking Black and white."

The excavation began last year. So far, 25 graves have been located based on the discoloration of the

soil in areas where a plot was dug, according to Jack Gary, Colonial Williamsburg's director of archaeology.

Gary said some congregants have already expressed an interest in analyzing bones to get a better idea of the lives of the deceased and to discover familial connections. He said some graves appear to predate the building of the second church.

It's unclear exactly when First Baptist's first church was built. Some researchers have said it may already have been standing when it was offered to the congregation by Jesse Cole, a white man who owned the property at the time.

First Baptist is mentioned in tax records from 1818 for an adjacent property.

Gary said the original foundation was confirmed by analyzing layers of soil and artifacts found in them. They included an one-cent coin from 1817 and copper pins that held together clothing in the early 18th century.

Colonial Williamsburg and the congregation want to eventually reconstruct the church.

"We want to make sure that we're telling the story in a way that's appropriate and accurate — and that they approve of the way we're telling that history," Gary said.

Jody Lynn Allen, a history professor at the nearby College of William & Mary, said the excavation is part of a larger reckoning on race and slavery at historic sites across the world.

"It's not that all of a sudden, magically, these primary sources are appearing," Allen said. "They've been in the archives or in people's basements or attics. But they weren't seen as valuable."

Allen, who is on the board of First Baptist's Let Freedom Ring Foundation, said physical evidence like a church foundation can help people connect more strongly to the past.

"The fact that the church still exists — that it's still thriving — that story needs to be told," Allen said. "People need to understand that there was a great resilience in the African American community."

Ship anchored near oil pipeline made unusual movements

By MICHAEL BIESECKER, STEFANIE DAZIO and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

HUNTINGTON BEACH, Calif. (AP) — A massive cargo ship made a series of unusual movements while anchored in the closest spot to a Southern California oil pipeline that ruptured and sent crude washing up on beaches, according to data collected by a marine navigation service.

The Coast Guard is investigating whether a ship anchor might have snagged and bent the pipeline owned by Amplify Energy, a Houston-based company that operates three offshore oil platforms south of Los Angeles.

The Associated Press reviewed more than two weeks of data from MarineTraffic, a navigation service that tracks radio signals from transponders that broadcast the locations of ships and large boats every few minutes.

That data shows the Rotterdam Express, a German-flagged ship nearly 1,000 feet (305 meters) long, was assigned to anchorage SF-3, the closest to where the pipeline ruptured off Huntington Beach. The ship made three unusual movements over two days that appear to put it over the pipeline.

In a statement to AP, Hapag-Lloyd, the shipping company that operates the Rotterdam Express, denied any role in the spill.

A U.S. official told the AP on Wednesday that the Rotterdam Express has become a focus of the spill investigation. The official cautioned the ship is only one lead being pursued in the investigation, which is in the early stages.

The investigators are seeking to collect tracking and navigational information from the vessel that could help them identify its exact movements, the official said. They are also seeking preliminary interviews with at least some crew members.

The official could not discuss the investigation publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

Petty Officer Steve Strohmaier, a Coast Guard spokesperson, declined to comment on the Rotterdam Express but said the agency is analyzing electric charting systems from its vessel traffic service to see what ships were anchored or moving over the spill area.

The MarineTraffic data shows the Rotterdam Express arrived outside the Port of Long Beach early on Sept. 22 and dropped anchor about 2,000 feet (610 meters) from the pipeline.

The following day, at about 5 p.m., the data for the ship's locator beacon indicated that while anchored it suddenly moved thousands of feet to the southeast, a track that would have taken it over the pipeline lying on the seafloor about 100 feet (30 meters) below. The ship appears to have then engaged its engines to return to its anchorage about 10 minutes later.

The ship then moved again around midnight and a third time shortly before 8 a.m. on Sept. 23, each time moving back to its assigned anchorage, according to its online location data. The Rotterdam Express remained at spot SF-3 until Sunday, when it moved into the port to unload.

The first report of oil in the water near the pipeline were made Friday evening. Amplify said the pipeline was shut down early Saturday morning but has not said how long it believes oil flowed from it.

Amplify's CEO Martyn Willsher said Tuesday divers determined a 4,000-feet (1,219-meter) section of the pipeline was dislodged 105 feet (32 meters), bent back like the string on a bow. Oil escaped through a slender crack.

The amount is unclear. Amplify has said publicly that no more than 126,000 gallons (476,962 liters) leaked but told federal investigators it may be only 29,400 gallons (111,291 liters).

AP first contacted Hapag-Lloyd on Tuesday evening, seeking an explanation for the ship's movements on Sept. 22 and 23.

Nils Haupt, a spokesman at its headquarters in Hamburg, Germany, denied in an email Wednesday that the ship ever moved off anchor from spot SF-3 during that period. He said the transponder data displayed by MarineTraffic is erroneous.

"We have proof by the logbook, which is updated hourly, that the vessel did not move," Haupt said. "MarineTraffic in this case is wrong and the position is indeed incorrect."

Haupt said Hapag-Lloyd would cooperate with any investigation.

On Wednesday morning, AP sent an email that included a screenshot of the Rotterdam Express movements as indicated on MarineTraffic to the Unified Command Joint Information Center for state and federal agencies responding to the oil spill. Senior Chief Petty Officer Lauren Jorgensen said the command was unable to discuss matters involving an ongoing investigation.

Nikolas Xiros, a professor of marine engineering at the University of New Orleans, said it would be highly unlikely that the transponder data for a ship, which works through a global network called the Automatic Identification System, would be off by several thousand feet.

"AIS transporters are very accurate and the whole system is also very accurate," Xiros said after reviewing the location track for Rotterdam Express. "I think probably the ship moved, that's what I think. And with the anchor down, which was a big problem."

Xiros, who has spent more than two decades teaching marine navigation and electronics to future ship captains and crew, said the only alternative explanation he could think of was that either someone had hacked the AIS system to make the Rotterdam Express appear to move or that the ship's transmitter somehow became unfastened from its mast, fell in the water and drifted away before being retrieved by the crew, only to have it come unfastened two more times.

Xiros said he could provide no reasonable explanation for why the ship might have moved so far off its assigned station. Records show relatively calm weather and seas during the days in question.

"There is a series of peculiar things and all that need to be explained," Xiros said. "It may very well be some kind of an accident, but not necessarily a human error. We will have to see. But … I think he most probable explanation is the ship with anchor down moved both back and forth and possibly caused damage to the pipeline."

If a ship's anchor were to become entangled with an underwater obstacle such as a communications cable or petroleum pipeline, the operator is required by federal law to notify the Coast Guard. The locations and movements of ships are also regularly monitored by both the AIS system and radar, according to the Coast Guard.

Xiros said if he were investigating the cause of the oil spill, he would seek to review the digital logs for

both location and engine operations aboard the Rotterdam Express.

According to MarineTraffic data, the ship left Long Beach on Monday for the Port of Oakland, where it was moored at a dock Wednesday night.

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Associated Press writer Michael Blood in Los Angeles contributed to this report.

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Follow AP Investigative Reporter Michael Biesecker at http://twitter.com/mbieseck

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Contact AP's global investigative team at Investigative@ap.org.

The Latest: Rebel-held NW Syria facing unprecedented surge

By The Associated Press undefined

BEIRUT — Rebel-held northwest Syria is facing an unprecedented coronavirus surge and aid agencies are calling on the world to help provide humanitarian and medical aid, increase hospital capacity and ensure people are vaccinated.

The surge apparently caused by the more contagious delta variant has overwhelmed hospitals with sick patients and is causing shortages of oxygen, according to local officials. The local rebel-run authority imposed a nighttime curfew as of Tuesday while schools and universities were closed and students are getting distant learning.

The region is home to 4 million people, many of them internally displaced people by Syria's 10-year conflict.

Dr. Khaula Sawah, president of The International Union of Medical Care and Relief Organizations, or UOSSM, says international aid is urgently needed "to prevent a humanitarian disaster. Millions of lives are at stake."

The rate of positive test results — an indication of the level of virus spread — is around 55%, according to UOSSM and Christian humanitarian organization, World Vision. Only 1.3% of people are vaccinated, according to World Vision.

Local medical authorities say the number of registered coronavirus cases in the region reached nearly 77,000 while deaths reached 1,357.

"People are dying in Northwest Syria because they cannot access hospitals," says Johan Mooij, World Vision Syria Response Director said in a statement released Thursday.

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MORE ON THE PANDEMIC:

— More than 120,000 US children had caregivers die during pandemic

— WHO working to get COVID-19 medical supplies to North Korea

— Virus measures stop legal return of thousands to New Zealand

— Health officials say it's OK to get COVID-19 and flu vaccines at same time

— See all of AP's pandemic coverage at https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic

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HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING:

HANOI, Vietnam — Vietnam's airlines will resume domestic flights on Sunday, after the country suspended their operation in July to contain the spread of the coronavirus.

In the first phase of the resumption, passengers must be vaccinated with at least one shot and hold a negative virus test to board flights, according to the plan announced by the civil aviation authority Thursday. Carriers can board only half of each plane's seat capacity.

Noi Bai airport in Hanoi, Vietnam's major city in the northern region, will remain closed for domestic flights. The city authority said on Wednesday it was not ready to receive a large volume of travelers, who could potentially spread the virus.

The outbreak fueled by the delta variant that began in July was Vietnam's worst, infecting over 800,000 people and killing more than 20,000. More than half of the 98 million population was under lockdown for

almost three months.

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TOLEDO, Ohio — The number of COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. is falling and the number of new cases per day is about to dip below 100,000 for the first time in two months.

All are encouraging signs that the summer surge is waning. Government leaders and employers not wanting to lose momentum are looking to strengthen and expand vaccine mandates.

Los Angeles has enacted one of the nation's strictest vaccine mandates. Minnesota's governor is calling for vaccine and testing requirements for teachers and long-term care workers. Health experts say there are still far too many unvaccinated people. In New York, a statewide vaccination mandate for all hospital and nursing home workers will be expanded Thursday to home care and hospice employees.

Across the nation, deaths per day have dropped by nearly 15% since mid-September and are averaging about 1,750. New cases have fallen to just over 103,000 per day on average, a 40% decline in the past three weeks.

The number of people in the hospital with COVID-19 has declined by about one-quarter since its most recent peak of almost 94,000 a month ago.

Now in power, Taliban set sights on Afghan drug underworld

By SAMYA KULLAB, MSTYSLAV CHERNOV and FELIPE DANA Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Now the uncontested rulers of Afghanistan, the Taliban have set their sights on stamping out the scourge of narcotics addiction, even if by force.

At nightfall, the battle-hardened fighters-turned-policemen scour the capital's drug-ravaged underworld. Below Kabul's bustling city bridges, amid piles of garbage and streams of filthy water, hundreds of homeless men addicted to heroin and methamphetamines are rounded up, beaten and forcibly taken to treatment centers. The Associated Press gained rare access to one such raid last week.

The scene provided a window into the new order under Taliban governance: The men — many with mental illness, according to doctors — sat against stone walls with their hands tied. They were told to sober up or face beatings.

The heavy-handed methods are welcomed by some health workers, who have had no choice but to adapt to Taliban rule. "We are not in a democracy anymore, this is a dictatorship. And the use of force is the only way to treat these people," said Dr. Fazalrabi Mayar, working in a treatment facility. He was referring specifically to Afghans addicted to heroin and meth.

Soon after the Taliban took power on Aug. 15, the Taliban Health Ministry issued an order to these facilities, underscoring their intention to strictly control the problem of addiction, doctors said.

Bleary-eyed and skeletal, the detained encompass a spectrum of Afghan lives hollowed out by the country's tumultuous past of war, invasion and hunger. They were poets, soldiers, merchants, farmers. Afghanistan's vast poppy fields are the source of the majority of the world's heroin, and the country has emerged as a significant meth producer. Both have fueled massive addiction around the country.

Old or young, poor or once well-off, the Taliban view the addicts the same: A stain on the society they hope to create. Drug use is against their interpretation of Islamic doctrine. Addicts are also stigmatized by the wider, largely conservative Afghan community.

But the Taliban's war on drugs is complicated as the country faces the prospect of economic collapse and imminent humanitarian catastrophe.

Sanctions and lack of recognition have made Afghanistan, long an aid-dependent country, ineligible for the financial support from international organizations that accounted for 75% of state spending. An appalling human rights record, especially with respect to women, has rendered the Taliban unpopular among international development organizations.

A liquidity crisis has set in. Public wages are months in arrears and drought has exacerbated food shortages and disease. Winter is weeks away. Without foreign funds, government revenues rely on customs and taxation.

The illicit opium trade is intertwined with Afghanistan's economy and its turmoil. Poppy growers are part of an important rural constituency for the Taliban, and most rely on the harvest to make ends meet.

During the insurgency years, the Taliban profited from the trade by taxing traffickers, a practice applied on a wide variety of industries in the areas under their control. Research by David Mansfield, an expert on the Afghan drug trade, suggests the group made $20 million in 2020, a small fraction compared to other sources of revenue from tax collection. Publicly, it has always denied links to the drug trade.

But the Taliban also implemented the only largely successful ban on opium production, between 2000-2001, before the U.S. invasion. Successive governments have failed to do the same.

Police roundups of addicts did occur during previous administrations. But the Taliban are more forceful and feared.

On a recent evening, fighters raided a drug den under a bridge in the Guzargah area of Kabul. With cables for whips and slung rifles, they ordered the group of men out of their fetid quarters. Some came staggering out, others were forced to the ground. The sudden clinking of lighters followed another order to hand over belongings; the men preferred to use up all the drugs they possessed before they were confiscated.

One man struck a match beneath a piece of foil, his sunken cheeks deepening as he sucked in the smoke. He stared blankly into the distance.

Another man was reluctant. "They are vitamins!" he pleaded.

Taliban fighter Qari Fedayee was tying up the hands of another.

"They are our countrymen, they are our family and there are good people inside of them," he said. "God willing, the people in the hospital will be good with them and cure them."

An elderly, bespectacled man raised his voice. He is a poet, he announced, and if they let him go he will never use drugs again. He scribbled verses on a piece of paper to prove his point. It didn't work.

What drove him to drugs? "Some things are not meant to be told," he replied.

In the end, they were at least 150 men rounded up. They were taken to the district police station, where all their belongings — drugs, wallets, knifes, rings, lighters, a juice box — were burned in a pile since they are forbidden to take them to the treatment center. As the men crouched nearby, a Taliban officer watched the plumes of smoke, counting prayer beads.

By midnight, they were taken to the Avicenna Medical Hospital for Drug Treatment, on the edges of Kabul. Once a military base, Camp Phoenix, established by the U.S. army in 2003, it was made into a drug treatment center in 2016. Now it's Kabul's largest, capable of accommodating 1,000 people.

The men are stripped and bathed. Their heads are shaved.

Here, a 45-day treatment program begins, said Dr. Wahedullah Koshan, the head psychiatrist.

They will undergo withdrawal with only some medical care to alleviate discomfort and pain. Koshan conceded the hospital lacks the alternative opioids, buprenorphine and methadone, typically used to treat heroin addiction. His staff have not been paid since July, but he said the Health Ministry promised salaries would be forthcoming.

The Taliban have broader aims. "This is just the beginning, later we will go after the farmers, and we will punish them according to (Islamic) Sharia law," said lead patrol officer Qari Ghafoor.

For Mansfield, the expert, the latest drug raids are history rinsed and repeated. "In the 90s, (when the Taliban were in power) they used to do exactly the same thing," he said. The only difference now is that there are drug treatment centers; back then drug users were made to stand on mountain melts, or rivers, thinking it would sober them up.

Whether they will be able to ban opium production is another story, he said. Any meaningful ban will require negotiations with farmers.

Mohammed Kabir, a 30-year-old poppy farmer from Uruzgan province, checked himself into the hospital two weeks ago. He said demand from traffickers remains high, and come harvest time in November, selling opium is his only means to make a living.

In the hospital, patients, totaling 700, float around the halls like ghosts. Some say they aren't being fed

enough. Doctors said hunger is part of the withdrawal process.

Most of their families don't know where they are.

A waiting room is full of parents and relatives wondering if their missing loved ones were among those taken in the raids.

Sitara wails when she is reunited with her 21-year-old son, missing for 12 days. "My entire life is my son," she weeps, embracing him.

Back in the city, under a bridge in the Kotesangi neighborhood, drug users live precariously under the cover of darkness, in fear of the Taliban.

One evening, they smoked up casually next to a man's collapsed body. He was dead.

They covered him with cloth but won't dare bury him while the Taliban patrol the streets.

"It's not important if some of them die," said Mawlawi Fazullah, a Taliban officer. "Others will be cured. After they are cured, they can be free."

Taylor hits walk-off HR, Dodgers deck Cards 3-1 in WC game

By BETH HARRIS AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — One big swing by Chris Taylor sent the Los Angeles Dodgers soaring and the St. Louis Cardinals crashing.

Taylor hit a two-run homer in the bottom of the ninth inning to give the Dodgers a 3-1 victory Wednesday night in a scintillating NL wild-card game.

Justin Turner homered early and the 106-win Dodgers advanced to a best-of-five Division Series against the NL West champion Giants, who won 107 games to barely hold off rival Los Angeles for the division title. Game 1 is Friday night in San Francisco.

"That's gonna be fun. Yeah, two of the best regular-season records of all-time. We've been battling all year, so I expect a hard-fought series," Taylor said.

The Dodgers celebrated on the field before heading into their clubhouse to continue the party. Champagne and beer were poured over the heads of shirtless, goggle-wearing players, thrilled to have stayed alive for a shot at their Bay Area adversary.

"One of the great rivalries in sports," Los Angeles manager Dave Roberts said. "It's happening."

The sellout crowd of 53,193 at Dodger Stadium hung on every pitch as the tension of a tie game built from the fourth inning on. Fans waved blue towels, futilely urging on the few balls launched into the outfield only to see them caught in a winner-take-all matchup between two of the National League's most storied and successful franchises.

The crowd was on its feet in the ninth, anxiously waiting to see if the defending World Series champions could pull out a must-have win. Cody Bellinger got the Dodgers started when he drew a two-out walk from T.J. McFarland. Alex Reyes entered to face Taylor, and Bellinger stole second.

"That's huge, knowing I don't have to do too much," said Taylor, batting in the No. 9 slot after entering to play left field as part of a double switch in the seventh. "It kind of settled me down a little bit."

Taylor then sent a 2-1 breaking ball into the left field pavilion, triggering an explosion of cheers and ending an October struggle that lasted 4 hours, 15 minutes.

The versatile veteran struggled in September because of a recurring neck injury, and he came off the bench in the Dodgers' most important game of the season.

"Honestly, I was just trying to hit a single," Taylor said after launching the fourth game-ending homer in Dodgers postseason history. "He gave me a good slider to hit and I was able to get it up in the air."

It was the fifth walk-off home run in a winner-take-all postseason game, after Pittsburgh's Bill Mazeroski in the 1960 World Series, the Yankees' Chris Chambliss in the 1976 AL Championship Series and Aaron Boone in the 2003 ALCS, and Toronto's Edwin Encarnación in the 2016 AL wild-card game.

Taylor also made a nifty defensive play in the eighth, robbing Edmundo Sosa of a hit for the second out.

Tommy Edman dropped a one-out single into right off closer Kenley Jansen in the top of the ninth and stole second. Paul Goldschmidt took a called third strike and Tyler O'Neill went down swinging to end the

threat. Edman went 3 for 5 with a run scored.

The Dodgers' bullpen stymied the St. Louis hitters, allowing just a pair of singles after the fifth inning.

"The whole bullpen stepped up. We've been doing it the whole year," Jansen said. "Off we go up north now."

Both teams had runners on in the sixth, seventh and eighth innings, but couldn't push a run across.

"It was a grind all night," Turner said.

St. Louis finished 0 for 11 with runners in scoring position, stranding 11 overall. The Cardinals went on a club-record 17-game winning streak in September to grab the second NL wild card, only to see their October dreams squelched.

"That's a clubhouse full of guys that are hurting," manager Mike Shildt said.

Dueling aces Adam Wainwright of St. Louis and the Dodgers' Max Scherzer struggled with their control early in just the second winner-take-all game in postseason history with two starting pitchers aged 37-plus. Wainwright is 40; Scherzer is 37.

"They were relentless," Wainwright said of the Dodgers. "We had our chances to win that game."

Wainwright and Scherzer issued two walks apiece through the first three innings. Scherzer's wild pitch led to a run in the first and he plunked Harrison Bader in the fourth.

Turner tied it at 1 in the fourth on a leadoff shot into the Dodgers' bullpen in left. It was the first homer Wainwright has ever given up on a curveball in the postseason. Turner's 13 postseason homers are the most in franchise history.

St. Louis led 1-0 when Edman scored on Scherzer's wild pitch. Edman singled leading off, stole second base and went to third when O'Neill fouled out to right.

Scherzer left with one out in the fifth after giving up a leadoff single to Edman and a walk to Goldschmidt. He paced the dugout with his hands on his hips. Former Cardinal Joe Kelly got out of the jam after Goldschmidt reached third on a wild pitch.

Scherzer allowed one run and three hits, struck out four and walked three against his hometown team.

"We won the game. That's all that matters," Scherzer said.

Wainwright permitted one run and four hits in 5 1/3 innings. He struck out five and walked two.

The Dodgers had Wainwright on the ropes in the third, loading the bases with one out. He was within one ball of walking in the tying run before Trea Turner broke his bat grounding into an inning-ending double play on a 3-2 pitch.

IN THE HOUSE

Nationals outfielder Juan Soto sat behind the plate wearing a Trea Turner jersey from his time in Washington. Soto finished second to Turner, his former Nats teammate, for the NL batting title. Turner won his first batting crown with a .328 average.

Soto said he wanted to support his teammates and "see their face when I surprise them."

It worked. Turner didn't know Soto was coming.

"When I saw him during the game I was laughing for him to be wearing my jersey," he said.

Nationals hitting coach Kevin Long was sitting next to Soto wearing Scherzer's jersey.

LOSING WAGER

Roberts said he and retired Giants manager Bruce Bochy had a bet on the outcome of the NL West. The Giants took the title by a game over the Dodgers, whose eight-year reign ended on the final day of the regular season.

"I lost a dinner and a nice bottle of bordeaux because we didn't win the division," Roberts said, adding that Bochy will choose the vintage.

"Knowing him it's going to be some type of first growth, so it's not going to be cheap."

Roberts is a partner in Red Stitch Wine Group, which produced its first vintage in 2007.

UP NEXT

Cardinals: Pitchers and catchers report for spring training in mid-February.

Dodgers: Open the best-of-five NLDS against San Francisco on Friday. They went 9-10 against the Giants this season.

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More AP MLB: https://apnews.com/hub/MLB and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

Virus measures stop legal return of thousands to New Zealand

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — When Silvia Dancose's daughter called in distress from Canada in August, Dancose flew over right away to comfort her. But now, after weeks of trying, she has no idea when she'll be allowed to return home to New Zealand.

This week, Dancose found herself waiting in vain behind 17,000 others in an online queue. New Zealanders desperate to return to their home country are forced each week or so to enter a lottery for coveted beds in quarantine hotels.

As part of its effort to minimize the spread of the coronavirus, New Zealand requires all returning citizens and residents — whether vaccinated or not — to spend 14 days isolating in a hotel run by the military.

Because demand is far outstripping supply, New Zealanders are being locked out indefinitely, despite the right of return enshrined in New Zealand's constitutional arrangements and in international law.

The quarantine system remains in place despite New Zealand's government acknowledging this week that it can no longer wipe out the virus. The tight border controls, along with strict lockdowns and aggressive contact tracing, ensured New Zealand eliminated each outbreak of the virus for the first 18 months of the pandemic.

For most of that time, people were able to live without any restrictions, going to work and filling sports stadiums. Only 28 people in the country with a population of 5 million have died from COVID-19.

But an outbreak of the more transmissible delta variant in August has proved impossible to extinguish, especially after spreading through marginalized groups, including homeless people and gang members.

Yet the strict border measures remain.

For many trying to come home, it has been particularly galling that sports stars, politicians and other selected high-flyers glide through the system with guaranteed spots upon their return.

For one New Zealander, it took filing a lawsuit before she could get home. Bergen Graham unexpectedly found out she was pregnant in March while living in El Salvador.

Doctors told Graham her pregnancy was considered high-risk because of her blood type. She filed six applications for an emergency spot in quarantine, but was denied each time.

As Graham and her husband tried to get back, they flew to Los Angeles, where they lined up alongside undocumented immigrants at community clinics to get medical care.

They worried they would get deported from the U.S. when their visa waiver entitlement expired, or that the delays would disqualify them from traveling home because the pregnancy would get too far advanced. They feared they would get stuck with a six-figure medical bill if they had the baby in the U.S.

"It was inhumane. Everyone's situation changes, and everyone has the right to come home," Graham said. "I felt like that right had been taken away. It was the weirdest feeling."

A London-based group called Grounded Kiwis helped her file legal action in New Zealand asking for a judicial review of her case. Within 48 hours, the government made a U-turn and last month offered her an emergency spot in quarantine.

Graham, whose baby is due in mid-November, said she's incredibly relieved to be back home in Auckland, but remains angry at what she endured.

One of the founders of Grounded Kiwis is Alexandra Birt, a 29-year-old New Zealand lawyer based in London, who became concerned that people's rights were being breached.

Birt found time for research when she caught COVID-19 herself in July and took sick leave from work. She said New Zealand's quarantine system is broken and needs to change.

Many New Zealanders stranded abroad have also become disheartened by the attitude of those back home, Birt said, some of whom seem to have little sympathy for their plight and are content for the borders to remain tightly sealed.

"People are feeling totally abandoned both by the government and the New Zealand public," Birt said.

New Zealand's government says the quarantine system will be vital in its virus response for the foreseeable future.

COVID-19 Response Minister Chris Hipkins recently announced plans to add an extra quarantine hotel and begin a small trial that would allow some fully vaccinated people to isolate at home.

"We want to assure Kiwis overseas that we are doing everything we can to facilitate their safe return," he said.

But the system may have already caused a symbolic loss. Amazon Studios filmed one season of a television production inspired by "The Lord of the Rings" in New Zealand, which has a long association with the books of J.R.R. Tolkien.

However, Amazon said it decided to film the second season in Britain to expand its production footprint there. Many people locally, however, have pointed to the problems Amazon was having in getting its actors and crew in and out of New Zealand.

For Dancose, the waiting to return home continues. When her 23-year-old daughter, who is studying in Montreal and has a history of depression, reached out to her in August, Dancose had just accepted a new job. But she knew she needed to be by her daughter's side.

"When you are in New Zealand, the narrative is, don't go, despite whatever reasons you may have," Dancose said. "I have no regrets, though."

Dancose has been logging on to a virtual waiting room, where a few thousand places for returnees open up every week or two, often for slots months in the future.

People are assigned a place randomly, and Dancose was about 15,000th in the queue, then 24,000th and another time 17,000th. She hasn't come close to getting a slot.

For now, she is couch-surfing in Montreal. A Canadian by birth and a New Zealand permanent resident, Dancose has connections in both countries.

Dancose said her daughter is doing much better. She said her new employer has allowed her to work remotely for now, even though she's supposed to be interacting with people as part of her new job.

Dancose said she was double vaccinated in New Zealand before she left, and remains dismayed that despite doing everything right, she's still not allowed to return home.

Summer storms were a climate-change wake-up call for subways

By PHILIP MARCELO and DAVID PORTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — When the remnants of Hurricane Ida dumped record-breaking rain on the East Coast this month, staircases into New York City's subway tunnels turned into waterfalls and train tracks became canals.

In Philadelphia, a commuter line along the Schuylkill River was washed out for miles, and the nation's busiest rail line, Amtrak's Northeast Corridor running from Boston to Washington, was shut down for an entire day.

Nearly a decade after Superstorm Sandy spurred billions of dollars in investment in coastal flooding protection up and down the East Coast — some of which remains unfinished — Hurricane Ida and other storms this summer provided a stark reminder that more needs to be done — and quickly — as climate change brings stronger, more unpredictable weather to a region with some of the nation's oldest and busiest transit systems, say transit experts and officials.

"This is our moment to make sure our transit system is prepared," said Sanjay Seth, Boston's "climate resilience" program manager. "There's a lot that we need to do in the next 10 years, and we have to do it right. There's no need to build it twice."

In New York, where some 75 million gallons (285 million liters) of water were pumped out of the subways during Ida, ambitious solutions have been floated, such as building canals through the city.

But relatively easy, short-term fixes to the transit system could also be made in the meantime, suggests Janno Lieber, acting CEO of the Metropolitan Transit Authority.

Installing curbs at subway entrances, for example, could prevent water from cascading down steps into

the tunnels, as was seen in countless viral videos this summer.

More than 400 subway entrances could be affected by extreme rains from climate change in coming decades, according to projections from the Regional Plan Association, a think tank that plans to put forth the idea for a canal system.

"The subway system is not a submarine. It can't be made impervious to water," Lieber said. "We just need to limit how quickly it can get into the system."

In Boston, climate change efforts have focused largely on the Blue Line, which runs beneath Boston Harbor and straddles the shoreline north of the city.

This summer's storms were the first real test of some of the newest measures to buffer the vulnerable line.

Flood barriers at a key downtown waterfront stop were activated for the first time when Tropical Storm Henri made landfall in New England in August. No major damage was reported at the station.

Officials are next seeking federal funds to build a seawall to prevent flooding at another crucial Blue Line subway stop, says Joe Pesaturo, a spokesperson for the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority. The agency has also budgeted for upgrading harbor tunnel pumps and is weighing building a berm around an expansive marsh the Blue Line runs along, he said.

In Philadelphia, some flood protection measures completed in Superstorm Sandy's wake proved their worth this summer, while others fell short.

Signal huts that house critical control equipment were raised post-Sandy along the hard-hit Manayunk/Norristown commuter line, but it wasn't high enough to avoid damage during Ida, said Bob Lund, deputy general manager of the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority.

On the bright side, shoreline "armoring" efforts prevented damaging erosion in what was the highest flooding in the area since the mid-1800s. That has buoyed plans to continue armoring more stretches along the river with the cable-reinforced concrete blocks, Lund said.

If anything, he said, this year's storms showed that flood projections haven't kept up with the pace of environmental change.

"We're seeing more frequent storms and higher water level events," Lund said. "We have to be even more conservative than our own projections are showing."

In Washington, where the Red Line's flood-prone Cleveland Park station was closed twice during Hurricane Ida, transit officials have begun developing a climate resiliency plan to identify vulnerabilities and prioritize investments, said Sherrie Ly, spokesperson for the Washington Metropolitan Area Transit Authority.

That's on top of the work WMATA has undertaken the last two decades to mitigate flood risks, she said, such as raising ventilation shafts, upgrading the drainage systems and installing dozens of high-capacity pumping stations.

On balance, East Coast transit systems have taken laudable steps such as sketching out climate change plans and hiring experts, said Jesse Keenan, an associate professor at Tulane University in New Orleans who co-authored a recent study examining climate change risks to Boston's T.

But it's an open question whether they're planning ambitiously enough, he said, pointing to Washington, where subway lines along the Anacostia and Potomac rivers into Maryland and Virginia are particularly vulnerable.

Similar concerns remain in other global cities that saw bad flooding this year.

In China, Premier Li Keqiang has pledged to hold officials accountable after 14 people died and hundreds of others were trapped in a flooded subway line in Zhengzhou in July. But there are no concrete proposals yet for what might be done to prevent deadly subway flooding.

In London, efforts to address Victorian-age sewer and drainage systems are too piecemeal to dent city-wide struggles with flooding, says Bob Ward, a climate change expert at the London School of Economics.

The city saw a monsoon-like drenching in July that prompted tube station closures.

"There just isn't the level of urgency required," Ward said. "We know these rain events will get worse, and flooding will get worse, unless we significantly step up investment."

Other cities, meanwhile, have moved more swiftly to shore up their infrastructure.

Tokyo completed an underground system for diverting floodwater back in 2006 with chambers large enough to fit a space shuttle or the Statue of Liberty.

Copenhagen's underground City Circle Line, which was completed in 2019, features heavy flood gates, raised entryways and other climate change adaptations.

How to pay for more ambitious climate change projects remains another major question mark for East Coast cities, said Michael Martello, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology researcher who co-authored the Boston study with Keenan.

Despite an infusion of federal stimulus dollars during the pandemic, Boston's T and other transit agencies still face staggering budget shortfalls as ridership hasn't returned to pre-pandemic levels.

The stunning images of flooding this summer briefly gave momentum to efforts to pass President Joe Biden's $3.5 trillion infrastructure plan. But that mammoth spending bill, which includes money for climate change preparedness, is still being negotiated in Congress.

"It's great to have these plans," Martello said. "But has to get built and funded somehow."

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Marcelo reported from Boston. Associated Press journalist Dake Kang in Beijing contributed to this report.

Panel tackles issue of missing, slain Native Hawaiian women

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — At first, he was just a boyfriend. He gave Ashley Maha'a gifts and attention. But then he gave her drugs and became controlling and abusive. He would punish her for breaking ambiguous, undefined "rules," only to later say he was sorry and shower her with flowers and lavish presents.

After a while, he led the Honolulu high school senior — a 17-year-old minor — into Hawaii's commercial sex trade.

"I shouldn't be here with everything that was going on. I should be dead. And the majority of the people who are in my situation are missing or dead," said Maha'a, who is Native Hawaiian.

Maha'a got out of that world years ago and is now a married mother of four. But it's on her mind as she joins a new task force studying the issue of missing and murdered Native Hawaiian women and girls. She reminds herself of her plight every day so she can fight for others similarly trapped and vulnerable.

The panel, created by the state House earlier this year, aims to gather data and identify the reasons behind the problem. As of now, few figures exist, but those that do suggest Native Hawaiians are disproportionately represented among the state's sex trafficking victims.

Its work comes amid renewed calls for people to pay more attention to missing and killed Indigenous women and girls and other people of color after the recent disappearance of Gabby Petito, a white woman, triggered widespread national media coverage and extensive searches by law enforcement. Petito's body was later found in Wyoming.

Several states formed similar panels after a groundbreaking report by the Urban Indian Health Institute found that of more than 5,700 cases of missing and slain Indigenous girls in dozens of U.S. cities in 2016, only 116 were logged in a Justice Department database.

Wyoming's task force determined 710 Indigenous people disappeared there between 2011 and September 2020 and that Indigenous people made up 21% of homicide victims even though they are only 3% of the population. In Minnesota, a task force led to the creation of a dedicated office to provide ongoing attention and leadership on the issue.

The Urban Indian Health Institute's report didn't include data on Native Hawaiians because the organization is funded by the Indian Health Service, a U.S. agency that serves Native Americans and Alaska Natives but not Native Hawaiians. The Seattle institute didn't have the resources to extend the study to Hawaii, Director Abigail Echo-Hawk said.

It's not the first time Native Hawaiians have been sidelined in the broader national conversation. The federal government's efforts to tackle the problem of missing and murdered Indigenous women often focus on Native Americans and Alaska Natives — in part because it has authority over major crimes on most

tribal lands, and Native Hawaiians don't have such lands in the same sense as many other U.S. Indigenous communities. An Interior Department spokesman said it instead works to support and collaborate with state programs in the islands.

Yet Hawaii faces many of the same challenges as other states, including a lack of data on missing and murdered Indigenous women. The precise number of nationwide cases is unknown because many have gone unreported or have not been well-documented or tracked.

Public and private agencies don't always collect statistics on race. And some data groups Native Hawaiians with other Pacific Islanders, making it impossible to identify the degree to which Hawaii's Indigenous people are affected. About 20% of the state's population is Native Hawaiian.

Its task force is being led by representatives from the Hawaii State Commission on the State of Women and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, a semi-autonomous state agency directed by Native Hawaiians. The panel also includes members from state agencies, county police departments and private organizations.

Khara Jabola-Carolus, executive director of the commission and co-chairperson of the task force, suspects its work will show Hawaii's large tourism industry and military presence fuel sex trafficking. Money to be made from these sectors gives people an incentive to take girls and women from their families, she said.

"It's not like someone is kidnapped off the street. It's that person is enticed and convinced to cut off their family if they're a child, or a teenager," Jabola-Carolus said.

Advocates for Native American and Alaska Native women and girls say sex trafficking affects them as well, particularly in areas with high populations of transitory male workers.

Maha'a said the extent of the commercial sex industry in Hawaii also is illustrated by the number of girls and women brought to the islands from other states.

"I've met so many people on the mainland, and so, so, so many of them have told me that when they were being trafficked nationally, they would be flown here for a period of time and work here when things were slow, because the demand is so high," Maha'a said.

Advocates say a number of systemic issues contribute to the problem. Native Hawaiians have the highest poverty rate — 15.5% — of any of the five largest racial groups in Hawaii, which is also one of country's the most expensive places to rent or own property.

The history of colonization has torn Native Hawaiians from their land, language and culture, similar to Indigenous communities in other states.

Rosemond Pettigrew, board president of Pouhana 'O Na Wahine, a grassroots collective of Native Hawaiian women advocating against domestic and sexual violence, said land is family, and not being connected to it severs Native Hawaiians from their past.

"When you separate yourself from what you know or what you believe, and you're no longer on land, then you're left where you don't know where you come from and who you are, and your identity becomes lost," she said.

Echo-Hawk, of the Urban Indian Health Institute, said Hawaii's task force is "monumental" and necessary to understanding the full scope of the problem.

She suspects some of its biggest obstacles will be in getting cooperation from law enforcement agencies and not having dedicated funding. Lawmakers didn't allocate the panel any money, so its members are relying on existing resources to do their research. The most successful state task forces had funding, Echo-Hawk said.

It will be important for the task force to recognize the problems are rooted in government policies, said Paula Julian, senior policy specialist with the Montana-based National Indigenous Women's Resource Center. The solutions for Native Hawaiians, meanwhile, must come from Native Hawaiians, she said.

Pettigrew said she'd like to see resources put into prevention. For example, Hawaii's public schools could teach students about healthy relationships, starting as early as elementary grades. Lessons could address dating once students get to middle and high schools.

State Rep. Stacelynn Eli, a Native Hawaiian and a Democrat who sponsored the resolution creating the task force, said she has friends and classmates who were trafficked. She doesn't want her nieces to face

the same thing because no one knew enough to take action.

"We are surviving, and I would like to see our people get to a point where we are thriving. And I think we won't get to that point until we know for sure that we are protecting our Native women and children and holding those who try to harm them accountable," she said.

The panel is expected to produce reports for the Legislature by the end of 2022 and 2023.

Ship anchored near oil pipeline made unusual movements

By MICHAEL BIESECKER, STEFANIE DAZIO and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

HUNTINGTON BEACH, Calif. (AP) — A massive cargo ship made a series of unusual movements while anchored in the closest spot to a Southern California oil pipeline that ruptured and sent crude washing up on beaches, according to data collected by a marine navigation service.

The Coast Guard is investigating whether a ship anchor might have snagged and bent the pipeline owned by Amplify Energy, a Houston-based company that operates three offshore oil platforms south of Los Angeles.

The Associated Press reviewed more than two weeks of data from MarineTraffic, a navigation service that tracks radio signals from transponders that broadcast the locations of ships and large boats every few minutes.

That data shows the Rotterdam Express, a German-flagged ship nearly 1,000 feet (305 meters) long, was assigned to anchorage SF-3, the closest to where the pipeline ruptured off Huntington Beach. The ship made three unusual movements over two days that appear to put it over the pipeline.

In a statement to AP, Hapag-Lloyd, the shipping company that operates the Rotterdam Express, denied any role in the spill.

A U.S. official told the AP on Wednesday that the Rotterdam Express has become a focus of the spill investigation. The official cautioned the ship is only one lead being pursued in the investigation, which is in the early stages.

The investigators are seeking to collect tracking and navigational information from the vessel that could help them identify its exact movements, the official said. They are also seeking preliminary interviews with at least some crew members.

The official could not discuss the investigation publicly and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

Petty Officer Steve Strohmaier, a Coast Guard spokesperson, declined to comment on the Rotterdam Express but said the agency is analyzing electric charting systems from its vessel traffic service to see what ships were anchored or moving over the spill area.

The MarineTraffic data shows the Rotterdam Express arrived outside the Port of Long Beach early on Sept. 22 and dropped anchor about 2,000 feet (610 meters) from the pipeline.

The following day, at about 5 p.m., the data for the ship's locator beacon indicated that while anchored it suddenly moved thousands of feet to the southeast, a track that would have taken it over the pipeline lying on the seafloor about 100 feet (30 meters) below. The ship appears to have then engaged its engines to return to its anchorage about 10 minutes later.

The ship then moved again around midnight and a third time shortly before 8 a.m. on Sept. 23, each time moving back to its assigned anchorage, according to its online location data. The Rotterdam Express remained at spot SF-3 until Sunday, when it moved into the port to unload.

The first report of oil in the water near the pipeline were made Friday evening. Amplify said the pipeline was shut down early Saturday morning but has not said how long it believes oil flowed from it.

Amplify's CEO Martyn Willsher said Tuesday divers determined a 4,000-feet (1,219-meter) section of the pipeline was dislodged 105 feet (32 meters), bent back like the string on a bow. Oil escaped through a slender crack.

The amount is unclear. Amplify has said publicly that no more than 126,000 gallons (476,962 liters) leaked but told federal investigators it may be only 29,400 gallons (111,291 liters).

AP first contacted Hapag-Lloyd on Tuesday evening, seeking an explanation for the ship's movements

on Sept. 22 and 23.

Nils Haupt, a spokesman at its headquarters in Hamburg, Germany, denied in an email Wednesday that the ship ever moved off anchor from spot SF-3 during that period. He said the transponder data displayed by MarineTraffic is erroneous.

"We have proof by the logbook, which is updated hourly, that the vessel did not move," Haupt said. "MarineTraffic in this case is wrong and the position is indeed incorrect."

Haupt said Hapag-Lloyd would cooperate with any investigation.

On Wednesday morning, AP sent an email that included a screenshot of the Rotterdam Express movements as indicated on MarineTraffic to the Unified Command Joint Information Center for state and federal agencies responding to the oil spill. Senior Chief Petty Officer Lauren Jorgensen said the command was unable to discuss matters involving an ongoing investigation.

Nikolas Xiros, a professor of marine engineering at the University of New Orleans, said it would be highly unlikely that the transponder data for a ship, which works through a global network called the Automatic Identification System, would be off by several thousand feet.

"AIS transporters are very accurate and the whole system is also very accurate," Xiros said after reviewing the location track for Rotterdam Express. "I think probably the ship moved, that's what I think. And with the anchor down, which was a big problem."

Xiros, who has spent more than two decades teaching marine navigation and electronics to future ship captains and crew, said the only alternative explanation he could think of was that either someone had hacked the AIS system to make the Rotterdam Express appear to move or that the ship's transmitter somehow became unfastened from its mast, fell in the water and drifted away before being retrieved by the crew, only to have it come unfastened two more times.

Xiros said he could provide no reasonable explanation for why the ship might have moved so far off its assigned station. Records show relatively calm weather and seas during the days in question.

"There is a series of peculiar things and all that need to be explained," Xiros said. "It may very well be some kind of an accident, but not necessarily a human error. We will have to see. But … I think he most probable explanation is the ship with anchor down moved both back and forth and possibly caused damage to the pipeline."

If a ship's anchor were to become entangled with an underwater obstacle such as a communications cable or petroleum pipeline, the operator is required by federal law to notify the Coast Guard. The locations and movements of ships are also regularly monitored by both the AIS system and radar, according to the Coast Guard.

Xiros said if he were investigating the cause of the oil spill, he would seek to review the digital logs for both location and engine operations aboard the Rotterdam Express.

According to MarineTraffic data, the ship left Long Beach on Monday for the Port of Oakland, where it was moored at a dock Wednesday night.

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Associated Press writer Michael Blood in Los Angeles contributed to this report.

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Judge orders Texas to suspend new law banning most abortions

By PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A federal judge ordered Texas to suspend the most restrictive abortion law in the U.S., calling it an "offensive deprivation" of a constitutional right by banning most abortions in the nation's second-most populous state since September.

The order Wednesday by U.S. District Judge Robert Pitman is the first legal blow to the Texas law known

as Senate Bill 8, which until now had withstood a wave of early challenges. In the weeks since the restrictions took effect, Texas abortion providers say the impact has been "exactly what we feared."

In a 113-page opinion, Pitman took Texas to task over the law, saying Republican lawmakers had "contrived an unprecedented and transparent statutory scheme" by leaving enforcement solely in the hands of private citizens, who are entitled to collect $10,000 in damages if they bring successful lawsuits against abortion providers who violate the restrictions.

The law, signed by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott in May, prohibits abortions once cardiac activity is detected, which is usually around six weeks, before some women even know they are pregnant.

"From the moment S.B. 8 went into effect, women have been unlawfully prevented from exercising control over their lives in ways that are protected by the Constitution," wrote Pitman, who was appointed to the bench by former President Barack Obama.

"That other courts may find a way to avoid this conclusion is theirs to decide; this Court will not sanction one more day of this offensive deprivation of such an important right."

But even with the law on hold, abortion services in Texas may not instantly resume because doctors still fear that they could be sued without a more permanent legal decision. Planned Parenthood said it was hopeful the order would allow clinics to resume abortion services as soon as possible.

Texas officials swiftly told the court of their intention to seek a reversal from the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which previously allowed the restrictions to take effect.

The lawsuit was brought by the Biden administration, which has said the restrictions were enacted in defiance of the U.S. Constitution. Attorney General Merrick Garland called the order "a victory for women in Texas and for the rule of law."

The law had been in effect since Sept. 1.

"For more than a month now, Texans have been deprived of abortion access because of an unconstitutional law that never should have gone into effect. The relief granted by the court today is overdue, and we are grateful that the Department of Justice moved quickly to seek it," said Alexis McGill Johnson, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Texas Right to Life, the state's largest anti-abortion group, said the order was not unexpected.

"This is ultimately the legacy of Roe v. Wade, that you have activist judges bending over backwards, bending precedent, bending the law, in order to cater to the abortion industry," said Kimberlyn Schwartz, a spokeswoman for the group. "These activist judges will create their conclusion first: that abortion is a so-called constitutional right and then work backwards from there."

Abortion providers say their fears have become reality in the short time the law has been in effect. Planned Parenthood says the number of patients from Texas at its clinics in the state decreased by nearly 80% in the two weeks after the law took effect.

Some providers have said that Texas clinics are now in danger of closing while neighboring states struggle to keep up with a surge of patients who must drive hundreds of miles. Other women, they say, are being forced to carry pregnancies to term.

Other states, mostly in the South, have passed similar laws that ban abortion within the early weeks of pregnancy, all of which judges have blocked. A 1992 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court prevented states from banning abortion before viability, the point at which a fetus can survive outside the womb, around 24 weeks of pregnancy.

But Texas' version had so far outmaneuvered the courts because it leaves enforcement to private citizens to file suits, not prosecutors, which critics say amounts to a bounty.

"This is not some kind of vigilante scheme," said Will Thompson, counsel for the Texas Attorney General's Office, while defending the law to Pitman last week. "This is a scheme that uses the normal, lawful process of justice in Texas."

The Texas law is just one that has set up the biggest test of abortion rights in the U.S. in decades, and it is part of a broader push by Republicans nationwide to impose new restrictions on abortion.

On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court began a new term, which in December will include arguments in

Mississippi's bid to overturn 1973's landmark Roe v. Wade decision guaranteeing a woman's right to an abortion.

Last month, the court did not rule on the constitutionality of the Texas law in allowing it to remain in place. But abortion providers took that 5-4 vote as an ominous sign about where the court might be heading on abortion after its conservative majority was fortified with three appointees of former President Donald Trump.

Ahead of the new Supreme Court term, Planned Parenthood on Friday released a report saying that if Roe v. Wade were overturned, 26 states are primed to ban abortion. This year alone, nearly 600 abortion restrictions have been introduced in statehouses nationwide, with more than 90 becoming law, according to Planned Parenthood.

Texas officials argued in court filings that even if the law were put on hold temporarily, providers could still face the threat of litigation over violations that might occur in the time between a permanent ruling.

At least one Texas abortion provider has admitted to violating the law and been sued — but not by abortion opponents. Former attorneys in Illinois and Arkansas say they sued a San Antonio doctor in hopes of getting a judge who would invalidate the law.

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Associated Press writer Jamie Stengle in Dallas contributed to this report

More than 120,000 US kids had caregivers die during pandemic

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The number of U.S. children orphaned during the COVID-19 pandemic may be larger than previously estimated, and the toll has been far greater among Black and Hispanic Americans, a new study suggests.

More than half the children who lost a primary caregiver during the pandemic belonged to those two racial groups, which make up about 40% of the U.S. population, according to the study published Thursday by the medical journal Pediatrics.

"These findings really highlight those children who have been left most vulnerable by the pandemic, and where additional resources should be directed," one of the study's authors, Dr. Alexandra Blenkinsop of Imperial College London, said in a statement.

During 15 months of the nearly 19-month COVID-19 pandemic, more than 120,000 U.S. children lost a parent or grandparent who was a primary provider of financial support and care, the study found. Another 22,000 children experienced the death of a secondary caregiver — for example, a grandparent who provided housing but not a child's other basic needs.

In many instances, surviving parents or other relatives remained to provide for these children. But the researchers used the term "orphanhood" in their study as they attempted to estimate how many children's lives were upended.

Federal statistics are not yet available on how many U.S. children went into foster care last year. Researchers estimate COVID-19 drove a 15% increase in orphaned children.

The new study's numbers are based on statistical modeling that used fertility rates, death statistics and household composition data to make estimates.

An earlier study by different researchers estimated that roughly 40,000 U.S. children lost a parent to COVID-19 as of February 2021.

The two studies' findings are not inconsistent, said Ashton Verdery, an author of the earlier study. Verdery and his colleagues focused on a shorter time period than the new study. Verdery's group also focused only on deaths of parents, while the new paper also captured what happened to caregiving grandparents.

"It is very important to understand grandparental losses," said Verdery, a researcher at Penn State, in an email. "Many children live with grandparents," a living arrangement more common among certain racial groups.

About 32% of all kids who lost a primary caregiver were Hispanic and 26% were Black. Hispanic and

Black Americans make up much smaller percentages of the population than that. White children accounted for 35% of the kids who lost primary caregivers, even though more than half of the population is white.

The differences were far more pronounced in some states. In California, 67% of the children who lost primary caregivers were Hispanic. In Mississippi, 57% of the children who lost primary caregivers were Black, the study found.

The new study based its calculation on excess deaths, or deaths above what would be considered typical. Most of those deaths were from the coronavirus, but the pandemic has also led to more deaths from other causes.

Kate Kelly, a Georgia teenager, lost her 54-year-old father in January. William "Ed" Kelly had difficulty breathing and an urgent care clinic suspected it was due to COVID-19, she said. But it turned out he had a blocked artery and died at work of a heart attack, leaving Kate, her two sisters and her mother.

In the first month after he died, friends and neighbors brought groceries, made donations and were very supportive. But after that, it seemed like everyone moved on — except Kate and her family.

"It's been just like no help at all," said the high school junior from Lilburn.

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

With windfall, city tries to reach kids trapped in violence

By SARA BURNETT Associated Press

ROCKFORD, Ill. (AP) — The teenagers were arrested so many times that Deputy Chief Kurt Whisenand knew them by name. Accused of shootings, carjackings and armed robberies, they had become some of the most violent young offenders in Rockford, Illinois — a city with no shortage of them.

But it was a report from a few years earlier that gave Whisenand the most pause.

Police believed most of the five — then 13 or 14 years old — had been sexually abused by the same man whom one of the boys had met on social media. The man bought them presents, got them alone and abused them. He eventually was caught and sentenced to 20 years in federal prison.

Reading that report was "kind of a light bulb moment" — the type of discovery that didn't catch the longtime investigator by surprise, exactly, but did make Whisenand rethink the way he and others in law enforcement had been approaching violent crime.

A few months of painstaking research later, Whisenand had data to back up his hunch: Of the offenders age 17 and under involved in violent crime between 2016 and 2019 in the northern Illinois city, about 70% had been exposed to domestic or sexual abuse. For some, the abuse started before they turned 1 and continued for years.

That is the short version of how, after a pandemic year when the violent crime rate in Illinois' fifth-largest city soared along with much of the rest of the country, Rockford decided to spend part of a roughly $54 million federal windfall to overhaul its approach to juvenile crime. That means hiring a data analyst and improving the way the whole city — from police to schools and social service agencies — interacts with young people. Maybe looking out for these youngest victims early on, they say, would prevent crimes from happening years down the road.

The roughly $2 million the city is investing comes from the American Rescue Plan Act, the $1.9 trillion package that funneled billions of dollars in economic stimulus directly to local governments. It is a "once-in-a-lifetime sum of money," says Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara, particularly arriving after the COVID-19 pandemic left finances in tatters for many communities.

The money is so substantial and allows such broad leeway on spending that communities across the U.S. are trying out new, longer-term ways to fix what's broken in their cities. For some that means addressing rising homelessness, replacing lead pipes that are sickening children or finding alternative ways to fight high crime.

There is no guarantee any of the experiments will work. And in Rockford's case, it will be years before

anyone can say for certain. But after a year when homicides and the number of people injured in shootings doubled, city leaders are taking a calculated risk.

"By and large for 30 years we have been addressing crime in the same way," McNamara said. "We know we can't keep doing things the same way."

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Approved by Democrats in March over GOP objections that it spent too much and on projects unrelated to the coronavirus pandemic, the American Rescue Plan was one of President Joe Biden's earliest legislative accomplishments. The massive plan included money for COVID-19 vaccinations, $1,400 checks to individuals, expanded unemployment benefits and a tax credit expected to slash child poverty. It also provides $350 billion for state, local and tribal governments.

With violent crime on the rise this summer, Biden encouraged local officials to use some of their allotment to address shootings and homicides. For some local governments that meant hiring more police officers or giving out bonuses. Others turned to non-police initiatives like summer jobs and mentoring programs.

In Rockford, a city of about 150,000 just south of the Wisconsin border, the mayor and City Council didn't need prodding from the president.

Crime has been an ongoing challenge for the former manufacturing hub, once known as the "screw capital of the world" for the millions of fasteners it produced. The city lost jobs as factories closed across the Rust Belt, then with the pandemic. Rockford now has the highest unemployment rate of any metro area in Illinois, leading to foreclosures, deteriorating housing and nearly one-quarter of residents living in poverty. Its violent crime rate in 2019 was more than three times the national rate for similarly sized cities, according to FBI statistics. Not all police forces report crime data to the FBI.

McNamara, whose father served as Rockford mayor in the 1980s, studied criminology and sociology in college. Shortly after he became mayor himself in 2017, his office began analyzing crime data. Among the findings: about 40% of the city's violent crime was domestic violence.

McNamara formed a special office that helped create the Family Peace Center in downtown Rockford. There, domestic violence victims can get an emergency order of protection, find counseling, help with food and housing and other services under one roof. Rockford police also work out of the center. It's a multiagency approach that city officials now want to use for juvenile crime.

Between 2016 and 2019 the number of violent crimes in the city fell each year, according to Rockford police. Starting in November 2019 the city went four straight months without a murder, and McNamara was hopeful Rockford might see another year-over-year decrease in 2020.

"Then the pandemic hit, and it was like all hell broke loose," he said.

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Most of the shootings over the next year were part of what then-Police Chief Dan O'Shea called a "tit for tat" between factions of two street gangs. They were largely concentrated in lower-income neighborhoods that are home to more of the city's Black and Hispanic residents. Too many, O'Shea said, involved juveniles driving around town with guns and "aimlessly blasting away."

Police said some of the problem may have been kids not being in school and officers not able to get out into neighborhoods and interact with residents because of COVID-19. A home life where young people may have lacked support before the pandemic, they say, got tougher.

A 37-year-old man was charged in a shooting at a bowling alley that left three people dead and three wounded. And two murders were domestic cases, including the strangulation of a woman who had reported her boyfriend for abuse a few days earlier.

The eruption in violence among people stuck at home wasn't a surprise to Delicia Harris, a survivor of abuse who has worked with youth programs in Rockford.

"You gotta spend more time at home with these fools," Harris says of the people committing the abuse. "You don't get to say 'I'm going to Grandma's' or 'I'm going to the cookout at my Auntie's' because we can't go anywhere."

That violence often involved young people who had grown up surrounded by violence. Between 2016

and 2020, 79% of homicide victims and 81% of known homicide suspects had been involved in abuse cases reported to police, Whisenand said.

In the city's review of juveniles accused of violent crimes, a typical youth had experienced a dozen or more incidents of domestic or sexual abuse before age 18, either as a victim or witness. Some saw parents and siblings shot or attacked with knives. In one case, a girl was a victim or witness in 26 separate attacks between age 9 and 13 — including 10 times when she was sexually assaulted. At 17, she was arrested for battery.

"My thought at the time was, 'Well, of course she was,'" Whisenand said.

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Camp Hope is one of the programs Rockford already is offering not only for kids who are victims, but those who are present when abuse is occurring.

The motorcoach that carried the first group of 8- to 11-year-olds to the camp in late August was like a spaceship, the kids said, dubbing it "Ship Hope" for its fancy seats and lights. When they got off at Atwood Park, a few hundred acres of woods and trails along the river outside town, it was the first time some of them had left the city.

The group spent three days hiking through the woods, trying archery and talking about people who, like them, had lived through adversity. The aim is to help them believe in themselves and learn how to cope with their own difficulties, said Annie Hobson, the Family Peace Center's youth services manager.

To Hobson, it makes perfect sense that kids exposed to violence might become violent themselves.

"That's what they've seen. That's what they know," she said, adding that the campers will leave with better coping skills and a mentor they will connect with throughout the year.

The Associated Press was unable to interview camp participants due to city policy of keeping the identity of minors confidential. Other programs being tried in Rockford are aimed specifically at girls or teenagers.

In cases of domestic abuse, "I don't know if we could adequately ever describe what it must be like for a child to watch something like that happen," said Jennifer Cacciapaglia, who runs the mayor's office on domestic and community violence prevention.

If something isn't done for those children, she said, "we will pay for it. We're going to pay for it now or later."

Can I get the flu and COVID-19 vaccines at the same time?

By EMMA H. TOBIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Can I get the flu and COVID-19 vaccines at the same time?

Yes, you can get the shots in the same visit.

When COVID-19 vaccines were first rolling out in the U.S., the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended waiting 14 days between the shots and other immunizations as a precaution. But the agency has since revised its guidelines and says the wait is unnecessary.

The CDC and other health experts point to past experience showing that vaccines work as they should and any side effects are similar whether the shots are given separately or in the same visit.

"We have a history of vaccinating our kids with multiple vaccines," says flu specialist Richard Webby of St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Staying up to date on all vaccinations will be especially important this year, experts say.

Since people were masked and staying home, last year's flu season barely registered. This year, it's unclear how intense the flu season will be with more places reopening.

"The worry is that if they both circulate at the same time, we're going to have this sort of 'twin-demic,'" Webby says. "The concern with that is that it's going to put extra strain on an already strained health care system."

The CDC recommends an annual flu vaccine for everyone 6 months and older, and says ideally everyone should be vaccinated by the end of October. It takes 10 to 14 days for the flu vaccine to take full effect so if you wait until the flu begins circulating, your body may not have time to build up protection. Vaccine

options vary by age but include several types of shots or a nasal spray version.

One caution: COVID-19, colds and flu all share similar symptoms so if you feel ill, the CDC says to postpone a vaccination appointment until you're better to avoid getting others sick.

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The AP is answering your questions about the coronavirus in this series. Submit them at: FactCheck@AP.org. Read more here:

Am I fully vaccinated without a COVID-19 vaccine booster?

Is the delta variant of the coronavirus worse for kids?

What can employers do if workers avoid COVID-19 vaccines?

UN endorses world's 1st malaria vaccine as 'historic moment'

By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

LONDON (AP) — The World Health Organization on Wednesday endorsed the world's first malaria vaccine and said it should be given to children across Africa in the hope that it will spur stalled efforts to curb the spread of the parasitic disease.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus called it "a historic moment" after a meeting in which two of the U.N. health agency's expert advisory groups recommended the step.

"Today's recommendation offers a glimmer of hope for the continent, which shoulders the heaviest burden of the disease. And we expect many more African children to be protected from malaria and grow into healthy adults," said Dr. Matshidiso Moeti, WHO's Africa director.

WHO said its decision was based largely on results from ongoing research in Ghana, Kenya and Malawi that tracked more than 800,000 children who have received the vaccine since 2019.

The vaccine, known as Mosquirix, was developed by GlaxoSmithKline in 1987. While it's the first to be authorized, it does face challenges: The vaccine is only about 30% effective, it requires up to four doses, and its protection fades after several months.

Still, scientists say the vaccine could have a major impact against malaria in Africa, home to most of the world's more than 200 million cases and 400,000 deaths per year.

"This is a huge step forward," said Julian Rayner, director of the Cambridge Institute for Medical Research, who was not part of the WHO decision. "It's an imperfect vaccine, but it will still stop hundreds of thousands of children from dying."

Rayner said the vaccine's impact on the spread of the mosquito-borne disease was still unclear, but pointed to those developed for the coronavirus as an encouraging example.

"The last two years have given us a very nuanced understanding of how important vaccines are in saving lives and reducing hospitalizations, even if they don't directly reduce transmission," he said.

Dr. Alejandro Cravioto, head of the WHO vaccine group that made the recommendation, said designing a shot against malaria was particularly difficult because it is a parasitic disease spread by mosquitoes.

"We're confronted with extraordinarily complex organisms," he said. "We are not yet in reach of a highly efficacious vaccine, but what we have now is a vaccine that can be deployed and that is safe."

WHO said side effects were rare, but sometimes included a fever that could result in temporary convulsions.

Sian Clarke, co-director of the Malaria Centre at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, said the vaccine would be a useful addition to other tools against the disease that might have exhausted their utility after decades of use, like bed nets and insecticides.

"In some countries where it gets really hot, children just sleep outside, so they can't be protected by a bed net," Clarke said. "So obviously if they've been vaccinated, they will still be protected."

In recent years, little significant progress has been made against malaria, Clarke said.

"If we're going to decrease the disease burden now, we need something else," she explained.

Azra Ghani, chair of infectious diseases at Imperial College London, said she and colleagues estimate that giving the malaria vaccine to children in Africa might result in a 30% reduction overall, with up to 8

million fewer cases and as many as 40,000 fewer deaths per year.

"For people not living in malaria countries, a 30% reduction might not sound like much. But for the people living in those areas, malaria is one of their top concerns," Ghani said. "A 30% reduction will save a lot of lives and will save mothers (from) bringing in their children to health centers and swamping the health system."

The WHO guidance would hopefully be a "first step" to making better malaria vaccines, she said. Efforts to produce a second-generation malaria vaccine might be given a boost by the messenger RNA technology used to make two of the most successful COVID-19 vaccines, those from Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna, she added.

"We've seen much higher antibody levels from the mRNA vaccines, and they can also be adapted very quickly," Ghani said, noting that BioNTech recently said it would begin researching a possible malaria shot. "It's impossible to say how that may affect a malaria vaccine, but we definitely need new options to fight it."

Instagram and teens: How to keep your kids safe

By BARBARA ORTUTAY and AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

For many parents, revelations this week from whistleblower Frances Haugen showing internal Facebook studies of the harms of Instagram for teenagers only intensified concerns about the popular photo sharing app.

"The patterns that children establish as teenagers stay with them for the rest of their lives," Haugen said in Senate testimony Tuesday.

"The kids who are bullied on Instagram, the bullying follows them home. It follows them into their bedrooms. The last thing they see before they go to bed at night is someone being cruel to them," Haugen said. "Kids are learning that their own friends, people who they care about, are cruel to them."

So, what can you do to protect your kids? Experts say open lines of communication, age limits and if necessary, activity monitoring are some of the steps parents can take to help kids navigate the dangers of social media while still allowing them to chat with peers on their own terms.

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IS 17 THE NEW 13?

Ever wonder why 13 is the age kids can be on Instagram and other social media apps? It's because of the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act that went into effect in 2000 — before today's teenagers were even born (and when Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg was just a teen himself, for that matter).

The goal was to protect kids' online privacy by requiring websites and online services to disclose clear privacy policies and get parents' consent before gathering personal information on their kids, among other things. To comply, social media companies have generally banned kids under 13 from signing up for their services, although it's been widely documented that kids sign up anyway, either with or without their parents' permission.

But times have changed, and online privacy is no longer the only concern when it comes to kids being online. There's bullying, harassment, and, as Facebook's own research has shown, the risk of developing eating disorders, suicidal thoughts or worse.

In her testimony, Haugen suggested raising the age limit to 16 or even 18. There has been a push among some parents, educators and tech experts to wait to give children phones — and access to social media — until they are older, such as the "Wait Until 8th" pledge that has parents sign a pledge not to give their kids a smartphone until the 8th grade. But neither social media companies nor the government have done anything concrete to increase the age limit.

"There is not necessarily a magical age," said Christine Elgersma, a social media expert at the nonprofit Common Sense Media. But, she added, "13 is probably not the best age for kids to get on social media."

It's still complicated. There's no reliable way to verify a person's age when they sign up for apps and online services. And the apps popular with teens today were created for adults first. Companies have added some safeguards over the years, Elgersma noted, but these are piecemeal changes, not funda-

mental rethinks of the services.

"Developers need to start building apps with kids in mind," she said. And no, she doesn't mean Instagram Kids, the project Facebook paused last week amid a widespread backlash. "We can't trust a company that didn't start with kids' best interests in mind," she said.

Facebook says it's added a host of safeguards and features to improve teens' well-being on Instagram over the years, such as mental-health support for people who search for common hashtags associated with eating disorders or self-harm. The company also tested hiding "like" counts, "which means when you post something, if you're a young person, you don't have to worry about how many people are going to like your post and whether people will see that," said Monika Bickert, Facebook's head of global policy management.

But Facebook's own researchers found that hiding like counts did not help make teenagers feel better.

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TALK, TALK, TALK

Start early, earlier than you think. Elgersma suggests that parents go through their own social media feeds with their children before they are old enough to be online and have open discussions on what they see. How would your child handle a situation where a friend of a friend asks them to send a photo? Or if they see an article that makes them so angry they just want to share it right away?

For older kids, approach them with curiosity and interest.

"If teens are giving you the grunts or the single word answers, sometimes asking about what their friends are doing or just not asking direct questions like 'what are you doing on Instagram?' but 'hey, I heard this influencer is really popular,'" she suggested. "And even if your kid rolled their eyes it could be a window."

Don't say things like "turn that thing off" when your kid has been scrolling for a long time, says Jean Rogers, the director of Fairplay, a nonprofit that advocates for kids to spend less time on digital devices.

"That's not respectful," Rogers said. "It doesn't respect that they have a whole life and a whole world in that device."

Instead, Rogers suggests asking them questions about what they do on their phone, and see what your child is willing to share.

Kids are also likely to respond to parents and educators "pulling back the curtains" on social media and the sometimes insidious tools companies use to keep people online and engaged, Elgersma said. Watch a documentary like " The Social Dilemma " that explores algorithms, dark patterns and dopamine feedback cycles of social media. Or read up with them how Facebook and TikTok make money.

"Kids love to be in the know about these things, and it will give them a sense of power," she said.

Vicky Lacksonen, a 53-year-old mother in Mount Vernon, Ohio, says she just tries to talk with her son. She knows the passcodes to her son's phone and sometimes nudges him to put his phone down if he's been on it for a while. But as long as her 14-year-old keeps his grades up and is doing activities he enjoys, like soccer, she mostly lets him have privacy on his smartphone and apps like Instagram.

"You don't really know what they're looking at," Lacksonen said. "Just having those conversations and talking to them is huge part ... and don't be afraid to ask questions."

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SETTING LIMITS

Rogers says most parents have success with taking their kids' phones overnight to limit their scrolling. Occasionally kids might try to sneak the phone back, but it's a strategy that tends to work because kids need a break from the screen.

"They need to an excuse with their peers to not be on their phone at night," Rogers said. "They can blame their parents."

Parents may need their own limits on phone use. Rogers said it's helpful to explain what you are doing when you do have a phone in hand around your child so they understand you are not aimlessly scrolling through sites like Instagram. Tell your child that you're checking work email, looking up a recipe for dinner or paying a bill so they understand you're not on there just for fun. Then tell them when you plan to put the phone down.

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YOU CAN'T DO IT ALONE

Parents should also realize that it's not a fair fight. Social media apps like Instagram are designed to be addictive, says Roxana Marachi, a professor of education at San Jose State University who studies data harms. Without new laws that regulate how tech companies use our data and algorithms to push users toward harmful content, there is only so much parents can do, Marachi said.

"The companies are not interested in children's well-being, they're interested in eyes on the screen and maximizing the number of clicks." Marachi said. "Period."

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This story has been updated to correct the spelling of Facebook's CEO's name. It's Mark Zuckerberg, not Zuckberg.

Judge orders Texas to suspend new law banning most abortions

By PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A federal judge on Wednesday ordered Texas to suspend the most restrictive abortion law in the U.S., calling it an "offensive deprivation" of a constitutional right by banning most abortions in the nation's second-most populous state since September.

The order by U.S. District Judge Robert Pitman is the first legal blow to the Texas law known as Senate Bill 8, which until now had withstood a wave of early challenges. In the weeks since the restrictions took effect, Texas abortion providers say the impact has been "exactly what we feared."

In a 113-page opinion, Pitman took Texas to task over the law, saying Republican lawmakers had "contrived an unprecedented and transparent statutory scheme" by leaving enforcement solely in the hands of private citizens, who are entitled to collect $10,000 in damages if they bring successful lawsuits against abortion providers who violate the restrictions.

The law, signed by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott in May, prohibits abortions once cardiac activity is detected, which is usually around six weeks, before some women even know they are pregnant.

"From the moment S.B. 8 went into effect, women have been unlawfully prevented from exercising control over their lives in ways that are protected by the Constitution," wrote Pitman, who was appointed to the bench by former President Barack Obama.

"That other courts may find a way to avoid this conclusion is theirs to decide; this Court will not sanction one more day of this offensive deprivation of such an important right."

But even with the law on hold, abortion services in Texas may not instantly resume because doctors still fear that they could be sued without a more permanent legal decision. Planned Parenthood said it was hopeful the order would allow clinics to resume abortion services as soon as possible.

Texas officials swiftly told the court of their intention to seek a reversal from the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which previously allowed the restrictions to take effect.

The lawsuit was brought by the Biden administration, which has said the restrictions were enacted in defiance of the U.S. Constitution. Attorney General Merrick Garland called the order "a victory for women in Texas and for the rule of law."

The law had been in effect since Sept. 1.

"For more than a month now, Texans have been deprived of abortion access because of an unconstitutional law that never should have gone into effect. The relief granted by the court today is overdue, and we are grateful that the Department of Justice moved quickly to seek it," said Alexis McGill Johnson, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Texas Right to Life, the state's largest anti-abortion group, said the order was not unexpected.

"This is ultimately the legacy of Roe v. Wade, that you have activist judges bending over backwards, bending precedent, bending the law, in order to cater to the abortion industry," said Kimberlyn Schwartz, a spokeswoman for the group. "These activist judges will create their conclusion first: that abortion is a so-called constitutional right and then work backwards from there."

Abortion providers say their fears have become reality in the short time the law has been in effect.

Planned Parenthood says the number of patients from Texas at its clinics in the state decreased by nearly 80% in the two weeks after the law took effect.

Some providers have said that Texas clinics are now in danger of closing while neighboring states struggle to keep up with a surge of patients who must drive hundreds of miles. Other women, they say, are being forced to carry pregnancies to term.

Other states, mostly in the South, have passed similar laws that ban abortion within the early weeks of pregnancy, all of which judges have blocked. A 1992 decision by the U.S. Supreme Court prevented states from banning abortion before viability, the point at which a fetus can survive outside the womb, around 24 weeks of pregnancy.

But Texas' version had so far outmaneuvered the courts because it leaves enforcement to private citizens to file suits, not prosecutors, which critics say amounts to a bounty.

"This is not some kind of vigilante scheme," said Will Thompson, counsel for the Texas Attorney General's Office, while defending the law to Pitman last week. "This is a scheme that uses the normal, lawful process of justice in Texas."

The Texas law is just one that has set up the biggest test of abortion rights in the U.S. in decades, and it is part of a broader push by Republicans nationwide to impose new restrictions on abortion.

On Monday, the U.S. Supreme Court began a new term, which in December will include arguments in Mississippi's bid to overturn 1973's landmark Roe v. Wade decision guaranteeing a woman's right to an abortion.

Last month, the court did not rule on the constitutionality of the Texas law in allowing it to remain in place. But abortion providers took that 5-4 vote as an ominous sign about where the court might be heading on abortion after its conservative majority was fortified with three appointees of former President Donald Trump.

Ahead of the new Supreme Court term, Planned Parenthood on Friday released a report saying that if Roe v. Wade were overturned, 26 states are primed to ban abortion. This year alone, nearly 600 abortion restrictions have been introduced in statehouses nationwide, with more than 90 becoming law, according to Planned Parenthood.

Texas officials argued in court filings that even if the law were put on hold temporarily, providers could still face the threat of litigation over violations that might occur in the time between a permanent ruling.

At least one Texas abortion provider has admitted to violating the law and been sued — but not by abortion opponents. Former attorneys in Illinois and Arkansas say they sued a San Antonio doctor in hopes of getting a judge who would invalidate the law.

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Associated Press writer Jamie Stengle in Dallas contributed to this report

Congress foresees short-term debt fix amid perilous standoff

By KEVIN FREKING and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican and Democratic leaders edged back Wednesday from a perilous standoff over lifting the nation's borrowing cap, with Democratic senators signaling they were receptive to an offer from Senate GOP leader Mitch McConnell that would allow an emergency extension into December.

McConnell made the offer shortly before Republicans were prepared to block legislation to suspend the debt limit until December of next year and as President Joe Biden and business leaders ramped up their concerns that an unprecedented federal default would disrupt government payments to millions of people and throw the nation into recession.

The emerging agreement sets the stage for a sequel of sorts in December, when Congress will again face pressing deadlines to fund the government and raise the debt limit before heading home for the holidays.

A procedural vote — on the longer extension the Republicans were going to block — was abruptly delayed late Wednesday and the Senate recessed so lawmakers could discuss next steps. Democrats emerged from their meeting more optimistic that a crisis would be averted.

"Basically, I'm glad that Mitch McConnell finally saw the light," said Bernie Sanders, the independent senator from Vermont. The Republicans "have finally done the right thing and at least we now have another couple months in order to get a permanent solution."

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., added that, assuming final details in the emergency legislation are in order, "for the next three months, we'll continue to make it clear that we are ready to continue to vote to pay our bills and Republicans aren't."

Unsurprisingly, McConnell portrayed it very differently.

"This will moot Democrats' excuses about the time crunch they created and give the unified Democratic government more than enough time to pass standalone debt limit legislation through reconciliation," he said.

Congress has just days to act before the Oct. 18 deadline when the Treasury Department has warned it would quickly run short of funds to handle the nation's already accrued debt load.

McConnell and Senate Republicans have insisted that Democrats would have to go it alone to raise the debt ceiling and allow the Treasury to renew its borrowing so that the country could meet its financial obligations. Further, McConnell has insisted that Democrats use the same cumbersome legislative process called reconciliation that they used to pass a $1.9 trillion COVID relief bill and have been employing to try to pass Biden's $3.5 trillion measure to boost safety net, health and environmental programs.

McConnell said in his offer Wednesday that Republicans would still insist that Democrats use the reconciliation process for a long-term debt limit extension. However, he said Republicans are willing to "assist in expediting" that process, and in the meantime Democrats may use the normal legislative process to pass a short-term debt limit extension with a fixed dollar amount to cover current spending levels into December.

While he continued to blame Democrats, his offer will also allow Republicans to avoid the condemnation they would have gotten from some quarters if a financial crisis were to occur.

Earlier Wednesday, Biden enlisted top business leaders to push for immediately suspending the debt limit, saying the approaching deadline created the risk of a historic default that would be like a "meteor" that could crush the economy and financial markets.

At a White House event, the president shamed Republican senators for threatening to filibuster any suspension of the $28.4 trillion cap on the government's borrowing authority. He leaned into the credibility of corporate America — a group that has traditionally been aligned with the GOP on tax and regulatory issues — to drive home his point as the heads of Citi, JP Morgan Chase and Nasdaq gathered in person and virtually to say the debt limit must be lifted.

"It's not right and it's dangerous," Biden said of the resistance by Senate Republicans.

His moves came amid talk that Democrats might try to change Senate filibuster rules to get around Republicans. But Sen. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., reiterated his opposition to such a change Wednesday, likely taking it off the table for Democrats.

The business leaders echoed Biden's points about needing to end the stalemate as soon as possible, though they sidestepped the partisan tensions in doing so. Each portrayed the debt limit as an avoidable crisis.

"We just can't wait to the last minute to resolve this," said Jane Fraser, CEO of the bank Citi. "We are, simply put, playing with fire right now, and our country has suffered so greatly over the last few years. The human and the economic cost of the pandemic has been wrenching, and we don't need a catastrophe of our own making."

The financial markets have yet to fully register the drama in Washington, though there are signs that they are getting jittery, said Adena Friedman, CEO of the Nasdaq stock exchange.

Stock prices rose after news of McConnell's offer came out.

Ahead of the White House meeting, the administration warned that if the borrowing limit isn't extended, it could set off an international financial crisis the United States might not be able to manage.

"A default would send shock waves through global financial markets and would likely cause credit markets worldwide to freeze up and stock markets to plunge," the White House Council of Economic Advisers said in a new report. "Employers around the world would likely have to begin laying off workers."

The recession that could be triggered could be worse than the 2008 financial crisis because it would

come as many nations are still struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic, the report said. It was first obtained by The New York Times.

To get around the standoff taking place in the Senate, Biden indicated in off-the-cuff comments Tuesday Democrats were weighing a change to Senate rules.

"It's a real possibility," Biden told reporters outside the White House.

But Manchin, who has for months resisted pressure from liberal activists to change the filibuster so that Democrats can advance legislation on other issues such as voting rights, appeared unmoved.

"I think I've been very clear," Manchin told reporters. "Nothing changes." He implored Schumer and McConnell to work together to resolve the impasse.

Getting rid of the filibuster rule would lower the typical 60-vote threshold for passage to 50. In the split 50-50 Senate, Vice President Kamala Harris could then break a tie, allowing Democrats to push past Republicans. But to succeed in changing the rules, all Democratic senators would need to be on board.

Once a routine matter, raising the debt limit has become politically treacherous over the past decade or more, used by Republicans, in particular, to rail against government spending and the rising debt load.

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AP Business Writer Stan Choe contributed from New York.

Student taken into custody hours after Texas school shooting

By JAMIE STENGLE and JILL BLEED Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — An 18-year-old student opened fire during a fight at his Dallas-area high school on Wednesday, injuring four people and then fleeing before being taken into custody hours later, authorities said.

Timothy George Simpkins was taken into custody without incident, the Arlington Police Department tweeted. He was booked in the Arlington jail on three counts of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and was being held on $75,000 bail.

One person was in critical condition, another was in good condition and a third person was treated for minor abrasions and was scheduled to be released from the hospital later Wednesday, police said. A fourth person was hurt but did not require treatment at a hospital. Police said earlier that three of the four injured were students.

The shooting at Timberview High School, which is in Arlington but belongs to the school district in neighboring Mansfield, stemmed from a fight that broke out in a classroom, Arlington Assistant Police Chief Kevin Kolbye said at news conference before Simpkins' arrest.

"This is not a random act of violence," he said. "This is not somebody attacking our school."

A spokeswoman for Simpkins' family said he had been bullied and robbed twice at school.

"The decision he made, taking the gun, we're not justifying that," said family spokeswoman Carol Harrison Lafayette, who spoke to reporters outside the Simpkins' home while standing with other relatives. "That was not right. But he was trying to protect himself.

The federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives is investigating how the suspect got a gun. Local police from other nearby jurisdictions, including the cities of Mansfield and Grand Prairie, assisted Wednesday.

Student Hanyla Milligan said she first got word of the shooting when she heard a commotion.

"Someone outside of my classroom said, 'He just shot him," the 16-year-old Milligan said, and then she heard people running. "People were scared. They was crying. They was shaking."

After news of the shooting spread, hundreds of parents gathered at the Mansfield Independent School District Center for the Performing Arts about 5 miles (8 kilometers) from the high school to be reunified with their kids, who were bused over. Among them was Justin Rockhold, whose ninth-grade son had texted to let him know he was OK.

Rockhold said he has served in the military and he drew on that experience to instruct his son, telling him to keep his head down and be still to stay safe. When asked whether he had thought a shooting could

happen at the school, he said his military training is also a reminder of life's dangerous realities.

"Obviously in America — in the world we live in today — it's always something. ... It's in the back of your mind," Rockhold said, adding that he was praying for the injured. "I'm just blessed today that my kid's safe."

Timberview serves about 1,900 students in the ninth through 12th grades. The sprawling complex opened in 2004.

Arlington, with a population of about 400,000, is a major suburb of the Dallas-Fort Worth area. The city is home to attractions including the Six Flags Over Texas amusement park and the stadiums where the NFL's Dallas Cowboys and MLB's Texas Rangers play. Authorities closed a section of a tollway in Arlington near Timberview as dozens of school buses picked up students to reunite them with their parents. Some waited for hours to collect their children as traffic in the area crawled.

The shooting Wednesday happened just days after a shooting at a Houston charter school that injured an administrator. Texas' deadliest school shooting occurred in May 2018 when a 17-year-old armed with a shotgun and a pistol opened fire at Santa Fe High School near Houston, killing 10 people, most of whom were students.

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An earlier version of this story was corrected to reflect that the suspect's last name is Simpkins, not Simpkin.

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Bleed reported from Little Rock, Arkansas. Acacia Coronado in Austin contributed to this report. Coronado is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Biden, China's Xi expected to meet virtually by year's end

By JAMEY KEATEN and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

ZURICH (AP) — With tensions rising between the global powers, President Joe Biden and Chinese leader Xi Jinping are expected to hold a virtual meeting before year's end, according to the White House.

The agreement in principle for the talks was disclosed after White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan and senior Chinese foreign policy adviser Yang Jiechi met for six hours in Zurich.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the two sides are still working through what the virtual meeting "would look like."

The presidential meeting was proposed after Biden, who spent a substantial amount of time with Xi when the two were vice presidents, mentioned during their call last month that he would like to be able to see Xi again, according to a senior administration official, who was not authorized to comment publicly on the talks between Sullivan and Yang and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Xi has not left China during the coronavirus pandemic and is not expected to attend in person the upcoming Group of 20 summit in Rome and a U.N. climate conference in Scotland.

A White House statement on the Swiss meeting said Sullivan stressed to Yang the need to maintain open lines of communication, while raising concerns about China's recent military provocations against Taiwan, human rights abuses against ethnic minorities and Beijing's efforts to squelch pro-democracy advocates in Hong Kong.

Sullivan made clear that while the United States would "continue to invest in our own national strength," it sought better engagement at a senior level "to ensure responsible competition," the statement said.

U.S. officials have expressed frustration that interactions with high-level Chinese counterparts, including Yang, in the early stages of Biden's presidency have been less than constructive. But the talks Wednesday were described as respectful, constructive and perhaps the most in-depth between the sides since Biden took office in January, according to the administration official.

China's official Xinhua News Agency echoed that description, saying the two sides had a candid and in-depth exchange of views. It quoted Yang as saying that "China attaches importance to the positive remarks

on China-U.S. relations made recently by U.S. President Joe Biden, and China has noticed that the U.S. side said it ... is not seeking a new Cold War."

Yang added, however, that China opposes defining the relationship as "competitive" and urged the U.S. to stop using Taiwan, Hong Kong, human rights and other issues to interfere in what China calls its internal affairs.

The White House said the meeting was intended to serve as a follow-up to last month's call between Biden and Xi in which Biden stressed the need to set clear parameters in their competition.

Still, the U.S.-China relationship has been under strain, exacerbated recently by the Chinese military's flying dozens of sorties near the self-ruled island of Taiwan, which Beijing considers part of its territory.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Wednesday reiterated concerns that Beijing was undermining regional peace and stability with its "provocative" action. China sent a record 56 fighter planes toward Taiwan on Monday alone.

"We strongly urge Beijing to cease its military, diplomatic and economic pressure and coercion directed at Taiwan," said Blinken, who was in Paris for talks with French officials.

At the start of Biden's presidency, he pledged to press Beijing on its human rights record. His administration has affirmed the U.S. position, first made late in the Trump administration, that China's repression of Uyghur Muslims and other minorities in its northwest Xinjiang region was "genocide."

In March, the United States, in coordination with the European Union, United Kingdom and Canada, imposed sanctions on top communist party officials for their roles in detaining and abusing Uyghurs and other ethnic minorities. At June's Group of Seven summit in England, Biden successfully pressed fellow leaders to include specific language criticizing China's use of forced labor and other human rights abuses in the leaders' joint statement.

Human rights advocates and Republican lawmakers in the U.S. have raised concerns that the administration might be easing pressure on human rights as it looks for cooperation from Beijing on the global effort on climate change and in thwarting North Korea's nuclear program.

The White House said last week it did not have a position on the Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act, which was passed by the U.S. Senate in July.

U.S. Sen. Marco Rubio, a Florida Republican and sponsor of the legislation, wrote in the Washington Examiner on Wednesday that "the Biden administration is choosing to ignore the Chinese Communist Party's egregious human rights abuses to strike a deal on climate."

Psaki pushed back against the criticism. She asserted that Biden, unlike President Donald Trump, "has spoken out against human rights abuses, has raised his concerns about human rights abuses directly with President Xi and we have done that at every level."

The U.S. signaled this week that, for the time being, it plans to stick with tariffs levied against China during the Trump administration.

U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai, in a speech in Washington this week, said she would begin engaging her Chinese counterparts to discuss Beijing's failure to meet commitments made in the first phase of a U.S.-China trade agreement signed in January 2020. Biden has criticized Beijing for "coercive" trade practices, including its use of forced labor, that has led to an unfair playing field.

"We will use the full range of tools we have and develop new tools as needed to defend American economic interests from harmful policies and practices," Tai said.

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Madhani reported from Washington. Associated Press writers Alexandra Jaffe in Washington, Matthew Lee in Paris and Ken Moritsugu in Beijing contributed to this report.

Ethiopia airs claims about UN officials; UN seeks documents

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS (AP) — Days after kicking out seven U.N. officials, Ethiopia accused them without providing evidence Wednesday of inflating the magnitude of humanitarian crisis and taking sides in the

war in its Tigray region, while U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres pressed the country's ambassador for documentation of the allegations.

The unexpected exchange came at a Security Council meeting called to discuss the officials' expulsion amid what the U.N. sees as an escalating humanitarian catastrophe in the Horn of Africa nation. To some council members, the ejection of the officials — most of them with the U.N.'s humanitarian agency — will complicate already difficult aid operations.

Ethiopian Ambassador Taye Atske Selassie laid out newly detailed claims about the officials. He alleged they inflated the number of needy people by 1 million, cheered the Tigrayan forces who are fighting the government, invented a dozen deaths in a camp for displaced people, and helped channel Ethiopian migrants from Saudi Arabia to another African nation "for training and preparation" to fight with the Tigrayans, among other accusations.

"Ethiopia deeply resents this experience," the ambassador said, adding that the government had written to the U.N. about staff conduct in July.

A surprised Guterres responded that he had known nothing of these allegations and that he had twice asked Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed to send him details on any concerns about the impartiality of U.N. staffers.

Guterres, who maintains Ethiopia had no right under the U.N. charter to expel the officials, took a rare step for a secretary-general by responding directly in the council chamber. He asked the ambassador to provide any written documents that the government may have about any alleged wrongdoing by any of the seven officials.

"It is my duty to defend the honor of the United Nations," Guterres told reporters afterward. He said if such documents are provided, the U.N. will investigate why he wasn't alerted about the matter.

Ethiopia announced the expulsions last Thursday, accusing the U.N. officials of meddling in the country's internal business.

The country's foreign ministry later added some more specific claims of "grave violations," such as violating security agreements, transferring communications equipment to be used by Tigray forces, spreading misinformation and "politicization of humanitarian assistance."

But much of what the ambassador said Wednesday had not been raised publicly before.

The expulsions came as the U.N. was increasingly outspoken about what it calls the Ethiopian government's de facto blockade of the Tigray region, where local forces have been fighting government soldiers and allied troops since November.

The conflict began as a political dispute after Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed sidelined the Tigrayan regional party that had dominated Ethiopia's government for decades. The clash spiraled into a war that has killed thousands of people and a hunger crisis that threatens still more.

Up to 7 million people need food and other aid in Tigray and nearby regions where the fighting has spread, and an estimated 400,000 people are living in "famine-like conditions," Guterres said.

"The people of Ethiopia are suffering. We have no other interest but to help stop that suffering," he said.

U.N. humanitarian chief Martin Griffiths told The Associated Press last week that only 10% of needed humanitarian supplies have been reaching Tigray in recent weeks,

Five of the officials expelled work with the U.N. humanitarian agency, another is with the U.N. human rights office and the seventh is with UNICEF, the U.N. children's agency.

The council had taken no action after an emergency closed-door discussion Friday, and divisions came into the open at Wednesday's meeting.

Speaking before the Ethiopian ambassador leveled the new allegations, the U.S. and several European members deplored the expulsions.

"It cannot be excused, nor ignored," Irish Ambassador Geraldine Byrne Nason said.

U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield called the expulsions reckless, unjustified and an affront to the U.N., its member countries and humanitarian principles.

Asked later about the Ethiopian envoy's accusations, she said the U.S. wanted to see the allegations and "where they're coming from," but it "raises some concerns" that they emerged after the officials were kicked out.

Thomas-Greenfield urged the council to consider passing a resolution to help ensure the U.N. can deliver humanitarian aid in Ethiopia.

"If these calls for humanitarian access continue to go unheard, then the Security Council must act," she said.

But representatives for China and Tunisia — the latter speaking for the council's three African members plus St. Vincent and the Grenadines — called for "quiet diplomacy."

Indian Ambassador T.S. Tirumurti wanted to "de-escalate the situation through engagement and dialogue," and Russian deputy Ambassador Anna Evstigneeva said the council shouldn't "overdramatize the developments" in what her country views as Ethiopia's internal affairs.

The Ethiopian ambassador asked the U.N. to send new staffers to replace those forced to leave, and he said his country wanted to work with the international community.

"No one should doubt the Ethiopian tradition of hospitality," he said. "What we ask is respect, dignity and honesty."

Lawyer charged in Durham probe demands more info about case

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Attorneys for a cybersecurity lawyer charged in a special counsel's probe into the Trump-Russia investigation asked federal prosecutors Wednesday to provide more information about the indictment, calling the allegations vague, ill-defined and confusing.

The motion by attorneys for Michael Sussmann previews the lines of attack they intend to use in defending him on a charge of making a false statement to the FBI five years ago.

The case was brought last month by John Durham, the prosecutor tasked with examining the U.S. government's investigation into ties between Russia and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Sussmann has pleaded not guilty, and his lawyers have attacked the case as driven by politics rather than facts.

Sussmann is accused of lying to the FBI during a September 2016 conversation in which he relayed concerns about potentially suspicious cyber contacts between a Trump Organization server and the server of a Russian bank. The indictment alleges Sussmann told the FBI's then-general counsel, James Baker, that he was not bringing the concerns to the FBI on behalf of any particular client when he was actually representing the Hillary Clinton campaign and a technology executive.

In a motion filed Wednesday, Sussmann's lawyers note that the alleged false statement was unrecorded and that there are no contemporaneous notes about it. Baker, the sole witness, has "already disclaimed memory of the statement" and has testified in ways that support rather than cut against Sussmann's account, according to Sussmann's lawyers.

Sussmann, they say, has consistently maintained — including in testimony to Congress — that he met with the FBI on behalf of a cyber expert client. His lawyers say he met with Baker to advise the FBI about a forthcoming news media report describing potential cyber contacts between the Trump server and the Russian bank. The FBI ultimately examined the matter, but found no evidence of a communications backchannel.

The motion for what's known in the law as a "bill of particulars" seeks additional information about the allegations, including the precise words of Sussmann's alleged false statement, the context in which it was made, what part of it was false and why it was material.

"While the Indictment in this matter is 27 pages long, the majority of the allegations are not relevant to the crime the Special Counsel has chosen to charge," says the motion from Sussmann's lawyers.

"And on that charge, a single alleged false statement, the Indictment plainly fails to provide Mr. Sussmann with the detail and clarity that the law requires and that is essential in enabling Mr. Sussmann to prepare his defense," the lawyers added.

A spokesman for the Justice Department declined to comment Wednesday evening.

Durham, a longtime federal prosecutor who served for years as the U.S. attorney in Connecticut, was tapped in 2019 by Attorney General William Barr to examine any potential misconduct in the federal investigation into potential coordination between Russia and the 2016 Trump campaign. An investigation by

special counsel Robert Mueller detailed significant contacts between Russians and Trump associates, but did not allege a criminal conspiracy to tip the outcome of the presidential election.

Barr appointed him last year as a special counsel, giving him extra protection intended to ensure that he could complete his work without being fired in a new administration.

The case against Sussmann is only the second criminal prosecution Durham has brought in roughly two and a half years of work. Last year, he secured a guilty plea from a former FBI lawyer, Kevin Clinesmith, on a charge that he altered a government email. Clinesmith was sentenced to probation.

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Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP

City in Michigan urged to use bottled water due to lead risk

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Michigan on Wednesday urged residents of Benton Harbor to use only bottled water for cooking and drinking, a major shift in response to the city's elevated levels of lead.

The state recently said it would distribute free water and filters in the southwestern Michigan city. But federal regulators now are reviewing how effective the filters are in removing lead from water at certain levels, according to the health department.

The state said more than 15,000 cases of water will be delivered in coming days to the predominantly Black and mostly low income community.

"We think they probably are effective," health department director Elizabeth Hertel said of the filters.

"Right now don't use the water for cooking or drinking, even the filtered water, until we can guarantee the efficacy of those filters," Hertel told The Associated Press.

She didn't know how long it would take. Filters so far have been given to more than 2,600 homes, the department said.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said it's evaluating how filters perform specifically on Benton Harbor's water chemistry.

"Certified filters that are properly installed and maintained are very effective in reducing lead concentrations in drinking water," the EPA said, citing studies.

A local activist, the Rev. Edward Pinkney, said he has boxes of filters at his church. He's pleased with the state's emphasis on bottled water but said residents need to hear a stronger message.

"The water is unsafe to use. Period. Any use. That will get more attention around here," Pinkney said.

Benton Harbor, population 9,600, is in Berrien County, 100 miles from Chicago. Pinkney and environmental groups have accused Gov. Gretchen Whitmer's administration and local officials of failing to adequately respond since lead contamination was discovered three years ago.

Whitmer has called for spending $20 million in Benton Harbor to replace nearly 6,000 service lines, most suspected of containing lead, within five years.

Lead is considered harmful at any level, and children are particularly vulnerable because it can slow growth and result in learning and behavior problems.

Two hundred miles away in Flint, lead contamination occurred in 2014-15 because water pulled from a river wasn't properly treated to reduce corrosion in old pipes. The river was tapped as a cost-saving move by managers appointed by then-Gov. Rick Snyder.

Benton Harbor, like many communities in western Michigan, gets its water from Lake Michigan. The problem apparently is the condition of the water after it is treated and moves through an aging distribution system into homes.

While recommending that residents use bottled water, the state still urged them to run their faucets or bathtubs daily to keep tap water moving.

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Fed up by pandemic, US food workers launch rare strikes

By DEE-ANN DURBIN and GRANT SCHULTE undefined

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — A summer of labor unrest at U.S. food manufacturers has stretched into fall, as pandemic-weary workers continue to strike for better pay.

Around 1,400 workers at Kellogg Co.'s U.S. cereal plants walked off the job this week, saying negotiations with the company over pay and benefits are at an impasse. Meanwhile, in Kentucky, a strike by 420 workers against Heaven Hill Distillery is in its fourth week.

The actions come on top of strikes earlier this summer by 600 workers at a Frito-Lay plant in Topeka, Kansas, and 1,000 workers at five Nabisco plants across the U.S. In June, Smithfield Foods narrowly avoided a strike by thousands of workers at a plant in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

The number of actions is unusual. Kellogg says this is the first time its U.S. cereal workers have gone on strike since 1972. Nabisco workers last walked off the job in 1969.

But after a difficult 18 months, which saw many workers putting in 12-hour shifts and mandatory overtime to meet pandemic demand, employees are in no mood to compromise.

"We're drawing a line in the sand," said Rob Long, a production mechanic who has worked at Kellogg's Omaha plant for 11 years. Kellogg workers are also striking in Michigan, Pennsylvania and Tennessee.

Long said he and others are upset about a two-tiered system of employees that gives fewer benefits and less pay to newer workers, creating a wedge within the ranks. Long said the company wants to get rid of a provision that currently caps the lower tier of workers at 30% of the workforce.

After decades of watching companies chip away at pay and benefits, food workers sense that they have a rare upper hand in the wake of the pandemic, says Patricia Campos-Medina, the executive director of The Worker Institute at ILR Cornell.

Labor shortages mean companies can't easily find replacements for food-production workers, she said. And the pandemic put a spotlight on the essential __ and sometimes dangerous __ nature of their work.

"Workers in general are demanding that companies invest more in the workforce and not just use the profits for the shareholders," she said.

Campos-Medina said the trend is not only happening with unionized workers like those at Kellogg, who are members of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers Union. Non-union fast food workers have walked off the job in dozens of U.S. cities seeking a $15 minimum wage. And workers at three Starbucks stores in Buffalo, New York, are trying to unionize.

The strikes come as food companies are still trying to get back to normal levels of production. Kellogg's cereal sales had been anemic for years, for example, as families shifted to portable breakfast items like nutrition bars. But when schools closed and kids were home last year, U.S. cereal sales shot up 7%. So far this year, they're down 7.7%.

Kris Bahner, Kellogg's senior vice president for global corporate affairs, says the company's compensation and benefits are already among the industry's best. The company, which is based in Battle Creek, Michigan, says its longer-term employees made an average of $120,000 last year and $118,000 in 2019, and its proposed contract would shift newer workers to those higher wage rates over six years.

"We are disappointed by the union's decision to strike," she said. Kellogg began negotiating a new four-year contract on Sept. 8.

But workers on the picket line in Omaha say they're routinely working 74- to 84-hour weeks to earn that money. Some workers said they've endured 12-hour shifts seven days a week throughout the pandemic, with only a few minutes' notice about mandatory overtime.

"We do make good money, but we've given up a lot," said Dan Jourdan, a packing machine operator who has worked at Kellogg since 2001. "If we worked just 40 hours a week, we'd make nowhere near that kind of wage."

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Durbin reported from Ann Arbor, Michigan.

Ex-Facebook employee asks lawmakers to step in. Will they?

By MARCY GORDON AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Camera lights glare. Outrage thunders from elected representatives. A brave industry whistleblower stands alone and takes the oath behind a table ringed by a photographers' mosh pit.

The former Facebook product manager who has accused the social network giant of threatening children's safety — and the integrity of democracy — is urging Congress to take action to rein in a largely unregulated company. The drama rings familiar, but will real change come out of it this time?

When Frances Haugen came before a Senate Commerce panel to lay out a far-reaching condemnation of Facebook, she had prescriptions for actions by Congress at the ready. Not a breakup of the tech giant as many lawmakers are calling for, but targeted legislative remedies.

They include new curbs on the long-standing legal protections for speech posted on social media platforms. Both Republican and Democratic lawmakers have called for stripping away some of the protections granted by a 25-year-old law — generally known as "Section 230" — that shields internet companies from liability for what users post.

Haugen's idea would be to remove the protections in cases where dominant content driven by computer algorithms favors massive engagement by users over public safety.

"Congressional action is needed," Haugen told the senators in her testimony Tuesday. "(Facebook) won't solve this crisis without your help."

Democrats and Republicans have shown a rare unity around the revelations of Facebook's handling of potential risks to teens from Instagram, and a bipartisan push toward meaningful legislation appears to be stirring.

"We're going to propose legislation," Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., who heads the Senate subcommittee, told reporters. "And the days of Facebook evading oversight are over, because I think the American public is aroused about the importance of ... (social media) preying on their own children."

So it's on the way, right? Not quite. This is still Congress.

"I think it will eventually result in legislation, but it won't be right away," said former congressional aide Phil Schiliro.

Schiliro was there. He fought the congressional Big Tobacco wars in the 1990s as chief of staff to Rep. Henry Waxman, the California Democrat who headed the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Congress enacted landmark legislation reining in the tobacco industry by giving the Food and Drug Administration authority to regulate the manufacture, distribution and marketing of tobacco products. In the current Facebook scandal, critics of the company are pointing to it as a model for what Congress should do with the tech industry.

History, however, offers a cautionary note. In 1994, seven tobacco company executives gave electrifying testimony under oath before Waxman's committee that they didn't believe nicotine was addictive — assertions contradicted by internal documents from their companies. Still, Schiliro notes, tobacco legislation took another 15 years to get through Congress.

During that time, "public opinion really started to shift" toward a negative view of the tobacco industry, says Schiliro, who also worked in the Obama White House and is now a senior presidential fellow at Hofstra University. The public isn't there yet with Big Tech, he suggested, and tech companies still make the argument that they bring products to millions of people that improve their lives — mostly for free.

That dynamic could be changing with Haugen's revelations of internal company research indicating potential harm for some young users, especially girls, of Facebook's Instagram photo-sharing platform. For some of the teen users, the peer pressure generated by Instagram led to mental health and body-image problems, and in some cases, eating disorders and suicidal thoughts, the research leaked by Haugen showed.

"Whenever you have Republicans and Democrats on the same page, you're probably more likely to see something," said Gautam Hans, a technology law and free-speech expert at Vanderbilt University. "Protecting children is something that many people agree with, and I think it's easier to find consensus there."

Given the closely divided Congress and deep political polarization, prospects for legislation to ensure safety on social media platforms may appear as far-off as with the tobacco legislation. Still, lawmakers

from the two parties are rallying around the protection of young internet users. Their shared strident criticism of social media has come from divergent political views. Republicans have decried what they see as anti-conservative bias while Democrats denounce hate speech and incitement to violence.

"I think Congress was heading there and this adds momentum," said Matt Stoller, research director at the American Economic Liberties Project, an organization that advocates for government action against business concentration. "We're still a few years off really neutralizing the power of Big Tech."

Follow Marcy Gordon at https://twitter.com/mgordonap

While US summer surge is waning, more mandates in the works

By JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

COVID-19 deaths in the U.S. are coming down again, hospitalizations are dropping, and new cases per day are about to dip below 100,000 for the first time in two months — all signs that the summer surge is waning.

Not wanting to lose momentum, government leaders and employers are looking to strengthen and vaccine requirements.

Los Angeles enacted one of the nation's strictest vaccine mandates Wednesday, a sweeping measure that would require the shots for everyone entering a bar, restaurant, nail salon, gym or Lakers game. New York City and San Francisco have similar rules.

Minnesota's governor this week called for vaccine and testing requirements for teachers and long-term care workers. In New York, a statewide vaccination mandate for all hospital and nursing home workers will be expanded Thursday to home care and hospice employees.

Across the nation, deaths per day have dropped by nearly 15% since mid-September and are now averaging about 1,750. New cases have fallen to just over 103,000 per day on average, a 40% decline over the past three weeks.

The number of Americans now in the hospital with COVID-19 has declined by about one-quarter since its most recent peak of almost 94,000 a month ago.

"What we're seeing is what we've seen in the prior three surges," said Dr. Marybeth Sexton, an infectious-disease specialist at Emory University School of Medicine. "What we need to remember is when we see these numbers go down, it's not a signal to let up. It's a signal to push harder."

If people give up masks and social distancing and stop getting vaccinated, "we could be right back here in the winter with surge five," she said.

The decreases have been especially sharp in several Deep South states, where cases have gone down more than twice as fast as they have nationwide. Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Arkansas all saw their case numbers cut in half over the past two weeks.

What's behind the decline isn't entirely clear, though health experts point out that the numbers are falling as more are people getting vaccinated and new requirements for the shot are being put in place by government and private employers.

The decrease in case numbers could also be due to the virus running out of susceptible people in some places.

Several big companies and institutions with vaccine requirements are seeing high compliance rates. In Denver, 92% of its municipal employees have gotten the shot, well above the city's overall rate.

Ochsner Health, Louisiana's largest health system, said last week that 82% of its employees were fully vaccinated. But this week, a group of employees sued to block the mandate, which includes making unvaccinated spouses pay an extra $200 a month in health insurance.

Three of North Carolina's largest health systems said on Wednesday that more than 99% of the roughly 88,000 workers they collectively employ have gotten a shot or an approved medical or religious exemption. Just under 300 workers at Duke Health, UNC Health and Novant Health have quit or been fired over their refusal to comply.

Health care giant Kaiser Permanente put more than 2,200 employees nationwide — roughly 1% of its workforce — on unpaid leave because they have chosen not to get vaccinated. They have until Dec. 1 to get their shots or lose their jobs.

Since its vaccination requirement was announced, the inoculation rate among employees has gone from 78% to 92%, Kaiser said.

"Vaccine requirements work. New data reinforces that fact each day," White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said Wednesday.

The easing of cases, death and hospitalizations is happening along with other encouraging developments, including the possibility that vaccinations for 5-to-11-year-olds will become available in a matter of weeks and the first pill for treating people sick with COVID-19 could reach the market by year's end.

Worldwide, newly reported cases fell in the last week, continuing a declining global trend that began in August, the World Health Organization said. The U.N. agency reported that the biggest drop decline in deaths was in Africa.

Elsewhere around the world, Russia's daily coronavirus death toll this week surpassed 900 for the first time in the pandemic amid a low vaccination rate and the government's reluctance to impose tough infection-control restrictions.

And authorities in Sweden, Denmark and Norway suspended or discouraged the use of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine in young people because of an increased risk of heart inflammation, a very rare side effect associated with the shot.

Despite the encouraging direction in the U.S., health experts say it is no time for people to drop their guard because there are still far too many who are unvaccinated.

"This is still primarily a problem of people who are unvaccinated," said Jennifer Nuzzo, a Johns Hopkins University public health researcher. "Some of them are taking precautions, but many of them feel like they don't need to worry."

There is also concern that a new wave could come during the winter months when more people are indoors.

While hospitalizations nationwide are at a two-month low, intensive care units and staff in surging areas from Alaska to New England remain stretched thin.

Despite having some of the highest vaccination rates in the country, some parts of New England, including Maine, are seeing record caseloads, largely among the unvaccinated.

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Seewer reported from Toledo, Ohio. Associated Press writers Janet McConnaughey in New Orleans; Christopher Weber in Los Angeles; Bryan Anderson in Raleigh, North Carolina; and Brady McCombs in Denver contributed to this report.

Toymakers race to get products on shelves amid supply clogs

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO The Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Running out of time to get its products on store shelves ahead of the holidays, the Basic Fun toy company made an unprecedented decision: It's leaving one-third of its iconic Tonka Mighty Dump Trucks destined for the U.S. in China.

Why? Given surging prices for shipping containers and clogs in the supply network, transportation costs to get the bulky yellow toy to U.S. soil is now 40% of the retail price, which is roughly $26. That's dramatically up from 7% a year ago. And it doesn't even include the cost of getting the product from U.S. ports to retailers.

"We've never left product behind in this way," says Jay Foreman, CEO of Basic Fun. "We really had no choice."

Toy companies are racing to get their products to retailers as they grapple with a severe supply-network crunch that could mean sparse shelves for the holidays. They're trying to find containers to ship their goods while searching for alternative ports. Some are flying in some of the toys instead of shipping by

boat to ensure delivery before Dec. 25. And in cases like Basic Fun, they are leaving toys behind in China and waiting for costs to come down.

Like all manufacturers, toy companies have been facing supply chain woes since the pandemic started and temporarily closed factories in China in early 2020. Then, U.S. stores temporarily cut back or halted production amid lockdowns. The situation has only worsened since the spring, with companies having a hard time meeting surging demand for all sorts of goods from shoppers re-entering the world.

Manufacturers are wrestling with bottlenecks at factories and key ports like Long Beach, California — and all points in between. Furthermore, labor shortages in the U.S. have made it difficult to get stuff unloaded from ships and onto trucks.

But for toymakers that heavily rely on holiday sales, there's a lot at stake for the nearly $33 billion U.S. industry. The fourth quarter accounts for 70% of its annual sales. On average, holiday sales account for 20% of the overall retail industry. And 85% of the toys are made in China, estimates Steve Pasierb, CEO of The Toy Association.

The snarls are so severe that some retailers are telling companies they don't want products if they're shipped after mid-October. That's because products that typically took four to six weeks from when they left a factory in China to landing at a U.S. distribution center now take 12 to 16 weeks, says Marc Rosenberg, a toy consultant.

The struggles are happening as the U.S. toy industry enjoyed a nearly 17% increase in sales last year and a 40% increase in the first half of this year as parents looked to entertain their kids at home, according to NPD Group, a market research firm.

But while analysts expect strong growth in 2021, many toy companies said they'll see their sales reduced because they won't be able to fulfill orders on hot items, particularly surprise hits. They are also incurring big costs that will force some toy companies to shutter.

Toy executives say they can't raise prices any more than 10% — even though it won't completely cover the higher costs — because they're worried about shopper reaction. Mattel Inc., the nation's largest toy company, warned this summer it's raising prices in time for the holiday season to offset higher shipping costs, though it didn't say by how much.

Costs of containers on ships have increased more than six-fold from last year with some brand executives saying they've gone up to $20,000 from roughly $3,000 a year ago. That has forced big retailers like Walmart and Target among others to charter their own ships.

Foreman calculates 1,800 Tonka trucks fit on each 40-foot container. So at $20,000 per container, that's costing him $11 each. That's up from an average of $1.75 each in a typical year. He says he's focusing on shipping smaller items like Mash'ems — soft, squishy, water-filled collectibles — onto containers as he looks to maximize the total dollar value of the container and profit margins. He estimates he can fit $150,000 worth of Mash-ems in a container versus $40,000 worth of Tonka trucks.

Some like MGA Entertainment, the maker of L.O.L dolls, are expediting the flying of its toys because it now costs roughly the same shipping.

Jim Silver, editor-in-chief of TTPM, a toy review site, says big discounters like Target and Walmart should have a healthier supply of toys compared with smaller ones because of their clout. Target says it has been teaming up closely with its vendors and transportation partners to keep stores well-stocked and ready for its customers.

But Melissa McCollum, owner of Learning Express Toys in Birmingham, Alabama, says she's received only 25% of the holiday toys as of mid-September; typically, that figure is 50%. And The Toy Book, the leading trade magazine serving the toy industry, is promoting a curated list of in-stock products that retailers can get fast from U.S. warehouses.

Many toy companies like Basic Fun and PlayMonster have reduced advertising.

"We would be advertising to empty shelves," said Tim Kilpin, president of PlayMonster, who says 15% to 20% of its holiday goods are snarled in the supply chain. Koosh, a toy ball made of rubber filaments, was completely sold out in August, and he didn't think there would be a chance of it being replenished by

Christmas, he says. But on Wednesday, Kilpin said he received word that some of the containers including shipments of Koosh are flowing from the West Coast.

The bottlenecks are expected to have lingering consequences. Toymakers are facing pressure from retailers to ship the first flow of holiday 2022 goods in early March instead of late April and the second cycle in June instead of by late July, says Andrew Yanofsky, head of marketing and operations at WowWee.

That will force companies to make decisions about how much to make and reorder without having a full picture of the sales data, he says.

Yanofsky said he placed a big bet initially on Got2Glow Fairy Finder, a light show in a jar that allows children to find virtual fairies, because he knew he wouldn't be able to replenish the production given the snarls.

"We took a risk on excess material beyond the scope of what we thought we could sell, " he said.

Even the few toy companies that make goods in the U.S. have struggled because of labor shortages.

John Gessert is CEO and president of American Plastic Toys, based in Walled Lake, Michigan, with another plant in Mississippi. He says the company is missing 35% to 40% of its front-line workers. Now, it's shifting away its focus on play kitchens that require six workers toward less labor-intensive toys like basketball sets, which require just three workers to put together.

"I have never had such a complicated puzzle to fix," he said.

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Flush with COVID-19 aid, schools steer funding to sports

By COLLIN BINKLEY and RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — One Wisconsin school district built a new football field. In Iowa, a high school weight room is getting a renovation. Another in Kentucky is replacing two outdoor tracks — all of this funded by the billions of dollars in federal pandemic relief Congress sent to schools this year.

The money is part of a $123 billion infusion intended to help schools reopen and recover from the pandemic. But with few limits on how the funding can be spent, The Associated Press found that some districts have used large portions to cover athletics projects they couldn't previously afford.

Critics say it violates the intent of the legislation, which was meant to help students catch up on learning after months of remote schooling. But many schools argue the projects support students' physical and mental health, one of the objectives allowed by the federal government.

Rep. Bobby Scott, the top Democrat on the U.S. House education committee, said the money shouldn't be used to fund athletics at the expense of academics. It was meant to help students, he said, not sports programs.

"I suspect you can make a case for anything, but the purpose is clear: It's to open safely, stay open safely and deal with learning loss," Scott said. "These are targeted resources needed to address the fact that a lot of children just didn't achieve much for about a year."

Robin Lake, director of the Center on Reinventing Public Education, said every dollar of pandemic relief spent on sports could be used to expand tutoring, reduce class sizes and take other steps to help students who are struggling academically.

"Can these districts show that all their kids are ready to graduate at the end of this year — college- and career-ready?" she said. "If not, then stop the construction. Stop it right now."

In some parts of the country, exercise equipment companies have tried to capitalize, contacting school coaches and superintendents to suggest upgrades.

It's impossible to know exactly how many schools are using pandemic relief on athletics. Districts are required to tell states how they're spending the money, but some schools are using local funding for sports projects and then replacing it with the federal relief — a maneuver that skirts reporting requirements.

The funding is part of the American Rescue Plan signed in March by President Joe Biden that sent money to schools, giving larger shares to those with higher poverty. It's the latest of several rounds of funding Congress funneled to the states to address education needs. The AP has tracked more than $157 billion

distributed so far to school districts nationwide.

Schools have wide flexibility in how they use the money but only three years to spend it, a deadline that has led some to look for quick purchases that won't need ongoing funding after the federal money is gone.

When school officials in Whitewater, Wisconsin, learned they would be getting $2 million in pandemic relief this year, they decided to use most of it to cover their current budget, freeing up $1.6 million in local funding to build new synthetic turf fields for football, baseball and softball.

Athletics officials in the district of 1,800 students said the project was sorely needed to replace fields prone to heavy flooding. They touted the federal money as a chance to solve the problem without asking local taxpayers for funding.

"If we don't do it now with this money, I'm not sure when we would ever do something like this," athletic director Justin Crandall told the school board in May. "I don't see us being a district that would go to a referendum for turf fields."

Two school board members objected, with one raising concerns that just $400,000 was being used to address student learning loss — the minimum to meet a requirement that at least 20% goes toward that purpose.

The board approved the plan over those objections, and the new football field had its grand opening in September. District Superintendent Caroline Pate-Hefty declined to answer questions about the project.

In the Roland-Story Community School District in Iowa, there were no objections when the school board voted in May to use $100,000 in pandemic relief on a high school weight room renovation. That allowed the district to double its weightlifting platforms to 12 and add new flooring with customized school branding.

Superintendent Matt Patton called it a "major health and safety improvement," saying the new floors can be disinfected more easily. He said most of the district's federal aid went to other costs, including a full-time mental health therapist, special education teachers and expanded summer learning options.

Like many others in rural Iowa, the district of about 1,000 students has tried to return to normal operation: It's back to full in-person learning and, just weeks before approving the weight room overhaul, dropped a mask mandate.

The project is seen as a boon for wrestlers and the football team, which recently boasted that 39 players put in more than 3,300 workouts in the off-season. The old equipment will be used at the middle school.

"More kids will be able to lift at the same time with better equipment," said high school wrestling coach Leland Schwartz. "Anytime we can offer more opportunities for our athletes, those athletes will get better, which makes all of our programs better."

The school board in East Lyme, Connecticut, recently approved a plan to put some of its federal relief toward annual operating costs, freeing $175,000 to renovate a baseball field with poor drainage. Some board members called for quick action to get the work finished in time for games in the spring.

In September, the Pulaski County school board in Kentucky allocated $1 million in pandemic aid to resurface two outdoor tracks. Superintendent Patrick Richardson called it a health-and-wellness project that falls within the scope of the federal funding, saying it will "allow our students to be taken out for mask breaks, by class, in a safe environment."

Among education advocates, the athletics spending is seen as a breakdown at all levels of government.

Federal officials failed to provide clear funding guidelines, while state education departments didn't police their schools' spending, said Terra Wallin, an associate director of the Education Trust. She also questioned whether districts spending on athletics have considered what's best for students.

Wallin said the U.S. Education Department should issue new guidance and intervene before more districts make similar decisions.

"There are going to be districts next spring that are going to be considering things like this," she said. "There's still time to influence them and make sure districts are doing the right thing."

In a statement, the Education Department said it has made clear the funding must be used on "reasonable and necessary" expenses responding to the pandemic. It said there's "ample evidence" of districts using the relief to keep schools safe, including by increasing access to vaccines, implementing virus testing

and improving ventilation systems.

"We continue to strongly encourage every district to use these funds to help address these issues, including by using our Return to School Roadmap and by providing guidance on how to use these funds," the department said.

So far, athletic spending has generated little pushback from states, which are responsible for making sure districts spend the money appropriately. In August, education officials in Illinois rejected a school's plan to use the funds on a football field. But other states say it isn't their place to challenge school spending decisions.

Iowa's education department approved the weight room project in Roland-Story, saying the federal guidelines allow "capital expenditures for special purpose equipment."

Heather Doe, a spokesperson for the agency, said funding priorities are local decisions. The department doesn't have authority to reject a district's spending, she said, unless it's "definitely unallowable."

In Congress, lawmakers from both parties say it's wrong to use the money on sports. Democrats say it's not what it was meant for, while Republicans say it's a sign it wasn't needed.

"Congress allocated billions more than the CDC estimated was necessary to safely reopen schools, paving the way for rampant waste and abuse," said Rep. Virginia Foxx of North Carolina, the top Republican on the House Committee on Education and Labor.

Meanwhile, fitness companies are ramping up sales pitches.

Chad May, CEO of Commercial Fitness Equipment in Eugene, Oregon, said he's averaging five new school projects every week. So far, his company has taken on $25 million in weight room updates funded with pandemic aid, he said.

Often, the calls are from underfunded districts that want the kind of facilities their wealthier peers have, May said. But some are just looking for ways to spend their federal relief within the three-year deadline.

The high school weight room overhaul in Story City, Iowa, is being done by Push Pedal Pull, a South Dakota company that's taking on similar projects elsewhere in Iowa and Nebraska.

Luke Reiland, a company representative in Ames, Iowa, said he's been calling schools to let them know the funding can be used for those kinds of costs. He sees weight rooms and fitness centers as increasingly important for schools in smaller towns as they look to keep students from leaving for larger districts.

"I'm right in the battle ... to get this money allocated," Reiland said. "I think a lot of these small schools are trying to use this money to really upgrade a bunch of stuff, and I am just trying to get my piece of the pie."

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AP Education Writer Binkley reported from Boston.

Nobel in chemistry honors 'greener' way to build molecules

By DAVID KEYTON, FRANK JORDANS and CHRISTINA LARSON Associated Press

STOCKHOLM (AP) — Two scientists won the Nobel Prize in chemistry Wednesday for finding an ingenious and environmentally cleaner way to build molecules — an approach now used to make a variety of compounds, including medicines and pesticides.

The work of Benjamin List and David W.C. MacMillan has allowed scientists to produce those molecules more cheaply, efficiently, safely and with significantly less hazardous waste.

"It's already benefiting humankind greatly," said Pernilla Wittung-Stafshede, a member of the Nobel panel.

It was the second day in a row that a Nobel rewarded work that had environmental implications. The physics prize honored developments that expanded our understanding of climate change, just weeks before the start of global climate negotiations in Scotland.

The chemistry prize focused on the making of molecules. That requires linking atoms together in specific arrangements, an often difficult and slow task. Until the beginning of the millennium, chemists had only two methods — or catalysts — to speed up the process, using either complicated enzymes or metal catalysts.

That all changed when List, of the Max Planck Institute in Germany, and MacMillan, of Princeton University

in New Jersey, independently reported that small organic molecules can be used to do the job. The new tools have been important for developing medicines and minimizing drug manufacturing glitches, including problems that can cause harmful side effects.

Johan Åqvist, chair of the Nobel panel, called the method as "simple as it is ingenious."

"The fact is that many people have wondered why we didn't think of it earlier," he added.

MacMillan said that winning the prize left him "stunned, shocked, happy, very proud."

"I grew up in Scotland, a working-class kid. My dad's a steelworker. My mom was a home help. … I was lucky enough to get a chance to come to America, to do my Ph.D.," he said.

In fact, he said at a news conference in Princeton, he was planning to follow his older brother into physics, but the physics classes in college were at 8 a.m. in a cold and leaky classroom in rainy Scotland, while the chemistry courses were two hours later in warmer, drier spaces. As he told that story, he said he could hear his wife pleading with him not to share it.

His said the inspiration for his Nobel-winning work came when thinking about the dirty process of making chemicals — one that requires precautions he likened to those taken at nuclear power plants.

If he could devise a way of making medicines faster by completely different means that didn't require vats of metal catalysts, the process would be safer for both workers and the planet, he reasoned.

List said he did not initially know MacMillan was working on the same subject and figured his own hunch might just be a "stupid idea" — until it worked. At that eureka moment, "I did feel that this could be something big," the 53-year-old said.

H.N. Cheng, president of the American Chemical Society, said the laureates developed "new magic wands."

Before the their work, "the standard catalysts frequently used were metals, which frequently have environmental downsides," Cheng said. "They accumulate, they leach, they may be hazardous."

The catalysts that MacMillan and List pioneered "are organic, so they will degrade faster, and they are also cheaper," he said.

The Nobel panel noted that their contributions made the production of key drugs easier, including an antiviral and an anti-anxiety medication.

"One way to look at their work is like molecular carpentry," said John Lorsch, director of the National Institute of General Medical Sciences at the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

"They've found ways to not only speed up the chemical joining," he said, "but to make sure it only goes in either the right-handed or left-handed direction."

The ability to control the orientation in which new atoms are added to molecules is important. Failing to do so can result in side effects in drugs, the Nobel panel explained, citing the catastrophic example of thalidomide, which caused severe birth defects in children.

Since the scientists' discovery, the tool has been further refined, making it many times more efficient.

Peter Somfai, another member of the committee, stressed the importance of the discovery for the world economy.

"It has been estimated that catalysis is responsible for about 35% of the world's GDP, which is a pretty impressive figure," he said. "If we have a more environmentally friendly alternative, it's expected that that will make a difference."

The NIH supported List's research with a grant in 2002. MacMillan's work has received funding from NIH since 2000, for a total of around $14.5 million to date.

"It's a great example of supporting basic science that you don't necessarily know where it's going to go" but can have major impact, said Francis Collins, NIH director.

The Nobel comes with a gold medal and 10 million Swedish kronor,, or more than $1.14 million. The money comes from a bequest left by the prize's creator, Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel, who died in 1895.

Over the coming days, Nobels will be awarded in literature, peace and economics.

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Jordans reported from Berlin and Larson from Washington. Associated Press journalists Mike Corder in Amsterdam and Ted Shaffrey in Princeton, New Jersey, contributed.

Read more stories about Nobel Prizes past and present at https://www.apnews.com/NobelPrizes.

Ban on negotiating Medicare drug prices under pressure

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Donna Weiner looks at Medicare's prescription drug program from two different points of view.

As a participant, she wants to pay less for her medicines, which cost her about $6,000 a year. As a retired accountant who spent 50 years handling the books for companies, she sees a way to get there.

"You know from working in a business that it makes no sense for an administrator of a plan or a company not to be involved in what they have to pay out," said Weiner, who lives near Orlando, Florida. For Medicare "to negotiate those prices down would be thousands of dollars back in my pocket every year," she said.

Negotiating Medicare drug prices is the linchpin of President Joe Biden's ambitious health care agenda. Not only would consumers see lower costs, but savings would be plowed into other priorities such as dental coverage for retirees and lower premiums for people with plans under the Obama-era health law.

To do that, Congress would have to change an unusual arrangement that's written into law.

When lawmakers created Medicare's Part D outpatient prescription drug program in 2003, they barred Medicare from negotiating prices. Republicans who controlled Congress at the time wanted insurers that administer drug plans to do the haggling. Medicare was sidelined, despite decades of experience setting prices for hospitals, doctors and nursing homes.

"I don't know of any other situation where the government has one hand tied behind its back when dealing with people like big pharma," said Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., who is leading efforts to draft the Democratic plan in the Senate.

Known as the "noninterference clause," the ban has been unbendable. That's the way the pharmaceutical industry wants to keep it.

Former Medicare administrator Andy Slavitt recalls proposing a "modest experiment" on pricing. "You would have thought we had pressed the nuclear button and the country was going to blow up," he said.

Drugs costing tens of thousands of dollars a month were rare when the prescription benefit was enacted nearly 20 years ago. Now they have become more common, and Democrats want to allow Medicare to negotiate over high cost brand-name drugs with little or no competition, as well as insulins.

Their legislation also would limit price increases for established drugs and cap annual out-of-pocket costs for Medicare recipients such as Weiner. Another part would overhaul the inner workings of the nearly $100 billion-a-year drug program to try to reduce costs for taxpayers.

Politicians including former President Donald Trump and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., have supported Medicare negotiations. But it's Biden, with Pelosi doing much of the lifting, who's come closest to getting it done.

And it still might not happen.

Similar to the rest of Biden's massive agenda, authorizing Medicare to negotiate hinges on a few Democratic holdouts. During committee deliberations in the House, three Democrats were opposed. In the Senate, a couple are seen as unconvinced.

Amid a furious lobbying and advertising campaign, the AARP, consumer groups, and health insurers are pressing for Medicare negotiations.

Business groups and the pharmaceutical industry are opposed. Drug companies have spent $171 million so far this year on lobbying, far above any other industry, according to the watchdog group OpenSecrets.

The industry says weakening the ban on negotiations would stifle investment in innovative ideas that can lead to lifesaving cures.

"The United States simply put is the bio-pharmaceutical engine for the world," said Lisa Joldersma, a top executive of the lobbying group Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, or PhRMA. "The investments that our companies make are what allow things like multiple vaccines and therapies to

address a global pandemic to come to market in an unprecedented amount of time."

PhRMA opposes constraints on launch prices for new drugs, as well as limitations on price increases for existing medicines. It says the government has other ways to shield Medicare recipients from high out-of-pocket costs and blames insurers for not passing manufacturer rebates directly to patients.

Joldersma points to research by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office to support the industry argument that fewer drugs would come to market. The CBO found an approach similar to the legislation would lead to a slight reduction in new drugs in the first 10 years, growing with time to 8% fewer new drugs in the third decade.

PhRMA says the chilling effect would be deeper.

"If you are the patient ... it is certainly not a marginal issue," said Joldersma.

Others say it's unlikely that drug development would shrivel. Valuable medicines would go forward, but ones with fewer benefits would have a harder path, said biotethicist said Dr. Steven Pearson, head of the nonprofit Institute for Clinical and Economic Review, or ICER, in Boston. The research organization recommends prices based on effectiveness.

"The big argument is at if the government lays a finger on the process, somehow that is going to stifle innovation," said Pearson. "We can get even better innovation by being smart in how we pay."

Responded industry official Joldersma: "I'm not aware that Steve Pearson of ICER has ever been in the business of discovering or bringing to market any treatment or cure."

Juliette Cubanski, a Medicare expert with the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation, says "the level of hyperbole that we are hearing in this present drug debate suggests the industry is quite concerned."

One of the biggest industry objections is that the House bill would use lower prices in other advanced counties as a yardstick for Medicare. The Trump administration tried a similar idea with a different set of Medicare medications. Drugmakers say U.S. patients may have to wait longer than they're used to for new medications if that goes through.

A recent RAND Corporation study found that linking the cost of top U.S. drugs and insulins to prices abroad could reduce spending here for those drugs by about half.

Other countries try to balance incentives for research and development with prices that reflect the value to patients and society, said study author Andrew Mulcahy.

"If we just wrote a huge check to drug companies, would they do more research?" Mulcahy asked. "Probably some. But is that the socially optimal thing to do? Probably not."

In dry California, some buy units that make water from air

By HAVEN DALEY undefined

BENICIA, Calif. (AP) — The machine Ted Bowman helped design can make water out of the air, and in parched California, some homeowners are already buying the pricey devices.

The air-to-water systems work like air conditioners by using coils to chill air, then collect water drops in a basin.

"Our motto is, water from air isn't magic, it's science, and that's really what we're doing with these machines," said Ted Bowman, design engineer at Washington state-based Tsunami Products.

The system is one of several developed in recent years to extract water from humidity. Other inventions include mesh nets, solar panels and shipping containers that harvest the moisture from the air.

Bowman said his company's machines — made for use at homes, offices, ranches and elsewhere — dehumidify the air and in doing so create water that's filtered to make it drinkable.

The technology works especially well in foggy areas and depending on the size can produce between 200 and 1,900 gallons (900 and 8,600 liters) of water a day. The machines also operate efficiently in any area with high humidity, including California's coastline, he said.

But they're not cheap, with prices ranging from $30,000 to $200,000. Still, in California, where residents have been asked to conserve water because one of the worst droughts in recent history has depleted reservoirs, some homeowners are buying them to meet their water needs.

Don Johnson, of the San Francisco Bay Area city of Benicia, said he bought the smallest machine, which looks like a towering AC unit, hoping it would generate sufficient water to sustain his garden. But he found it puts out more than enough for his garden and his household.

"This machine will produce water for a lot less than you can buy bottled water at Costco for, and I believe, as time goes on and the price of freshwater through our utilities goes up, I think it's going to more than pay for itself," he said.

Besides the high price tag, the unit also requires a significant amount of energy to run. But Johnson said the solar panels on his roof produce enough power to operate the machine without additional energy costs.

Experts like University of California, Davis hydrology researcher Helen Dahlke said the technology makes sense for individual homeowners, especially in rural areas. But she said it is not a practical solution for California's broader water woes.

Dahlke said the focus should be on fighting global warming to prevent future droughts.

"We really actually need to curb climate warming to really make a difference again," she said.

As Lebanese got poorer, politicians stowed wealth abroad

By BASSEM MROUE Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — A trove of leaked documents confirmed that for years, Lebanon's politicians and bankers have stowed wealth in offshore tax havens and used it to buy expensive properties — a galling revelation for masses of newly impoverished Lebanese, caught in one of the world's worst economic meltdowns in decades.

Some of the newly outed holders of offshore accounts belong to the same ruling elite that is being blamed for the collapse and for derailing the lives of ordinary Lebanese who have lost access to savings and now struggle to get fuel, electricity and medicine.

Bold-faced names in the leaked documents include the longtime central bank governor, a pivotal figure in the failed policies that helped trigger the financial crisis, as well as Prime Minister Najib Mikati and his predecessor.

The documents, named the "Pandora Papers," were examined by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, with the first findings released on Sunday. The ICIJ report exposes the offshore secrets of wealthy elites from more than 200 countries and territories.

It was based on a review of nearly 11.9 million records obtained from 14 firms that provide services in setting up offshore firms and shell companies. Clients of such firms are often trying to hide their wealth and financial activities.

Setting up an offshore company is not illegal, but reinforces the perception that the wealthy and powerful play by different rules — a particularly upsetting notion for many Lebanese.

The papers show how members of the political class were sending wealth abroad for years, even as they urged people to deposit money in Lebanon's banks, assuring them that it was safe, said Alia Ibrahim, a Lebanese journalist.

"We are not talking about regular citizens," said Ibrahim, a co-founder of Daraj, a Beirut-based independent digital media platform, and one of scores of journalists across the world who worked with ICIJ on the investigation into the documents.

"These are politicians who served in public office for years, and they are partly responsible for the current crisis Lebanon is going through," she said.

Lebanon is in the midst of what the World Bank says is one of the world's worst economic meltdowns in the past 150 years. More than 70% of the population has been thrown into poverty, their savings nearly wiped out in the crisis that began in late 2019 and was in part caused by decades of corruption and mismanagement by the political class.

Hundreds of thousands of people staged nationwide protests against corruption starting in late 2019. Yet two years later the same politicians still run the country in the same way, protected by the sectarian-based system.

One of the protesters, Samir Skaff, said that the Lebanese are not surprised to be told that the political class "is made up of a bunch of thieves."

"We have been saying that for years," he said.

Offshore companies, though not illegal, can be used to elude taxes or hide illicitly gained money. The leaks only add further confirmation to what Lebanese have long said about their ruling class — though repeated reports of graft or illicit activity in the past have failed to bring change.

One of the 14 firms listed by ICIJ as providing offshore services is Trident Trust, with 346 Lebanese clients making up the largest group, more than double the second-place country, Britain.

One focus of the revelations is Riad Salameh, who has been Lebanon's central bank governor for nearly 30 years.

Daraj reported that the documents showed Salameh founded a company called AMANIOR, based in the British Virgin Islands, in 2007. He is listed as its full owner and sole director, which Daraj said appeared to violate Lebanese laws forbidding the central bank governor from activity in any enterprise.

Salameh's office told The Associated Press that the central bank governor has no comment on the documents. ICIJ quoted him as saying that he declares his assets and has complied with reporting obligations under Lebanese law.

Salameh, 70, is being investigated in Switzerland and France for potential money laundering and embezzlement. Local media reported over the past months that Salameh and his brother as well as one of his aides have been involved in illegal businesses, including money transfers abroad despite the capital controls imposed at home. Salameh had denied making such transfers.

Other documents showed that Marwan Kheireddine, chairman of Lebanon's Al-Mawarid Bank, was involved in setting up a flurry of offshore businesses in the months just before the economic crisis hit in late 2019. In November that year, his bank and others began imposing capital controls that meant Lebanese could pull very little money out of their accounts even as the currency crashed, wrecking their savings' value.

The Pandora Papers reveal that in 2019, Kheireddine received control of an offshore firm in the British Virgin Islands, which he then used to buy a $2 million yacht.

In January 2019, he and his brother set up four firms in Britain on the same day, all based at the same London address, and all registered as "small companies," which Daraj said meant they are exempt from auditing. In 2020, Kheireddine bought a $9.9 million New York penthouse sold by American actress Jennifer Lawrence, Lebanese media reported at the time.

Kheireddine is a former Cabinet minister and a senior member of the Lebanese Democratic Party. He did not respond to calls and a text message by the AP.

Prime Minister Mikati, a businessman who formed a new government last month, has owned a Panama-based offshore company since the 1990s. He used it in 2008 to buy property in Monaco worth more than $10 million, Daraj reported from the documents.

The leaked documents also show that his son Maher was a director of at least two British Virgin Islands-based companies, which his father's Monaco-based company, M1 Group, used to obtain an office in central London.

Mikati released a statement saying his family fortune was amassed prior to his involvement in politics and was "compliant with global standards" and regularly scrutinized by auditors. Contacted by the AP, Mikati's media adviser Fares Gemayel said he had no comment.

Speaking to Daraj, Maher Mikati said it was common for people in Lebanon to use offshore companies "due to the easy process of incorporation" and denied the purpose was to evade taxes.

Mikati's predecessor as prime minister, Hassan Diab, was a co-owner of a shell company in the British Virgin Islands, Daraj reported.

Diab's office said in a statement Monday that he helped establish the company in 2015, but it did not do any business and he resigned from the firm and gave up his shares in 2019.

"Is the setting up of a company against the law?" the statement said.

Diab's government resigned days after a massive Aug. 4, 2020, blast in Beirut that killed and injured hundreds and destroyed the city's port and nearby neighborhoods. Diab was charged with intentional

killings and negligence in the case. He denies any wrongdoing but has refused to be questioned by the judge leading the investigation.

Scandinavians curb Moderna shots for some younger patients

By JAN M. OLSEN Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — Scandinavian authorities on Wednesday suspended or discouraged the use of Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine in young people because of an increased risk of heart inflammation, a very rare side effect associated with the shot.

Sweden suspended the use of Moderna for those recipients under 30, Denmark said those under 18 won't be offered the Swiss-made vaccine, and Norway urged those under 30 to get the Pfizer vaccine instead.

The countries have adequate supplies of both Pfizer and Moderna vaccines and will be able to continue their vaccination campaigns.

In neighboring Finland, authorities are expected to announce their decision Thursday, according to Dr. Hanna Nohynek, chief physician at the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, told local broadcaster YLE.

All three countries based their decision on an unpublished study with Sweden's Public Health Agency saying that it signals "an increased risk of side effects such as inflammation of the heart muscle or the pericardium" — the double-walled sac containing the heart and the roots of the main vessels. It added: "The risk of being affected is very small."

Anders Tegnell, Sweden's chief epidemiologist, said they "follow the situation closely and act quickly to ensure that vaccinations against COVID-19 are always as safe as possible and at the same time provide effective protection" against the disease.

The preliminary information from the Nordic study has been sent to the European Medicines Agency's adverse reaction committee to be assessed.

The study was conducted by Denmark's Statens Serum Institut, a government agency that maps the spread of the coronavirus in the country; the Medical Products Agency in Sweden; Norway's National Institute of Public Health; and the Institute for Health and Welfare in Finland. The final results were expected in about a month, said Bolette Soeborg of the Danish government health agency.

Moderna's vaccine was given the green light for use in anyone 18 and over across the 27-nation European Union in January.

In July, the European Medicines Agency recommended authorizing Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine for children ages 12 to 17, the first time that shot was cleared for anyone under 18. Canada also recently approved its use for those as young as 12.

The Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine is cleared for people 12 and older in Europe and North America.

Hundreds of millions of Moderna doses already have been administered to adults. In a study of more than 3,700 children aged 12 to 17, the vaccine triggered the same signs of immune protection, and no COVID-19 diagnoses arose in the vaccinated group compared with four cases among those given dummy shots.

Sore arms, headache and fatigue were the most common side effects in young vaccine recipients, the same ones as for adults.

U.S. and European regulators cautioned, however, that both the Moderna and Pfizer vaccines appear linked to a rare reaction in teenagers and young adults — chest pain and heart inflammation.

Swedish health authorities said the heart symptoms "usually go away on their own," but they must be assessed by a doctor. The conditions are most common among young men, in connection with, for example, viral infections such as COVID-19. In 2019, approximately 300 people under the age of 30 were treated in hospital with myocarditis.

Data point to an increased incidence also in connection with vaccination against COVID-19, mainly in adolescents and young adults and mainly in boys and men.

The preliminary Nordic analysis indicate that the connection is especially clear when it comes to Moderna's vaccine, especially after the second dose, the agency said.

"The increase in risk is seen within four weeks after the vaccination, mainly within the first two weeks," it said.

The Swedish agency said the vaccine from Pfizer is recommended for these age groups instead. Its decision to suspend the Moderna vaccine is valid until Dec. 1.

In Denmark, people under 18 won't be offered the Moderna vaccine out of precaution, the Danish Health Authority said Wednesday. It said that data show that there is a suspicion of an increased risk of heart inflammation when vaccinated with Moderna shots, although the number of cases of heart inflammation remains very low.

In non-EU member Norway, the Norwegian Institute of Public Health urged young people under 30 to opt for the Pfizer vaccine "due to an increased risk of a rare side effect" with Moderna.

In Denmark, children and young people ages 12-17 have primarily been invited to receive the COVID-19 vaccine from Pfizer.

"Based on the precautionary principle, we will in future only invite children and young people to receive this vaccine, not least in view of the fact that it is for this vaccine that the largest amount of data from use exists for children and young people, especially from the USA and Israel, Soeborg said.

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

In budget turning point, Biden conceding smaller price tag

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats' push for a 10-year, $3.5 trillion package of social and environmental initiatives has reached a turning point, with the president repeatedly conceding that the measure will be considerably smaller and pivotal lawmakers flashing potential signs of flexibility.

In virtual meetings Monday and Tuesday with small groups of House Democrats, Biden said he reluctantly expected the legislation's final version to weigh in between $1.9 trillion and $2.3 trillion, a Democrat familiar with the sessions said Tuesday. He told them he didn't think he could do better than that, the person said, reflecting demands from some of the party's more conservative lawmakers.

Biden used those same figures during a Friday meeting in the Capitol with nearly all House Democrats, according to that person and a second Democrat familiar with the gathering. Both Democrats would describe the meetings only on condition of anonymity.

There has been no agreement on a final figure, and plenty of other unanswered questions — plus the possibility of failure — remain. Crucial unresolved matters include how to get virtually every Democrat in Congress to vote for a measure they've spent months fighting over and that Republicans will solidly oppose, and whether the shrunken price tag would be reached by dropping some proposals or by keeping most but at lower cost or shorter duration.

But by repeatedly conceding that the crown jewel of his own domestic agenda will have to shrink and providing a range for its cost, Biden is trying to push his party beyond months of stalemate and refocus bargainers on nailing down needed policy and fiscal decisions.

"I want to make sure that we have a package that everyone can agree on," Biden told reporters Tuesday in Howell, Michigan, where he went to try building public support for his plan. "It's not going to be $3.5 trillion. It's going to be less than that."

Asked how he would trim $1 trillion from his initial plan, Biden said, "My objective is to get everything that I campaigned on passed." He added, "It won't all happen at once." That seemed to suggest that some initiatives in the bill might not begin right away or might last only temporarily to save money.

He also said he expected the measure to include means testing, or limits on the incomes of people who would qualify for initiatives. Some moderates have wanted to impose such limits on some programs.

The social and environment bill is the heart of Biden's push to beef up federal efforts to help families

and slow global warming.

It would require paid family and medical leave; extend tax breaks for families with children, low earners and people buying health insurance; expand Medicare coverage; prod energy companies to move toward cleaner fuels and provide free pre-kindergarten and community college. In a nod to his party's progressive instincts, it would be largely paid for by increasing taxes on the wealthy and corporate America.

Sens. Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., want curb the bill's cost and have been their party's highest-profile holdouts. Manchin has insisted on holding the package to $1.5 trillion and has said he wants to means test some programs. Democratic leaders will need every vote in the 50-50 Senate and all but three in the House for victory.

In one indication of possible give-and-take, Manchin on Tuesday said, "I'm not ruling anything out," when asked if he would definitely oppose a price tag in Biden's range. Progressives consider Manchin's demand for a ceiling of $1.5 trillion unacceptable, though an aide said the senator still wants the lower number.

Manchin remained coy Wednesday, telling reporters, "My number's been 1.5." He said he wanted the legislation to avoid turning the U.S. into "an entitlement society" while helping children and seniors.

"It's going to take time to get this done," he said.

Progressive Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., said during Monday's virtual meeting with Biden that she wanted $2.5 trillion to $2.9 trillion, The Washington Post reported Tuesday. Jayapal leads the nearly 100-member Congressional Progressive Caucus.

As Democrats make painful decisions about scaling down the measure, they are battling over whether to finance as many initiatives as possible but for less than 10 years, or to pick out top priorities and fund them robustly.

Big proposed increases in housing may be cut. Expensive proposed Medicare dental benefits might have to be scaled back. And a proposed extension of a more generous children's tax credit might be temporary, effectively daring a future Congress to refuse to extend them.

That Medicare expansion, which also includes new coverage for hearing and vision, is competing for money against other proposals to expand Medicaid coverage and to extend bigger tax credits for people buying health insurance under President Barack Obama's health care law.

Biden's recalibration of his plan's cost has been accompanied by stepped up talks involving the White House, congressional leaders and lawmakers.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., met late Monday in the Capitol with White House officials including senior adviser Brian Deese and Susan Rice, who heads Biden's Domestic Policy Council. White House officials have met with Manchin and Sinema as well.

Top Democrats are now hoping to craft an agreement they can push through Congress by Oct. 31, along with a companion $1 trillion measure financing highway, internet and other infrastructure projects.

The leaders had to abandon long shot hopes of advancing those measures last week after divisions between progressives and moderates left them short of votes.

Their divisions remained despite Biden's extraordinary visit with House Democrats on Friday in an effort to unify his party. That same day, Pelosi scrapped a planned vote on the Senate-approved infrastructure bill, which is coveted by moderates but which progressives are holding hostage to force them to back the social and environment measure.

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Associated Press writer Jonathan Lemire in Howell, Michigan, contributed to this report.

Eviction confusion, again: End of US ban doesn't cause spike

By ANITA SNOW Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — Chandra Dobbs was stunned when the constable showed up on her doorstep with a fat packet of eviction papers. She thought she had more time.

"I didn't think I was going to be evicted because I applied for rental assistance money," Dobbs said a few days later. "But they didn't want to wait the four to six weeks. So now we're homeless - me, my 16-year-

old son, my daughter and my grandchild, a toddler."

Her confusion is a common theme across America at a time when the federal government has ended renter protections while doling out billions of dollars in rental assistance. Instead of the expected surge in evictions, many landlords are holding off, waiting for the federal money to come through.

But while a few jurisdictions bar landlords from evicting renters who have applied for the money, most do not.

Court records show the eviction judgment against Dobbs was for $3,837, which included $2,700 in rent plus late fees and court and legal costs. Encore Management LLC, which filed for the eviction, did not respond to a request for comment about its side of the case.

Dobbs, who was laid off from her job as an exotic dancer during the pandemic, said her family is staying temporarily with friends while working with a nonprofit to find a new home and get money for a rent deposit.

After a slow start, the pace to distribute the first $25 billion installment of $46.5 billion in rental assistance is picking up. Treasury Department officials said the program had served 420,000 households in August — up from 340,000 in July — and distributed $7.7 billion since January.

Treasury officials said the strong signs of progress came from New Jersey, New York and South Carolina, which at first struggled to get their programs going. New Jersey, for example, sent out no money in the first quarter but now has distributed 78% of its first-installment money and doubled the number of households served in August compared with July.

Spending in Florida increased from $60.9 million in July to $141.4 million in August while South Carolina went from $10.6 million to $25.3 million. New York saw a jump from $8.5 million to $307 million.

"These numbers are still early, uncertain and there is likely additional pain and hardship not showing up in these reports," said Gene Sperling, who is charged with overseeing implementation of Biden's $1.9 trillion coronavirus rescue package. "But what is out so far is certainly better than anyone's previous best case scenario for the month after the moratorium."

Sperling credited rental assistance and an increase in eviction diversion programs as key reasons the tidal wave predictions didn't come through, adding that it was important to keep speeding relief money to landlords. On Wednesday, the Department of Housing and Urban Development issued a new rule barring landlords from evicting tenants in HUD-subsidized public housing without providing them 30 days' notice and information about available federal emergency rental assistance.

Some tenants have benefited from remaining eviction moratoriums including in California which ended last month, New York's which runs through the end of the year and Boston's which is ongoing.

Others have taken advantage of newly created programs from Washington to Texas to Philadelphia to New Hampshire that aimed at keeping eviction cases out of the courts and keeping renters in their homes. Some court systems have also put in place policies staying evictions if a tenant has applied for rental assistance while at least three states and 10 cities have approved measures providing tenants with free legal counsel in eviction proceedings.

Diane Yentel, president and CEO of the low income coalition, said the nonprofit has encouraged leaders of state and local governments to maintain the few local eviction bans still remaining after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention moratorium ended in late August.

Landlord advocacy groups have encouraged members not to evict tenants who have applied for government funds to pay their back rent, but owners don't always follow that suggestion. Smaller property owners in particular have struggled for months to pay their own mortgages and taxes with many tenants not paying rent.

"The vast majority of property owners have worked with their residents for nearly two years to keep people in their homes," said Courtney Gilstrap LeVinus, president of the Arizona Multihousing Association.

She has defended landlords throughout the pandemic, noting that many have been pushed to the brink of bankruptcy.

Many property owners were more willing to offer concessions during the pandemic, waiving late fees

and sometimes reducing or forgiving rent, according to a synthesis of two recent studies of mostly small landlords carried out by the Terner Center of Housing Innovation at the University of California, Berkeley, and the Joint Center for Housing Studies of Harvard University.

The findings also highlighted the financial hardships landlords have faced, with some opting to sell their properties, a move that could could lead to a loss of affordable housing stock in some communities.

U.S. Marine veteran Paul Wunder, who was also on Constable Kristen Randall's schedule the following week for eviction from his Tucson apartment, said all landlords should wait to receive federal money set aside for rental assistance so they can get the rent money they are owed.

"If they just wait one month, they'll get all their money," said Wunder, cradling his small dog Missy, a shaggy terrier mix, inside his apartment a few days before he was locked out. The 66-year-old was laid off early in the pandemic, then laid off again after getting another job as an air conditioner technician.

"If they throw us into the street," he said, "they'll get nothing."

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Michael Casey contributed to this report from Boston.

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New HUD rule aimed at preventing public housing evictions

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is trying to prevent evictions from public housing for non-payment of rent, seeking to shore up protections following the end of the nationwide eviction moratorium.

Under a new rule from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, tenants in HUD-subsidized public housing cannot be evicted for nonpayment without providing them 30 days' notice and information about available federal emergency rental assistance. The rule is scheduled to be published Thursday in the Federal Register.

Technically, the rule would go into effect 30 days after publication, but a senior HUD official told The Associated Press that public housing authorities across the country were expected to comply immediately. The official, who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the rule change was due to significant concern about a looming wave of evictions as cases begin to work their way through courts.

In an official statement set for release Wednesday, HUD Secretary Marcia Fudge called the change "a significant step in raising tenant awareness about the availability of funds that can assist them with past due rent and allowing them additional time to access relief that may stave off eviction entirely."

Elements of the new rule are not new. The 30-day notice requirement is part of the original COVID-19 relief package. But the change will be coupled with specific guidance for housing authorities on how to steer tenants toward the billions of dollars in available emergency rental assistance. It's also designed to buy some extra time for those funds to work their way through the system.

Besides public housing residents, the rule change will apply to those living in project-based rental assistance properties — a program whereby private for-profit or nonprofit property owners enter into a contract with HUD to provide affordable housings units. All told, HUD estimates that the change will cover 4.1 million people.

Biden administration officials have complained in the past that the rental relief funds are bottlenecked by bureaucracy at the state and local level. The senior HUD official said the funds' dispersal has been proceeding a little slower than officials had hoped.

The federal moratorium, a response to the coronavirus pandemic, expired in late August, and Congress did not extend it. While the federal government now focuses on pumping money into rental assistance programs, the nationwide moratorium has devolved into a patchwork of localized bans, in places like Washington state, Boston and New York state — all expiring on different schedules.

The senior HUD official said one of the primary goals of the change is to bring all jurisdictions under

the same banner.

Token of all tokens: Could a $1T coin fix the debt limit?

By CALVIN WOODWARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Some politicians think they've found a silver bullet for the impasse over the debt limit, except the bullet is made of platinum: Mint a $1 trillion coin, token of all tokens, and use it to flood the treasury with cash and drive Republicans crazy.

Even its serious proponents — who are not that many — call it a gimmick. They say it is an oddball way out of an oddball accounting problem that will have severe consequences to average people's pocketbooks and the economy if it is not worked out in coming days.

But despite all the jokes about who should go on the face of the coin — Chuck E. Cheese? Donald Trump, to tempt or taunt the GOP? — there's scholarship behind it, too. However improbable, it is conceivable the government could turn $1 trillion into a coin of the realm without lawmakers having a say.

How is this possible when the treasury secretary can't simply print money to pay public debts? It's because a quirky law from more than 20 years ago seems to allow the administration to mint coins of any denomination without congressional approval as long as they're platinum.

The intent was to help with the production of commemorative coins for collectors, not to create a nuclear option in a fiscal crisis. Oops.

Specifically, the law says the treasury secretary "may mint and issue platinum bullion coins and proof platinum coins in accordance with such specifications, designs, varieties, quantities, denominations, and inscriptions as the Secretary, in the Secretary's discretion, may prescribe from time to time."

This is that time, in the view of coin advocates. But Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, the White House and some Democrats slapped down the idea Tuesday, just as past leaders have done when the going got tough and radical quick-fixes emerged.

"The only thing kookier would be a politically inflicted default," Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va, said of the coin.

Said Yellen, "What's necessary is for Congress to show that the world can count on America paying its debt." A platinum coin, she told CNBC, "is really a gimmick."

Sure it is, said Rohan Grey, a Willamette University law professor and expert on fiscal policy.

"The fact that (the coin) represents an accounting gimmick is a source of its strength, rather than a weakness," Grey wrote in a 2020-21 study in the Kentucky Law Journal. "The idea of 'fighting an accounting problem with an accounting solution' is entirely coherent … the debt ceiling itself can be viewed as one big, poorly designed accounting gimmick."

The United States will hit the ceiling Oct. 18 unless Congress acts in time to suspend it. The two parties are in a stalemate in the Senate — Republicans unwilling to join Democrats in what used to be a routine exercise; Democrats holding back on using only their own votes to fix the problem.

That's what makes a shiny coin with a 1 and 12 zeroes tempting to some, if that untested and audacious path actually would work.

But fraught questions arise for lots of Democrats as well as Republicans: Would they have wanted President Donald Trump to be ordering up mega-coins like Diet Cokes to his desk? Do they want the next president to have that power? Or even this one?

Other extraordinary possibilities have been floated, too, such as invoking the 14th Amendment's guarantee that the "validity of the public debt of the United States, authorized by law … shall not be questioned," which some scholars argue could be used to override the debt limit.

The White House has looked at all such options "and none of those options were viable," press secretary Jen Psaki said. "So, we know that the only path forward here is through Congress acting."

The debt ceiling was instituted in the World War I era to make it easier for the U.S. to issue war bonds without needing congressional approval each time. Legislators only needed to stay under the approved total.

Raising or suspending the ceiling has been a mostly uncontroversial task until recent times, because the debt comes mostly from spending that has already been approved by Congress or covers payments

mandated by law. Now everything is fodder for a fight to the last minute.

The Treasury can't introduce new currency into circulation, only the Fed can do that. In theory, the coin would be minted and deposited with the Fed and its value would make its way into Treasury's general account and used to pay a whole lot of bills.

In practice, no one knows precisely how it would work and what problems, like inflation, would result. Democrats do not seem willing to upend a messy process that for generations has nevertheless stood as the gold standard in global credit.

The idea of a $1 trillion coin got attention in 2013 when President Barack Obama struggled to get Republicans on board. Donald Marron, a tax policy expert who had led the Congressional Budget Office during part of the Bush administration, thought it wasn't a great idea — but not a terrible one, either.

"Analysts have considered a range of other options for avoiding default, including prioritizing payments, asserting the debt limit is unconstitutional, and temporarily selling the gold in Fort Knox," Marron said then. "All raise severe practical, legal, and image problems. In this ugly group, the platinum coin looks relatively shiny."

Still, he said, it sounds like an Austin Powers sequel or a "Simpsons" episode: "It lacks dignity."

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Associated Press writers Josh Boak and Martin Crutsinger contributed to this report.

In brazen attack by settlers, Palestinians see larger threat

By JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

Al-MUFAGARA, West Bank (AP) — Dozens of Jewish settlers swept down from the dusty hills, hurling rocks at a small Palestinian village in broad daylight, smashing windows, cars and water cisterns as families hid inside their homes and Israeli soldiers looked on.

Palestinians in this rural part of the occupied West Bank say last week's attack was especially violent but not unusual. They view it as part of a much larger effort by Israel to force them off their land, including by cutting off vital water resources in a parched region.

Days after the attack — in which a 4-year-old boy was hospitalized after being struck in the head by a stone as his family hid inside their home — residents of the village of Al-Mufagara surveyed the damage. It included the smashed water cisterns on which the Bedouin community and its livestock rely.

"They attacked everything we have, our water containers, our animals, our trees, our houses," said Mohammed Rahbi, deputy head of the rural Yatta regional council. "It was an attack on humanity itself."

The hardscrabble region is in what's known as Area C, the 60% of the West Bank that is under full Israeli military control, according to agreements reached in the 1990s. Palestinians say it's nearly impossible to secure building permits, even for basic infrastructure like water and electricity. The military has designated an area that includes Al-Mufagara as a firing range, making it even harder for residents to remain on the land.

Israeli authorities have meanwhile tolerated the construction of two nearby settlement outposts that are illegal even under Israeli law, where those who took part in last Wednesday's attack are believed to have come from.

After ambushing a local shepherd and killing a number of his sheep, the settlers — shirtless with scarves wrapped around their faces — rampaged through the small cluster of stone homes and animal pens.

Footage released by the Israeli rights group B'Tselem showed Israeli soldiers standing among the settlers as they hurled the stones. At one point a soldier threw a tear gas grenade and shoved the Palestinian who was filming the attack. "This is our home," the Palestinian shouted.

Israeli police said they arrested five Israeli suspects, including a teenager. All have since been released.

The military declined a request for an interview. But its top commander overseeing the West Bank, Maj. Gen. Yehuda Fuchs, last week held a rare meeting with Palestinian residents and said Israel is committed to the security of everyone in the area.

Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid condemned the attack as "terror" and blamed it on a "violent and

dangerous fringe" that he said should be brought to justice. The U.S. State Department also condemned the violence.

But rights groups say settlers have launched several similar attacks over the past year, with the military doing little to stop them.

"This is happening all the time," said Hagai El-Ad, the head of B'Tselem. "Soldiers sometimes even participate directly in such assaults on Palestinians. And this is part of that bigger state project of forcible transfer of Palestinians from their communities in large parts of the West Bank."

Israel captured the West Bank in the 1967 war and has granted the Palestinian Authority limited autonomy in cities and towns that make up less than 40% of the territory. The Palestinians want the entire West Bank to form the main part of their future state.

Around 500,000 Jewish settlers live in the West Bank amid more than 2.5 million Palestinians. Most settlers live in the more than 120 settlements authorized by the Israeli government, but more radical settlers have built dozens of outposts without state permission in rural areas.

The nationalist parties that dominate Israel's political system view the West Bank as the biblical heartland of the Jewish people and support the settlers. Israel's current prime minister, Naftali Bennett, is a longtime supporter of settlements who is opposed to a Palestinian state.

Israeli authorities are reluctant to evacuate outposts because doing so ignites clashes between soldiers and settlers, and successive governments have retroactively authorized 15 outposts. Israel subsidizes settlements and provides water and electricity to many outposts.

The Palestinians view all settlements as illegal and an obstacle to peace, a position with wide international support.

Even as the settlements develop largely unchecked, the 1,300 Palestinians living in Al-Mufagara and the surrounding area, known as Masafer Yatta, are unable to build or maintain basic infrastructure. According to statistics published by Peace Now, an anti-settlement Israeli monitoring group, Israeli authorities approved around 1% of Palestinian requests for Area C construction permits submitted between 2009 and 2016.

"Israel is just trying to empty Masafer of the communities that have lived there for generations," said Quamar Mishirqi-Assad, director of Haqel, a rights group that works with local communities.

Rahbi said he has submitted dozens of applications for new housing and irrigation projects that have been rejected. He says Israel only approves such projects in the nearby community of Al-Tuwani, which is outside its declared firing range.

A spokesman for COGAT, the Israeli defense body that grants the permits, said the refusals in the military zone were for the safety of the residents. Speaking on condition of anonymity under military guidelines, he could not explain why settler communities, including unauthorized outposts, do not face the same barriers.

This was not the first time local sources of water have been harmed.

Over the last two years, the military has destroyed nearly all the pipelines linking Masafer to Israel's national water carrier, as well as more than 20 local wells, according to Al-Haq, a Palestinian human rights group. COGAT had no immediate comment.

Rural Palestinian communities often struggle with shortages. A report released Friday by the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights said 660,000 Palestinians have "limited access to water" and denounced Israel's recent destruction of vital water sources in Masafer. Israel refused to comment on the report, saying the U.N. is biased against it.

According to Rahbi, most communities have built small pipes that connect to al-Tuwani, the only village in the area connected to Israel's water supplier, Mekorot.

But Rahbi said it isn't enough. Residents collect rainwater during the winter months in plastic cisterns and purchase expensive water tankers from nearby cities. Suppliers often charge extra because of the poor roads.

During the settler attack on Wednesday, many of the plastic cisterns and pipes were damaged and will be costly to replace.

Despite the growing hardships, the Palestinians say they are determined to stay.

"People here are rooted, in love with the land," Rahbi said.

Tensions flare as Chinese flights near Taiwan intensify

By HUIZHONG WU and DAVID RISING Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan (AP) — With record numbers of military flights near Taiwan over the last week, China has been showing a new intensity and military sophistication as it steps up its harassment of the island it claims as its own and asserts its territorial ambitions in the region.

China's People's Liberation Army flew 56 planes off the southwest coast of Taiwan on Monday, setting a new record and capping four days of sustained pressure involving 149 flights. All were in international airspace, but prompted Taiwanese defense forces to scramble in response and raised fears that any misstep could provoke an unintended escalation.

The sorties came as China, with growing diplomatic and military power, faces greater pushback from countries in the region and an increasing naval presence from the United States and other Western democracies in Asia as Taiwan pleads for more global support and recognition.

The U.S. called China's latest actions "risky" and "destabilizing," while China responded that the U.S. selling weapons to Taiwan and its ships navigating the Taiwan Strait were provocative.

At the same time as the flights, the U.S. stepped up naval maneuvers in the Indo-Pacific with its allies, challenging Beijing's territorial claims in critical waterways.

Taiwanese Defense Minister Chiu Kuo-cheng told legislators Wednesday that the situation "is the most severe in the 40 years since I've enlisted."

While most agree that war is not imminent, Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen warned that more is at stake if Beijing makes good on past threats to seize the island by force if necessary.

"If Taiwan were to fall, the consequences would be catastrophic for regional peace and the democratic alliance system," she wrote in an impassioned op-ed in Foreign Affairs magazine published Tuesday. "It would signal that in today's global contest of values, authoritarianism has the upper hand over democracy."

China regularly flies military aircraft into Taiwan's "air defense identification zone," international airspace that Taiwan counts as a buffer in its defense strategy, although previous flights have usually involved a handful of planes at most.

Perhaps more significant than the number of planes was the constitution of the group, with fighters, bombers and airborne early warning aircraft, said Euan Graham, a defense analyst with the International Institute for Strategic Studies in Singapore.

"That's the level of sophistication — it looks like a strike package, and that's part of the step up in pressure," he said. "This is not a couple of fighters coming close and then going straight back after putting one wing across the median; this is a much more purposeful maneuver."

Controlling Taiwan and its airspace is key to China's military strategy, with the area where the most recent sorties took place also leading to the west Pacific and the South China Sea.

The latest maneuvers bring the total number of flights to more than 815 as of Monday since the Taiwanese government started publicly releasing the numbers a little more than a year ago.

China has been rapidly improving and strengthening its military, and the most recent flights demonstrate a greater level of technical expertise and power, said Chen-Yi Tu, a researcher at the Institute for National Defense and Security Research in Taiwan.

It's a marked contrast from 20, 30 years ago, when Chinese forces couldn't refuel in the air, or fly across the water, said Oriana Skylar Mastro, a fellow at Freeman Spogli Institute for International Studies at Stanford University and non-resident senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, D.C.

"I think China is trying to remind the U.S. and Taiwan that this is not then, that they have options," she said. "They can do what they want, that they won't be deterred."

At the same time, many democracies have been increasingly vocal in their support of Taiwan and have stepped up naval operations in the area.

As China was conducting its most recent flights, 17 ships from six navies — the U.S., Britain, Japan, Netherlands, Canada and New Zealand — including three aircraft carriers and a Japanese helicopter carrier — carried out joint maneuvers off the Japanese island of Okinawa, northeast of Taiwan, meant to show their commitment to a "free and open Indo-Pacific."

A few days earlier, the British frigate HMS Richmond transited through the Taiwan Strait, announcing its presence on Twitter and angering China, which condemned the move as a "meaningless display of presence with an insidious intention."

The international actions are an attempt to counter China's frequent claim that its own actions are in response to American moves, and demonstrate that democracies intend to defend established maritime laws and norms, Graham said.

"When the U.K. sends a ship through the Taiwan Strait for the first time since 2008 and it sailed down the median line, the point that it's making is that they know China knows where that line is," he said. "In order for the status quo to be meaningful, it has to be upheld and the most emphatic way to do that is to physically demonstrate with a government asset like a warship."

Australia, which also spoke out against China's recent flights, last month announced a deal with the U.S. and Britain to obtain nuclear-powered submarines, which was seen as a strong statement it planned to play a greater role.

And Japan, which has long been cautious with its relations with China, a key trading partner, now considers the country a security threat amid Beijing's increasingly assertive activity in the regional seas and around the Taiwan Strait. New Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said dialogue with China is important but Japan should also team up with like-minded democracies and step up its security alliance with the U.S. and other partners while Tokyo also strengthens its defense capabilities.

"We are seeing a slow emergence of some sort of coalition of democracies in the region that are trying to come together to build some sort of mechanism to respond to Chinese behavior in the region," said J. Michael Cole, a Taipei-based senior fellow with Global Taiwan Institute in Washington, D.C.

Under longstanding policy, the United States provides political and military support for Taiwan, but does not explicitly promise to defend it from a Chinese attack.

Still, as the U.S. increases its military activities in the Indo-Pacific region, the Chinese response has been to increase its own, said Yue Gang, a retired Chinese army colonel and Beijing-based military commentator.

"The Biden administration has been increasing military deterrence against China, not only by dispatching many warships and warplanes, but also showcasing its allies," he said. "One of the possibilities is that the mainland hopes to send a signal it will not be misjudged as weak."

The Chinese flights into the Taiwanese defense buffer zone have forced Taiwan to scramble its own aircraft and anti-aircraft missile batteries, wearing down their readiness and reducing their capabilities, Yue said.

"Every time a warplane takes off, the engine life is reduced to some extent," he said.

In addition to keeping Taiwan on edge, the sorties also help the Chinese pilots keep their edge, and could eventually help give them an element of surprise "if the scenario is to eventually use hard power to resolve their unification claim over Taiwan," Graham said.

"It's hard to know if exercise 39 or exercise 57 is the one that isn't an exercise," he said.

For the moment, however, most agree that is not the immediate goal.

"It's more signaling and psychological warfare and a warning to the U.S. to not be so close to Taiwan," Mastro said.

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Rising reported from Bangkok.

Boris Johnson brushes off UK woes, vows to transform economy

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

MANCHESTER, England (AP) — Prime Minister Boris Johnson shrugged off Britain's problems of empty gas pumps, worker shortages and gaps on store shelves as he told fellow Conservatives on Wednesday

that the U.K. would emerge from Brexit and the coronavirus pandemic as a more productive and dynamic nation.

Johnson told the party's annual conference that he'd end "decades of drift and dither" and tackle "long-term structural weaknesses," especially a reliance on low-cost labor from abroad.

"We're embarking now on a change of direction that has been long overdue in the U.K. economy," Johnson said, vowing "not to use immigration as an excuse for the failure to invest."

Relaxed and ebullient in front of a friendly crowd, Johnson did not note that much of the alleged drift and dither came under Conservative governments. The party has been in power for two-thirds of the past four decades.

Johnson extoled the "Brexit freedoms" brought by Britain's exit from the European Union, even as shortages of truck drivers and other workers cause economic hiccups. Brexit ended the right of EU citizens to work visa-free in Britain and has left growing gaps in the economy.

Delegates at the conference in Manchester, northwest England, gave a standing ovation to a speech that was long on optimism but short on concrete policies, and seemed well insulated from the world outside.

Britain has been through a turbulent time since the Conservatives last met in person two years ago. Then, Johnson vowed to "get Brexit done" after years of wrangling over Britain's exit terms from the EU.

That promise won Johnson a huge parliamentary majority in December 2019. He led Britain out of the EU last year, ending the U.K.'s seamless economic integration with a trading bloc of almost half a billion people. Britain also has been hammered by the coronavirus pandemic, registering more than 136,000 deaths, Europe's highest toll after Russia.

The pandemic, which put much of the economy on ice, and Brexit have combined to throw Britain's economy out of sync.

Britain's current autumn of inconvenience is not as dire as the infamous "Winter of Discontent" in 1978-79, when thousands of striking workers crippled essential services, a crisis that ultimately led to the election of Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. But supply problems are causing the most widespread economic disruption in years.

A truck driver shortage, due partly to a testing backlog and partly to an exodus of European workers, has snarled British supply chains. That has left supermarkets with some empty shelves, fast-food chains without chicken and gas pumps dry.

This week the government called in the army, getting scores of soldiers to drive tanker trucks. It also says it will issue up to 5,500 short-term emergency visas for foreign truckers.

Other struggling parts of the economy say they aren't getting the same quick action. Pig farmers protested outside the Conservative conference, saying a shortage of abattoir butchers means thousands of hogs may have to be slaughtered on farms, ending up in landfills.

"It's a complete and utter waste," said farmer Meryl Ward, who urged the government to recruit European butchers to ease the crisis.

Johnson says businesses will have to tough it out by improving pay and conditions to get British workers to fill the empty jobs.

He said the move to a "high-wage, high-skilled, high-productivity" economy "will take time, and sometimes it will be difficult, but that is the change that people voted for in 2016" when they opted for Brexit.

Some economists say Johnson's argument that immigration pushes down wages is misleading, and that his economic plan is incomplete.

"The prime minister is right to say that the U.K's economic model is broken, but his lack of policies to remedy this speaks volumes," said George Dibb of the Institute for Public Policy Research, a center-left think tank. "Labor market shortages alone won't lift wages and working conditions across the U.K. economy."

Many Conservatives too are worried the winter could bring a hit on voters' pocketbooks due to a new health care tax, rising prices, soaring energy costs from a global surge in natural gas prices and a cut to welfare benefits.

Starting Wednesday, the government is withdrawing a 20 pound ($27) a week welfare boost that helped

more than 4 million families make ends meet during the pandemic.

Danny Sriskandarajah, chief executive of Oxfam GB, said many people who rely on the benefit are low-paid workers.

"Removing this safety net, despite warnings from across the political spectrum, will cause immense hardship to families who are already barely keeping their heads above water," he said.

A squeeze on living standards could make it harder for Johnson to meet his key goal of "leveling up" the U.K. by spreading economic opportunity beyond the south of England, where most business and investment is centered. That promise helped him win working-class votes in areas that long were strongholds of the center-left Labour Party.

It is also pushing the Conservative Party out of its comfort zone as the champion of small government and low public spending. Johnson's ambitious and expensive list of promises ranges from new railways and roads to slashing Britain's carbon emissions and reintroducing beavers to its landscape.

Voters will eventually judge whether the Conservatives have delivered on their promises. But for now, with most opinion polls giving the party a lead over a demoralized Labour, delegates in Manchester were as buoyant as their famously irrepressible leader.

They packed meeting halls and sipped warm white wine at sweaty receptions, as if Britain's pandemic-plagued months of lockdowns, masks and social distancing were a bad dream. The delegates were visibly younger, more diverse and less dominated by affluent residents of southern England than they had been for years.

"You wouldn't have seen this even 10, 15 years ago, the north turning out in such droves to support the Conservative Party," said Max Darby, a delegate who was born in the northern England town of Scunthorpe. "I think Boris has to be doing something right if people like me are more than happy — in fact proud — to vote Conservative."

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Oct. 7, the 280th day of 2021. There are 85 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Oct. 7, 2001, the war in Afghanistan started as the United States and Britain launched air attacks against military targets and Osama bin Laden's training camps in the wake of the September 11 attacks.

On this date:

In 1765, the Stamp Act Congress convened in New York to draw up colonial grievances against England.

In 1849, author Edgar Allan Poe died in Baltimore at age 40.

In 1910, a major wildfire devastated the northern Minnesota towns of Spooner and Baudette, charring at least 300,000 acres; some 40 people are believed to have died.

In 1949, the Republic of East Germany was formed.

In 1954, Marian Anderson became the first Black singer hired by the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York.

In 1985, Palestinian gunmen hijacked the Italian cruise ship Achille Lauro (ah-KEE'-leh LOW'-roh) in the Mediterranean. (The hijackers shot and killed Leon Klinghoffer, a Jewish-American tourist in a wheelchair, and pushed him overboard, before surrendering on Oct. 9.)

In 1991, University of Oklahoma law professor Anita Hill publicly accused Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas of making sexually inappropriate comments when she worked for him; Thomas denied Hill's allegations.

In 1992, trade representatives of the United States, Canada and Mexico initialed the North American Free Trade Agreement during a ceremony in San Antonio, Texas, in the presence of President George H.W. Bush, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (muhl-ROO'-nee) and Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari.

In 1996, Fox News Channel made its debut.

In 1998, Matthew Shepard, a gay college student, was beaten and left tied to a wooden fencepost outside of Laramie, Wyoming; he died five days later. (Russell Henderson and Aaron McKinney are serving life sentences for Shepard's murder.)

In 2003, California voters recalled Gov. Gray Davis and elected Arnold Schwarzenegger their new governor.

In 2004, President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney conceded that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction as they tried to shift the Iraq war debate to a new issue, arguing that Saddam was abusing a U.N. oil-for-food program.

Ten years ago: The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to three women: President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, Liberian activist Leymah Gbowee, and Tawakkul Karman, who began pushing for change in Yemen long before the Arab Spring.

Five years ago: The U.S. accused Russia of hacking American political sites and email accounts in an effort to interfere with the upcoming presidential election and also directly accused Russia of war crimes in Syria; Moscow dismissed the allegations. Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos was named winner of the Nobel Peace Prize, receiving a big boost in his efforts to save an agreement seeking to end his country's half-century conflict.

One year ago: President Donald Trump returned to the Oval Office for the first time since he was diagnosed with COVID-19; he credited an experimental drug treatment with helping his recovery. Debating from behind plexiglass shields, Vice President Mike Pence and Democrat Kamala Harris zeroed in on Trump's handling of the coronavirus pandemic, with Harris labeling it "the greatest failure of any presidential administration" while Pence defended the overall response. President Donald Trump tweeted that remaining U.S. troops in Afghanistan should be home by Christmas. (Military officials said they had been given no orders to accelerate a more gradual pullout.) The former Minneapolis police officer charged with murder in the death of George Floyd posted bail and was released from state prison, leading Minnesota's governor to activate the National Guard to help keep the peace in the event of protests.

Today's Birthdays: Retired South African Archbishop and Nobel Peace laureate Desmond Tutu is 90. Author Thomas Keneally is 86. Comedian Joy Behar is 79. Former National Security Council aide Lt. Col. Oliver North (ret.) is 78. Rock musician Kevin Godley (10cc) is 76. Actor Jill Larson is 74. Country singer Kieran Kane is 72. Singer John Mellencamp is 70. Rock musician Ricky Phillips is 70. Russian President Vladimir Putin is 69. Actor Mary Badham (Film: "To Kill a Mockingbird") is 69. Rock musician Tico Torres (Bon Jovi) is 68. Actor Christopher Norris is 66. Cellist Yo-Yo Ma is 66. Gospel singer Michael W. Smith is 64. Olympic gold medal ice dancer Jayne Torvill is 64. Actor Dylan Baker is 63. Actor Judy Landers is 63. Recording executive and TV personality Simon Cowell is 62. Rock musician Charlie Marinkovich (formerly with Iron Butterfly) is 62. Actor Paula Newsome is 60. Country singer Dale Watson is 59. Pop singer Ann Curless (Expose) is 58. R&B singer Toni Braxton is 54. Rock singer-musician Thom Yorke (Radiohead) is 53. Rock musician-dancer Leeroy Thornhill is 52. Actor Nicole Ari Parker is 51. Actor Allison Munn is 47. Rock singer-musician Damian Kulash (KOO'-lahsh) is 46. Singer Taylor Hicks is 45. Actor Omar Miller is 43. Neo-soul singer Nathaniel Rateliff (Nathaniel Rateliff & the Night Sweats) is 43. Actor Shawn Ashmore is 42. Actor Jake McLaughlin is 39. Electronic musician Flying Lotus (AKA Steve Ellison) is 38. MLB player Evan Longoria is 36. Actor Holland Roden is 35. Actor Amber Stevens is 35. MLB outfielder Mookie Betts is 29. Actor Lulu Wilson is 16.