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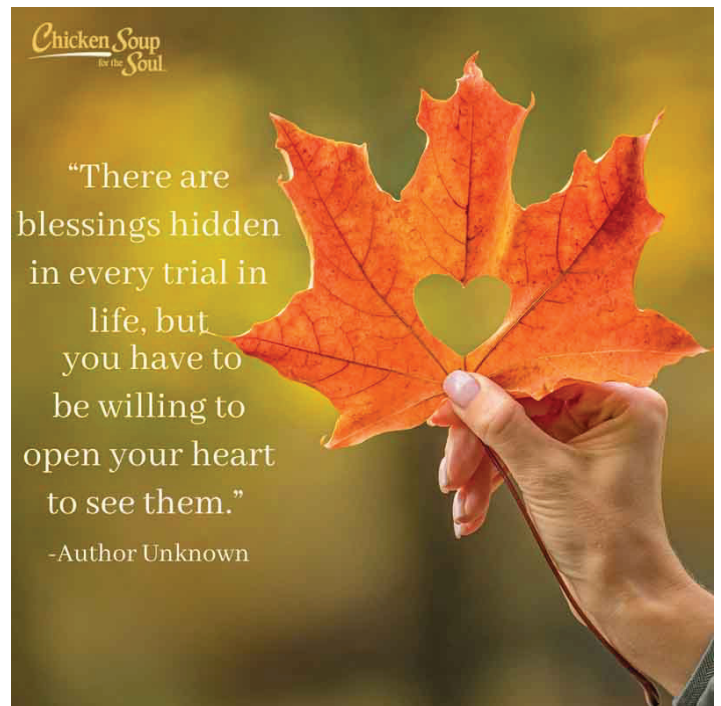
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Upcoming Events

Thursday, Oct. 21

First Round Football Playoffs: Wagner at Groton, 7 p.m.

Friday, Oct. 22

End of First Quarter

Volleyball at Aberdeen Roncalli. (7th at 5 p.m., 8th at 6 p.m., JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

Saturday, Oct. 23

State Cross Country at Yankton Trail Park in Sioux Falls.

Oral Interp at NSU Invitational

ACT Testing at GHS, 8 a.m. to Noon

Starting 10/24/21, you must dial the area code for all calls. This change supports 988 as the new 3-digit code to reach the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

Ice skating opportunity on Sunday, Oct 24 in Watertown -- one of our guest skaters at the carnival for the past few years, Kathryn Pfaff, would like to invite our ice skaters to their Come Skate with Us event on Sunday, Oct 24 in Watertown. It will be held at the Maas Ice Arena in Watertown from 5:30 - 7:00 p.m. with some mini classes available.

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Rising prices for meat and other groceries placing financial burden on South Dakota families

Bart Pfankuch
South Dakota News Watch

Rising food prices have added another financial burden on South Dakota families already facing increased costs for essential goods and services during the pandemic and amid a recent spike in inflation.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the average price of food bought for home consumption has risen at double the typical rate of inflation, especially among meat products that form the basis of many family meals in South Dakota.

Beef and veal prices were almost 10% higher in 2021 compared with 2020, while pork prices at the retail level jumped by 6.3% and poultry rose by 5.6% during that time period. Meat prices overall jumped almost 16% from 2019 to 2021, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and experts are predicting meat prices will increase as much as 6% more by the end of 2021.

The increase in food prices comes as many other essential products are increasing in price in South Dakota and across the country, including gasoline, home heating fuels, vehicles and housing.

When food prices rise, it puts a disproportionate financial burden on lower-income families, who must buy food to feed their families regardless of gross family income. Due to transportation and other factors, food costs are typically higher in rural communities, which make up the majority of South Dakota's population.

By one measure, South Dakotans pay less for at-home food than all other Great Plains states, and South Dakota is ranked 46th lowest in the nation, with the average per-person food cost at \$286.23 a month in Sioux Falls. However, South Dakota is also among the lowest in the nation in median gross family income, and the state is one of 17 states that charge sales taxes on food. Consumers pay 4.5% in state sales tax and can also be charged local sales tax on food in South Dakota.



Meat prices, particularly beef, have risen sharply in South Dakota and across the country this year. This certified Angus ribeye steak was offered at \$19.99 a pound at a regional grocery chain in eastern South Dakota. Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

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The group Feeding America predicted that one in six children in South Dakota will face food insecurity in 2021, an increase over the prior year. In August 2021, about 34,000 households in South Dakota qualified for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, also known as food stamps. Those households are home to about 35,000 children under 18, according to state data.

The rise in food prices is also affecting senior citizens who live on fixed incomes. Many elderly South Dakotans do not have much budgetary wiggle room and often spend a significant portion their overall income on essentials, including food.

Kathy Ryther, 65, a retiree from Pierre who lives on a fixed income, said she is shocked by the jump in grocery prices in South Dakota this year. Ryther said she has adapted by buying less food in general and by skimping on some meals.

"It's just so ungodly high right now," Ryther said after shopping at Lynn's Dakotamart in Pierre on a recent day. "I don't live in New York, do I?"

Ryther said she has cut back on buying ground beef and pork steaks that are usually a staple of her diet. Her friend, 62-year-old Deb Buringa of Pierre, said she has noticed higher prices on almost all grocery items since the pandemic hit.

"Canned goods, cereal, I've seen it all going up," said Buringa, a retiree who lives mostly on Social Security. "You can't afford a roast anymore; you have to almost butcher it yourself."

The rising food prices in South Dakota are the result of a combination of broader economic conditions, largely driven by the pandemic, said Nathan Sanderson, executive director of the South Dakota Retailers Association, who also served as a financial adviser on agriculture and other issues for former Gov. Dennis Daugaard.

"It's kind of complicated how we got here, but you don't have to be a rocket scientist and do anything other than pay attention to see that prices are up," Sanderson said.

As with many other businesses, breakdowns in the supply chain anchored by the shipping and trucking industries have made it harder and more expensive to get foods and other goods shipped to states like South Dakota, Sanderson said.

The food-distribution and grocery sales industries are also facing the same work-



Grocery shoppers Deb Buringa, at left, and Kathy Ryther of Pierre have noticed a recent sharp rise in food costs, especially for meat. While living on fixed incomes, they both have had to make hard choices about what and what not to buy. Photo: Bart

Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

SOUTH DAKOTA FOOD PRICES LOWEST IN GREAT PLAINS

This chart shows the per-person monthly cost of food purchased to be eaten at home in the largest city in each state listed (Sioux Falls in South Dakota.) Among the 50 states and District of Columbia, South Dakota ranked 46th lowest in 2020. Notably, South Dakota ranks 47th lowest in terms of median wage by state.

State	Rank	Per-person monthly food costs
Hawaii	1st	\$556.76
Minnesota	14th	\$395.39
Iowa	22nd	\$347.05
Wyoming	25th	\$345.62
Nebraska	31st	\$336.90
North Dakota	35th	\$326.66
Montana	37th	\$323.91
South Dakota	46th	\$286.23
New Hampshire	51st	\$183.00

Source: USDA data compiled by Numbeo.com

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force shortage that is holding many industries back, Sanderson said. An overall level of inflation in America, which could reach 5% this year, more than double the usual rate, has also added to costs of food growers, distributors and sellers, he said.

But the food industry is facing some unique challenges that are leading to higher prices, Sanderson said. Before the pandemic, food stocks around the world were high and products were moving efficiently. But the global slowdown in production during the pandemic has led to a disruption in supply and demand, where demand for food is higher than supplies, which ultimately pushes up prices, he said.

"People still need to eat, and demand for food hasn't decreased, it's actually increased during the pandemic as people are making more food at home," Sanderson said. "The demand has increased at a time the production has slowed down."



Retired truck driver and chaplain Ken Newling stands in the parking lot of Lynn's Dakotamart in Pierre, where Newling bought just enough groceries to get by for a couple days. Newling said that since food prices have gone up, he's started getting help from Feeding South Dakota. Photo:

Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch



Jennifer Stensaas

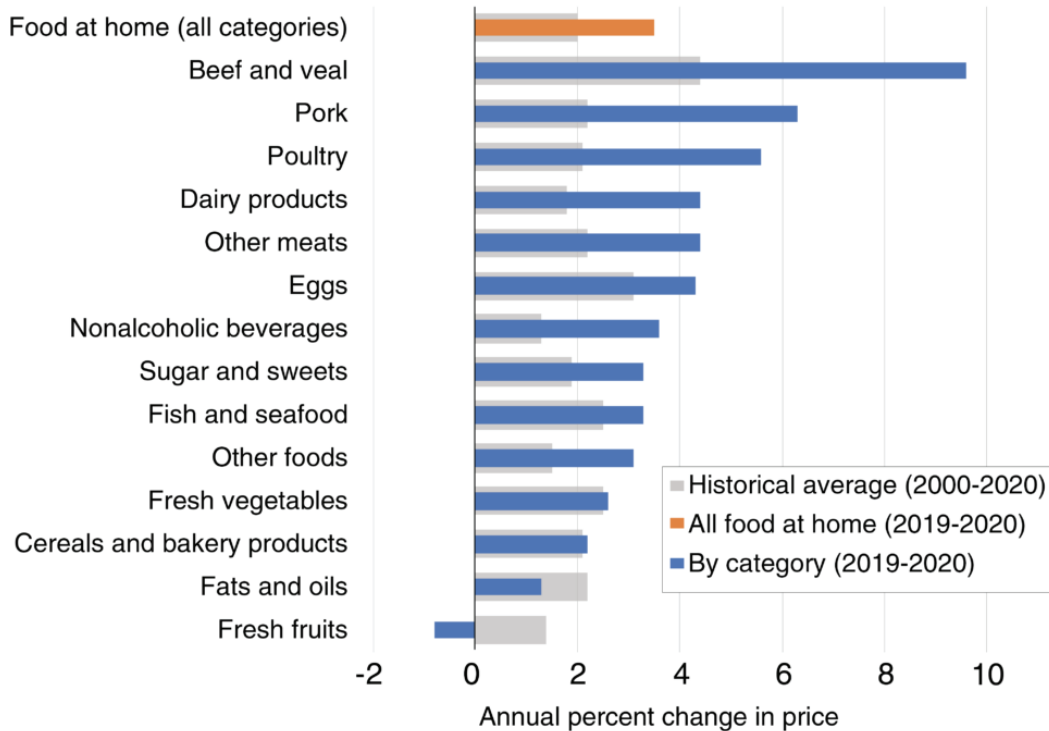
Sanderson, whose group represents numerous grocers across the state, said it is important for consumers to know that just because they are paying more, it doesn't mean that grocery stores or other businesses are raking in profits.

"At a high level, when consumers are paying more, retail businesses are paying more, too," he said. "Retail sellers aren't getting rich by fleecing consumers, because retailers are paying more, and in fact, a lot of businesses like restaurants are making less than they did before the pandemic."

According to the USDA, food spending rises in families as income rises, but at a slower rate than the rise in income. For families with the lowest 20% of gross incomes in the United States, spending on food averages \$4,400 a year, making up 36% of their income.

For comparison, families in the second-lowest 20% of average incomes spent \$5,500 on food in 2019, which consumed only 18% of their income. Meanwhile, families in the top 20% of average incomes in the U.S.

Price changes for CPI food-at-home categories, 2019–2020



Note: CPI = Consumer Price Index.

Source: USDA, Economic Research Service using U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index data.

spent \$14,000 on food in 2019, making up only 8% of their income.

Jennifer Stensaas, spokeswoman for Feeding South Dakota, said the group that provides free food to needy families closed its food pantries during the pandemic. The group has moved to providing only mobile food pickup sites across the state but increased the frequency of visits allowed by clients.

Stensaas said she has personally witnessed the rise in food prices in South Dakota, and is aware that increasing prices will force some individuals and families to make increasingly difficult choices about how to spend their money.

"You can see that food prices are going up as we start to see everything around us increase, and you think about people having to make these impossible choices of whether to pay their rent or their gas or utility bills or buy food for their families," Stensaas said.

"We've got families choosing, do they buy their eggs or do they pay their utility bills, do they buy breakfast foods or do they pay their day-care bill? They can't do everything, and that's where we come in and try to help with hunger in our state."

Increasing food prices, particularly among staples such as meat, dairy products and cereals, can also lead to purchasing of cheaper, more highly processed foods that are not as healthful as more expensive whole foods, Stensaas said. Feeding South Dakota, she said, works hard to purchase or accept donated foods that are as nutritious as possible.

"If you're at the grocery store and you're in financial crisis mode today, and you can't even think about tomorrow, you're probably making choices that aren't as nutritionally sound," she said. "Crisis mode can do things to your strategic thinking that don't always lead to healthy choices for your family."

Ken Newling, 70, a retired trucker and chaplain who lives in Pierre, is on a fixed income and has made recent visits to Feeding South Dakota mobile food banks to supplement what he can afford to buy at the grocery store.

"If it wasn't for them, I'd really be hurting right now," Newling said before a recent grocery-shopping trip in Pierre.

Newling said rising prices for meat have led him to purchase more frozen meals, canned meats and processed foods that are generally higher in sodium and fat.

"I've seen the beef really going up, which hurts because I'm a meat-and-potatoes man," Newling said. "That's how I grew up."

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Dave Johnson, interim general manager of the Lynn's Dakotamart chain of grocery stores, said food sellers don't have many options when it comes to pricing, other than offering "loss-leader" deals or weekly specials to attract customers to their stores. Lynn's is a Rapid City-based regional chain with 10 full-service grocery stores ranging from Belle Fourche in the west to Fort Thompson in the east.

Johnson called the modern grocery industry a "penny business" that generally makes only a small profit on each item, and relies instead on high volume of sales in order to remain profitable.

In general, he said, grocery stores raise prices as little as possible and only to cover higher costs for products purchased at the wholesale level or if other factors such as energy or personnel costs rise, Johnson said.

"It's mostly out of our control [on pricing]; we just have to do what our distributors and manufacturers require us to do," he said. "It's money in, money out, and you've got to pay the bills."

Johnson said his company is aware that retail food prices have risen, but noted that a recent rise in inflation in the U.S. has also led to increases in the costs of gasoline and other consumer goods.

"It's a competitive business and we're all in the same boat," he said. "We have the same problems that everybody else does."



ABOUT BART PFANKUCH

Bart Pfankuch, Rapid City, S.D., is the content director for South Dakota News Watch. A Wisconsin native, he is a former editor of the Rapid City Journal and also worked at newspapers in Florida. Bart has spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and writing coach.

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

I am away from home again, so we'll see how frequent these Updates are for the next couple of weeks. There hasn't been a lot of news since last week, but I expect we'll have more to say once the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices weighs in at their booster meeting in a few days. I figured I'll clean up what I have for you today and sort of clear the decks for the booster news we're expecting.

Overall numbers have continued to decline across the country, although there are, as always, a few hot spots left. At midday today our seven-day new-case average has finally dipped below 80,000 for the first time since August 1. That's progress, but it's still a very big number. Current US case total for the pandemic is now at 45,120,516; we passed 45 million on Monday. Here's the background:

April 28, 2020 – 1 million – 98 days
June 11 – 2 million – 44 days
July 8 – 3 million – 27 days
July 23 – 4 million – 15 days
August 9 – 5 million – 17 days
August 31 – 6 million – 22 days
September 24 – 7 million – 24 days
October 15 – 8 million – 21 days
October 29 – 9 million – 14 days
November 8 – 10 million – 10 days
November 15 – 11 million – 7 days
November 21 – 12 million – 6 days
November 27 – 13 million – 6 days

December 3 – 14 million – 6 days
December 7 – 15 million – 4 days
December 12 – 16 million – 5 days
December 17 – 17 million – 5 days
December 21 – 18 million – 4 days
December 26 – 19 million – 5 days
December 31 – 20 million – 5 days
January 5 – 21 million – 5 days
January 9 – 22 million – 4 days
January 13 – 23 million – 4 days
January 18 – 24 million – 5 days
January 23 – 25 million – 5 days

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January 30 – 26 million – 7 days
February 7 – 27 million – 8 days
February 19 – 28 million – 12 days
March 7 – 29 million – 16 days
March 24 – 30 million – 17 days
April 8 – 31 million – 15 days
April 24 – 32 million – 16 days
May 18 – 33 million – 23 days
July 16 – 34 million – 59 days
July 31 – 35 million – 15 days

August 11 – 36 million – 11 days
August 17 – 37 million – 6 days
August 23 – 38 million – 6 days
August 30 – 39 million – 7 days
September 5 – 40 million – 6 days
September 12 – 41 million – 7 days
September 18 – 42 million – 6 days
September 27 – 43 million – 9 days
October 6 – 44 million – 9 days
October 18 – 45 million – 12 days

We do still have four states with double-digit percentage increases in case numbers. Those are Colorado, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Connecticut. Only six more states are showing any increase at all; these are Montana, New Mexico, South Dakota, Michigan, Maine, and Massachusetts. The rest of them are flat or declining, which is all to the good.

Hospitalizations are also declining; the seven-day average here is 58,433. This just dropped below 60,000 on Monday as well; we haven't been this low since August 2. Deaths are continuing to decrease as well; the current seven-day average is 1557.

The CDC published some data analysis comparing vaccinated with unvaccinated people for the month of August. The case data comes from 14 states in all regions of the US plus New York City and King County, Washington; these comprise 30 percent of the US population. The hospitalization data come from a different set of 13 states. These are not comprehensive, but they're our first good look at this sort of comparison. Here's what we have:

- (1) Unvaccinated adults were six times more likely to test positive for Covid-19 than vaccinated adults.
- (2) Unvaccinated adults were almost 19 times more likely to be hospitalized for Covid-19. It is no surprise that these risks vary with age. Hospitalization rates under the age of 50 are 15 times higher for the unvaccinated; between 50 and 64, they're 31 times higher; and for those 65 and older, they're 16 times higher.
- (3) Once infected, unvaccinated adults were 11 times more likely to die than vaccinated adults. Death rates among the unvaccinated started at 13 per 100,000 early in the month, dropping to about 9 per 100,000 by month's end as case numbers came down. The highest death rates for vaccinated adults have been at any time since April was 1.2 per 100,000. A Kaiser Family Foundation published this week carries an estimate that we've seen more than 90,000 preventable Covid-19 deaths in unvaccinated adults in the past three months; over half of these occurred just in September. The disease was the number one cause of death in adults from 35 to 54 in August and September.

I don't really think these figures require a great deal of interpretation or explanation. They really do speak for themselves, so I'll just leave it here.

We talked last week about the authorization process for booster doses. I want to add to that the information that public health experts are strongly encouraging Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine recipients to get in for their second doses just as soon as they are eligible—probably a week or so from now. Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University School of Public Health, told CNN, "J&J is a very good vaccine. I

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also believe it's probably a two-shot vaccine. It's really urgent that people get that second shot pretty quickly. Probably one is not enough. And everybody who has had one needs a second one." That's how you're going to find yourself protected.

CDC officials are indicating there will be some language in the EUAs to permit some flexibility in terms of heterologous boosting in situations where an individual may need to receive a different vaccine, and just in the last couple of days, there is some indication floating around that an authorization for this practice may be in the works. It does occur to me that, even though our vaccine supplies are robust, if we get 15 million Janssen/Johnson & Johnson recipients rushing in for second doses in a relatively short time period, they may have trouble accessing the correct vaccine; that may be a situation that requires some flexibility. I'll be interested to see just what sort of language comes out of the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices (ACIP) in this regard. I also find myself wondering whether at some point the EUA (or license if we're at that stage of events) for this vaccine won't be amended to recommend a two-dose priming schedule; if so, then we'll have to see whether a further booster, a third dose (analogous to what we're seeing mRNA vaccine recipients getting now), is recommended for this one too. I'll watch for news.

Booster shots have been going out fairly rapidly. This shouldn't be a big surprise; the folks who are six months past their primary series are folks who were fairly eager to rush in for those first doses. Stands to reason they're lining up again. The CDC reports that around one in seven vaccinated people 65 and over have received one. We're finally up to 57 percent of the population fully vaccinated; this number is creeping up extremely slowly. Unfortunately, there's been no real change in the numbers of vaccinations occurring each day; we're still around 800,000 doses, fewer than a third of those are people initiating vaccination.

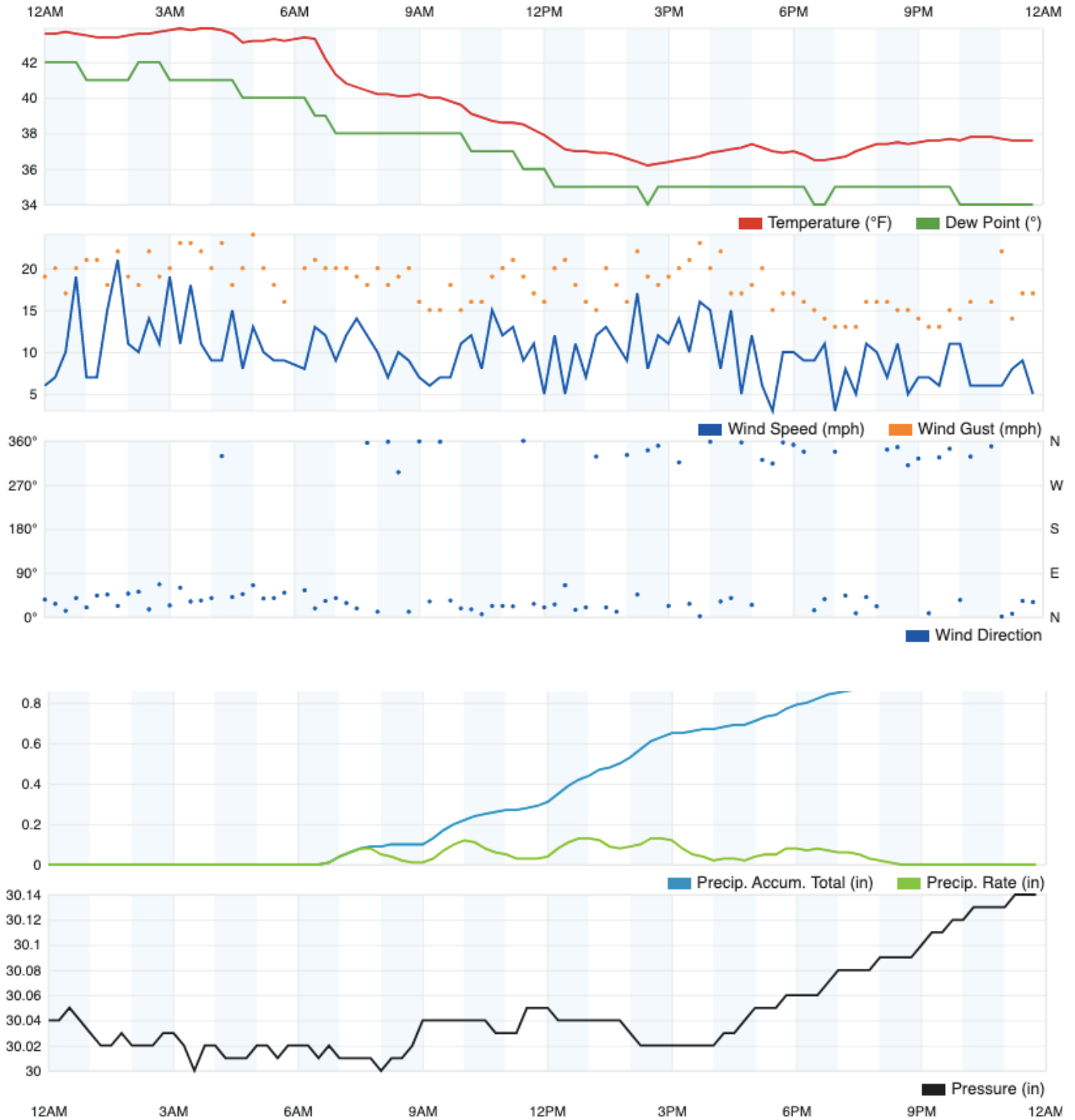
I've read a Swedish study published last week in JAMA Internal Medicine. The researchers looked at medical records for people diagnosed with Covid-19 or vaccinated who would be presumed to have some level of immunity to Covid-19 and set up a matched control group without immunity. This included 1.8 million cases in 800,000 households. They then took a look at the incidence of cases in unprotected household members of each to determine whether immunity influences transmission within a household. Findings were that having an immune family member did show a protective effect on the nonimmune members and that this effect increased as the number of immune family members increased. Families having one immune member showed a decrease in risk for Covid-19 infection by 45 to 61 percent; with two immune members, this increased to 75 to 86 percent; and for those with three or four immune members, it passed 90 percent and reached as high as 97 percent. Results were similar when looking at severe illness requiring hospitalization. I've said here before that the most important thing a parent can do to protect children is to surround them with vaccinated people; this is certainly evidence of that.

That's what I have for you today. Please stay well, and we'll talk soon.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Mostly Sunny

High: 45 °F

Tonight



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 30 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny

High: 49 °F

Friday
Night



Mostly Clear

Low: 28 °F

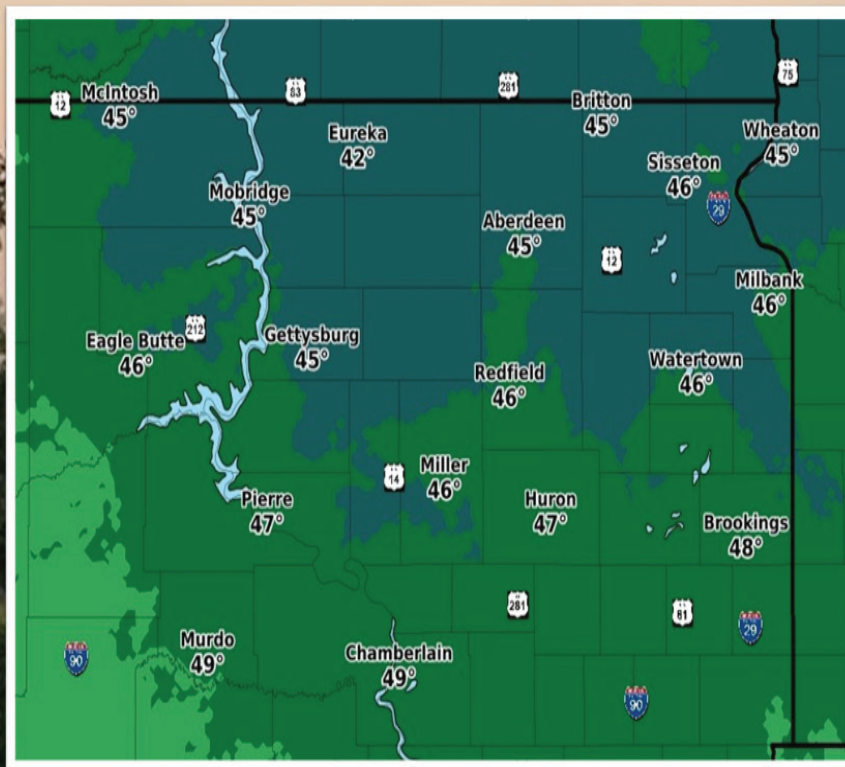
Saturday



Partly Sunny

High: 51 °F

Mostly Sunny and Cool Today



National Weather Service – Aberdeen, SD

weather.gov/Aberdeen



National Weather Service Aberdeen



@NWSAberdeen

Today will feature mostly sunny and cool conditions across the region. Highs will be in the 40s.

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Today in Weather History

October 21, 1987: Cold arctic air continued to invade the central U.S. Eleven record lows were reported in the Great Plains Region, including lows of 12 degrees at Valentine, Nebraska, and 9 degrees at Aberdeen, South Dakota. Temperatures warmed rapidly during the day in the Southern and Central Plains Region. Goodland, Kansas warmed from a morning low of 24 degrees to an afternoon high of 75 degrees.

1934: A severe windstorm lashed the northern Pacific coast. In Washington State, the storm claimed the lives of 22 persons, and caused 1.7 million dollars damage, mostly to timber. Winds, gusting to 87 mph at North Head, WA, produced waves twenty feet high on the Puget Sound.

1966: An avalanche of mud and rocks buries a school in Aberfan, Wales, killing 148 people, mostly young students. The elementary school was in a valley below where a mining operation dumped its waste. In the days leading up to October 21, there was heavy rain in the area. After five months of investigation and the deposition of more than 100 witnesses, it was determined that the tip had blocked the natural course of water down the hill. As the water was soaked into the tip, pressure built up inside until it cracked, with devastating results. The site of the disaster later became a park.

1975: Carlton Fisk made history on this day because of a walk-off home run in the 1975 World Series, after rain had postponed it for three days.

1988: Hurricane Joan, the last hurricane of the season, neared the coast of Nicaragua packing 125 mph winds. Joan claimed more than 200 lives as she moved over Central America, and total damage approached 1.5 billion dollars. Crossing more than 40 degrees of longitude, Hurricane Joan never strayed even one degree from the 12-degree north parallel. After crossing Central America into the Pacific, the cyclone was renamed Tropical Storm Miriam, with the system's dissipation occurring southwest of Mexico.

2010: Tornadoes do occur in South America. A tornado rampaged through Poza del Tigre, a northern Argentinean town, leaving at least six are dead and over 100 wounded. 1934 - A severe windstorm lashed the northern Pacific coast. In Washington State, the storm claimed the lives of 22 persons, and caused 1.7 million dollars damage, mostly to timber. Winds, gusting to 87 mph at North Head WA, produced waves twenty feet high. (David Ludlum)

1957 - The second in a series of unusual October storms hit southern California causing widespread thunderstorms. Santa Maria was drenched with 1.13 inches of rain in two hours. Hail drifted to 18 inches in East Los Angeles. Waterspouts were sighted off Point Mugu and Oceanside. (20th-21st) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Cold arctic air continued to invade the central U.S. Eleven record lows were reported in the Great Plains Region, including lows of 12 degrees at Valentine NE, and 9 degrees at Aberdeen SD. Temperatures warmed rapidly during the day in the Southern and Central Plains Region. Goodland KS warmed from a morning low of 24 degrees to an afternoon high of 75 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Joan, the last hurricane of the season, neared the coast of Nicaragua packing 125 mph winds. Joan claimed more than 200 lives as she moved over Central America, and total damage approached 1.5 billion dollars. Crossing more than 40 degrees of longitude, Hurricane Joan never strayed even one degree from the 12 degree north parallel. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Unseasonably cold weather continued to grip the south central and southeastern U.S. Twenty cities reported record low temperatures for the date, including Calico AR with a reading of 26 degrees, and Daytona Beach FL with a low of 41 degrees. Squalls in the Great Lakes Region finally came to an end, but not before leaving Marquette MI buried under 12.7 inches of snow, a record 24 hour total for October. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

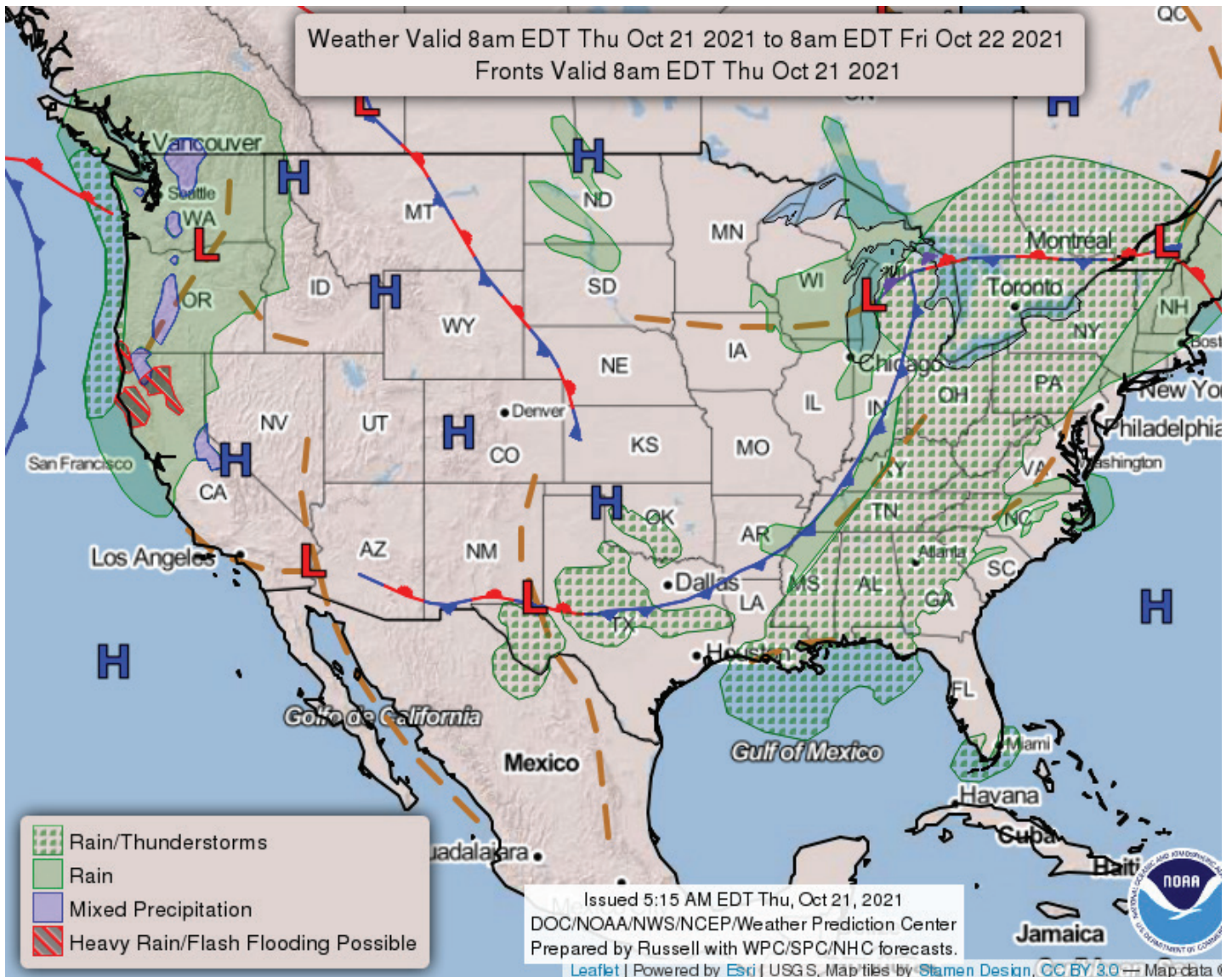
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 43.9 °F at 3:45 AM
Low Temp: 36.2 °F at 2:30 PM
Wind: 24 mph at 5:00 AM
Precip: 0.87

Record High: 86° in 1947
Record Low: 9° in 1987
Average High: 56°F
Average Low: 31°F
Average Precip in Oct.: 1.58
Precip to date in Oct.: 2.81
Average Precip to date: 19.91
Precip Year to Date: 18.23
Sunset Tonight: 6:38:00 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:57:13 AM



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HOW GREAT IS GOD'S LOVE?

Miss Burrell was my second-grade teacher and next-door neighbor. It seemed as though I could never get beyond her "watchful" eye. When she called on me in class, I would "shrive!" up inside and have difficulty getting any words out of my mouth. And when I was out in our yard playing, I imagined that she was "peeking" at my friends and me from the corner of a window. Perhaps it was feelings of guilt for not being a better student or more gracious when she came to visit my mother.

But despite those feelings, I remember the many evenings she would knock on our front door and ask me to join her in the front yard and study the stars and constellations. She would bring her flashlight and point out "The Big Dipper" and "The Little Dipper" and all the constellations that God formed in the sky. She would also point out different stars - some that shined brightly and some that we could barely see. I remember asking her often how many miles they were from where we were standing.

"No one will ever be able to measure the most-distant star because we will always be finding new ones that are even farther away." So, "we'll never know" was her answer every time I asked that question.

"For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who stand in awe of Him," said the Psalmist. What a marvelous statement about the love of God. It is so immense, as are His heavens, that we will never be able to measure it.

Prayer: Lord, we will never understand why You love us, nor how very much You love us. But we do thank You! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His love for those who stand in awe of Him. Psalm 103:11-12

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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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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

16-17-20-22-30

(sixteen, seventeen, twenty, twenty-two, thirty)

Estimated jackpot: \$155,000

Lotto America

08-17-20-41-51, Star Ball: 3, ASB: 3

(eight, seventeen, twenty, forty-one, fifty-one; Star Ball: three; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$3.36 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$108 million

Powerball

07-29-36-41-43, Powerball: 5, Power Play:

(seven, twenty-nine, thirty-six, forty-one, forty-three; Powerball: five; Power Play: zero)

Estimated jackpot: \$73 million

Inmate who failed to return from work shift back in custody

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A western South Dakota inmate who walked away from a minimum-security facility was arrested Wednesday, corrections officials said.

Inmate Timothy Mitchell had been on escape status since Oct. 6, after he failed to return to the Rapid City Community Work Center following a shift on work release.

Mitchell is currently being held at the Meade County Jail. He faces a charge of second-degree escape, which carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison.

Mitchell is serving two sentences for possession of a controlled substance from Butte County.

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined

Yankton Press & Dakotan. October 18, 2021.

Editorial: South Dakota Redistricting: Redrawing The State

South Dakotans are finding out a few things in the once-in-a-decade exercise of legislative redistricting currently being conducted by state lawmakers.

Among many things, we're learning a lot about what Nebraskans have gone through in recent go-rounds. Through the years, the people of that state have seen boundaries redrawn to reflect the growing populations in the Omaha and Lincoln areas. Needless to say, those urban areas have steadily gained more legislative clout at the expense of rural areas where populations aren't growing nearly as fast or are declining. Thus, more legislative seats are hailing from the metro areas because that is where the state is growing.

This issue has become increasingly magnified in South Dakota as the Sioux Falls metro area continues to grow at a pace far outstripping the rest of the state in general. Thus, that area will be gaining more legislative clout in Pierre at the expense of the rest of the state.

This is no small turn of events. Occasionally, the desires of the bigger communities tend to conflict with the rural areas. This has been evident at times in education issues. Such divisions in opinion will likely grow more pronounced after the next redistricting.

We're about to learn to what extent the state will be redrawn. For instance, it's virtually guaranteed that

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District 18, which for years has consisted solely of Yankton County, will be broadened to include portions of other counties, likely Clay County. As we've pointed out before, Yankton County's population growth in recent years has failed to expand enough for the county to maintain its own self-contained district. This will also be true elsewhere as lawmakers try to redraw lines based on the new census map.

We'll also see the strategies that go into redistricting, and herein aggravation may await. There are politicians who tend to dabble in gerrymandering to realign boundaries for political advantage. For example, one House idea being kicked around would partition the city of Vermillion (not just Clay County), which has a fairly strong Democratic base, among THREE different legislative districts; it would also split the town of Burbank between two districts. This proposal would seem to reflect some Republican power playing, but not all GOP officials are on board with such an approach. Senate Pro Temp Lee Schoenbeck (R), speaking more broadly about the process, said of some proposals, "It looks like someone accidentally spilled something on the map. ... They are making a concerted effort to create or protect districts for people."

(Redistricting really should be a nonpartisan exercise, but by law, it isn't. In most every state and no matter who is in control, the redistricting process sometimes shows why letting politicians draw up playing fields to their own advantage makes little sense. Changing this process in South Dakota was proposed via a constitutional amendment in 2016, but it was soundly rejected by voters. It remains a good idea, however.)

Meanwhile, redistricting still must consider areas with minority populations, which can't be divvied up to dilute their voting power. According to The Associated Press, "Federal law requires that racial minorities receive adequate representation in legislative boundaries."

The Legislature convenes on Nov. 8 in Pierre to settle on the details. The redistricting process in South Dakota has been far from smooth so far, and the end result, no matter where the lines are drawn, will likely be open to considerable criticism on many fronts.

END

Police: Rapid City stabbing victim, suspect were associated

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — A suspect in a fatal stabbing in Rapid City had an "association" with the victim, according to investigators.

Officers were called to the crime scene about 4 a.m. Tuesday and found the 24-year-old victim on the ground with several stab wounds. Paramedics arrived and transported the man to the hospital where he later died.

The victim is identified as Leon Richards of Rapid City. Officers investigating the homicide say it does not appear to be a random crime. A suspect remains at large.

India celebrates 1B vaccine doses, hopes to speed 2nd shots

By KRUTIKA PATHI Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — India celebrated giving its billionth COVID-19 vaccine dose on Thursday, a hopeful milestone for the South Asian country where the delta variant fueled a crushing surge earlier this year and missteps initially held back its inoculation campaign.

About half of India's nearly 1.4 billion people have received at least one dose while around 20% are fully immunized, according to Our World in Data. Many of those shots have come in just the past couple of months, after the rollout languished in the first half of the year amid vaccine shortages and problems with the system for rolling them out.

The success of the campaign has been credited with driving down coronavirus cases since the devastating months at the start of the year when India was recording hundreds of thousands infections a day, hospitals buckled under the pressure, and crematoriums and graveyards became overwhelmed. But experts warn that India must speed up the delivery of second shots in order to ensure the outbreak doesn't flare again.

The country widened the gap between shots from 12 to 16 weeks in order to administer more first doses at a time when supply was limited and infections were surging — a tactic countries like the United Kingdom have used in times of crisis. But it created a lag in getting people fully immunized.

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Ramping up the second dose is “an important priority,” V.K. Paul, the head of the country’s COVID-19 taskforce, said last week.

“We would like to see this number go up. Complete coverage is absolutely critical,” Paul said.

For now, the country appears to have enough vaccines to do that — but its supplies will be watched closely since it is a major supplier of the shots globally. When it halted exports in April as cases surged at home, it had a devastating impact on poorer countries that particularly rely on doses from India. Exports resumed earlier this month.

The government is now optimistic that the country’s rising vaccine supply will be enough to cover its international and domestic commitments. Both of the two main suppliers have ramped up production, with the Serum Institute of India now producing around 220 million doses a month and Bharat Biotech about 30 million, Paul said.

Still, experts say the vaccine situation will need constant review. “There can be no written-in-stone rule — if infections rise drastically, they can again stop exports until there’s enough doses,” said K. Srinath Reddy, president of the Public Health Foundation of India.

On Thursday, India confirmed more than 18,400 new cases and 160 deaths — dramatically below the worst days in May when daily fatalities exceeded 4,000. Overall, the country has recorded around 34 million infections and over 450,000 deaths, according to the Health Ministry, though those figures, as elsewhere, are likely undercounts.

Even states where infections were swelling a few weeks ago, such as Kerala along the tropical Malabar coast, have seen a sustained decline.

“There is a sense of comfort that India has suffered the worst of the delta variant, but this must be accompanied with a feeling of caution,” said Reddy. “Even if cases go up, we are unlikely to see the scale of the surge earlier — if that does happen, it would be fairly unexpected.”

India earlier said it aimed to vaccinate all eligible adults by the end of the year, but experts say the current pace of immunizations will need to increase to meet this goal, even though it has already ramped up significantly. Though the campaign began in January, by mid-June, only about 3.5% of the population had been fully vaccinated.

India celebrated the achievement of 1 billion shots with fanfare Thursday — though it’s not that surprising since it’s the world’s second-most populous country. The first country to reach that milestone, China, is the most populous.

Billboards announcing the feat with a photo of Prime Minister Narendra Modi were posted across New Delhi. Outside a local politician’s house in the capital city, residents gathered as sweets were distributed. A song and film to commemorate the moment have been released, and the Indian flag was unfurled at the historic Red Fort in New Delhi.

In recent months, life in India has swung back to normal. Markets buzz with activity, foreign tourists are allowed again after a 19-month hiatus and the country is gearing up to celebrate Diwali, the Hindu festival of lights.

But there are fears this could be a lull before a storm. Even though India may have borne the brunt of the delta variant already, things could escalate quickly if a new variant emerges — either from within the country or outside.

“If the virus becomes different or mutates, it changes the dynamics. This could change everything,” Paul said.

S Korea test launches 1st domestically made space rocket

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea’s first domestically produced space rocket reached its desired altitude but failed to deliver a dummy payload into orbit in its first test launch on Thursday.

South Korean President Moon Jae-in still described the test as an “excellent accomplishment” that takes the country a step further in its pursuit of a space launch program.

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Live footage showed the 47-meter (154 foot) rocket soaring into the air with bright yellow flames shooting out of its engines following blastoff at Naro Space Center, the country's lone spaceport, on a small island off its southern coast.

After the launch, the Korea Aerospace Research Institute, the country's space agency, reported that Nuri's first and second stages separated properly and that the third stage carried the payload – a 1.5-ton block of stainless steel and aluminum – 700 kilometers (435 miles) above Earth. But Moon, who observed the launch at the Naro spaceport, said in a televised speech that the payload didn't stabilize in orbit after being separated from the third stage.

Officials from KARI and the country's Science Ministry didn't immediately provide more details on what went wrong.

The launch, which took place at 5 p.m. (0800 GMT), had been delayed by an hour because engineers needed more time to examine the rocket's valves. There had also been concerns that strong winds and other conditions would pose challenges for a successful launch.

"Although (the launch) failed to achieve its objectives perfectly, it was an excellent accomplishment for a first launch," Moon said.

"The midair engine ignitions and the separations of the rockets, fairings (covering the payload) and the dummy satellite worked smoothly. All this was done based on technology that is completely ours," he added.

After relying on other countries to launch its satellites since the early 1990s, South Korea is now trying to become the 10th nation to send a satellite into space with its own technology.

Officials say such an ability would be crucial for the country's space ambitions, which include plans for sending more advanced communications satellites and acquiring its own military intelligence satellites. The country is also hoping to send a probe to the moon by 2030.

Nuri is the country's first space launch vehicle built entirely with domestic technology. The three-stage rocket is powered by five 75-ton class rocket engines placed in its first and second stages.

Scientists and engineers at KARI plan to test Nuri several more times, including conducting another launch with a dummy device in May 2022, before trying with a real satellite.

South Korea had previously launched a space launch vehicle from the Naro spaceport in 2013, which was a two-stage rocket built mainly with Russian technology. That launch came after years of delays and consecutive failures. The rocket, named Naro, reached the desired altitude during its first test in 2009 but failed to eject a satellite into orbit, and then exploded shortly after takeoff during its second test in 2010.

It wasn't clear how North Korea, which had been accused of using its space launch attempts in past years as a disguise for developing long-range missile technology, would react to Thursday's launch.

While pushing to expand its nuclear and missile program, the North had shown sensitivity about South Korea's increasing defense spending and efforts to build more powerful conventionally armed missiles.

In a speech to Pyongyang's rubber-stamp parliament last month, North Korean leader Kim Jong Un accused the U.S. and South Korea of "destroying the stability and balance" in the region with their allied military activities and a U.S.-led "excessive arms buildup" in the South.

While Nuri is powered by liquid propellants that need to be fueled shortly before launch, the South Koreans plan to develop a solid-fuel space launch rocket by 2024, which could be cheaper to build and prepared for launch more quickly. Such rockets would also be ideal for more sensitive space launches, including those involving military intelligence satellites.

South Korea's space ambitions received a boost in recent years as the Trump and Biden administrations took steps to ease decades-long U.S. restrictions that capped Seoul's missile development before eventually allowing its ally to build conventional weapons with unlimited range and warhead weight. In easing the so-called missile guidelines, the U.S. also removed a limit on how powerful solid-fuel rockets South Korea can build for space launch purposes.

South Korea currently has no military surveillance satellites of its own, which leaves it relying on U.S. spy satellites to monitor North Korea. Officials have expressed hopes of launching domestically developed, low-orbit military surveillance satellites using the country's own solid-fuel rockets in the next several years.

Activist dad of school shooting victim joins anti-gun group

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The father of a 14-year-old girl killed in the 2018 Florida high school shooting massacre announced Thursday that he's joining the top ranks of a progressive anti-gun group to promote like-minded political candidates around the country ahead of next year's midterm elections.

Fred Guttenberg will be a senior adviser to Brady PAC. His daughter Jamie, an aspiring dancer and gymnast, died with 16 others during the Valentine's Day 2018 shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida.

Nikolas Cruz pleaded guilty Wednesday to 17 counts of first-degree murder for that shooting and could face the death penalty during sentencing in January. Guttenberg, who has become a nationally known activist in the years since the shooting, said he visited his daughter's grave this week and "asked her for guidance. 'Cause Jamie is my strength."

"Jamie may only have been 14, but she was the toughest, wisest person I ever knew," Guttenberg said in an interview. "If you want to know my motivation for why I'm doing this with Brady PAC right now, that's the reason."

Brady PAC, formed leading up to 2018's midterm elections, supports candidates who promote gun violence prevention and spent \$5 million during the 2020 election cycle. It has promised to pump millions more into next year's races.

Guttenberg, a 55-year-old former small business owner, said, "I believe we are one election cycle away from either getting this done, or one election cycle away from losing the chance."

"We do it now," he added, "or we never do it."

Guttenberg noted that Democrats, most of whom agree with him and Brady PAC on top gun issues, control Congress and could hold both chambers after 2022 — even though the party that wins the White House, as Democrats did through Joe Biden in 2020, historically loses seats in the next election.

"I think people need to stop acting like everyone knows what's going to happen in 2022 and get back to working for what you want to happen," Guttenberg said. "I want more gun safety candidates elected to the House and the Senate. Period. Full stop. And I think that voters agree with me."

Cruz killed 14 students and three staff members during a seven-minute rampage through Stoneman Douglas, using an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle to shoot victims in hallways and classrooms. Cruz had been expelled from the school a year earlier after a history of threatening, frightening, unusual and sometimes violent behavior that dated to preschool.

The shootings caused some Stoneman Douglas students to launch the March for Our Lives movement, which pushes for stronger gun restrictions nationally. Besides Guttenberg, several other parents of students killed have also become activists.

Last February, Guttenberg attended President Donald Trump's State of the Union address and began yelling after the Republican president said, "I will always protect your Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms." Guttenberg was escorted out and later apologized via Twitter.

Guttenberg also drew attention in Congress in September 2018 when he attempted to shake hands with Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh during a break at the latter's Senate confirmation hearing. Kavanaugh looked at him, turned and walked away. Kavanaugh later said that he had assumed Guttenberg was a protester and that he would have expressed his sympathy and shaken Guttenberg's hand had he recognized him before being whisked away by his security detail. Kavanaugh was confirmed to the court.

Brady PAC is the political arm of a nonprofit named in honor of former White House press secretary James Brady, who suffered a bullet wound to his head in the assassination attempt against President Ronald Reagan outside the Washington Hilton Hotel in 1981.

Together with his wife, Brady became a leading gun control activist before his death in 2014. A federal law requiring a background check on handgun buyers bears Brady's name, as does the White House press briefing room.

Strong winds cause damage, disruptions in western Europe

PARIS (AP) — A quarter of a million French homes were without electricity Thursday and trains were halted from Normandy to the Paris region after powerful winds swept across swaths of northern France, the Netherlands and Belgium.

Local media reported that four people were injured in the Dutch town of Barendrecht, on the southern edge of Rotterdam, as strong gusts ripped tiles off roofs and uprooted trees in a residential neighborhood in the early hours of the morning.

The storm that started by hitting Brittany's Atlantic Coast Wednesday afternoon blew eastward through the night, felling trees and collapsing roofs in some areas, according to images posted online. France's national weather service maintained storm warnings Thursday in the country's northeastern corner that borders Germany, Belgium and Luxembourg.

Wind speeds reached 175 kilometers per hour (109 mph) in the Normandy town of Fecamp, according to the weather service.

Blown-down trees toppled power lines, and the Enedis utility said 250,000 homes were without electricity as of Thursday morning.

Train travel was disrupted in Normandy and Champagne-Ardennes region, as well as on some commuter routes in the Paris region, according to the SNCF national rail authority.

The Dutch rail network also was disrupted Thursday morning by trees that had blown onto railroad tracks.

Germany's national railway operator, Deutsche Bahn, suspended all long-distance trains in North Rhine-Westphalia state – the country's most populous, which borders the Netherlands and Belgium. The company said there were cancellations and delays in other parts of Germany as well.

Firefighters in the Belgian town of Westerhoek, close to the Dutch border, tweeted that they had been called out dozens of times over night to deal with storm damage.

Germany's national weather service warned of gusts ranging up to 105 kph (65 mph) in the north and northeast of the country on Thursday, and up to 120 kph in mountainous areas. But there were no immediate reports of significant damage.

In Delmenhorst, in northwestern Germany, a man was hit by a falling branch on Wednesday evening but only slightly injured. During the night, a freight train collided with a fallen branch in Bad Godesberg, a suburb of Bonn.

Berlin's two zoos closed as a precaution for the day because of the forecast high winds and the animals were brought into indoor enclosures.

Moscow tightens restrictions as infections, deaths soar

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The authorities in Moscow on Thursday announced a plan to shut restaurants and non-food stores and introduce other restrictions later this month as Russia registered the highest daily numbers of new coronavirus infections and deaths since the start of the pandemic.

The government coronavirus task force reported 36,339 new confirmed infections and 1,036 deaths in the past 24 hours that brought Russia's death toll to 227,389 — by far the highest in Europe.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday responded to rising contagion and deaths by ordering Russians to stay off work for a period starting Oct. 30 and extending through the following week, and Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin followed up Thursday by introducing a slew of restrictions in the capital.

He said all restaurants, cafes and non-food stores, gyms, movies and other entertainment venues in the Russian capital will be shut for a period from Oct. 28 to Nov. 7, and schools and kindergartens will also be closed. Access to museums, theaters and other venues will be limited to holders of digital codes proving vaccination or past illness, a practice that will also remain in place after Nov. 7.

"The situation in Moscow is developing according to the worst-case scenario," Sobyenin wrote on his blog, adding that the number of infections in the capital is nearing all-time highs.

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Russia's daily infections have been surging for weeks and coronavirus mortality numbers topped 1,000 for the first time over the weekend amid low vaccination rates, lax public attitudes toward taking precautions and the government's reluctance to tighten restrictions. Only about 45 million Russians — roughly a third of its nearly 146 million people — are fully vaccinated.

The nonworking period, which includes a two-day state holiday, should help limit the spread by keeping people out of offices and off crowded public transportation. The government also urged local authorities to restrict access to restaurants, theaters and other entertainment venues during the period.

Putin said that in some regions where the situation is the most threatening, he said the nonworking period could start as early as Saturday and be extended past Nov. 7.

Until now, the Kremlin ruled out a nationwide lockdown like the one early in the pandemic that dealt a heavy blow to the economy and sapped Putin's popularity, instead empowering regional authorities to decide on local restrictions.

Many of Russia's 85 regions already have restricted attendance at large public events and introduced digital codes proving vaccination or past illness for access to restaurants, theaters and other venues. Some have made vaccinations compulsory for certain public servants and people over 60.

But Moscow had avoided restrictions until now, with restaurants and movie theaters brimming with people, crowds swarming nightclubs and karaoke bars, and commuters widely ignoring mask mandates on public transportation even as ICUs have been filling quickly.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Israeli minister sees opportunity at UN climate conference

By JOSEF FEDERMAN Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel's new environmental protection minister has set some ambitious goals: She believes she can use her office to play an important role in the global battle against climate change while also promoting peace in the volatile Middle East.

Tamar Zandberg laid out her agenda in an interview with The Associated Press ahead of the upcoming U.N. climate conference in Glasgow. She says Israel, despite its small size and own inability to reach the global goal of zero net emissions by 2050, has the potential to be a key player.

Zandberg said the country is eager to share its expertise in green technologies. Israel is widely considered a world leader in areas such as solar energy storage, sustainable protein alternatives, agriculture technology and desalination.

"These are fields where Israel is already in the cutting edge frontier of global innovation, and we hope that this is something that small Israel can contribute to bigger countries than us to adjust better to the new climate reality," she said.

Major countries, including China and India, have become important markets for Israeli environmental technologies. Zandberg said she already has held a pair of meetings with her counterpart in the United Arab Emirates, which established diplomatic ties with Israel just over a year ago, and that the two countries have teams working together on issues like agriculture and water in the arid Middle East.

Israel and Jordan last week held a signing ceremony on a new water-sharing agreement, and Zandberg said the two countries are having "extensive talks" on various environmental issues.

"Our neighbors share our region and share our climate," she said. "So it's only natural that we will face them together. That can contribute to climate change, but also to the regional stability and to our peace in the Middle East."

Zandberg took office in June as part of Israel's new government — a diverse patchwork of small and midsize parties spanning the political spectrum. This includes deep ideological differences over how to handle the decades-long conflict with the Palestinians.

Prime Minister Naftali Bennett heads a religious, ultranationalist party that opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state, and Bennett, a former leader of the West Bank settlement movement, has ruled out

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peace talks with the Palestinians.

Zandberg's Meretz party is the most dovish member of the eight-party coalition and supports a two-state solution with the Palestinians. As part of the coalition deal, forged to prevent the country from plunging into a fifth election in a two-year span, all members were forced to compromise on their core beliefs.

Zandberg acknowledged some frustration with the limitations created by the political reality, but said environmental cooperation provides an opportunity to improve the atmosphere and lay the groundwork for future negotiations. She said she has met with her Palestinian counterpart, and that professional teams meet regularly to work on issues of mutual concern, such as protecting shared water resources.

"We live here together and we share the land and we share the air and share the water," she said. "The better we communicate, the better our peoples will live."

At home, Zandberg has a long to-do list.

Israel has acknowledged it will fall short of the goal of the international community to reach zero net emissions by 2050. It expects to reduce emissions by 85% by that time. Environmentalists have cited a lack of political will by previous governments and the country's reliance on newly discovered natural gas for energy for the lower target.

Zandberg said this figure was calculated based largely on a situation inherited from previous governments. She also said Israel's relatively high population growth is an obstacle. And while Israel lags on its own renewable energy goals, she said the government is determined to help the world reach the zero-emissions target through its technology exports and to do more on the domestic front.

"That's our goal to close that gap," she said. "We are working on new climate legislation for the first time in the Israeli parliament. We are working on the series of implementation plans, how to take the low carbon economy governmental declaration and make it a reality in sectors of energy, transportation, waste, agriculture. So we are serious."

There are other challenges. The Dead Sea, which is actually a salty lake situated at the lowest place on earth, is slowly shrinking. This is the result of years of water diversion from the Jordan River for drinking and agriculture and from damage caused by mineral-extraction companies. A secretive oil pipeline deal between Israel and the United Arab Emirates has raised fears that an oil spill might one day destroy the Red Sea coral reefs, prized by scientists for their unique resilience against warming seas. Water resources that traverse Israel and the occupied West Bank are threatened by sewage and pollution.

Zandberg said her team is involved in negotiations to ensure that Dead Sea factories, which are among Israel's worst polluters, address environmental concerns as licenses are renewed in the coming years. The Israel-UAE pipeline is now under review by the government, "and we will express our concerns in those discussions," she said. Zandberg has been pushing for a new tax on single-use plastics to go into effect next year.

Gidon Bromberg, the Israeli director of EcoPeace, an environmental advocacy group with offices in Israel, Jordan and the West Bank, said it is too early to judge Zandberg's performance. But he said her appointment has raised hopes that Israel can finally make some progress on long-festering issues.

"We're in a very unique position where we have a minister of environment who is extremely committed to the issue and wants to succeed," Bromberg said. "You have an environment minister who's an environmentalist."

Whether she succeeds, he said, will depend in part on her political skills, largely her relationship with Bennett. Despite their different backgrounds, Bromberg said that so far they appear to have a good rapport.

"It's still very early days. The issues are enormous," he said.

Youth yearning for independence fuel Western Sahara clashes

By ARITZ PARRA Associated Press

MAHBAS REGION, Western Sahara (AP) — As a glowing sun sank behind the sandy barrier that cuts across the disputed territory of Western Sahara, Sidati Ahmed's battalion launched two missiles that sizzled through the air and then followed with an artillery attack.

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Within minutes, a barrage of mortar shells flew in the opposite direction, from Moroccan positions, landing with a thick column of smoke in the barren desert of what is known as Africa's last colony.

"Low-intensity hostilities," as a recent United Nations report describes them, have raged for the past year along the 2,700-kilometer (1,700-mile) berm — a barrier second in length only to the Great Wall of China that separates the part of Western Sahara that Morocco rules from the sliver held by the Polisario Front, which wants the territory to be independent. Both sides claim the area in its entirety.

For nearly 30 years this swath of North African desert about the size of Colorado — that sits on vast phosphate deposits, faces rich fishing grounds and is believed to have off-shore oil reserves — has existed in limbo, awaiting a referendum that was supposed to let the local Sahrawi people decide their future. Instead, as negotiations over who would be allowed to vote dragged on, Morocco tightened its control of the territory, which was a Spanish colony until 1975.

Last year, the Polisario Front announced that it would no longer abide by the 1991 cease-fire that ended its 16-year guerilla war with Morocco.

The decision was fueled by frustration among younger Sahrawi — many of whom were born in refugee camps in Algeria, have never lived in their ancestral homeland, and are tired of waiting for the U.N.-promised referendum.

"Everybody is ready for war," said Ahmed, who spent more than half of his 32 years in Cuba before returning to enlist for battle when the truce ended last year.

"We are fed up. The only thing that is going to bring our homeland back to us is this," Ahmed said pointing at his AK-47 weapon, as he stood on the front line in Mahbas. The region, at the crossroads of Morocco, Mauritania and Algeria, is where most of the exchanges of fire take place.

Ahmed is typical of a generation of Sahrawi youth, most of whom traveled abroad to study — from Spain to Libya — but returned to the camps to form families. And they've told their elders that they don't want to die in exile, with no future to offer to their own children.

"Life abroad can be tempting," said Omar Deidih, a baby-faced soldier and cybersecurity student who on a recent visit to the front line organized by the Polisario spoke to foreign reporters in fluent English. "But the most important thing is that we have fresh blood in this new phase of the struggle."

The possibility, however remote, that clashes could escalate into a full-out regional war may be the Polisario's only hope of drawing attention to a conflict with few known casualties in a vast but forgotten corner of the desert. Many in the camps feel that efforts to finally settle the status of Western Sahara have languished since Morocco proposed greater autonomy for the territory in 2004.

The front's hopes for independence suffered a major blow last year when the U.S. in the waning days of the Trump administration backed Morocco's claim to the territory, as part of efforts to get Morocco to recognize Israel. Other countries, including the Polisario's main ally Algeria, recognize Western Sahara as independent, while still more support U.N. efforts for a negotiated solution.

The rising tensions have gotten the attention of the U.N., whose Minurso force oversaw the cease-fire and whose secretary-general recently appointed Staffan de Mistura, a seasoned Italian diplomat and former U.N. envoy for Syria, to take charge of the negotiations.

The Polisario's leader, Brahim Ghali, last week warned that de Mistura must be given a clear mandate from the Security Council to carry out a referendum. Western Sahara will be before the Council on Oct. 28, when members vote on whether to extend the Minurso mission.

Achieving progress is also a matter of legitimacy for the Polisario. After years of internal division, the new hostilities have rallied pro-independence supporters around its leadership, but many fear that the lack of results could lead to more radicalization.

In the camps, the live fire from the front line reverberates strongly among refugees, who were forced to confront the precariousness of their existence when the humanitarian aid they rely on slowed to a trickle during the pandemic.

Medical missions were halted, medicine was in short supply and prices of camel, goat and chicken meat all went up, said 29-year old Dahaba Chej Baha, a refugee in the Boujdour camp. On a recent morning,

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the mother of a 3-year-old was sheltering in the shade while in her third hour of waiting for an Algerian truck to deliver gas canisters.

"Everything is so difficult here," Chej Baha said, adding that those who would typically find ways to work overseas and send money back have become trapped because of pandemic-related travel restrictions. "I don't like war, but I feel that nothing is going to change without it."

Meima Ali, another mother, with three kids, said she was against the war, but that her voice was not listened to in a community dominated by men.

"My husband has to decide between finding work or looking like a traitor for not going to the front," she said. "How am I going to survive without him? Here, we live as if we were dead."

Morocco denies that there is an armed conflict raging in what it calls its "southern provinces," where about 90,000 Sahrawi people are estimated to live alongside 350,000 Moroccans. Morocco has told the U.N. mission that its troops only return fire "in cases of direct threat" and "always in proportion to actions" of the Polisario.

In a response to questions from The Associated Press, the Moroccan government said that there have been "unilateral attacks" by the Polisario but no casualties on the Moroccan side.

It called any effort to portray the conflict as something bigger "propaganda elements intended for the media" and "desperate gesticulations to attract attention."

Intissar Fakir, an expert on the region for the Washington-based Middle East Institute, said that a full-fledged conflict — which could pit Morocco and Algeria against each other — wasn't in anyone's interest. But she said that negotiating a lasting solution wouldn't be easy either.

"Maybe in terms of international law, the Polisario have their standing, but I think Morocco here is the strongest it has ever been with the U.S. recognition and de facto control over most of the territory," she said. But the Polisario, she added, "is more entrenched in their own position because they really have kind of nothing to lose at this point."

Although many interviewed by the AP at the camps or on the front line expressed frustration with the years of negotiations that the Polisario defended until last year, open criticism is hard to come by in such a tight community.

Baali Hamudi Nayim, a veteran of the 1970s and 1980s war against Mauritania and Morocco, said he had been against the 1991 cease-fire.

"If it was up to me, the time for a political solution without any guarantees, through the U.N. or others, is over," said Hamudi, who is back in his guerrilla attire to oversee battalions in the restive Mahbas. "For me, the solution is a military one."

Associated Press journalists Bernat Armangué in Sahrawi refugee camps and Tarik El Barakah and Mosa'ab Elshamy in Rabat, Morocco, contributed to this report.

Tool for police reform rarely used by local prosecutors

By MARTHA BELLISLE Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — Isaiah Obet was behaving erratically and in mental distress in 2017 when Officer Jeff Nelson ordered his police dog to attack and then shot Obet in the torso. Obet fell to the ground and Nelson fired again, fatally shooting Obet in the head. The officer said his life was in danger.

The next year, Joseph Allen was crossing in front of Nelson's patrol car when the officer swerved and pinned him against a fence, breaking both his ankles. His justification: Allen was a dangerous criminal.

In 2019, Nelson scuffled with Jesse Sarey after attempting to arrest him for disorderly conduct. He punched Sarey seven times and then shot him in the torso. After Sarey fell to the ground, Nelson killed him with a second shot to the forehead. He claimed Sarey was on his hands and knees "ready to spring forward," which later was disproved by both video and witnesses.

Nelson's actions in all three cases were outlined in a criminal complaint, eyewitness accounts, and police dashcam video obtained by The Associated Press. In the past decade, Nelson has been investigated in

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more than 60 use-of-force cases that involved choking suspects until they passed out, severe dog bites, and physical force that required medical care. But he was not on the King County Prosecuting Attorney's list that flags officers whose credibility is in question due to misconduct – a designation that must be shared with defense attorneys.

Nelson was only added to its "potential impeachment disclosure" list, or Brady List, after he was charged with killing Sarey. A trial is set for February 2022. Mohammad Hamoudi, a federal public defender, said given Officer Nelson's history, all of his cases should be reviewed. And he hopes his story will encourage prosecutors to track excessive force cases involving other police officers.

"It has to do with respect for the rules, the laws, and others," he said. "If an officer lacks impulse control or the ability to exercise informed judgment, you can call into question how he investigates cases."

The murder of George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer has sparked a national conversation on police reform, ranging from defunding departments to enhancing training. But reform activists and civil rights advocates say prosecutors already have powerful tools at their disposal to curb bad behavior by police: They can use Brady Lists to shine a light on troubled officers, and they can then refuse to put forward cases from those officers with tarnished histories.

The AP found that prosecutors sometimes don't even compile the lists and that wide disparities in what offenses land officers on them are prevalent across the country, with excessive force often failing to merit inclusion.

The AP also found that many prosecutors and police unions have gone to great lengths to keep Brady List information from becoming public.

Now, defense attorneys, public defenders, civil rights groups and even some prosecutors are calling for an increased use of Brady Lists and a broadening of the offenses that will land a police officer on them, while police unions are resisting those efforts.

Amy Parker of the King County Department of Public Defense called it imperative for officers' violent histories to be exposed.

"As a career public defender, I have listened to prosecutors routinely make the argument that defendants with prior unlawful uses of force/crimes of violence are more prone to violence and lack credibility," she said in an email. "If prosecutors are going to apply that standard to defendants, then the same standard should apply to police officers when judging their conduct."

King County prosecutor Dan Satterberg argues excessive force doesn't make an officer less credible. "An officer who was accused of using too much force in an unrelated arrest has nothing to do with the impeachment of their veracity," he said.

Brady Lists stem from a ruling in the 1963 Supreme Court case *Brady v. Maryland* mandating prosecutors turn over exculpatory evidence to defense attorneys, including information that could be used to question the officers' credibility. But the ruling did not define the steps prosecutors and police departments must take to ensure defendants are informed or whether lists of troubled officers must be kept at all.

The result, critics say, is a mishmash of policies that vary state to state -- and even jurisdiction to jurisdiction.

Prosecutors in Atlanta, Chicago, Tulsa, and Pittsburgh told the AP that they don't track officers with disciplinary problems, and Milwaukee prosecutors only listed officers who have been convicted of crimes.

The Dallas County district attorney's list contained 192 names, with infractions ranging from making false statements to convictions for theft, assault, and driving under the influence. The Suffolk County, Massachusetts, prosecutor's list included Boston officers who lied on their timesheets or embezzled funds. Louisiana's Orleans Parish district attorney tracked officers who committed crimes, lied, or drove dangerously, but not violent arrests.

Dishonesty lands an officer on the list in Detroit, Denver, and Seattle, but using excessive force does not.

The Phoenix district attorney, along with prosecutors in Orange County, Florida, and Los Angeles, were among the few the AP found who include excessive use of force cases on their lists.

"It's like there's a huge continuum and the result is you don't have the same procedures being followed

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not only across the country but within individual states," said Will Aitchison, an attorney with Portland, Oregon-based Labor Relations Information Systems, which represents officers after they've appealed discipline orders.

Some states have attempted to pass legislation that would address the lack of consistency, including the Washington State Legislature, which approved a bill this year requiring county prosecutors to develop written protocols for collecting potential impeachment information by July 2022.

The California Legislature approved a bill last year that required prosecutors to maintain a list of officers who have had "sustained findings for conduct of moral turpitude or group bias," but Gov. Gavin Newsom vetoed the measure due to the cost of such "a significant state mandate."

When Larry Krasner was elected Philadelphia district attorney in 2017, his staff discovered a "do not call" list of police officers that had been compiled by a previous prosecutor.

The officers had a history of lying, bias, and excessive force and were barred from testifying "absent explicit permission from the highest levels of the district attorney's office."

Krasner shared the list with defense attorneys, who used the information to challenge the convictions of people imprisoned by testimony from those officers and has continued to provide timely Brady material to public defenders.

"When my client goes for a preliminary arraignment first appearance in court where they set bail, the prosecutor might disclose 20 to 30 or 40 pages of materials that they've generated on a particular police officer," Philadelphia public defender Bradley Bridge said.

Using Brady List information, Bridge has filed motions to dismiss about 6,000 convictions based on officer misconduct, with more than 2,000 convictions thrown out so far.

Bridge acknowledges some of those released might be guilty.

"The problem is, there's no way to know," he said. "I have no idea how to evaluate whether they're guilty or not guilty because the officer's behavior in the cases is too tainted."

Bridge has filed more than 500 petitions to reopen convictions tied to a sole officer who admitted falsifying records -- Christopher Hulmes of the Philadelphia Police Department's Narcotics Strike Force, who was charged in 2015 with perjury and tampering with public records. So far, 357 of those convictions have been dismissed, many involving drugs and guns, Bridge said.

Krasner said he feels prosecutors have both a legal and moral obligation to use Brady Lists, but that local police have pushed back.

Last month, he asked for the Philadelphia Police Department to be held in contempt for not cooperating with his request for officer disciplinary material.

Kym Worthy, the prosecutor for Wayne County, Michigan, which includes Detroit, also is disclosing Brady List material to defense attorneys and the public "because in an era of criminal justice reform," she said, "it just makes sense."

Worthy has compiled a list of officers who have committed offenses involving theft, dishonesty, fraud, bias or bribery, saying officers who commit these crimes have lost their credibility and won't be called to testify.

St. Louis Circuit Attorney Kim Gardner also has said she won't take criminal cases filed by untrustworthy officers and has an "exclusion list" with more than 50 names.

"The union's predictable over-the-top 'sky is falling' reaction to any attempt to distinguish the vast majority of honest and hardworking officers from the few bad actors is one big reason why community relations with the people they serve are so frayed," Gardner said.

Last year, police misconduct records were at issue in the hotly contested Los Angeles district attorney race between Jackie Lacey and former San Francisco District Attorney George Gascon, who had been the San Francisco police chief when now Vice-President Kamala Harris was the city's district attorney and became the DA when she ascended to the state attorney general job.

Gascon had partnered with Harris and the police union to establish a "do not call" list that became

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the model for the state. After he won the Los Angeles election, he sent letters to local law enforcement agencies seeking the names of officers involved in 11 categories of misconduct, including bribery, theft, evidence tampering, dishonesty, and unreasonable force.

"If the officer's history is such that we just don't believe the officer, period, we will not use him," Gascon said.

Settlement agreements -- and many police union contracts -- often prohibit the release of the names of officers named in disciplinary records, but Brady Lists can blow open those closed doors.

The contract between Seattle and its police department, for instance, prohibits releasing disciplined officers' names. But the Brady Lists sent to the AP by the King County prosecuting attorney included 51 Seattle officers.

Seventeen of those officers had criminal charges filed against them, 26 had sustained findings of dishonesty, six had shown racial bias and one violated the department's ethics policy.

An investigation by the Office of Police Accountability found that a Seattle officer violated policies against biased policing by posting offensive comments on social media in 2019. The office was prohibited from naming the officer and so referred to him in its report as Named Employee #1, but the Brady List identified him as Ron Smith.

One of Smith's social media comments "stated that the Islamic religion was not one of peace, suggesting that the Islamic religion and all of its approximately 1.57 billion adherents were supportive of violence," the OPA report said.

Another post targeted Gov. Jay Inslee, a Democrat, saying: "you weak wristed lefties don't want border security ... you want votes to keep your anti-American party in power," the report said.

Smith resigned, but the OPA investigation did find that he engaged in "bias-based policing."

Another Seattle officer on the Brady List was Salvatore Ditusa, who was working a side job flagging traffic when he approached three workers and "engaged in a diatribe that included multiple racial slurs towards African Americans," the OPA said. Ditusa also resigned. The OPA found that he had also engaged in biased policing.

In Los Angeles, the battle over disclosing officer misconduct information traveled all the way to the state's highest court.

When Jim McDonnell took over the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, he wanted to share the list of officers accused of misconduct with the prosecutor's office, but both sides were concerned that a state law -- the peace officer's bill of rights -- would prohibit the move.

After the police union filed an injunction to block any sharing, the case went to the state Supreme Court, which ruled in 2019 that prosecutors could be given the list.

One of the people named was homicide detective Daniel Morris.

In 2003, a car theft suspect had said Morris and other officers kicked, punched, and stomped on him -- an accusation Morris denied to three different supervisors. But he eventually admitted to the beating, receiving a 30-day suspension.

That information was not shared with the district attorney's office until 2019.

Ten years before that, Morris had investigated the murder of a gang member in Paramount, California, obtaining a search warrant for the home of Filipe Angel Acosta.

Morris testified that Acosta, who had no criminal history, was associated with a gang and he was charged with drug possession, with a gang enhancement.

Acosta refused a deal that would have involved admitting to gang involvement, but changed his mind and entered a plea of no contest after getting sick in jail and being hospitalized.

At no point did the district attorney reveal that Morris had been disciplined for dishonesty.

When Morris' misconduct finally was disclosed, Acosta filed a motion to overturn his conviction because of the prosecutor's Brady violation. The charges were dismissed.

As a 2013 report on the sheriff's department by a civilian oversight group called the Office of Indepen-

dent Review put it: "Instances of deputies lying in reports or during investigations do not simply affect the immediate case at hand. Instead, they may influence the outcome of every other case in which the deputy's testimony is considered."

Email AP's Global Investigations Team at investigative@ap.org or <https://www.ap.org/tips/>. See other work at <https://www.apnews.com/hub/ap-investigations>.

Follow AP investigative reporter Martha Bellisle at <https://twitter.com/marthabellisle>

NFL, players agree to end 'race-norming' in \$1B settlement

By MARYCLAIRE DALE Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA (AP) — The NFL and lawyers for thousands of retired NFL players have reached an agreement to end race-based adjustments in dementia testing in the \$1 billion settlement of concussion claims, according to a proposed deal filed Wednesday in federal court.

The revised testing plan follows public outrage over the use of "race-norming," a practice that came to light only after two former NFL players filed a civil rights lawsuit over it last year. The adjustments, critics say, may have prevented hundreds of Black players suffering from dementia to win awards that average \$500,000 or more.

The Black retirees will now have the chance to have their tests rescored or, in some cases, seek a new round of cognitive testing, according to the settlement, details of which were first reported in The New York Times on Wednesday.

"We look forward to the court's prompt approval of the agreement, which provides for a race-neutral evaluation process that will ensure diagnostic accuracy and fairness in the concussion settlement," NFL lawyer Brad Karp said in a statement.

The proposal, which must still be approved by a judge, follows months of closed-door negotiations between the NFL, class counsel for the retired players, and lawyers for the Black players who filed suit, Najeh Davenport and Kevin Henry.

The vast majority of the league's players — 70% of active players and more than 60% of living retirees — are Black. So the changes are expected to be significant, and potentially costly for the NFL.

"No race norms or race demographic estimates — whether Black or white — shall be used in the settlement program going forward," the proposal said.

To date, the concussion fund has paid out \$821 million for five types of brain injuries, including early and advanced dementia, Parkinson's disease and Lou Gehrig's disease, also known as ALS.

Lawyers for the Black players suspect that white men were qualifying for awards at two or three times the rate of Blacks since the payouts began in 2017. It's unclear whether a racial breakdown of payouts will ever be done or made public.

Black NFL retiree Ken Jenkins and others have asked the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department to investigate.

The binary scoring system used in dementia testing — one for Black people, one for everyone else — was developed by neurologists in the 1990s as a crude way to factor in a patient's socioeconomic background. Experts say it was never meant to be used to determine payouts in a court settlement.

However, it was adopted by both sides in the court-approved, \$765 million settlement in 2013 that resolved lawsuits accusing the NFL of hiding what it knew about the risk of repeated concussions. The fund was later uncapped amid concerns the money would run out.

This year, amid the national reckoning on race in America, both sides agreed to work to halt the use of race-norming, which assumes Black players start with lower cognitive function. That makes it harder to show they suffer from a mental deficit linked to their playing days.

The NFL would admit no wrongdoing under terms of the agreement. The league said it hoped the new testing formula, developed with input from a panel of experts, would be widely adopted in medicine.

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To date, about 2,000 men have applied for dementia awards, but only 30% have been approved. In some cases, the NFL appealed payouts awarded to Black men if doctors did not apply the racial adjustment. The new plan would forbid any challenges based on race.

The awards average \$715,000 for those with advanced dementia and \$523,000 for those with early dementia. The settlement is intended to run for 65 years, to cover anyone retired at the time it was first approved.

"The NFL should be really enraged about the race norming. That should be unacceptable to them and all of their sponsors," Roxanne "Roxy" Gordon of San Diego, the wife of an impaired former player, said earlier this week.

Amon Gordon, a Stanford University graduate, finds himself at 40 unable to work. He has twice qualified for an advanced dementia award only to have the decision overturned for reasons that aren't yet clear to them. His case remains on review before the federal appeals court in Philadelphia.

Nearly 20,000 NFL retirees have registered for the settlement program, which offers monitoring, testing and, for some, compensation.

"If the new process eliminates race-norming and more people qualify, that's great," said Jenkins, who does not have an impairment but advocates for those who do.

"(But) we're not going to get everything we wanted," Jenkins, an insurance executive, said Tuesday. "We want full transparency of all the demographic information from the NFL — who's applied, who's been paid."

Senior U.S. District Judge Anita B. Brody, who has overseen the settlement for a decade, dismissed the suit filed by Davenport and Henry this year on procedural grounds. But she later ordered the lawyers who negotiated the 2013 settlement — New York plaintiffs lawyer Christopher Seeger for the players and Karp for the NFL — to work with a mediator to address it.

In the meantime, the Gordons and other NFL families wait.

"His life is ruined," Roxy Gordon said of her husband, who spent nearly a decade in the league as a defensive tackle or defensive end. "He's a 40-year-old educated male who can't even use his skills. It's been horrible."

Follow Maryclaire Dale on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/Maryclairedale>.

_____ This story has been corrected to say Najeh Davenport and Kevin Henry filed their civil rights complaint last year, not in 2019.

US marks 200M COVID-19 shots shared with world

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. on Thursday donated its 200 millionth COVID-19 shot to help vaccinate the rest of the world, the White House announced. The Biden administration aims to lead a global vaccination campaign even as it rolls out boosters for domestic use, which critics say diverts doses from those who are in greater need around the world.

The donated doses include more than 120 million in surplus from the U.S. stockpile of shots, as well as the initial deliveries of the 1 billion doses the Biden administration has purchased from Pfizer for overseas donation by September 2022. More than 100 countries and territories have received the American doses, and the U.S. remains the largest vaccine donor in the world.

"These 200 million COVID-19 vaccine doses have helped bring health and hope to millions of people, but our work is far from over," U.S. Agency for International Development Administrator Samantha Power said in a statement. "To end the pandemic, and prevent the emergence of new variants, as well as future outbreaks within our nation's borders, we must continue to do our part to help vaccinate the world."

While aid groups have praised the U.S. for leading the world in vaccine donations, they have criticized the U.S. for approving booster doses for use in the country while many people in lower-income nations have no protection at all. The Food and Drug Administration approved booster doses of the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines Wednesday, following last month's authorization of a third dose of the Pfizer

shot.

"The reality is, the more wealthy countries use booster shots, the further we will be from ending the pandemic," said Tom Hart, acting CEO of the One Campaign. "While some argue that we can both administer boosters and vaccinate the world, the simple fact is that boosters divert supply from an urgent area of need — administering first shots around the world."

While half the planet has been vaccinated, there are massive geographic and wealth disparities. The majority of global shots have been administered in high- and moderate-income countries.

Can new variants of the coronavirus keep emerging?

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Can new variants of the coronavirus keep emerging?

Yes, as long as the virus that caused the pandemic keeps infecting people. But that doesn't mean new variants will keep emerging as regularly, or that they'll be more dangerous.

With more than half the world still not vaccinated, the virus will likely keep finding people to infect and replicating inside them for several months or years to come. And each time a virus makes a copy of itself, a small mutation could occur. Those changes could help the virus survive, becoming new variants.

But that doesn't mean the virus will keep evolving in the same way since it emerged in late 2019.

When a virus infects a new species, it needs to adapt to the new host to spread more widely, says Andrew Read, a virus expert at Pennsylvania State University.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the delta variant is twice as contagious as earlier versions of the virus. And while it could still mutate to become more infectious, it probably won't double its transmission rate again, says Dr. Adam Luring, a virus and infectious disease expert at the University of Michigan.

"We've seen a stage of rapid evolution for the virus. It's been harvesting the low-hanging fruit, but there's not an infinite number of things it can do," Luring says.

It's possible that the virus could become more deadly, but there isn't an evolutionary reason for that to happen. Extremely sick people are also less likely to socialize and spread the virus to others.

Experts are watching to see whether emerging variants could be better at evading the protection people develop from vaccination and infections. As more people get the shots, the virus would have to be able to spread through people who have some immunity for it to survive, says Dr. Joshua Schiffer, a virus expert at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.

"The virus could take on a mutation that makes the immune response less effective," he says.

If that happens, scientists may recommend that vaccine formulas be updated periodically, just as annual flu shots are.

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

Is the delta variant of the coronavirus worse for kids?

Do the COVID-19 vaccines affect my chances of pregnancy?

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

Virginia gives Democrats a test of Black turnout before 2022

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — As Democrat Terry McAuliffe worked the crowd at Norfolk State University's homecoming football game, many fans at the historically Black school were ready with answers before he could even ask for their vote.

"Everybody I talked to said: 'Don't worry, I've already voted. I've already voted,'" McAuliffe said of his campaign stop last weekend.

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But McAuliffe can't afford not to worry. Polls have consistently shown him with the overwhelming support of Black Virginians, but his victory may hinge on whether this core part of his base shows up in strong numbers to vote.

National activists worry that President Joe Biden's falling approval ratings, and a lack of action by the Democrat-controlled Congress on voting rights and issues important to African Americans, could spell trouble in a race with Republican former businessman Glenn Youngkin that already looked exceedingly tight.

"Black voters, by and large, are feeling like they're being taken for granted," said Wes Bellamy, co-chair of Our Black Party, which advocates for political positions that benefit African Americans.

And any hint of waning enthusiasm among Democratic base voters could prove even more disastrous for the national party in next year's midterm elections — when the party's narrow control of both congressional chambers is at stake.

Black voters made up 11% of the national electorate in 2020 and 9 in 10 of them supported Biden last year, playing critical roles in delivering close states like Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, according to AP VoteCast, a nationwide survey of the 2020 electorate. But that means any softening of support could have the opposite effect in statewide races next year.

Democrats have been mobilizing their brightest national stars in hopes of staving off complacency in party ranks. Vice President Kamala Harris recorded a video praising McAuliffe that will be seen at 300-plus churches statewide and is campaigning for McAuliffe in Northern Virginia's Washington exurbs Thursday. Former President Barack Obama will be in Richmond this weekend.

He'll follow Georgia Democratic gubernatorial candidate Stacey Abrams and Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms, who each visited Black churches last weekend. Abrams will be back in the state for a Charlottesville rally Sunday.

"When people show you who they are, believe them," Abrams said at Second Calvary Baptist Church in Norfolk last weekend to calls from congregants of "That's right!" "Terry has shown you who he is."

McAuliffe, who served as governor from 2014 to 2018, has visited 60-plus Black churches, his campaign says, and last Sunday held the first of several planned "Souls to the Polls" efforts to bring African American worshippers to early voting stations.

It's difficult to gauge the success of those campaigns, since Virginia has only recently begun allowing no-excuse early voting. Still, McAuliffe advisers say they're encouraged by the total number of early ballots cast so far. Nearly 310,000 people have cast in-person ballots, with another almost 180,000 voting by mail.

That pales in comparison to the more than 1 million Virginians who voted by mail during last year's presidential race, though. Those totals could also be offset by a strong showing on Election Day, when more Republicans than Democrats have tended to vote.

At nearly every campaign stop, McAuliffe, who is white, mentions how he was recruited by leading members of the statehouse Black caucus to run again, and that helped him top three Black candidates in the Democratic gubernatorial primary, two of them woman.

This week he released an ad focusing on the violent 2017 clash between white supremacists and counter-protesters in the college town of Charlottesville, part of an ongoing effort to keep former President Donald Trump front of mind for Virginia voters. The ad contrasted Trump saying there were "very fine people on both sides" against McAuliffe's own reaction as governor, when he implored the "white supremacists and the Nazis that came into Charlottesville today: Go home. You are not wanted."

Youngkin's message to Black voters promotes his economic plans.

"Terry McAuliffe failed to deliver for the Black community as governor — losing their support — and now he is desperately trying to regain their trust," said Youngkin spokesperson Macaulay Porter.

Bellamy, of Our Black Party, spent recent weeks driving around Virginia and was surprised at the number of Youngkin yard signs he saw. He said McAuliffe has a "very strong record" that will help him with the Black community, but national Democrats present potential hurdles.

"When you look at national politics, when you look at some of the things that the Biden campaign promised but not quite delivered on yet, I think there will be some trickle-down effect," he said.

Bellamy singled out Congress' failure to pass federal voting rights legislation and policing reform. He said

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many Black voters have been troubled that some top Democrats haven't endorsed changing Senate rules to get such legislation passed over unified Republican opposition — but have said they might be willing to change chamber rules to move major spending bills.

Indeed, the Senate took up a voting rights package Wednesday only to have it blocked by Republican opposition — the kind of maneuver changing chamber rules might prevent.

McAuliffe counters that Black voters know his record from his first tenure as governor, when he restored voting rights for many former Virginia felons and others who had been removed from the state's voting rolls, and pushed state lawmakers to expand Medicare coverage under the Obama administration's signature health law.

He's also released a campaign plan to "Lift Up Black Virginians," which includes pledges to accelerate the pathway to a \$15 per hour minimum wage while working to ensure state government better supports Black-owned banks and promotes diversity in financial fields.

Jenkins Zardee, 62, a retired Navy sailor who attended a recent McAuliffe rally with Abrams in Norfolk, said he believes "there's enough enthusiasm."

"It's all about turnout," said Zardee. "But people know, if you didn't like the last four years we just came out of, you have to come and vote for Terry McAuliffe."

That message hasn't reached everyone, though. Regina Scheithauer, a singer and part-time school volunteer, attended the same rally and said of Abrams, "That's how you get the people to pay attention."

But Scheithauer said she knew little about McAuliffe — despite the fact that he's already been governor — and said she hadn't yet decided whether to vote for him.

Another potential wildcard is Princess Blanding, the sister of a Black man who was killed by Richmond police in 2018. She is running for governor as a third-party candidate. At McAuliffe's rally with Abrams, some attendees hoisted Blanding campaign signs, and though their ranks were small, they outnumbered the few protesters present waving Youngkin signs.

The Democratic National Committee has announced a campaign featuring ads on Spanish-language and Black radio, and in print outlets targeting the Asian American community. That's in addition to spending \$5 million in Virginia boosting campaign staff and organizing and training capacity.

But Cliff Albright, co-founder of Black Voters Matter, said Democratic outreach efforts in Virginia have generally been late and underfunded and have relied too heavily on things like ads instead of on-the-ground outreach. Bringing in Democratic standouts likely wouldn't be enough to correct that, he predicted.

"Pulling in new, infrequent voters, it's going to take more than a couple of visits. It's really going to take creating some type of excitement at the grassroots level, and ideally some excitement that's around policy that people feel passionate about and feel like is really on the line," Albright said. "I just don't know if McAuliffe has really specified to folks about what the urgency is in order to get some of the new voters that they need."

Coast Guard had earlier notice about California oil spill

By AMY TAXIN and BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

HUNTINGTON BEACH, Calif. (AP) — The Coast Guard received multiple reports of a possible fuel spill off the Southern California coast earlier than previously disclosed and asked local authorities to investigate about 15 hours before its own personnel confirmed a large oil slick, which came from a leaking undersea pipeline, records show.

The initial reports of a possible spill north of the Huntington Beach pier came into the Coast Guard about 5:30 p.m. on Oct. 1, according to an Orange County Sheriff's Department's memo provided Wednesday to The Associated Press. The documents said there were multiple similar calls over a marine radio emergency channel from boats leaving the Huntington Beach air show.

The department, which runs the county's harbor patrol, sent a fireboat to search for the spill, but the crew lost visibility as darkness fell, according to the memo obtained through the California Public Records Act. The spill wasn't confirmed until about 9 a.m. Saturday.

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The Coast Guard did not immediately comment on the documents, which raise more questions about the agency's response to a spill that forced the closure of some of the region's signature beaches and harmed animal and plant life.

Assemblywoman Cottie Petrie-Norris, who chairs a state legislative committee looking into the spill, said she was told the spill was reported much later Friday evening when it was too late to detect because of darkness.

"It seems too crazy in a world where we're trying to send a man to Mars that we can't inspect a potential oil slick in the dark," she said.

Miyoko Sakashita, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the Coast Guard should have responded more aggressively after getting the initial reports.

"An investigation should have immediately taken place, and it could have significantly reduced the size of the spill," said Sakashita, whose organization has called on the federal government to stop offshore oil drilling. "Among all those reports, you should be able to triangulate that there's something that needs investigation immediately."

Prior to release of the sheriff's department documents it was thought that the first word of a possible spill came to the Coast Guard at 6:13 p.m. on Oct. 1 from a foreign ship anchored off Huntington Beach that reported a sheen on the water that was more than 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) long.

Rear Adm. Brian Penoyer previously told the AP that the Coast Guard put out a radio broadcast to vessels in the area and oil platforms looking for reports confirming a possible spill. But Capt Rebecca Ore, the unified response commander, said no such broadcasts were made.

Coast Guard officials said they needed to look into what — if anything — was done at the time, but have repeatedly declined to answer questions about the purported broadcast.

Penoyer said the Coast Guard did not send a boat out to look for the spill because it was limited by darkness and didn't have the technology to detect it. The report by the Orange County Sheriff's Department, however, says the Coast Guard did request that the Harbor Patrol dispatch a boat.

The next morning, the Coast Guard reached out again to the Harbor Patrol, and its hazardous materials investigators went out on a county fireboat. Authorities on that boat located a miles-long black plume several miles offshore, the memo said.

Huntington Beach Mayor Kim Carr said it's not clear that earlier notice would have made a difference.

"Hindsight is 20-20," she said. But Carr added that had she known about the 5:30 p.m. report, it would have elevated the first notice she got of a possible spill at around 9 a.m. the next morning.

Federal investigators are examining whether the Panama-registered MSC DANIT, a 1,200-foot (366-meter) container ship, was dragging anchor during a Jan. 25 storm and snagged the pipeline and dragged it on the seabed. It's not known why the leak occurred eight months later. Authorities are looking into whether other anchors hit and weakened the pipeline or if a preexisting condition with the line was to blame.

Houston-based Amplify Energy owns and operates the pipeline that ferries oil from the company's three offshore platforms. It is being scrutinized for its maintenance of the pipe and whether it reacted fast enough to the spill.

The Coast Guard says about 25,000 gallons (94,635 liters) of oil spilled off Orange County. Blobs of oil and tar balls washed ashore, forcing a weeklong closure of beaches that greatly disrupted the local economy and killing dozens of birds. Environmental advocates say the damage was less than initially feared but the long-term impact on wetlands and marine life is unknown.

Pete Stauffer, environmental director for Surfrider Foundation, which is working as a liaison between non-governmental agencies and the unified command for the spill response, said a swift response to a spill is key to limiting damage.

"When there's a report of a significant-sized oil slick on the ocean, it's important to investigate," Stauffer said. "What happens in the first hours and days during an oil spill is absolutely critical."

Nearly three weeks since the spill, officials are starting to wind down some of the clean-up efforts as conditions along the coastline have improved. While tar balls continue to wash up farther south in San

Diego County, beach clean up in some areas of Orange County could soon be deemed complete, California Fish and Wildlife Lt. Christian Corbo said Wednesday.

Workers are also scaling back efforts to scour the coastline for oiled wildlife, but they will continue to respond to reports from the public of oiled birds, said Dr. Michael Ziccardi, director of the Oiled Wildlife Care Network. Six birds that were treated for oiling were released Wednesday along the shoreline and another six are still being cared for, he said, adding they will hopefully be released next week.

A group of environmental organizations Wednesday demanded that the Biden administration suspend and cancel oil and gas leases in federal waters off the California coast. The Center for Biological Diversity and about three dozen organizations sent a petition to the Department of the Interior, arguing it has the authority to end these leases and that the decades-old platforms off the coast of California are especially susceptible to problems because of their age.

The Department of the Interior declined to comment on the petition.

Melley reported from Los Angeles.

House to vote on Bannon contempt as Justice decision looms

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, MICHAEL BALSAMO and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House is voting Thursday on whether to hold Steve Bannon, a longtime ally and aide to former President Donald Trump, in contempt of Congress after he defied a subpoena from a committee investigating the violent Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection.

That committee has vowed to move swiftly and forcefully to punish anyone who won't cooperate with the probe. But it's likely up to the Justice Department, and the courts, to determine what happens next.

If the House vote succeeds, as is expected, there's still considerable uncertainty about whether the Justice Department will prosecute Bannon, despite Democratic demands for action.

The outcome could determine not only the effectiveness of the House investigation but also the strength of Congress' power to call witnesses and demand information — factors that will certainly be weighing on Justice officials as they determine whether to move forward. While the department has historically been reluctant to use its prosecution power against witnesses found in contempt of Congress, the circumstances are exceptional as lawmakers investigate the worst attack on the U.S. Capitol in two centuries.

To emphasize the committee's unity in holding Bannon accountable, the panel's Democratic chairman, Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, will lead the debate on the bill along with Republican Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, one of two Republicans on the committee — a rare show of bipartisanship on the House floor.

Still, most House Republicans are expected to vote against the contempt measure, despite the potential consequences for the institution.

If Congress can't perform its oversight job, the message sent to "the general public is these subpoenas are a joke," said Stephen Saltzburg, a George Washington University law professor and former Justice Department official. He said if Attorney General Merrick Garland, a former federal judge whom Saltzburg regards "as one of the most nonpartisan people I know," doesn't authorize a prosecution, "he's going to be letting the Constitution, it seems to me, be placed in jeopardy. And it's way too important for him to let that happen."

Democrats are pressuring Justice to take the case, arguing that nothing less than democracy is on the line.

"The stakes are enormous," said Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin, a member of the panel. "The Congress of the United States under Article One has the power to investigate in order to inform our deliberations about how to legislate going forward. That's what this is about."

Still, prosecution is not a given. Assuming his post after a turbulent Trump era, Garland has prioritized restoring what he has called "the norms" of the department. On his first day, he told rank-and-file prosecutors that they should be focused on equal justice and not feel pressure to protect the president's allies or to attack his enemies. He has repeatedly said political considerations shouldn't play a role in any decisions.

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And his deputies pushed back — hard — when President Joe Biden suggested to reporters last week that Bannon should be prosecuted for contempt.

“The Department of Justice will make its own independent decisions in all prosecutions based solely on the facts and the law. Period. Full stop,” Garland’s spokesman, Anthony Coley, said Friday, in response to the president’s comments.

The Jan. 6 panel voted Tuesday evening to recommend the contempt charges against Bannon, citing reports that he spoke with Trump before the insurrection, promoted the protests that day and predicted there would be unrest. Members said Bannon was alone in completely defying his subpoena, while more than a dozen other witnesses were at least speaking to the panel.

Assuming the full House votes to hold Bannon in contempt Thursday, the matter will be referred to the U.S. attorney’s office in Washington. It would then be up to prosecutors in that office whether to present the case to a grand jury for possible criminal charges. The office is run by Channing Phillips, an acting U.S. attorney who had previously served in the position in the Obama administration. Another attorney, Matt Graves, has been nominated for the post, but his nomination is pending in the Senate.

“If the House of Representatives certifies a criminal contempt citation, the Department of Justice, as with all criminal referrals, will evaluate the matter based on the facts and the law, consistent with the Principles of Federal Prosecution,” said Bill Miller, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney’s office in Washington.

The Justice Department has in the past been wary of prosecuting congressional contempt cases, especially when the White House and the House of Representatives are controlled by opposing political parties. During the Obama administration the department declined to prosecute then-Attorney General Eric Holder and former IRS official Lois Lerner following contempt referrals from the Republican-led House. And George W. Bush’s Justice Department declined to charge Harriet Miers after the former White House counsel defied a subpoena in a Democratic investigation into the mass firings of United States attorneys.

In addition, the Justice Department’s Office of Legal Counsel has said in multiple opinions — including one from the 1980s involving Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch’s mother Anne Gorsuch, who refused to turn over documents in her capacity as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency — that the Justice Department has discretion on when to prosecute for contempt, even when receiving a referral from the House.

Still, the Bannon case is different, as Democrats hold both Congress and the White House — and because the committee is investigating a violent insurrection of Trump’s supporters who beat law enforcement officers, broke into the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Biden’s victory.

“What we’re talking about is this massive, violent assault on American democracy,” Raskin said.

Even if the department does decide to prosecute, the case could take years to play out — potentially pushing past the 2022 election when Republicans could win control of the House and end the investigation.

And if they don’t prosecute, then the House will likely find another route. A House-authorized civil lawsuit could also take years but force Bannon and any other witnesses to defend themselves in court.

Another option available to Congress would be to try to imprison defiant witnesses — an unlikely, if not outlandish, scenario. Called “inherent contempt,” the process was used in the country’s early years but hasn’t been employed in almost a century.

Ex-Minneapolis cop faces new sentence in death of 911 caller

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A Minneapolis police officer who fatally shot an unarmed woman after she called 911 to report a possible rape happening behind her home will be sentenced on a lesser charge Thursday after his murder conviction was overturned in a case that drew global attention and was fraught with the issue of race.

Mohamed Noor was initially convicted of third-degree murder and manslaughter in the 2017 fatal shooting of Justine Ruszczyk Damond, a 40-year-old dual U.S.-Australian citizen and yoga teacher who was engaged to be married. With his conviction and sentence for murder thrown out, he could be out on

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supervised release within months.

Last month, the Minnesota Supreme Court tossed out Noor's murder conviction and sentence, saying the third-degree murder statute doesn't fit the case. The justices said the charge can only apply when a defendant shows a "generalized indifference to human life," not when the conduct is directed at a particular person, as it was with Damond.

Noor testified at his 2019 trial that he and his partner were driving slowly in an alley when a loud bang on his police SUV made him fear for their lives. He said he saw a woman appear at the partner's driver's side window and raise her right arm before he fired a shot from the passenger seat to stop what he thought was a threat.

He was sentenced to 12 1/2 years on the murder count and had been serving most of his time at an out-of-state facility. Noor will be resentenced for his second-degree manslaughter conviction, with state guidelines calling for a range of 41 to 57 months and a presumptive sentence of four years.

His attorneys, Tom Plunkett and Peter Wold, have asked for 41 months, citing Noor's good behavior behind bars and harsh conditions he face during many months in solitary, away from the general prison population. Legal experts expect prosecutors to seek a sentence at the top end of the range.

Noor, who was fired after he was charged, has already served more than 29 months. In Minnesota, defendants with good behavior typically serve two-thirds of their prison sentences and the remainder on supervised release. If Noor gets the presumptive four years, he could be eligible for supervised release around the end of this year.

If the judge sentences Noor to 41 months, he could be eligible for supervised release — commonly known as parole — right away, though in such situations defendants are typically briefly returned to prison to work out logistics of the parole.

Noor can make a statement at Thursday's hearing. At his original sentencing in 2019, he got emotional as he expressed regret for what he had done and apologized to Damond's family.

Damond's family members came from Australia for the 2019 trial, but they were expected to have statements read on their behalf Thursday.

Damond's death angered citizens in the U.S. and Australia, and led to the resignation of Minneapolis' police chief. It also led the department to change its policy on body cameras; Noor and his partner didn't have theirs activated when they were investigating Damond's 911 call.

Noor, who is Somali American, was believed to be the first Minnesota officer convicted of murder for an on-duty shooting. Activists who had long called for officers to be held accountable for the deadly use of force applauded the murder conviction but lamented that it came in a case in which the officer is Black and his victim was white. Some questioned whether the case was treated the same as police shootings involving Black victims.

Days after Noor's conviction, Minneapolis agreed to pay \$20 million to Damond's family, believed at the time to be the largest settlement stemming from police violence in Minnesota. It was surpassed earlier this year when Minneapolis agreed to a \$27 million settlement for George Floyd's death just as former officer Derek Chauvin was going on trial.

Coast Guard had earlier notice about California oil spill

By AMY TAXIN and BRIAN MELLEY Associated Press

HUNTINGTON BEACH, Calif. (AP) — The Coast Guard received multiple reports of a possible fuel spill off the Southern California coast earlier than previously disclosed and asked local authorities to investigate about 15 hours before its own personnel confirmed a large oil slick, which came from a leaking undersea pipeline, records show.

The initial reports of a possible spill north of the Huntington Beach pier came into the Coast Guard about 5:30 p.m. on Oct. 1, according to an Orange County Sheriff's Department's memo provided Wednesday to The Associated Press. The documents said there were multiple similar calls over a marine radio emergency channel from boats leaving the Huntington Beach air show.

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The department, which runs the county's harbor patrol, sent a fireboat to search for the spill, but the crew lost visibility as darkness fell, according to the memo obtained through the California Public Records Act. The spill wasn't confirmed until about 9 a.m. Saturday.

The documents raise more questions about the Coast Guard's response to a spill that forced the closure of some of the region's signature beaches and harmed animal and plant life.

U.S. Coast Guard Lt. Commander Jeannie Shaye said an official report came from the National Response Center after dark on Friday. She could not immediately answer questions about the marine radio calls that, according to the county memo, came in before that time or the harbor patrol's search on Friday.

Assemblywoman Cottie Petrie-Norris, who chairs a state legislative committee looking into the spill, said she was told the spill was reported much later Friday evening when it was too late to detect because of darkness.

"It seems too crazy in a world where we're trying to send a man to Mars that we can't inspect a potential oil slick in the dark," she said.

Miyoko Sakashita, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the Coast Guard should have responded more aggressively after getting the initial reports.

"An investigation should have immediately taken place, and it could have significantly reduced the size of the spill," said Sakashita, whose organization has called on the federal government to stop offshore oil drilling. "Among all those reports, you should be able to triangulate that there's something that needs investigation immediately."

Prior to release of the sheriff's department documents it was thought that the first word of a possible spill came to the Coast Guard at 6:13 p.m. on Oct. 1 from a foreign ship anchored off Huntington Beach that reported a sheen on the water that was more than 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) long.

Rear Adm. Brian Penoyer previously told the AP that the Coast Guard put out a radio broadcast to vessels in the area and oil platforms looking for reports confirming a possible spill. But Capt. Rebecca Ore, the unified response commander, said no such broadcasts were made.

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Huntington Beach Mayor Kim Carr said it's not clear that earlier notice would have made a difference.

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spill is key to limiting damage.

"When there's a report of a significant-sized oil slick on the ocean, it's important to investigate," Stauffer said. "What happens in the first hours and days during an oil spill is absolutely critical."

Nearly three weeks since the spill, officials are starting to wind down some of the clean-up efforts as conditions along the coastline have improved. While tar balls continue to wash up farther south in San Diego County, beach clean up in some areas of Orange County could soon be deemed complete, California Fish and Wildlife Lt. Christian Corbo said Wednesday.

Workers are also scaling back efforts to scour the coastline for oiled wildlife, but they will continue to respond to reports from the public of oiled birds, said Dr. Michael Ziccardi, director of the Oiled Wildlife Care Network. Six birds that were treated for oiling were released Wednesday along the shoreline and another six are still being cared for, he said, adding they will hopefully be released next week.

A group of environmental organizations Wednesday demanded that the Biden administration suspend and cancel oil and gas leases in federal waters off the California coast. The Center for Biological Diversity and about three dozen organizations sent a petition to the Department of the Interior, arguing it has the authority to end these leases and that the decades-old platforms off the coast of California are especially susceptible to problems because of their age.

The Department of the Interior declined to comment on the petition.

Melley reported from Los Angeles.

'The stakes are enormous': Bannon case tests Congress' power

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, MICHAEL BALSAMO and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. House is expected to hold Steve Bannon in contempt of Congress. It's up to the Justice Department, and the courts, to determine what happens next.

As lawmakers ready a Thursday vote to send a contempt referral to the U.S. attorney's office in Washington, there's considerable uncertainty about whether the Justice Department will prosecute Bannon for refusing to cooperate with the investigation into the Jan. 6 insurrection, despite Democratic demands for action.

The outcome could determine not only the effectiveness of the House investigation, but the strength of Congress' power to call witnesses and demand information — factors that will certainly be weighing on Justice officials as they determine whether to move forward. While the department has historically been reticent to use its prosecution power against witnesses found in contempt of Congress, the circumstances are exceptional as lawmakers investigate the worst attack on the U.S. Capitol in two centuries.

If Congress can't perform its oversight job, the message sent to "the general public is these subpoenas are a joke," said Stephen Saltzburg, a George Washington University law professor and former Justice Department official. He said if Attorney General Merrick Garland, a former federal judge whom Saltzburg regards "as one of the most nonpartisan people I know," doesn't authorize a prosecution, "he's going to be letting the Constitution, it seems to me, be placed in jeopardy. And it's way too important for him to let that happen."

Democrats are pressuring Justice to take the case, arguing that nothing less than democracy is at stake.

"The stakes are enormous," said Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin, a member of the panel. "The Congress of the United States under Article One has the power to investigate in order to inform our deliberations about how to legislate going forward. That's what this is about."

Still, prosecution is not a given. Assuming his post after a turbulent Trump era, Garland has prioritized restoring what he has called "the norms" of the department. On his first day, he told rank-and-file prosecutors that they should be focused on equal justice and not feel pressure to protect the president's allies or to attack his enemies. He has repeatedly said political considerations shouldn't play a role in any decisions.

And his deputies pushed back — hard — when President Joe Biden suggested to reporters last week that Bannon should be prosecuted for contempt.

"The Department of Justice will make its own independent decisions in all prosecutions based solely on

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the facts and the law. Period. Full stop," Garland's spokesman, Anthony Coley, said on Friday, in response to the president's comments.

The Jan. 6 panel voted Tuesday evening to recommend the contempt charges against Bannon, citing reports that he spoke with Trump before the insurrection, promoted the protests that day and predicted there would be unrest. Members said Bannon was alone in completely defying his subpoena, while more than a dozen other witnesses were at least speaking to the panel.

If the full House votes to hold Bannon in contempt on Thursday, as expected, the matter will be referred to the U.S. attorney's office in Washington. It would then be up to prosecutors in that office whether to present the case to a grand jury for possible criminal charges. The office is run by Channing Phillips, an acting U.S. attorney who had previously served in the position in the Obama administration. Another attorney, Matt Graves, has been nominated for the post, but his nomination is pending in the Senate.

"If the House of Representatives certifies a criminal contempt citation, the Department of Justice, as with all criminal referrals, will evaluate the matter based on the facts and the law, consistent with the Principles of Federal Prosecution," said Bill Miller, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Washington.

The Justice Department has in the past been wary of prosecuting congressional contempt cases, especially when the White House and the House of Representatives are controlled by opposing political parties.

The department in the Obama administration declined to prosecute then-Attorney General Eric Holder and former IRS official Lois Lerner following contempt referrals from the Republican-led House, while George W. Bush's Justice Department declined to charge Harriet Miers after the former White House counsel defied a subpoena in a Democratic investigation into the mass firings of United States attorneys.

In addition, the Justice Department's Office of Legal Counsel has said in multiple opinions — including one from the 1980s involving Anne Gorsuch, the mother of Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, who refused to turn over documents in her capacity as administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency — that the Justice Department has discretion on when to prosecute for contempt, even when receiving a referral from the House.

Still, the Bannon case is different, as Democrats hold both Congress and the White House — and because the committee is investigating a violent insurrection of Trump's supporters who beat law enforcement officers, broke into the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Biden's victory.

"What we're talking about is this massive, violent assault on American democracy," Raskin said.

Thomas Spulak, a former Democratic counsel to the House, said there are arguments that could be made for and against a Justice Department prosecution. On one hand, he said, "Some have suggested that perhaps this Justice Department doesn't want to get caught up in a continuation in the saga that went on in the last administration over subpoenas with the House."

But, given the severity and historic nature of Jan. 6, "This is a significant matter for the House and the House is going to press this very hard — and it might be difficult for the administration to not act on it."

Even if the department does decide to prosecute, the case could take years to play out — potentially pushing past the 2022 election when Republicans could win control of the House and end the investigation.

And if they don't prosecute, then the House will likely find another route. A House-authorized civil lawsuit could also take years, but force Bannon and any other witnesses to defend themselves in court.

Another option available to Congress would be to try to imprison witnesses who defy them — an unlikely, if not outlandish, scenario. Called "inherent contempt," the process was used in the country's early years but hasn't been employed in almost a century.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Adam Schiff, another member of the panel, says if Justice prosecutes the case it will have "a vigorous effect in terms of other potential witnesses' willingness to cooperate" or face consequences.

"I think the criminal justice system, when it has a mind to, can move very quickly," Schiff said. "And we hope that it will."

Astros' Valdez goes 8, beats Red Sox 9-1 for 3-2 ALCS lead

By JIMMY GOLEN AP Sports Writer

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BOSTON (AP) — Framber Valdez lost his perfect game in the fifth inning and then bounced the next pitch off the batter's leg.

Astros manager Dusty Baker headed for the mound.

"It was surprising more than anything," Valdez said, noting that a visit from the manager usually means his night is over. "The first thing I did was look back to the bullpen to see if anyone was out there. I saw nobody was there.

"He just came out and told me ... 'You know what you're doing out here, so just breathe,'" Valdez said. "He gave me the confidence to get out of the inning."

And much more than that.

Perfect through four, the Houston left-hander took a two-hit shutout into the seventh and became the first pitcher this postseason to complete eight innings, leading the Astros over Boston 9-1 on Wednesday for a 3-2 lead in the AL Championship Series.

Yordan Alvarez had three hits and three RBIs for Houston, which could clinch a second trip to the World Series in three years with a victory at home on Friday night.

The Red Sox need a win to force a deciding seventh game on Saturday.

"We came back to Boston exactly where we wanted to be: We were 1-1," Red Sox starter Chris Sale said. "Not in a good spot going back to Houston. There's no denying that, but this team has won two games in the playoffs back-to-back before, and we think we can do it again."

One day after the Astros scored seven runs to break a ninth-inning tie, they hung another crooked number on the Fenway Park scoreboard, chasing Sale while scoring five runs in the sixth. Alvarez, who homered in the second and singled in the fourth, had a two-run double to break things open.

That was plenty for Valdez, who extended the staff's shutout streak to 14 straight innings before Rafael Devers homered with one out in the seventh — one of just three Boston hits.

Valdez departed after retiring the Red Sox in order in the eighth — completing three full turns through the Boston lineup, a dramatic break from the prevailing baseball wisdom.

"It makes me feel great" to show that starters can still have that kind of impact on a game, Baker said.

"Today, it was in the hands of Framber," he said. "This was in this hands of Framber, and, really, in the hands of Alvarez."

In all, Valdez gave up one run on three hits, one walk and a hit batter, striking out five. He was also the first opposing pitcher to last eight innings in a postseason start at Fenway since Cleveland's Charles Nagy went eight in the 1998 Division Series.

Ryne Stanek pitched a perfect ninth while the rest of Houston's relievers rested. Astros starters had not lasted three innings all series, pitching to a 18.90 ERA in the first four games and giving up 10 homers — including a record three grand slams.

Valdez was not much better, allowing two earned runs in 2 2/3 innings in Game 1.

"I didn't get frustrated at all. I wasn't down on myself," Valdez said. "I just worked the entire time and I had my mindset set that I was just going to come out and have a way better outing. And that's what I was able to do tonight."

Valdez retired the first 12 batters on Wednesday — eight on grounders, four on strikeouts. Devers singled to lead off the fifth, then Valdez bounced the next pitch off J.D. Martinez's leg. The Astros escaped when Hunter Renfroe grounded into a double play and Alex Verdugo bounced out to first.

"Everybody knew he had a no-hitter, and then they get a hit, and then he hits the batter," Baker said. "That's the time that you've really got to settle him down and just take the air out the ball, because the crowd was about to get into it. And he threw up a double-play pitch and then he went back to dealing again."

Sale started almost as well, allowing just two hits — both to Alvarez — in his first five innings. But he walked Jose Altuve to start the sixth, then Michael Brantley nubbed one toward third. Devers fielded it and made the throw in time but Schwarber dropped it at first; after sliding into second, Altuve popped up and took off for third, which was uncovered.

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Brantley moved up to second on a groundout to the pitcher, then Alvarez doubled to left, scoring two to make it 3-0 and chasing Sale. Ryan Brasier struck out Carlos Correa before giving up an RBI double to Yuli Gurriel and a two-run single to Jose Siri that made it 6-0.

Brantley added an RBI single in the seventh, and Gurriel singled in two more in the ninth.

Sale was charged with four runs — two earned — on three hits and two walks, striking out seven in 5 1/3 innings.

"I was good for five, and then I sucked for one," he said. "I told myself coming into this game I had a job to do; obviously didn't get it done. But I left (it all) out there on that mound tonight, that's for damn sure."

The Red Sox had won seven straight postseason games at home — dating to the 2018 ALCS — before blowing an eighth-inning lead on Tuesday night. They had never lost back-to-back postseason games under manager Alex Cora.

UP NEXT

Nathan Eovaldi, who won Game 2 but came on in relief and lost in Game 4, will start Friday for Boston. Baker said he had not decided on a starter.

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

Canadian wins 18th Chopin international piano competition

By MONIKA SCISLOWSKA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Bruce (Xiaoyu) Liu of Canada was named early Thursday as the winner of the 40,000-euro (\$45,000) first prize in the 18th Frederic Chopin international piano competition, a prestigious event that launches pianists' world careers.

The announcement from the jury came just hours after Liu played as the last entrant among the 12 finalists, performing Chopin's concerto in E minor, opus 11 with the orchestra at the packed National Philharmonic in Warsaw. His inspired performance was met with huge applause.

"Oh my god. I don't know what to say, honestly," Liu said after being name winner.

"We have been dreaming with all these people here for this prestigious stage," the 24-year-old born in Paris said in English.

"Being able to play Chopin in Warsaw is one of the best things you can imagine, of course, so I'm truly honored for this award, of course, and for this jury's trust and for all the warmth I have received in recent days," Liu said.

The second prize and 30,000 euros (\$35,000) went jointly to Alexander Gadjiev, representing Italy and Slovenia, and Kyohei Sorita of Japan. Gadjiev also won Krystian Zimerman's prize of 10,000 euros (\$11,800) for the best sonata performance.

The third prize of 20,000 euros (\$23,000) was awarded to Martin Garcia Garcia of Spain, who also won the 5,000 euros (\$5,800) prize for best concerto performance.

The fourth prize and 15,000 euros (\$17,000) was shared by Aimi Kobayashi of Japan and Poland's Jakub Kuszlik, who also won best mazurka performance prize and 5,000 euros. Italy's Leonora Armellini was awarded the fifth prize of 10,000 euros (\$11,600), while the sixth prize and 7,000 euros (\$8,000) went to Canada's J.J. Jun Li Bui.

The first prize was funded by the office of Poland's president, and other prizes were funded by the government, state culture institutions and by private individuals.

High ranking in the renowned competition opens the world's top concert halls to the pianists and paves the way to recordings with best known record companies.

Jury head Katarzyna Popowa-Zydron said after the announcement that the level of the pianists was very high and made the award decisions very hard for the 17 jurors. She called the participants "wonderful young people."

During the competition, she had said that apart from being excellent pianists, the participants should also show sensitivity and bring freshness to the music.

"I try to look for a rapport between the performer and Chopin," Popowa-Zydron said in an interview. Music is a "message from a person, and (the musicians) should know what kind of person Chopin was."

Bowing to their artistry, the jury allowed two more finalists this year than usual. The competition, held every five years, was postponed from 2020 due to the pandemic.

Among previous winners are Maurizio Pollini of Italy, Argentina's Martha Argerich, Garrick Ohlsson from the United States, Poland's Krystian Zimerman and Artur Blechacz, and Seong-Jin Cho of South Korea.

Chopin, Poland's best known and beloved classical music composer and pianist, was born in 1810 in Zelazowa Wola near Warsaw to a Polish mother and a French father. He left Poland at 19 to broaden his musical education in Vienna and then in Paris, where he settled, composing, giving concerts and teaching the piano. He died on Oct. 17, 1849, in Paris and is buried at the Pere Lachaise cemetery. His heart is at the Holy Cross Church in Warsaw.

Canadian wins 18th Chopin international piano competition

By MONIKA SCISLOWSKA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Bruce (Xiaoyu) Liu of Canada was named early Thursday as the winner of the 40,000-euro (\$45,000) first prize in the 18th Frederic Chopin international piano competition, a prestigious event that launches pianists' world careers.

The announcement from the jury came just hours after Liu played as the last entrant among the 12 finalists, performing Chopin's concerto in E minor, opus 11 with the orchestra at the packed National Philharmonic in Warsaw. His inspired performance was met with huge applause.

"Oh my god. I don't know what to say, honestly," Liu said after being named winner.

"We have been dreaming with all these people here for this prestigious stage," the 24-year-old born in Paris said in English.

"Being able to play Chopin in Warsaw is one of the best things you can imagine, of course, so I'm truly honored for this award, of course, and for this jury's trust and for all the warmth I have received in recent days," Liu said.

The second prize and 30,000 euros (\$35,000) went jointly to Alexander Gadjiev, representing Italy and Slovenia, and Kyohei Sorita of Japan. Gadjiev also won Krystian Zimerman's prize of 10,000 euros (\$11,800) for the best sonata performance.

The third prize of 20,000 euros (\$23,000) was awarded to Martin Garcia Garcia of Spain, who also won the 5,000 euros (\$5,800) prize for best concerto performance.

The fourth prize and 15,000 euros (\$17,000) was shared by Aimi Kobayashi of Japan and Poland's Jakub Kuszlik, who also won best mazurka performance prize and 5,000 euros. Italy's Leonora Armellini was awarded the fifth prize of 10,000 euros (\$11,600), while the sixth prize and 7,000 euros (\$8,000) went to Canada's J.J. Jun Li Bui.

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FBI: Cash, shredded papers seen at couple's home in spy case

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The FBI found a trash bag of shredded documents, thousands of dollars in cash, latex gloves and a "go-bag" when they searched the home of a Maryland couple accused of trying to sell information about nuclear-powered warships to a foreign country, an agent testified Wednesday.

Jonathan Toebbe, a Navy nuclear engineer, and his wife, Diana, were arrested in West Virginia this month. Prosecutors allege that Jonathan Toebbe tried to pass secrets about sophisticated and expensive Virginia-class submarines to someone he thought was a representative of a foreign government but who was actually an undercover FBI agent. The government accuses Diana Toebbe of serving as a lookout for her husband at several "dead drop" locations at which sensitive information was left behind.

The couple pleaded not guilty in federal court in Martinsburg, West Virginia to espionage-related charges that carry life in prison. The Toebbes have been jailed since their arrests.

The country to which Toebbe was looking to sell the information has not been identified in court documents and was not disclosed in court during a detention hearing Wednesday. A judge heard arguments but did not immediately rule on whether Diana Toebbe should continue to be locked up. Jonathan Toebbe waived his right to a detention hearing, meaning he continues to be held.

Peter Olinits, a Pittsburgh-based agent specializing in counterintelligence investigations, testified in support of the government's argument that Diana Toebbe was a potential flight risk and should remain jailed as the case moved forward.

He described how agents on the day of the couple's arrest found in their home, among other objects, \$11,300 in cash, children's valid passports and a "go-bag" containing a USB flash drive and latex gloves.

Olinits also cited messages from 2019 and 2020 in which the Toebbes discussed leaving the country, including one in which Diana Toebbe said, "I cannot believe that the two of us wouldn't be welcomed and rewarded by a foreign government." Months later, in another message, she said, "I think we need to be actively making plans to leave the country," according to Olinits.

But Diana Toebbe's lawyer, Edward MacMahon, raised the possibility that his 45-year-old client, who worked as a teacher at a progressive private school in Annapolis, Maryland, was simply referring to her distress over the prospect of President Donald Trump's reelection.

"She's not the only liberal that's wanted to leave the country over politics," MacMahon pointed out. "That's correct, isn't it, sir?"

The investigation began in late 2020 after an FBI legal attache office in an unspecified country obtained a package that prosecutors say Jonathan Toebbe had sent that nation. In a letter, he offered to sell confidential U.S. Navy information, according to prosecutors.

The letter, sent on April 1, 2020, and bearing a return address in Pittsburgh, says: "If you do not contact me by December 31, 2020 I will conclude you are uninterested, and will approach other possible buyers," according to Olinits' testimony.

After receiving the letter, the FBI began using an undercover agent to communicate with Jonathan Toebbe, arranging for the information to be deposited at "dead drop" locations around the region.

Olinits testified that Diana Toebbe accompanied her husband on three of the four missions. To avoid suspicion, Olinits said, the Toebbes would dress as if tourists or hikers and meander around the drop site. Authorities say Jonathan Toebbe left at the locations memory cards containing government secrets, concealing them in objects including a chewing gum wrapper, a Band-Aid wrapper and a peanut butter

sandwich.

Olinits said the FBI has not been able to locate the roughly \$100,000 in cryptocurrency payments that the bureau sent the Toebbes in exchange for the stolen government secrets, and that agents have also not yet recovered all the classified documents.

MacMahon, the lawyer for Diana Toebbe, argued that because the FBI did not record any of the couple's conversations, agents actually had no proof that his client had any knowledge of her husband's activities or what precisely he was doing.

He said the couple, who has children, had been planning a family trip, which could explain the bag that agents found and why their passports were being renewed. And he suggested that Diana Toebbe, who has a doctoral degree in anthropology, has no knowledge of nuclear submarines.

"Did it occur to you as part of your investigation that maybe Mr. Toebbe was telling her he was up to something other than espionage against the United States?" MacMahon asked.

"I think that'd be a difficult thing to sell, but maybe," Olinits said.

Follow Eric Tucker on Twitter at <http://www.twitter.com/etuckerAP>

Cargo backlog creates traffic headaches on sea and land

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A Los Angeles neighborhood just outside the nation's busiest port complex has become a perpetual traffic jam, with trucks hauling cargo containers backed up day and night as workers try to break through an unprecedented backlog of ships waiting to unload.

About 40% of all shipping containers entering the U.S. come through the Los Angeles and Long Beach ports. The logjam of ships has interrupted the global supply chain and last week prompted the Biden administration to allow the port complex to operate 24 hours a day to try to get goods unloaded and out to consumers.

Since then, residents of the Wilmington neighborhood just north of the ports have complained that trucks are backed up in the streets at all hours. Meanwhile, cargo companies running out of space to store containers off-loaded from ships are stacking them outside overloaded warehouses and in parking lots.

This week a container slid off a truck making a turn on a narrow street, pancaking a parked car. Nobody was hurt, but local officials say with so many trucks crammed into a small area it was an accident waiting to happen.

"This is becoming an issue of safety," said Jacob Haik, deputy chief of staff for LA City Councilman Joe Buscaino, who represents the working-class area. Haik said the city would start issuing citations to firms that stack containers unsafely or whose trucks clog streets.

As of Tuesday, there were 63 ships berthed at the two ports and 96 waiting to dock and unload, according to the Marine Exchange of Southern California that oversees port vessel traffic. On Monday, the number of ships waiting to enter the ports hit a record 100.

Wilmington resident Sonia Cervantes said her driveway was blocked by a truck as she tried to leave for work at 6:30 a.m. Her whole block is fed up with the traffic, she said.

"It's a bunch of neighbors that are very upset because it's a non-stop situation," Cervantes told CBS LA.

Maria Arriaran, who owns the UCTI Trucking Company along with her husband, Frank, said she sympathizes with the community, but the truck traffic is a result of limited container storage.

"It's an ongoing problem. We're just trying to get these truckers in and out," she said Wednesday. "I'm literally out on the streets directing traffic."

California Gov. Gavin Newsom on Wednesday issued an executive order that aims to ease the backlog. He directed California government agencies to look for state-owned properties that could temporarily store goods coming into the ports. Newsom, a Democrat, asked the state's Department of General Services to review potential sites by Dec. 15.

He also ordered the Governor's Office of Business and Economic Development to examine other proper-

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ties not owed by the state, such as private or locally owned parcels, that could also be used for storage, though he didn't give a timeline for that review.

Newsom's order is a start, Haik said, but he urged the governor to also allow cities to make it easier to change zoning rules. The city has identified several port-owned plots that could be quickly paved and transformed into storage sites if not for existing red tape, he said.

"The lots are quite small. But if you could pull together 10 or 12 lots, and put 40 containers on each of them, that's 500 containers," Haik said. "That's some serious relief."

More relief could come by diverting cargo ship traffic to the Port of Oakland. Mayor Libby Schaaf told KRON-TV on Wednesday that her city's port "has unused capacity right now" and Oakland can "take some of those ships off your hands, L.A."

Newsom's order also directed the state's transportation agency to look for freight routes where vehicle weight limits can be exempt to help with the movement of goods. He asked his administration to come up with port and transportation improvements that could be included in the next state budget, which he will introduce in January.

A coalition of business groups including retailers, truckers, grocers and others said Wednesday that Newsom's order doesn't go far enough.

"There are additional real, tangible actions the governor could take to meet the moment and tackle this crisis head-on, but convening taskforces in 2022, delaying urgent actions for at least a month, and pushing funding discussions to the January budget proposal do not provide the sense of urgency needed to address this crisis now," the coalition said in a letter.

The group urged Newsom to take drastic steps including suspending air quality rules governing truck emissions, allowing cities to drop prohibitions on unloading goods at stores after hours and expediting permitting processes for warehouses.

Associated Press writer Kathleen Ronayne in Sacramento, California, contributed to this report.

FDA OKs mixing COVID vaccines; backs Moderna, J&J boosters

By MATTHEW PERRONE and LAURAN NEERGAARD Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. regulators on Wednesday signed off on extending COVID-19 boosters to Americans who got the Moderna or Johnson & Johnson vaccine and said anyone eligible for an extra dose can get a brand different from the one they received initially.

The Food and Drug Administration's decisions mark a big step toward expanding the U.S. booster campaign, which began with extra doses of the Pfizer vaccine last month. But before more people roll up their sleeves, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention will consult an expert panel Thursday before finalizing official recommendations for who should get boosters and when.

The latest moves would expand by tens of millions the number of Americans eligible for boosters and formally allow "mixing and matching" of shots — making it simpler to get another dose, especially for people who had a side effect from one brand but still want the proven protection of vaccination.

Specifically, the FDA authorized a third Moderna shot for seniors and others at high risk from COVID-19 because of their health problems, jobs or living conditions — six months after their last shot. One big change: Moderna's booster will be half the dose that's used for the first two shots, based on company data showing that was plenty to rev up immunity again.

For J&J's single-shot vaccine, the FDA said all U.S. recipients, no matter their age, could get a second dose at least two months following their initial vaccination.

The FDA rulings differ because the vaccines are made differently, with different dosing schedules — and the J&J vaccine has consistently shown a lower level of effectiveness than either of the two-shot Moderna and Pfizer vaccines.

As for mixing and matching, the FDA said it's OK to use any brand for the booster regardless of which vaccination people got first. The interchangeability of the shots is expected to speed the booster campaign,

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particularly in nursing homes and other institutional settings where residents have received different shots over time.

FDA officials said they wanted to make the booster guidance as flexible as possible, given that many people don't remember which brand of vaccine they received.

"Being able to interchange these vaccines is a good thing — it's like what we do with flu vaccines," FDA's Dr. Peter Marks told reporters Wednesday evening. "Most people don't know what brand of flu vaccine they received."

Still, he added that many people will decide to get a booster from the same company as their initial vaccination.

The agency's mix-and-match decision was based on preliminary results from a government study of different booster combinations that showed an extra dose of any type revs up levels of virus-fighting antibodies. That study also showed recipients of the single-dose J&J vaccination had a far bigger response if they got a full-strength Moderna booster or a Pfizer booster rather than a second J&J shot. The study didn't test the half-dose Moderna booster.

Health authorities stress that the priority still is getting first shots to about 65 million eligible Americans who remain unvaccinated. But the booster campaign is meant to shore up protection against the virus amid signs that vaccine effectiveness is waning against mild infections, even though all three brands continue to protect against hospitalization and death.

"Today the currently available data suggest waning immunity in some populations of fully vaccinated people," said FDA's acting commissioner Dr. Janet Woodcock. "The availability of these authorized boosters is important for continued protection against COVID-19 disease."

The Moderna booster decision essentially matches FDA's ruling that high-risk groups are eligible for the Pfizer vaccine, which is made with the same technology.

FDA recommended that everyone who'd gotten the single-shot J&J vaccine get a booster since it has consistently shown lower protection than its two-shot rivals. And several independent FDA advisers who backed the booster decision suggested J&J's vaccine should have originally been designed to require two doses.

Experts continue to debate the rationale of the booster campaign. Some warn that the U.S. government hasn't clearly articulated the goals of boosters given that the shots continue to head off the worst effects of COVID-19, and wonder if the aim is to tamp down on virus spread by curbing, at least temporarily, milder infections.

FDA regulators said they would move quickly to expand boosters to lower age groups, such as people in their 40s and 50s, if warranted.

"We are watching this very closely and will take action as appropriate to make sure that the maximum protection is provided to the population," said Marks, the FDA's top vaccine official.

In August, the Biden administration announced plans for an across-the-board booster campaign aimed at all U.S. adults, but outside experts have repeatedly argued against such a sweeping effort.

On Thursday an influential panel convened by the CDC is expected to offer more specifics on who should get boosters and when. Their recommendations are subject to approval by the CDC director.

The vast majority of the nearly 190 million Americans who are fully vaccinated against COVID-19 have received the Pfizer or Moderna options, while about 15 million have received the J&J vaccine.

Associated Press writer Mike Stobbe contributed to this story from New York.

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

Reports: Health problems tied to global warming on the rise

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

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Health problems tied to climate change are all getting worse, according to two reports published Wednesday.

The annual reports commissioned by the medical journal Lancet tracked 44 global health indicators connected to climate change, including heat deaths, infectious diseases and hunger. All of them are getting grimmer, said Lancet Countdown project research director Marina Romanello, a biochemist.

"Rising temperatures are having consequences," said University of Washington environmental health professor Kristie Ebi, a report co-author.

This year's reports — one global, one just aimed at the United States — called "code red for a healthy future," highlight dangerous trends:

— Vulnerable populations — older people and very young — were subject to more time with dangerous heat last year. For people over 65, the researchers calculated there were 3 billion more "person-day" exposures to extreme heat than the average from 1986 to 2005.

— More people were in places where climate-sensitive diseases can flourish. Coastline areas warm enough for the nasty Vibrio bacteria increased in the Baltics, the U.S. Northeast and the Pacific Northwest in the past decade. In some poorer nations, the season for malaria-spreading mosquitoes has expanded since the 1950s.

"Code Red is not even a hot enough color for this report," said Stanford University tropical medicine professor Dr. Michele Barry, who wasn't part of the study team. Compared to the last Lancet report, "this one is the sobering realization that we're going completely in the wrong direction."

In the U.S., heat, fire and drought caused the biggest problems. An unprecedented Pacific Northwest and Canadian heat wave hit this summer, which a previous study showed couldn't have happened without human-caused climate change.

Study co-author Dr. Jeremy Hess, a professor of environmental health and emergency medicine at the University of Washington, said he witnessed the impacts of climate change while working at Seattle emergency rooms during the heat.

"I saw paramedics who had burns on their knees from kneeling down to care for patients with heat stroke," he said. "And I saw far too many patients die" from the heat.

Another ER doctor in Boston said science is now showing what she has seen for years, citing asthma from worsening allergies as one example.

"Climate change is first and foremost a health crisis unfolding across the U.S.," said Dr. Renee Salas, also a co-author of the report.

George Washington University School of Public Health Dean Dr. Lynn Goldman, who was not part of the project, said health problems from climate change "are continuing to worsen far more rapidly than would have been projected only a few years ago."

The report said 65 of the 84 countries included subsidize the burning of fossil fuels, which cause climate change. Doing that "feels like caring for the desperately ill patient while somebody is handing them lit cigarettes and junk food," said Dr. Richard Jackson, a UCLA public health professor who wasn't part of the study.

Read more stories on climate issues by The Associated Press at <https://www.apnews.com/Climate>

Follow Seth Borenstein on Twitter at @borenbears.

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Tesla hits record profit despite parts shortage, ship delays

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Record electric vehicle sales last summer amid a shortage of computer chips and other

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materials propelled Tesla Inc. to the biggest quarterly net earnings in its history.

The company said Wednesday that it made \$1.62 billion in the third quarter, beating the old record of \$1.14 billion set in the second quarter of this year. The profit was nearly five times larger than the \$331 million Tesla made in the same quarter a year ago.

Revenue of \$13.76 billion from July through September also set a record, but it fell short of Wall Street expectations of just over \$14 billion, according to FactSet.

Excluding special items such as stock-based compensation, Palo Alto, California-based Tesla made \$1.86 per share, beating analyst estimates of \$1.62. CEO Elon Musk has said he's moving the headquarters to Austin, Texas, the dateline of Wednesday's earnings release.

Some of the quarterly profit, though, came from selling regulatory credits to other automakers. Tesla made \$279 million on credits during the quarter.

"A variety of challenges, including semiconductor shortages, congestion at ports and rolling blackouts, have been impacting our ability to keep factories running at full speed," the company said in a statement to shareholders.

Earlier this month Tesla said it delivered a record 241,300 electric vehicles in the third quarter even as it wrestled with the shortages that have hit the entire auto industry. Most automakers reported sales declines in the U.S. last quarter due to chip and other shortages, including General Motors and Ford.

Previously, Musk has said Tesla kept its manufacturing lines running largely by finding chips from alternate suppliers and then scrambling to rewrite some of the software in its cars to ensure all the technology remained compatible.

Third-quarter sales rose 72% over the 140,000 deliveries Tesla made for the same period a year ago.

So far this year, Tesla has sold around 627,300 vehicles. That puts it on pace to soundly beat last year's total of 499,550.

While sales grew in the third quarter, the average sales price fell 6% because Tesla is selling more less-expensive Models 3 and Y and fewer pricier Models S and X.

Tesla also took an impairment charge of \$51 million due to a decline in value of its Bitcoin holdings.

Musk didn't appear on this quarter's conference call with analysts and investors. He said previously that he would show up only when he had something important to say.

That left Chief Financial Officer Zachary Kirkhorn and Vice President of Vehicle Engineering Lars Moravy to answer questions.

Kirkhorn said the company was able to hit an operating margin — how much it makes pretax after variable production costs — of just under 15%.

But Kirkhorn said Tesla may face some difficulties in the future that could threaten that margin, including rising commodity prices and labor shortages. Tesla's biggest cost exposure is for nickel, which goes into battery cells, and aluminum, which the company uses for other nonbattery components, he said. Tesla also will face inefficiencies as it starts production at new factories in Texas and Germany next year, he said.

The company already is seeing commodity cost increases, which have resulted in price hikes, Kirkhorn said. Next year it's possible that Tesla will see more. "It's difficult to say precisely, but the volatility and the increases are just so substantial," he said.

Tesla executives also made their first public comment on multiple investigations of the company by U.S. safety regulators. Moravy said Tesla is cooperating as much as possible.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has opened an investigation into why Tesla's Autopilot driver-assist system keeps running into parked emergency vehicles. Of the dozen crashes that are part of the probe, 17 people were injured and one was killed.

The safety agency also is questioning why Tesla didn't recall vehicles with Autopilot when it did an over-the-internet software update so they better recognize firetrucks and police cars in low light. NHTSA said the update addressed a safety defect.

Kirkhorn said safety is important to Tesla as the auto industry transitions from traditional cars to being more software-oriented. "Regulatory bodies, and understandably so, are interested in understanding how to regulate in this environment, and NHTSA is no exception," he said. "We're excited to partner and we'll

work collaboratively with all the different regulatory bodies.”

Tesla hasn't always cooperated with the safety agency, though. In January, Tesla resisted a request from NHTSA to recall about 135,000 vehicles because their touch screens could go dark. The agency said the screens were a safety defect because backup cameras and windshield defroster controls could be disabled.

A month later, after NHTSA started the process toward holding a public hearing and taking Tesla to court, the company agreed to the recall.

In its shareholder statement, Tesla also said that construction of its new factory near Austin is progressing as planned and it's preparing equipment and "fabricating our first pre-production vehicles."

The factory, which is centrally located versus Tesla's other assembly plant in Fremont, California, will send Model Y small SUVs and new Cybertruck pickups to East Coast population centers.

Tesla said it expects to expand its factory capacity quickly, and over a "multi-year horizon" it expects sales to grow an average of 50% annually.

Shares of Tesla Inc. fell 1.6% to \$851.80 in after-hours trading Wednesday.

This story has been corrected to show that Tesla made a \$331 million net profit in the third quarter of 2021, not \$300 million.

Big changes in White House ideas to pay for \$2 trillion plan

By LISA MASCARO, DARLENE SUPERVILLE and ALAN FRAM Associated Press

SCRANTON, Pa. (AP) — In an abrupt change, the White House on Wednesday floated new plans to pay for parts of President Joe Biden's \$2 trillion social services and climate change package, shelving a proposed big increase in corporate tax rates though also adding a new billionaires' tax on the investment gains of the very richest Americans.

The reversal came as Biden returned to his hometown of Scranton, Pennsylvania, to highlight the middle class values he says are at the heart of the package that Democrats are racing to finish. Biden faces resistance from key holdouts, including Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., who has not been on board with her party's plan to undo Trump-era tax breaks to help pay for it.

"This has been declared dead on arrival from the moment I introduced it, but I think we're going to surprise them, because I think people are beginning to figure out what's at stake," Biden said in a speech at Scranton's Electric City Trolley Museum, his first visit home since becoming president.

Negotiations between the White House and Democratic leaders on Capitol Hill are underway on what's now a scaled-back package but would still be an unprecedented federal effort to expand social services for millions and confront the rising threat of climate change. It's coupled with a separate \$1 trillion bill to update roads and bridges.

Biden and his Democratic Party have given themselves a deadline to seal agreement after laboring to bridge his once-sweeping \$3.5 trillion vision preferred by progressives with a more limited focus that can win over party centrists. He has no Democratic votes to spare for passage in the closely divided Congress, and leaders want agreement by week's end.

The newly proposed tax provisions, though, are likely to sour progressives and even some moderate Democrats who have long campaigned on undoing the 2017 GOP tax cuts that many believe unduly reward the wealthy, costing the federal government untold sums in lost revenue at a time of gaping income inequality.

Administration officials spoke with congressional leaders on the tax alternatives, according to a person familiar with the private talks and granted anonymity to discuss them. The changes may be needed to win over Sinema, who had objected to plans to raise the rates on corporations and wealthy individuals earning more than \$400,000 a year, said the person and several others.

As it stands, the corporate tax rate is 21%, and Democrats want to lift it to 26.5% for companies earning more than \$5 million a year. The top individual income tax rate would rise from 37% to 39.6% for those earning more than \$400,000, or \$450,000 for married couples.

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Under the changes being floated that 21% corporate rate would stay the same.

However, the revisions wouldn't be all positive for big companies and the wealthy. The White House is reviving the idea of a minimum corporate tax rate, similar to the 15% rate Biden had proposed earlier this year. That's even for companies that say they had no taxable income — a frequent target of Biden who complains that they pay "zero" in taxes.

And there could be a new billionaires' tax, modeled on legislation from Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Ore., the chairman of the Finance Committee, who has proposed taxing stock gains of those with more than \$1 billion in assets — fewer than 1,000 Americans.

Sinema has not publicly stated her position, and her office did not respond to a request for comment.

Another key Democrat, conservative Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia, has said he prefers a 25% corporate rate. He has been withholding his support for the bill with additional objections to its provisions on climate change and social services.

On the call with the administration and the White House, Wyden said he "stressed the importance of putting an end to America's two tax codes, and finally showing working people in this country that the wealthiest Americans are going to pay taxes just like they do."

The possible shift comes as Democrats appear to have made progress uniting themselves, ready to abandon what had been a loftier package in favor of a smaller, more workable proposal the party can unite around

In the mix: At least \$500 billion to battle climate change, \$350 billion for child care subsidies and free pre-kindergarten, a new federal program for at least four weeks of paid family leave, a one-year extension of the \$300 monthly child tax credit put in place during the COVID-19 crisis, and funding for health care provided through the Affordable Care Act and Medicare.

Likely to be eliminated or shaved back: plans for tuition-free community college, a path to permanent legal status for certain immigrants in the U.S. and a clean energy plan that was the centerpiece of Biden's strategy for fighting climate change.

"Nothing is decided until everything is decided," said Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., the leader of the Congressional Progressive Caucus after a morning meeting of House Democrats. "We're just trying to get it done."

Democrats are growing anxious they have little to show voters despite their campaign promises and have had trouble explaining what they're trying to do with the massive package, made up of so many different proposals.

It's a tall order that was leading to an all-out push Wednesday to answer the question — "What's in the damn bill?" — as a press release from Sen. Bernie Sanders, the independent from Vermont, put it.

The president especially wants to advance his signature domestic package to bolster federal social services and address climate change by the time he departs for a global climate summit next week.

Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., a progressive caucus member, said, "He really believes American leadership, American prestige is on the line."

Manchin has made clear he opposes the president's initial energy plan, which was to have the government impose penalties on electric utilities that fail to meet clean energy benchmarks and provide financial rewards to those that do.

Instead, Biden is focused on providing at least \$500 billion in tax credits, grants and loans for energy producers that reach emission-reduction goals.

On other fronts, to preserve Biden's initial sweep, Democrats are moving to retain many of the programs but trim their duration to shave costs.

Biden wants to extend the \$300 monthly child tax credit that was put in place during the COVID-19 crisis for another year, rather than allow it to expire in December, but not as long as Democrats wanted.

What had been envisioned as a months-long federal paid family leave program could be shrunk to as few as four weeks — an effort to at least start the program rather than eliminate it.

Biden also wants to ensure funding for health care programs, including for home- and community-based health care services, supporting a move away from widespread nursing home care.

And a new program to provide dental, vision and hearing aid benefits to people on Medicare proposed by Sanders, is likely to remain in some fashion.

Biden has told lawmakers that after his top priorities there would be \$300 billion remaining.

That could lower the overall price tag or be used for other programs.

Associated Press writers Kevin Freking and Josh Boak contributed to this report.

Chappelle special spurs Netflix walkout; 'Trans lives matter'

By ALEX VEIGA and LYNN ELBER Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Netflix employees who walked out Wednesday in protest of Dave Chappelle's special and its anti-transgender comments were joined by allies who chanted "Trans lives matter," getting pushback from counterprotesters who also showed up.

A pre-noon rally at a Netflix office-studio complex drew about 100 people, most on the side of an estimated 30 workers at the streaming giant that joined in afterward. Some were willing to identify themselves as Netflix employees, but all declined to provide their names.

Joey Soloway, creator of the groundbreaking Emmy-winning comedy "Transparent," was among the speakers at the rally.

Chappelle's decision to share "his outrage as comedic humiliation in front of thousands of people, and then broadcasting it to hundreds of millions of people is infinitely amplified gender violence," they said.

"I want trans representation on the Netflix board, this (expletive) week," the writer-director said.

Ashlee Marie Preston, an activist and the event's organizer, addressed the rally and spoke to The Associated Press afterward. She said that calling out Chappelle for his remarks wasn't enough.

"It was important to shift the focus to the people that sign the checks, because Dave Chappelle doesn't sign checks, Netflix does," Preston said. "If we have companies like Netflix who aren't listening to their employees, who are forcing their employees to participate in their own oppression, that's unacceptable."

"We're here to keep people accountable. We're not going anywhere," she said, adding that efforts are underway to start a dialogue with Netflix executives.

There were a few moments of shoving and pushing among the competing demonstrators, but the conflict was mostly limited to a war of words.

Leia Figueroa, a student from Los Angeles, doesn't work at Netflix but said she wanted to back the walkout. While the streaming service offers positive fare for the LGBTQ community, she said, it's having it both ways by also offering a show like Chappelle's that includes disparaging comments about trans women.

If Netflix wants to be "an apolitical platform then they should be that," Figueroa said. "But they're saying things like 'Black lives matter' and 'We don't stand for transphobia.' If you say things like that, then you have to be vetting all of your content to reflect your values."

As she spoke, a protestor shouted, "We like jokes."

"I like funny jokes, and transphobia is not a joke," Figueroa replied.

Belissa Cohen, a former journalist, said she was on hand to "support Netflix's decision not to pull" the special.

"We want to show that there isn't unanimous support about transgender ideology when it comes to Netflix viewers," Cohen said.

She was among about a dozen people who carried placards reading "Free speech is a right" and "Truth is not transphobic." Opposite them were those carrying signs that included "Black Trans Lives Matter" and "Transphobia is not Funny."

Elliot Page, who stars in Netflix's "The Umbrella Academy" and is transgender, tweeted that he stands with the trans, nonbinary and people of color working at Netflix who are "fighting for more and better trans stories and a more inclusive workplace."

Team Trans(asterisk), which identifies itself as supporting "trans people working at Netflix trying to build a better world for our community," posted what it called a list of "asks" being made of Netflix by trans and nonbinary workers and allies at the company.

They are calling on the company to "repair" its relationships with staff and the audience with changes involving the hiring of trans executives and increased spending on trans and nonbinary creators and projects.

"Harm reduction" is another demand, which according to the list includes acknowledgment of what it called Netflix's "responsibility for this harm from transphobic content, and in particular harm to the Black trans community."

It also called for disclaimers to flag content that includes "transphobic language, misogyny, homophobia" and hate speech.

In a statement, the media watchdog group GLAAD said it salutes the Netflix's employees, allies and LGBTQ and Black advocates "calling for accountability and change within Netflix and in the entertainment industry as a whole."

The employees who walked out uniformly referred reporters to the GLAAD statement.

Netflix ran into a buzz-saw of criticism not only with the special but in how internal memos responded to employees' concerns, including co-CEO Ted Sarandos' assertion that "content on screen doesn't directly translate to real-world harm."

Sarandos also wrote that Netflix doesn't allow titles that are "designed to incite hate or violence, and we don't believe 'The Closer' crosses that line."

In interviews Tuesday, Sarandos said he failed to recognize that "a group of our employees was really hurting," as he told The Wall Street Journal, and that his comment about the effect of TV on viewers was an oversimplification.

Terra Field, who identifies herself on Twitter as a senior software engineer at Netflix and as trans, posted tweets critical of Chappelle's special immediately after it aired and the comments were widely shared.

In her posts, Field said the comic was being criticized not because his remarks are offensive but for the harm they do to the trans community, especially Black women. Field included a list of trans and nonbinary men and women of color who she said had been killed, adding in each case that the victim "is not offended."

This story corrects the spelling of the first name of Belissa Cohen.

FBI: Items linked to Laundrie, potential human remains found

By CURT ANDERSON Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. (AP) — Potential human remains were found Wednesday in a Florida wilderness area along with items believed to belong to Brian Laundrie, whose girlfriend, Gabby Petito, was found slain after he returned home alone from their cross-country road trip, according to the FBI.

Michael McPherson, chief of the Tampa FBI office, said at a news conference that it will take time to identify the remains, which forensic teams were examining. McPherson said they were found near a backpack and a notebook linked to Laundrie.

"We are working diligently to get those answers for you," McPherson said, adding that the items and remains were found in a swampy area — home to alligators, snakes, coyotes and other wildlife — that had previously been underwater. "It's likely the team will be on site for several days."

Laundrie's parents, Chris and Roberta Laundrie, took part in the search Wednesday with the FBI and police from North Port, Florida, more than a month after Laundrie was reported missing after heading to the vast Carlton Reserve park.

"After a brief search off a trail that Brian frequented some articles belonging to Brian were found," Laundrie family attorney Steven Bertolino said in a text to The Associated Press. "As of now law enforcement is conducting a more thorough investigation of that area."

The Sarasota County Medical Examiner's Office confirmed it had been summoned to the reserve but would not comment further.

Laundrie, 23, is a person of interest in the killing of Petito, who was reported missing Sept. 11 by her parents while the couple was on a cross-country trip out West.

The case generated enormous public interest but also raised uncomfortable questions over the unequal

attention given to the hundreds of cases of Native American and other minority women missing or murdered across the United States. Petito is white.

Petito's body was found Sept. 19 on the edge of Wyoming's Grand Teton National Park, which the couple had visited. The coroner there concluded she died of strangulation and her body had been where it was found for three or four weeks.

The couple was stopped Aug. 12 by police in Moab, Utah, after they had a physical altercation, but no charges were filed.

Laundrie returned home alone Sept. 1 in the Ford van the couple took on their trip. He was reported missing after telling his parents on Sept. 14 that he was going for a hike in the Carlton Reserve, a nature preserve in Sarasota County that has for weeks been a key area in the search.

The activity Wednesday was focused on the nearby Myakkahatchee Creek Environmental Park, where television news reports showed numerous law enforcement vehicles arriving and a tent set up inside the woods. The location is where a Ford Mustang that Laundrie drove to the wilderness was found.

Laundrie is charged in a federal Wyoming indictment with unauthorized use of a debit card, which would allow authorities to arrest him if he is found alive.

It alleges Laundrie used a Capital One Bank card and someone's personal identification number to make unauthorized withdrawals or charges worth more than \$1,000. It does not say to whom the card belonged or what type of charges were made.

Associated Press writer Mike Balsamo in Washington contributed to this story.

EXPLAINER: How jury selection works in Arbery slaying trial

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — Teachers, auto mechanics and retirees summoned to jury duty in the slaying of Ahmaud Arbery are being questioned about their thoughts on racism, their social media habits and whether they own guns, while hundreds more await their turn.

Finding an impartial jury won't be quick or easy in this coastal community of 85,000 people. The 25-year-old Black man was chased by three white men and fatally shot on Feb. 23, 2020, as he ran in their neighborhood. His death stunned people across the U.S. after graphic cellphone video of the killing leaked online two months later. The shooting dominated local news, social media feeds and workplace chatter.

When court adjourned Wednesday, the third day of jury selection at the Glynn County courthouse, a total of 15 prospective jurors had been deemed qualified to advance to the group from which a final jury will be chosen. Dozens more will be needed before the murder trial of defendants Greg and Travis McMichael and William "Roddie" Bryan gets underway.

HOW DO PEOPLE END UP ON A JURY?

Jury selection is essentially a process of elimination. In Georgia, court clerks use lists of licensed drivers and registered voters to randomly send jury duty notices. In this case, notices were mailed to 1,000 people. Ultimately, the court needs only 16 — a main jury of 12, plus four alternates in case any jurors get sick or are otherwise dismissed before the trial ends.

People can be excused automatically if they're 70 or older, full-time caregivers of young children or full-time students. The judge can dismiss others for hardships such as illness or disability or the need to care for an ailing relative or to run a business with a shortage of workers.

Attorneys may also persuade the judge to dismiss pool members whose answers to questions indicate they've formed opinions about the case that could prevent them from rendering a fair verdict.

HOW DOES THE PROCESS WORK IN THIS CASE?

Potential jurors are being questioned in three phases. Jury duty notices included a three-page questionnaire to be filled out before coming to court. People were asked what they already know about the case, which news sources or social media platforms they use and whether they have seen the cellphone video of the shooting.

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The first 600 prospective jurors are being summoned to the courthouse in groups of 20, with the remainder on deck for next week if needed. Prosecutors and defense lawyers first question them in groups, asking for a show of hands to answer yes-or-no questions such as whether anyone knows the three men on trial or already has negative impressions of them.

After that, jury pool members are being brought into court one at a time for more probing questions. How many times have they watched the video? Do they feel racism was a motivating factor? The attorneys want to find out who has fixed opinions on the case.

One man Wednesday acknowledged writing on his questionnaire: "Guilty. They killed him." He told the lawyers and judge he was referring to "all three of them. They did it as a team." The judge dismissed the man after defense attorneys reported seeing him give a thumbs-up to Arbery's father in the courtroom gallery.

IS SOMEONE DISQUALIFIED IF THEY ALREADY KNOW ABOUT THE CASE?

No. As one potential juror told the lawyers, almost everyone in Glynn County knows something about the killing.

Prospective jurors can be qualified to serve if they are deemed capable of weighing the courtroom evidence fairly, despite what they've already read or heard. Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley has been fairly lenient in that regard.

Two panelists who said their fathers were friends of either Greg McMichael or Bryan were allowed to remain in the jury pool. Another was deemed qualified after saying he had actively researched the case using Google and concluded: "Someone was murdered. That's all I know."

There's no question Travis McMichael shot Arbery three times with a shotgun. The key issue is whether the shooting amounted to murder. Defense attorneys contend the defendants legally pursued Arbery because they suspected he was a criminal, and that the shooting was in self-defense.

WHY WASN'T THE CASE MOVED BECAUSE OF PRETRIAL PUBLICITY?

The intense pretrial publicity about Arbery's slaying would likely qualify the trial to be moved to another Georgia county. But defense lawyers have said they prefer to try the case in Glynn County, where all three residents are longtime residents and are not known solely for Arbery's death.

If defense attorneys don't like the way the jury pool is shaping up, they could still ask the judge to move the case.

HOW DOES THE COURT ARRIVE AT A FINAL JURY?

Before a final jury is seated, attorneys get to take turns eliminating a significant number of prospective jurors from the final pool, for virtually any reason. There is one major exception — the U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that it's unconstitutional to cut potential jurors solely based on race.

"You're trying to get rid of the people you think would be worst for your case, either because of their background or opinions," said Page Pate, a Brunswick defense attorney who's not involved in the case.

So far, the judge has granted 12 such peremptory challenges, or strikes, to prosecutors and 24 total to defense attorneys. He will likely grant additional strikes for choosing the four alternate jurors.

Mathematically, that means 60 or more qualified jury pool members will probably be needed for attorneys to exercise their strikes and still have enough people left to form the final jury.

Senate report urges charging Brazil's leader over pandemic

By DÉBORA ÁLVARES and DIANE JEANTET Associated Press

BRASILIA, Brazil (AP) — A Brazilian Senate report recommended Wednesday pursuing crimes against humanity and other charges against President Jair Bolsonaro for allegedly bungling Brazil's response to COVID-19 and contributing to the country having the world's second-highest pandemic death toll.

Sen. Renan Calheiros presented the proposal to a committee of colleagues that has spent six months investigating the Brazilian government's management of the pandemic. The decision on whether to file most of the charges would be up to Brazil's prosecutor-general, a Bolsonaro appointee and ally.

Bolsonaro has consistently downplayed the threat of the coronavirus and touted misinformation and

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unproven COVID-19 treatments while ignoring international health guidelines on mask use and public activity. The 11-member Senate panel examined whether his actions caused many of Brazil's more than 600,000 COVID-19 deaths.

In a nearly 1,200-page report based on the committee's work, Calheiros called for Bolsonaro's indictment on charges ranging from charlatanism and inciting crime to misuse of public funds and crimes against humanity.

By insisting on so-called early treatment drugs like the anti-malarial medication hydroxychloroquine as "practically the only government policy to fight the pandemic," the report states, "Jair Bolsonaro strongly collaborated for COVID-19's spread in Brazilian territory and, as such, showed himself to be the main person responsible for the errors committed by the federal government during the pandemic."

The far-right Brazilian leader has repeatedly described the Senate investigation as a political instrument aimed at sabotaging him and denied any wrongdoing.

"We know we are not to blame for anything. We know we did the right thing from the very first moment," Bolsonaro said Wednesday from the northeastern state of Ceara.

The office of Prosecutor-General Augusto Aras said in a statement that the report would be carefully analyzed once it's received. Analysts said it was unclear if Aras would charge the president even if there are legal grounds to do so, and that the report was far more likely to hamper Bolsonaro's push for reelection in 2022 than make him a defendant in a courtroom.

"The major impact of the investigation is political, because it generated tons of news that certainly will be used by campaign strategists next year," said Thiago de Aragão, director of strategy at political consulting firm Arko Advice.

Calheiros, whom the committee designated to write the report, read a summary to the Senate committee on Wednesday. In addition to Bolsonaro, the report recommends charges for current and former members of his administration, dozens of allies, the president's three sons who are politicians and two companies.

The committee "collected evidence that abundantly demonstrated that the federal government was silent and chose to act in a non-technical and reckless manner," the report states.

The document can be modified before the 11-member senatorial committee considers endorsing it; a vote is set for Oct. 26. The committee's approval is needed before the report goes to the office of the prosecutor-general, who has the authority to carry the investigation forward and eventually pursue charges.

Pierpaolo Bottini, a lawyer with the Brazilian Bar Association who has advised the committee members, told The Associated Press that other avenues for bringing charges are available to the Senate if the prosecutor-general doesn't ask the Supreme Court for authorization to investigate the president. But those would run through the speaker of Congress' Lower House, another Bolsonaro ally.

Regardless of whether the report leads to charges, it is expected to fuel criticism of the divisive president, whose approval ratings have slumped ahead of his 2022 reelection campaign. The investigation itself has for months provided a drumbeat of damaging allegations.

Senators obtained thousands of documents and heard testimony from over 60 people. Scandals came to light, such as Bolsonaro allegedly turning a blind eye to possible corruption in a deal to purchase coronavirus vaccines.

Prevent Senior, a Sao Paulo-based hospital chain, also faced accusations that it forced doctors to toe the line on prescribing unproven drugs that Bolsonaro championed for treating COVID-19. The Senate report recommends charging the chain's executive director with four crimes. The company has denied wrongdoing.

Bolsonaro continues to argue that the hydroxychloroquine is effective in treating COVID-19, though broad, major studies have found it to be ineffective and potentially dangerous. On Wednesday, referring to criticism around his push for chloroquine, he portrayed his advocacy as a historical event.

"Back then, no one knew how to treat this disease and I had the courage, after listening to many people, especially doctors, to put forward a possible solution."

More recently, the senators heard heart-rending tales from family members of COVID-19 victims.

On Monday, Giovanna Gomes Mendes da Silva, 19, spoke tearfully of her parents deaths and assuming

custody of her 10-year-old sister. Her testimony so affected the sign language interpreter for the Senate's broadcast channel that he struggled to contain his emotion and had to be replaced halfway through.

"We lost the people we loved the most," da Silva told senators. "And I saw that I needed my sister, and that she needed me. I leaned on her, just like she leaned on me."

An earlier draft of the Senate report had recommended the president be indicted for homicide and genocide, as well, though the two proposed charges were scrapped in the face of opposition from committee members and concern that bombastic claims could undermine the report's credibility.

Still, the report concluded that the government "deliberately exposed the population to a concrete risk of mass infection," influenced by a group of unofficial advisers who advocated for pursuing herd immunity long after many experts said that wasn't a viable option. ___ Jeantet reported and David Biller contributed from Rio de Janeiro.

Arbitrator: Official wrongly fired in Flint water scandal

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — The only Michigan official fired in the Flint water catastrophe likely was a "public scapegoat" who lost her job because of politics, an arbitrator said in ordering \$191,880 in back pay and other compensation.

It's a remarkable victory for Liane Shekter Smith, who served as head of the state's drinking water office when Flint's water system was contaminated with lead. She was removed and then fired in 2016 and subsequently faced criminal charges in one of the worst environmental disasters in U.S. history.

Shekter Smith was dismissed while engineers in her department — the "boots on the ground" in Flint — were suspended with pay before ultimately returning to work, the arbitrator said in a 22-page report obtained Wednesday by The Associated Press.

Sheldon Stark said the state had failed to offer enough evidence to justify the firing of Shekter Smith, who had an "exemplary" record in government.

The arbitrator noted that Keith Creagh, director of the Department of Environmental Quality, fired Shekter Smith without even speaking to her about Flint or waiting for a state police investigation that exonerated her.

"No one ever asked (Shekter Smith) for her story," Stark said.

"Politics and the need for a public scapegoat helps explain why Shekter Smith might have been terminated when so many others who were directly involved and actually did make" decisions in Flint were not fired, Stark said in his September report.

He ordered \$166,053 in lost wages before a likely spring 2017 retirement and \$25,827 in 401(k) retirement compensation. The state agency, which now is known as the Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy, declined to comment on the arbitrator's decision but said an appeal was being considered.

A message seeking comment was left for Shekter Smith's attorney.

"I'm dumbfounded. She was their boss," said LeeAnne Walters, a Flint resident who is credited with exposing the lead contamination. "The system just spit in the face of every resident who died or was harmed. She should not be compensated for harming people."

Walters took her concerns to Shekter Smith in 2015 but felt "an air of untouchability."

The department defended the firing in a legal brief.

"Part of accepting a high-level position in government is also to accept responsibility for oneself and for the actions of those one supervises and accountability for results," the agency told the arbitrator.

In 2014-15, Flint's water was pulled from the Flint River, a money-saving decision that was made by state-appointed managers who were running the ailing city. The highly corrosive water wasn't properly treated before it flowed through aging pipes to roughly 100,000 residents, causing lead to leach from old pipes.

The disaster in majority-Black Flint has been described as environmental racism. In 2016, a task force appointed by then-Gov. Rick Snyder, a Republican, said his environmental agency misapplied lead-and-copper rules and "caused this crisis to happen."

The arbitrator's report reveals behind-the-scenes moves by Snyder's influential fix-it man, Rich Baird, who

asked Creagh to take control of the department after a director quit amid the scandal.

Creagh testified that Baird "encouraged Shekter Smith's termination."

Richard Benzie, who supervised the state engineers making key decisions in Flint, was not disciplined but "promoted and given more responsibility!" the arbitrator said in highlighting different treatment.

After her discharge, Shekter Smith was charged with misconduct in office and neglect of duty, and put on notice that an involuntary manslaughter case would be pursued because bacteria in the water were linked to a fatal outbreak of Legionnaires' disease.

But charges were dropped in 2019 in exchange for a no-contest plea to an obscure misdemeanor. The case was erased after a year, under a deal with special prosecutor Todd Flood.

Flint's water quality greatly improved after it returned to a regional water supplier and replaced thousands of lead or steel service lines. Meanwhile, nine people, including Snyder and Baird, were charged with crimes in January after a new investigation. Their cases are pending.

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Bitcoin tops \$66,000, sets record as crypto goes mainstream

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Bitcoin stormed above \$66,000 for the first time on Wednesday, riding a wave of excitement about how the financial establishment is increasingly accepting the digital currency's rise.

One Bitcoin was valued at \$66,096, as of 4:15 p.m. Eastern time, after earlier climbing as high as \$66,974.77. The digital currency has roared back after sinking below \$30,000 during the summer to top its prior record set in April. That previous all-time high was nearly \$64,889, according to CoinDesk.

The surge has come as more businesses, professional investors and even the government of El Salvador buy into Bitcoin, further broadening its base beyond its initial core of fanatics.

The latest converts came into the world of crypto on Tuesday, when the first exchange-traded fund linked to Bitcoin found huge interest from investors. Shares of the ProShares Bitcoin Strategy ETF changed hands 24.1 million times in a resounding debut. It was even busier on Wednesday, with trading volume topping 29.4 million.

The ETF doesn't invest directly in Bitcoin. It instead invests in the futures market tied to Bitcoin, but the industry sees the ETF bringing in a new class of investors. Someone with an old-school brokerage account can buy the ETF, for example, without having to open a trading account for crypto.

Investors are getting more interested in Bitcoin because they're always looking for assets whose prices moves independently of everything else in their portfolios. One school of thought says Bitcoin can offer investors protection from high inflation, and some fans see it as akin to "digital gold," though it doesn't have a long track record to back that up.

More high-minded fans say digital assets are simply the future of finance, allowing transactions to sidestep middlemen and fees with a currency that's not beholden to any government.

Cryptocurrencies are still very far from winning over everyone, though. Critics point to how they're still not widely used as forms of payment. They also criticize how much energy is used by the crypto system, which can ultimately mean higher bills for home heating and other utilities amid a global crunch, as well as more climate-changing emissions. The biggest threat, meanwhile, is all the regulatory scrutiny shining on it.

China last month declared Bitcoin transactions illegal, for example. U.S. regulators haven't gone that far, but the chair of the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission has said the world of crypto doesn't have enough protections for investors.

Cryptocurrencies are also notorious for their sharp swings in price. The last time Bitcoin set a record high, the price dropped by half in roughly three months.

A big reason for that volatility is how wide the range of possibilities is for Bitcoin's future, said Gil Luria, technology strategist at D.A. Davidson.

On one end, Bitcoin could go to zero if it ends up being a fad or if another cryptocurrency supplants it.

On the other, it could usurp the role of the U.S. dollar and other currencies and become "all of money." More people take a position in the middle, believing that Bitcoin can be useful and has some value.

Luria said he sees only a 1% probability of the "all of money" scenario happening, but that's a better chance than he saw five years ago.

"To become all of money, you have to get a lot of people on board," he said. And the last year has seen many new people come into Bitcoin as it's hit records and become more mainstream.

"The higher Bitcoin goes," he said, "it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Senate GOP again blocks Democrats' election bill

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the third time this year, Senate Democrats on Wednesday tried to pass sweeping elections legislation that they tout as a powerful counterweight to new voting restrictions sweeping conservative-controlled states.

Once again, Republicans blocked them.

But amid the ongoing stalemate, there are signs that Democrats are making headway in their effort to create consensus around changing Senate procedural rules, a key step that could allow them to muscle transformative legislation through the narrowly divided chamber.

Sen. Angus King, a Maine independent who caucuses with Democrats, recently eased his longstanding opposition to changing the filibuster rules, which create a 60-vote threshold for most legislation to pass.

"I've concluded that democracy itself is more important than any Senate rule," said King, who acknowledged that weakening the filibuster would likely prove to be a "double-edged sword" under a Republican majority.

Democrats still face long odds of passing their bill, now known as the Freedom to Vote Act, which Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., excoriated Wednesday as a federal "election takeover scheme." But the softening of King's stance on the filibuster amounts to progress, if incremental, for Senate Democrats as they look to convince others in their caucus to support a rule change.

After the vote, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer invoked the Reconstruction era following the Civil War, hailing the Northern senators serving at that time for "going it alone" when confronted by "minority obstruction."

"Members of this body now face a choice," said Schumer, D-N.Y. "They can follow in the footsteps of our patriotic predecessors in this chamber. Or they can sit by as the fabric of our democracy unravels before our very eyes."

The Democrats' voting bill was first introduced in March in the wake of the Jan. 6 Capitol attack. It quickly passed the House at a time when Republican-controlled legislatures — many inspired by Donald Trump's false claims of a stolen 2020 election — were advancing restrictions in the name of election security that will make it harder to vote and could make the administration of the elections more subject to partisan interference.

Trump's claims of election fraud were widely rejected in the courts, by state officials who certified the results and by his own attorney general.

But initial optimism that the measure would swiftly pass the Senate dissipated after several members of the Democratic caucus, including King, Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona and Joe Manchin of West Virginia, among others, made clear their reluctance to change the filibuster rules. Manchin, who has said that any election overhaul needs bipartisan support, also sought changes to the voting bill to make it more palatable to Republicans.

As written, the current "compromise" version of the bill would establish national rules for running elections, limit partisanship in the drawing of congressional districts and force the disclosure of many anonymous donors who spend big to influence elections.

Other provisions are aimed at alleviating concerns from local elections officials, who worried that that original bill would have been too difficult to implement. And some new additions are aimed at insulating

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nonpartisan election officials, who may be subject to greater partisan pressure under some of the new state laws.

It also includes a number of changes sought by Manchin, the chamber's most conservative Democrat, including a provision that would limit, but not prohibit, state voter ID requirements.

But so far, those changes have not attracted the Republican support that Manchin was seeking.

"The latest umpteenth iteration (of the bill) is only a compromise in the sense that the left and the far-left argued among themselves about exactly how much power to grab and in which areas," McConnell, who recently met with Manchin about the bill, said Wednesday. "The same rotten core is all still there."

Hours later, Republicans denied Democrats the 60 votes needed to debate the measure on the Senate floor.

That gives Democrats few options and little time to act on a major party priority while their restive base has become increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress on the issue.

"Democracy — the very soul of America — is at stake," President Joe Biden said in a statement. "It should be simple and straightforward. Let there be a debate and let there be a vote."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki also hinted that Biden may be softening his opposition to filibuster changes.

"Are (Republicans) going to protect this fundamental right? Or are they going to continue to be obstreperous — to use a word the president has used in the past — and put Democrats in a position where there's no alternative but to find another path forward?" Psaki said Monday.

But Manchin and Sinema, whose votes would be required for any rule change, have said they remain opposed to changing the filibuster.

Meanwhile, pressure is building from the Democratic base for Biden and Senate Democrats to take greater action.

"They have failed to pass substantive legislation, and they are failing to act now," said Joseph Geeverghese, the executive director of Bernie Sanders-aligned group Our Revolution. "It needs to be made even more clear by the President that he is 100% on the side of the American people's most sacred right, and if that means fixing the filibuster then we must do it for the sake of our democracy."

White House details plans to vaccinate 28M children age 5-11

By ZEKE MILLER and LINDSEY TANNER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Children ages 5 to 11 will soon be able to get a COVID-19 shot at their pediatrician's office, local pharmacy and potentially even their school, the White House said Wednesday as it detailed plans for the expected authorization of the Pfizer shot for elementary school youngsters in a matter of weeks.

Federal regulators will meet over the next two weeks to weigh the safety and effectiveness of giving low-dose shots to the roughly 28 million children in that age group.

Within hours of formal approval, which is expected after the Food and Drug Administration signs off and a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advisory panel meets on Nov. 2-3, millions of doses will begin going out to providers across the country, along with the smaller needles needed for injecting young children.

Within days of that, the vaccine will be ready to go into arms on a wide scale.

"We're completing the operational planning to ensure vaccinations for kids ages 5 to 11 are available, easy and convenient," White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients said. "We're going to be ready, pending the FDA and CDC decision."

The Pfizer vaccine requires two doses three weeks apart and a two-week wait for full protection to kick in, meaning the first youngsters in line will be fully covered by Christmas.

Some parents can hardly wait.

Dr. Sterling Ransone said his rural Deltaville, Virginia, office is already getting calls from people asking for appointments for their children and saying, "I want my shot now."

"Judging by the number of calls, I think we're going to be slammed for the first several weeks," said

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Ransone, president of the American Academy of Family Physicians.

Justin Shady, a film and TV writer in Chicago, said his 6-year-old daughter, Grey, got nervous when he told her she would be getting the shots soon. But he is bribing her with a trip to Disney World, and "she's all in."

The family likes to travel, "we really just want to get back in the swing of seeing the world," Shady said. As for youngsters under 5, Pfizer and Moderna are studying their vaccines in children down to 6 months old, with results expected later in the year.

The Biden administration noted that the expansion of shots to children under 12 will not look like the start of the country's vaccine rollout 10 months ago, when limited doses and inadequate capacity meant a painstaking wait for many Americans.

The country now has ample supplies of the Pfizer shot to vaccinate the children who will soon be eligible, officials said, and they have been working for months to ensure widespread availability of shots. About 15 million doses will be shipped to providers across the U.S. in the first week after approval, the White House said.

More than 25,000 pediatricians and primary care providers have already signed on to dispense the vaccine to elementary school children, the White House said, in addition to the tens of thousands of drugstores that are already administering shots to adults.

Hundreds of school- and community-based clinics will also be funded and supported by the Federal Emergency Management Agency to help speed the process.

In addition to doctors' offices, schools are likely to be popular spots for the shots.

In Maryland, state officials have offered to help schools set up vaccination clinics. Denver's public schools plan to hold mass vaccination events for young children, along with smaller clinics offering shots during the school day and in the evenings. Chicago's public health department is working closely with schools, which have already been hosting vaccination events for students age 12 and older and their families.

The White House is also preparing a stepped-up campaign to educate parents and children about the safety of the shots and the ease of getting them. As has been the case for adult vaccinations, the administration believes trusted messengers — educators, doctors and community leaders — will be vital to encouraging vaccinations.

Dr. Lisa Reed, medical director for family medicine at MAHEC, a western North Carolina safety net provider that serves patients from rural Appalachia and more urban communities such as the tourist town of Asheville, said it is going to take effort to get some families on board.

Reed said she lives "in a community that has a lot of vaccine hesitancy, unfortunately."

"Some have lower health literacy or belong to ethnic groups that are more hesitant in general" because of a history of mistrust, she said. And Asheville, she said, has a sizeable population of well-educated adults who are longtime vaccine skeptics.

While children run a lower risk than older people of getting seriously ill from COVID-19, at least 637 people age 18 or under have died from the virus in the U.S., according to the CDC. Six million U.S. children been infected, 1 million of them since early September amid the spread of the more contagious delta variant, the American Academy of Pediatrics says.

Health officials believe that expanding the vaccine drive will not only curb the alarming number of infections in children but also reduce the spread of the virus to vulnerable adults. It could also help schools stay open and youngsters get back on track academically, and contribute to the nation's broader recovery from the pandemic.

"COVID has also disrupted our kids' lives. It's made school harder, it's disrupted their ability to see friends and family, it's made youth sports more challenging," U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy told NBC. "Getting our kids vaccinated, we have the prospect of protecting them, but also getting all of those activities back that are so important to our children."

Murthy said the administration, which is imposing vaccine mandates for millions of adults, is leaving it up to state and local officials to decide whether to require schoolchildren to get vaccinated. But he said such measures would be "a reasonable thing to consider."

"It's also consistent with what we've done for other childhood vaccines, like measles, mumps, polio," he said.

The U.S. has purchased 65 million doses of the Pfizer pediatric shot, which is expected to be one-third the dose given to adults and adolescents, according to officials. They will be shipped in smaller packages of about 100 doses each, so that more providers can deliver them, and they won't require the super-cold storage that the adult version did at first.

About 219 million Americans age 12 and up, or 66% of the total population, have received a COVID-19 shot, and nearly 190 million are fully vaccinated.

Tanner reported from Three Oaks, Michigan.

Jim Anderson contributed from Denver.

Nikolas Cruz pleads guilty to 2018 Parkland school massacre

By TERRY SPENCER Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. (AP) — Nikolas Cruz pleaded guilty Wednesday to murdering 17 people during a rampage at his former high school in Parkland, Florida, leaving a jury to decide whether he will be executed for one of the nation's deadliest school shootings.

Relatives of the victims who sat in the courtroom and watched the hearing via Zoom broke down in tears and held hands across families as Cruz entered his pleas and later apologized for his crimes.

"Today we saw a cold and calculating killer confess to the murder of my daughter Gina and 16 other innocent victims at their school," said Tony Montalto. His daughter was 14 and sitting outside her classroom when Cruz shot her at close range numerous times. "His guilty pleas are the first step in the judicial process but there is no change for my family. Our bright, beautiful, and beloved daughter Gina is gone while her killer still enjoys the blessing of life in prison."

The guilty pleas will set the stage for a penalty trial in which 12 jurors will determine whether Cruz, 23, should be sentenced to death or life in prison without parole. Given the case's notoriety, Circuit Judge Elizabeth Scherer plans to screen thousands of prospective jurors. Jury selection is scheduled to begin on Jan. 4.

Cruz entered his pleas after answering a long list of questions from Scherer aimed at confirming his mental competency. He was charged with 17 counts of murder and 17 counts of attempted first-degree murder for those wounded in the Feb. 14, 2018, attack at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, located just outside Fort Lauderdale.

As several parents shook their heads, Cruz apologized, saying, "I'm very sorry for what I did. ... I can't live with myself sometimes." He also added that he wished it was up to the survivors to determine whether he lived or died.

Parents scoffed at Cruz's statement as they left the courtroom, saying it seemed self-serving and aimed at eliciting unearned sympathy. Gena Hoyer, whose 15-year-old son Luke died in the shooting, saw it as part of a defense strategy "to keep a violent, evil person off death row."

She said her son was "a sweet young man who had a life ahead of him and the person you saw in there today chose to take his life. He does not deserve life in prison."

Anthony Borges, a former Stoneman Douglas student who was shot five times and severely wounded, told reporters after the hearing that he accepted Cruz's apology, but noted that it was not up to him to decide the confessed murderer's fate.

"He made a decision to shoot the school," Borges said. "I am not God to make the decision to kill him or not. That's not my decision. My decision is to be a better person and to change the world for every kid. I don't want this to happen to anybody again. It hurts. It hurts. It really hurts. So, I am just going to keep going. That's it."

Cruz's attorneys announced his intention to plead guilty during a hearing last week.

Following the pleas Wednesday, former Broward State Attorney Mike Satz recounted the details of the

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murders. Cruz killed 14 students and three staff members on Valentine's Day 2018 during a seven-minute rampage through a three-story building at Stoneman Douglas, investigators said. They said he shot victims in the hallways and in classrooms with an AR-15 semiautomatic rifle, sometimes returning to the wounded to kill them with additional shots. Cruz had been expelled from Stoneman Douglas a year earlier after a history of threatening, frightening, unusual and sometimes violent behavior that dated back to preschool.

After Satz finished, the judge had to compose herself for several seconds before she began speaking again, her voice breaking.

The shootings caused some Stoneman Douglas students to launch the March for Our Lives movement, which pushes for stronger gun restrictions nationally.

Since days after the shooting, Cruz's attorneys had offered to have him plead guilty in exchange for a life sentence, saying that would spare the community the emotional turmoil of reliving the attack at trial. But Satz rejected the offer, saying Cruz deserved a death sentence, and appointed himself lead prosecutor. Satz, 79, stepped down as state attorney in January after 44 years, but remains Cruz's chief prosecutor.

His successor, Harold Pryor, is opposed to the death penalty but has said he will follow the law. Like Satz, he never accepted the defense offer — as an elected official, that would have been difficult, even in liberal Broward County, where Democrats outnumber Republicans by more than 2 to 1.

By having Cruz plead guilty, his attorneys will be able to argue during the penalty hearing that he took responsibility for his actions.

As at any trial, prosecutors will present evidence of the shooting, including security video that reportedly shows many of the killings in graphic detail. They will also be allowed to show evidence that Cruz had long planned the attack and made threats through cellphone videos. There will be testimony from students and teachers who were in the building, including some who were wounded.

Prosecutors will also present testimony from the victims' parents and spouses to demonstrate the toll the deaths have had on families and the community.

The defense will then present mitigating evidence that will likely include testimony about Cruz's life, including his long history of mental and emotional instability, his father's death when he was 5 and his mother's death four months before the shootings, when he was 19.

To impose a death sentence, all 12 jurors must agree. If they do, Judge Scherer will make the final decision.

Fed survey finds economy facing supply chain, other drags

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve reports that the economy faced a number of headwinds at the start of this month, ranging from supply-chain disruptions and labor shortages to uncertainty about the delta variant of COVID.

In its latest survey of business conditions around the nation, the Fed said Wednesday that a majority of its 12 regions viewed consumer spending, the main driving force for the economy, as remaining positive despite the various speed bumps.

The report noted wide differences in performance, however. It noted that auto sales suffered because of constrained inventories due to problems obtaining critical semiconductor components. Manufacturing, meanwhile, was growing either moderately or robustly depending on which Fed district was reporting.

"Outlook for near-term economic activity remained positive, overall, but some districts noted increased uncertainty and more cautious optimism than in previous months," the Fed said in the report on business conditions nationwide, known as the beige book.

The report, based on surveys of business contacts by the Fed's 12 regional banks, will form the basis for discussion when central bank officials next meet on Nov. 2-3.

The Fed is widely expected to announce at that meeting that it will begin to reduce, or taper, its \$120 billion in monthly bond purchases starting either in November or December.

Those purchases have been designed to give the economy an extra boost by holding down long-term

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interest rates.

A move to trim the purchases is expected to be followed in the second half of next year with the first rate hikes. The Fed's benchmark interest rate has been an at ultra-low zero to 0.25% since the COVID pandemic struck with force in the spring of 2020 but there are growing calls it to begin removing its support in the face of rising price pressures this year.

The beige book found "significantly elevated" prices with widespread increases across industry sectors due in large part to supply-chain bottlenecks.

Prices for steel, electronic components and shipping costs all "rose markedly," during the survey period, the report said.

Expectations for future price increases varied, the Fed report said, with some business contacts expecting prices to remain high or even increase further, while others expected prices to moderate over the next 12 months.

Fed board member Randall Quarles said in a speech Wednesday that he believes elevated inflation will start to "decline considerably next year from its currently very elevated rate." That reflects his belief that the factors now disrupting the economy, such a supply bottlenecks, "appear likely to fade over time."

The beige book report noted that while the demand for labor was high, job gains had been dampened by a low supply of workers, forcing many retail, hospitality and manufacturing companies to cut hours or production because they did not have enough employees.

"Firms reported high turnover as workers left for other jobs or retired," the Fed report said. "Child-care issues and vaccine mandates were widely cited as contributing to the problem."

In an effort to deal with the labor shortages, the Fed said many companies were offering more training to prospective workers and also boosting wages.

In addition to higher starting wages and increased pay to retain workers, companies reported offering signing and retention bonuses, flexible work schedules or increased vacation time as other incentives, the Fed survey found.

The Fed's report was based on interviews conducted by the 12 regional banks on or before Oct. 8.

Russia hosts Afghan talks, calls for an inclusive government

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia hosted talks on Afghanistan on Wednesday involving senior representatives of the Taliban and neighboring nations, a round of diplomacy that underlined Moscow's clout in Central Asia.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov opened the talks and emphasized that "forming a really inclusive government fully reflecting the interests of not only all ethnic groups but all political forces of the country" is necessary to achieve a stable peace in Afghanistan, a nation of 39 million.

Russia had worked for years to establish contacts with the Taliban, even though it designated the group a terror organization in 2003 and never took it off the list. Any contact with such groups is punishable under Russian law, but the Foreign Ministry has responded to questions about the apparent contradiction by saying its exchanges with the Taliban are essential for helping stabilize Afghanistan.

Unlike many other countries, Russia hasn't evacuated its embassy in Kabul and its ambassador has maintained regular contacts with the Taliban since they took over the Afghan capital of Kabul in August.

Lavrov commended the Taliban for their efforts to stabilize the military-political situation in the country and ensure the operation of state structures.

"We are satisfied with the level of practical interaction with Afghan authorities, which allows to effectively ensure the security of Russian citizens in Afghanistan and the unimpeded operation of our embassy in Kabul," Lavrov said in his opening speech.

At the same time, he emphasized the importance of respecting human rights and pursuing balanced social policies, adding that he discussed those issues with the Taliban delegation before the talks.

Lavrov said Russia would soon dispatch a shipment of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan.

Zamir Kabulov, the Kremlin envoy on Afghanistan who also attended the talks, said the international rec-

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ognition of the Taliban will hinge on the inclusiveness of their government and their human rights record. "We expect the Taliban to meet ... the request of the international community about inclusivity and basic human rights, which include broadly all kinds of human rights, and they confirmed that they are working on that, the process of improvement of governance, the process of improving the human rights situation," Kabulov told reporters.

Abdul Salam Hanafi, a deputy prime minister in the Taliban's interim government who attended Wednesday's talks, said "the meeting is very important for stability of the entire region."

In a conclusive statement, the participants in the talks noted that "further practical engagement with Afghanistan needed to take into account the new reality, that is the Taliban coming to power in the country, irrespective of the official recognition of the new Afghan government by the international community."

"Participating countries call on the current Afghan leadership to take further steps to improve governance and to form a truly inclusive government that adequately reflects the interests of all major ethno-political forces in the country," they said, stressing the need for the Afghan leadership to "respect the rights of ethnic groups, women and children."

The talks' participants called for an international donor conference under the auspices of the United Nations, "with the understanding that the core burden of post-conflict ... reconstruction and development of Afghanistan must be shouldered by the powers which had military contingents in the country for the past 20 years."

The Soviet Union fought a 10-year war in Afghanistan that ended with its troops withdrawing in 1989. In recent years, Moscow has made a strong comeback as an influential power broker in international talks on Afghanistan, hosting the Taliban representatives and members of other factions for bilateral and multilateral meetings.

Along with the Taliban and other Afghan factions, the so-called Moscow format talks held since 2017 also include representatives of China, Pakistan, Iran, India and the former Soviet nations in Central Asia.

Wednesday's talks were preceded earlier this week by a meeting of top diplomats from Russia, China and Pakistan. The U.S., which is also part of that "troika plus" format, didn't attend the meeting.

In explaining its absence from the meeting, the U.S. said it supported the talks, but was unable to attend for "logistical" reasons. State Department spokesman Ned Price did not elaborate on those reasons but his comments came just hours before the U.S. special envoy for Afghanistan Zalmay Khalilzad resigned. The resignation was effective on Tuesday and his successor, Thomas West, was not prepared to join the Moscow meeting, officials said.

"The Troika Plus has been an effective, a constructive forum," Price said. "We look forward to engaging in that forum going forward, but we're not in a position to take part this week."

Kabulov, the Kremlin envoy, said West is expected to visit Moscow for talks next month.

Last week, Russian President Vladimir Putin noted there must be no rush in officially recognizing the Taliban as the new rulers of Afghanistan, but emphasized the need to engage in talks with them.

At the same time, Putin and other Russian officials stressed the threats posed by the Islamic State group and other militants based in northern Afghanistan, and noted that drug trafficking from Afghanistan will continue to present a challenge.

"Numerous terrorist groups, notably the Islamic State and al-Qaida are trying to take advantage of the instability in the country mounting bloody attacks," Lavrov said. "There is a real danger of terrorism and drugs spilling into the neighboring nations under the guise of migration."

Russia's top diplomat urged the Taliban "not to allow the territory of Afghanistan (to be) used against the interests of any third countries, primarily its neighbors, our friends and allies in Central Asia."

Russia has vowed to provide military assistance to its ex-Soviet allies in Central Asia to help counter the threats, and held joint drills in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, which neighbor Afghanistan. Another sweeping military exercise in Tajikistan involving 5,000 troops, more than 700 military vehicles and combat jets has started this week.

AP Diplomatic Writer Matthew Lee contributed to this report from Washington.

Russians to stay off work for a week as virus deaths rise

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday ordered most Russians to stay off work for a week starting later this month amid rising COVID-19 infections and deaths, and he strongly urged reluctant citizens to get vaccinated.

The government coronavirus task force reported 1,028 deaths in the past 24 hours, the highest number since the start of the pandemic. That brought Russia's death toll to 226,353, by far the highest in Europe.

Putin said he supports the Cabinet's proposal to introduce a nonworking period starting Oct. 30 and extending through the following week, when four of seven days are already non-working, including a two-day state holiday. In some regions where the situation is the most threatening, he said the nonworking period could start as early as Saturday and be extended past Nov. 7.

"Our task today is to protect life and health of our citizens and minimize the consequences of the dangerous infection," Putin said in a video call with top officials. "To achieve that, it's necessary to first of all slow the pace of contagion and mobilize additional reserves of the health care system, which is currently working under a high strain."

Russia's daily coronavirus mortality numbers have been surging for weeks and topped 1,000 for the first time over the weekend amid sluggish vaccination rates, lax public attitudes toward taking precautions and the government's reluctance to toughen restrictions. Only about 45 million Russians — roughly a third of its nearly 146 million people — are fully vaccinated.

The nonworking period should help limit the spread by keeping people out of offices and off crowded public transportation, but Moscow and many other cities haven't curbed access to restaurants, cafes, bars, theaters and gyms.

When the Cabinet proposed the measure Tuesday, many Russians rushed to book flights to Black Sea resorts to take advantage of the break.

Deputy Prime Minister Tatyana Golikova, who leads the task force, emphasized that the nonworking week should imply limiting access to restaurants, theaters and other entertainment venues, adding that regional authorities will be expected to impose restrictions.

She particularly urged Russians to refrain from traveling to other regions during the period and emphasized the need for relatives of those infected to stay home.

It wasn't immediately clear what private businesses would be required to stop working in line with Putin's decree, in addition to state workers and employees of state-owned companies. During a similar measure early in the pandemic, many private and state-owned companies in "vital" economic sectors were allowed to keep operating.

The Cabinet has drafted measures on compensation to businesses to help absorb the economic blow, including one-time payments equivalent to a minimum monthly pay per worker and low-interest credits.

In urging Russians to get the shots, Putin said "it's a matter of your life and security and the health of your dear ones."

"There are only two ways to get over this period — to get sick or to receive a vaccine," he said. "It's better to get the vaccine. Why wait for the illness and its grave consequences? Please be responsible and take the necessary measures to protect yourself, your health and your close ones."

The Russian leader, who got the domestically developed Sputnik V vaccine earlier this year, said he's puzzled by the vaccine hesitancy, even among his close friends, who told him they would get the shot after he does and then kept delaying it.

"I can't understand what's going on," Putin said. "We have a reliable and efficient vaccine. The vaccine really reduces the risks of illness, grave complications and death."

He approved a Cabinet proposal giving two days of paid leave to those getting the shot to help encourage vaccination.

Even though Russia in August 2020 became the first country in the world to authorize a coronavirus vac-

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cine and has plentiful supplies, there has been reluctance among its citizens to get the shots, a skepticism blamed on conflicting signals from authorities.

While extolling Sputnik V and three other domestic vaccines, state-controlled media often criticized Western-made shots, a message that many saw as feeding doubts about vaccines in general.

Golikova emphasized that most of those who have died recently were unvaccinated. She said 87% of hospital beds allocated for COVID-19 patients are filled, with the number reaching 95% in some provinces.

Rising infections forced some regional authorities to suspend certain medical services as health care facilities were focusing on coronavirus patients. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov admitted the situation is "very sad," noting that the level of vaccination in those regions was particularly low.

Putin warned regional leaders against trying to embellish statistics, saying a "high number of new infections doesn't mean poor work" by the authorities. "It shows the efficiency of regional teams, not the other way round," he said.

Until now, the Kremlin ruled out a nationwide lockdown like the one early in the pandemic that dealt a heavy blow to the economy and sapped Putin's popularity, instead empowering regional authorities to decide on local restrictions.

Many of Russia's 85 regions already have restricted attendance at large public events and introduced digital codes proving vaccination or past illness for access to restaurants, theaters and other venues. Some have made vaccinations compulsory for certain public servants and people over 60.

In Moscow, however, life has continued as usual, with restaurants and movie theaters brimming with people, crowds swarming nightclubs and karaoke bars, and commuters widely ignoring mask mandates on public transportation even as ICUs have filled.

Medical workers expressed bewilderment over the vaccine skepticism and lax attitude to precautions. "I think about sleepless nights when we get a huge number of patients who didn't even bother to use banal protective means," said Dr. Natavan Ibragimova of Moscow's Hospital No. 52, where an ICU was filled to capacity.

Moscow Mayor Sergei Sobyenin said unvaccinated people over 60 will be required to stay home. He also told businesses to keep at least a third of their employees working remotely for three months starting Oct. 25.

Dr. Catherine Smallwood, the COVID-19 incident manager at the World Health Organization's European branch, said vaccination levels at or below 30% in Russia and eastern European countries like Bulgaria and Romania were "particularly concerning."

"It's very clear that in countries that have lower vaccine uptake, that's where we're seeing the serious pandemic effects at the moment in terms of deaths and people ending up in hospital," she said.

The government task force has registered more than 8 million total infections and its official COVID-19 death toll ranks Russia as having the fifth-most pandemic deaths in the world, behind the United States, Brazil, India and Mexico.

However, state statistics agency Rosstat, which also counts deaths in which the virus wasn't considered the main cause, has reported a much higher death toll — about 418,000 as of August.

Associated Press writers Jamey Keaten in Geneva and Kostya Manenkov in Moscow contributed.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

WHO: Europe the only region with rise in COVID-19 last week

LONDON (AP) — The World Health Organization said there was a 7% rise in new coronavirus cases across Europe last week, the only region in the world where cases increased, and said uneven vaccine uptake posed a threat to the continent.

In its weekly assessment of the pandemic, the U.N. health agency said there were about 2.7 million new COVID-19 cases and more than 46,000 deaths last week worldwide, similar to the numbers reported the

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previous week.

WHO said the two regions with the highest rates of COVID-19 incidence were Europe and the Americas. Globally, the U.S. reported the biggest number of new cases, more than 580,000, which still represented a 11% decline.

Britain, Russia and Turkey accounted for the most cases in Europe.

The biggest drop in COVID-19 cases were seen in Africa and the Western Pacific, where infections fell by about 18% and 16%, respectively. The number of deaths in Africa also declined by about a quarter, despite the dire shortage of vaccines on the continent.

But for the third consecutive week, coronavirus cases have jumped in Europe, with about 1.3 million new cases. More than half of countries in the region reported a rise in their COVID-19 numbers, WHO said. Britain and Russia each reported about a 15% increase in new cases.

In a statement Wednesday, WHO's Europe office said 1 billion coronavirus vaccines have now been administered across the continent and described uneven vaccine uptake as "the region's biggest enemy in the fight against COVID-19."

In the past week, Russia has repeatedly broken new daily records for COVID-19 cases and the number of infections in the U.K. has surged to levels not seen since mid-July.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday backed a Cabinet proposal to keep Russian workers home for a week in an effort to stem the spread of the virus.

Russian officials have struggled to vaccinate the population but due to vaccine skepticism, only about 32% of people have been immunized despite the availability of its Sputnik V vaccine. It has by far the largest virus death toll in Europe, with more than 225,000 deaths.

Although the head of Britain's National Health Service has urged the government to introduce stricter COVID-19 protocols including mask-wearing and the faster vaccination of children, politicians have so far demurred.

Follow all AP stories on the coronavirus pandemic at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>.

UK encourages booster jabs, resists new virus restrictions

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Under pressure from rising infections and worried health experts, the British government on Wednesday urged millions of people to get booster vaccine shots but resisted calls to reimpose coronavirus restrictions such as mandatory mask-wearing.

Health Secretary Sajid Javid said the government would "stay vigilant, preparing for all eventualities," but would not trigger its "Plan B" of bringing back restrictions on daily life.

Britain is relying heavily on vaccines to keep the virus at bay during the fall and winter months. Almost 80% of people 12 and over in the U.K. have received two vaccine doses and millions are being offered a booster shot, including everyone over 50.

But critics say the booster campaign is moving more slowly than the virus. The U.K. recorded 49,139 new infections on Wednesday, by far the highest total in Europe, and cases are averaging more than 45,000 a day, up 17% from a week earlier. Hospitalizations and deaths are also rising, though both remain far lower than before vaccination was widespread.

Javid said cases "could go as high as 100,000 a day," but insisted it was not yet time to reverse course.

"None of us want to go backwards now," he said at a televised news conference, adding that the government did not think the health system was under "unsustainable" pressure.

But Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the health care group the NHS Confederation, said Britain's health service risked being overwhelmed unless more measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 were introduced.

"It is time for the government to enact Plan B of its strategy without delay, because without preemptive action, we risk stumbling into a winter crisis," he said.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Conservative government lifted domestic coronavirus restrictions

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in July, including mandatory face coverings and social distancing. Nightclubs and other crowded venues were allowed to open at full capacity and people were no longer advised to work from home.

Infections remained stubbornly high after the reopening and recently have begun to increase — especially among children, who largely remain unvaccinated.

Hospitalizations and deaths are gradually rising, with deaths averaging 136 a day over the past week. Britain has recorded more than 138,000 coronavirus deaths, the highest total in Europe after Russia.

Against that backdrop, some feel that Britons have been too quick to return to pre-pandemic behavior. Masks and social distancing have all but vanished in most settings in England, although Scotland and other parts of the U.K. remain more strict. Even in shops, where masks are recommended, and on the London transit network, where they are mandatory, adherence is patchy.

A plan to require proof of vaccination to attend nightclubs, concerts and other mass events in England was dropped amid opposition from lawmakers, though Scotland introduced a vaccine pass program this month.

Critics say the vaccination program — among the world's speediest earlier this year — is moving too slowly. More than 4 million people in Britain have had a booster, although about half of those eligible have yet to receive their shot.

The U.K. also waited longer than the U.S. and other European nations to vaccinate children from 12-15, and only about 15% in that age group in England have had a shot.

The government says it will act to boost vaccination rates, with a new ad campaign and more sites where kids can receive their shots.

"We've got plenty of vaccines and we just need people to come forward and play their part," Javid said.

He also said the government had bought two antiviral drugs to prevent coronavirus infections or lessen the severity of disease — one by Pfizer and the other by Merck Sharp & Dohme. Neither has yet been approved by Britain's medicines regulator, but Javid said he hoped they would be in use by the winter.

Javid renewed calls for people to wear masks in crowded places and keep their distance from others, although critics say such calls need to be backed by law.

The Unite union, which represents workers in areas including hospitality and transport, said "customers are becoming increasingly abusive" when asked to don masks.

"The government can no longer pretend that COVID-19 is not a risk, and needs to take immediate action to protect key workers and passengers," said the union's national officer for passenger transport, Bobby Morton.

"The reintroduction of mask-wearing must go hand-in-hand with the proper enforcement of such rules," he said.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Pig-to-human transplants come a step closer with new test

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Scientists temporarily attached a pig's kidney to a human body and watched it begin to work, a small step in the decades-long quest to one day use animal organs for life-saving transplants.

Pigs have been the most recent research focus to address the organ shortage, but among the hurdles: A sugar in pig cells, foreign to the human body, causes immediate organ rejection. The kidney for this experiment came from a gene-edited animal, engineered to eliminate that sugar and avoid an immune system attack.

Surgeons attached the pig kidney to a pair of large blood vessels outside the body of a deceased recipient so they could observe it for two days. The kidney did what it was supposed to do — filter waste and produce urine — and didn't trigger rejection.

"It had absolutely normal function," said Dr. Robert Montgomery, who led the surgical team last month at NYU Langone Health. "It didn't have this immediate rejection that we have worried about."

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This research is "a significant step," said Dr. Andrew Adams of the University of Minnesota Medical School, who was not part of the work. It will reassure patients, researchers and regulators "that we're moving in the right direction."

The dream of animal-to-human transplants — or xenotransplantation — goes back to the 17th century with stumbling attempts to use animal blood for transfusions. By the 20th century, surgeons were attempting transplants of organs from baboons into humans, notably Baby Fae, a dying infant, who lived 21 days with a baboon heart.

With no lasting success and much public uproar, scientists turned from primates to pigs, tinkering with their genes to bridge the species gap.

Pigs have advantages over monkeys and apes. They are produced for food, so using them for organs raises fewer ethical concerns. Pigs have large litters, short gestation periods and organs comparable to humans.

Pig heart valves also have been used successfully for decades in humans. The blood thinner heparin is derived from pig intestines. Pig skin grafts are used on burns and Chinese surgeons have used pig corneas to restore sight.

In the NYU case, researchers kept a deceased woman's body going on a ventilator after her family agreed to the experiment. The woman had wished to donate her organs, but they weren't suitable for traditional donation.

The family felt "there was a possibility that some good could come from this gift," Montgomery said.

Montgomery himself received a transplant three years ago, a human heart from a donor with hepatitis C because he was willing to take any organ. "I was one of those people lying in an ICU waiting and not knowing whether an organ was going to come in time," he said.

Several biotech companies are in the running to develop suitable pig organs for transplant to help ease the human organ shortage. More than 90,000 people in the U.S. are in line for a kidney transplant. Every day, 12 die while waiting.

The advance is a win for Revivicor, a subsidiary of United Therapeutics, the company that engineered the pig and its cousins, a herd of 100 raised in tightly controlled conditions at a facility in Iowa.

The pigs lack a gene that produces alpha-gal, the sugar that provokes an immediate attack from the human immune system.

In December, the Food and Drug Administration approved the gene alteration in the Revivicor pigs as safe for human food consumption and medicine.

But the FDA said developers would need to submit more paperwork before pig organs could be transplanted into living humans.

"This is an important step forward in realizing the promise of xenotransplantation, which will save thousands of lives each year in the not-too-distant future," said United Therapeutics CEO Martine Rothblatt in a statement.

Experts say tests on nonhuman primates and last month's experiment with a human body pave the way for the first experimental pig kidney or heart transplants in living people in the next several years.

Raising pigs to be organ donors feels wrong to some people, but it may grow more acceptable if concerns about animal welfare can be addressed, said Karen Maschke, a research scholar at the Hastings Center, who will help develop ethics and policy recommendations for the first clinical trials under a grant from the National Institutes of Health.

"The other issue is going to be: Should we be doing this just because we can?" Maschke said.

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Workers fed up with nights, weekends seek flexible schedules

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

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NEW YORK (AP) — After struggling to hire workers for its outlet store in Dallas, Balsam Hill finally opened on Sept. 1. But the very next day, the online purveyor of high-end artificial holiday trees was forced to close after four of its five workers quit.

The main gripe for three of them? Working on weekends. So they found jobs elsewhere with better hours. Balsam Hill reopened weeks later with nine workers, hiking the hourly pay by \$3 to \$18 per hour. But more importantly, it changed its approach: Instead of only focusing on the needs of the business, it's now closely working with each employee to tailor their schedules based on when they want to work.

"We're working against people who have the choice of wherever they want to work," said Kendra Gould, senior retail strategist at Balsam Hill. "Now, it's more about what do you need as an employee and how can we make you happy?"

Companies are confronting demands by hourly workers on terms that often used to be non-negotiable: scheduling. Taking a page from their white-collar peers who are restructuring their workdays to accommodate their lifestyles, hourly workers are similarly seeking flexibility in how — and when — they do their jobs. That means pushing back on weekend, late night or holiday shifts.

Job openings are plentiful, so workers can afford to be picky. There were 10.4 million job openings at the end of August and 11.1 million openings the month before, the highest on record since at least December 2000, when the government started recording that figure. At the same time, the Labor Department said that the number of people quitting their jobs jumped to 4.3 million in August from 4 million in July.

Among the new workers Balsam Hill hired was Rickey Haynes, 62, a pastor for a local Baptist church. He retired in July but still preaches in the community. He said he was looking for part-time work in retail, but didn't want to work Sundays because of his preaching. Balsam Hill was willing to work around his schedule.

"They were accommodating," he said. "If I could, I could work with them until I am done."

A recent study from ManpowerGroup revealed that nearly 40% of job candidates worldwide said schedule flexibility is one of their top three factors in career decisions.

The shifting mindset is showing up in data from job site platforms.

SnagAJob.com, an online marketplace for hourly workers, says the word "flexibility" now accounts for roughly 11% of the more than 7 million job postings on its site compared with 8% earlier in the year. But overnight shifts at restaurants have also increased significantly since January.

Instawork, a staffing marketplace that connects local businesses with skilled hourly workers, says the rate at which employers were able to fill weekend shifts dropped significantly from January through August compared with weekday shifts.

Such challenges are happening as companies struggle to hire holiday workers. Target Corp. said this month it will pay \$2 an hour more to employees who pick up shifts during peak days of the holiday season, including Saturday and Sunday, as well as on Christmas Eve or on the day after Christmas. That's on top of companies already dangling bonuses and loosening requirements for drug testing and educational minimums that have kept some people out of the workforce.

Sumir Meghani, co-founder and CEO and founder of Instawork, says such perks don't solve the root of the problem.

"It's about flexibility," said Meghani, noting that available shifts on Instawork have surged eightfold from right before the pandemic to August 2021. "It's about workers saying 'I don't want to work weekends' or 'I can't work Mondays, Tuesday and Wednesdays because I don't have child care or schools haven't reopened' or 'I am worried about COVID.'"

Meghani says hourly workers are asking how can they get the same work-life balance as their peers who can work remotely.

"The challenge is, if you are a bartender you have to work until 2 a.m.," he says.

Employers of such jobs are limited in what they can do given the nature of how they operate, especially with customers having grown accustomed to getting what they want when they want it.

Radial, which fills online orders for retailers like Dick's Sporting Goods and PetSmart, says it's working to align its schedules with candidate expectations at each location. Increasingly, it's accommodating popular

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shifts such as Monday through Friday only, or Saturday and Sunday only.

But Sabrina Wnorowski, Radial's vice president of human resources, says it's difficult to address everyone's needs given the unpredictable nature of spending during the holidays.

On the flipside, the working poor have long struggled with erratic work schedules, particularly in the food service and retail sectors, says Daniel Schneider, professor of public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government whose Shift Project focuses on inequality of low-income workers.

"The problem isn't new, and we've shown that the consequences for workers and their families are dire," said Schneider, noting day-to-day instability of work schedules is inextricably linked to job instability. That leads to high job turnover for workers, which in turn imposes costs on individuals and on firms.

During the pandemic, hourly workers were hit especially hard when non-essential businesses like department stores and restaurants were forced to close for a few months during the spring of 2020. Those who remained employed at essential businesses like grocery stores found themselves overworked under the crush of shoppers' purchases for basic items.

When demand for dining and shopping rebounded as more people got vaccinated this past spring, businesses couldn't hire workers fast enough. And many of the hourly employees found new jobs as they redefined their priorities. That contributed to a labor shortage, forcing employers to look for ways to make their jobs seem more attractive while also cutting back on hours of operation.

The National Restaurant Association says that 68% of the 4,000 operators it polled in a September survey say their restaurants reduced hours of operation on days it was open for business from June through August. The survey also found that 45% of the operators polled said they closed their restaurant on the days that it would normally be open during that time frame.

Donald Minerva is the owner of a restaurant called Scottadito Osteria Toscana in Brooklyn, New York. He says that right before the pandemic he had 16 workers who worked various shifts at his restaurant, which was open six days a week. Now, Minerva has 14 workers but a good chunk of them don't want to work double-shifts and so the restaurant is now open just five days a week with limited hours.

Minerva says 70% of his staff are from the pre-pandemic days and want to work 40 hours a week. But the new workers want more flexibility.

For Minerva, that means he has to spend more time working on their schedules and less time on priorities like coming up with new strategies to bring in customers.

"It's a juggle to find them, and a juggle to keep them," he said.

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Across Africa, major churches strongly oppose LGBTQ rights

By KWASI GYAMFI ASIEDU, CHINEDU ASADU, RODNEY MUHUMUZA and MOGOMOTSI MAGOME Associated Press

In Ghana, home to a diverse array of religions, leaders of major churches have united in denouncing homosexuality as a "perversion" and endorsing legislation that would, if enacted, impose some of the harshest anti-LGBTQ policies in Africa.

In Nigeria, the umbrella body for Christian churches depicts same-sex relationships as an evil meriting the lengthy prison sentences prescribed under existing law.

And in several African countries, bishops aligned with the worldwide United Methodist Church are preparing to join an in-the-works breakaway denomination so they can continue their practice of refusing to recognize same-sex marriage or ordain LGBTQ clergy.

In the United States, Western Europe and various other regions, some prominent Protestant churches have advocated for LGBTQ inclusion. With only a few exceptions, this hasn't happened in Africa, where Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian and Lutheran leaders are among those opposing such inclusion.

"The mainstream churches — all of them — they actually are totally against it," said Caroline Omolo, associate pastor at the Cosmopolitan Affirming Community in Nairobi, Kenya. It is a rare example of a

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church in Africa serving a predominantly LGBTQ congregation.

"They have always organized a group to maybe silence us or make the church disappear," Omolo said. "They don't want it to appear anywhere."

Ghana, generally considered more respectful of human rights than most African countries, now faces scrutiny due to a bill in Parliament that would impose prison sentences ranging from three to 10 years for people identifying as LGBTQ or supporting that community. The bill has been denounced by human rights activists even as Ghanaian religious leaders rally behind it.

"Their role in perpetuating queerphobia and transphobia is clear and it's very troubling and dangerous," said Abena Hutchful, a Ghanaian who identifies as queer and co-organized a recent protest against the bill in New York City.

"The bill's strongest supporters claim to be doing this in the name of religion," says Graeme Reid, director of Human Rights Watch's LGBT Rights Program. He called the measure "a case study in extreme cruelty."

The lawmakers proposing the bill said they consulted influential religious leaders while drafting it. Among those endorsing it are the Christian Council of Ghana, the Ghana Catholic Bishops' Conference and the country's chief imam.

"We don't accept murderers, why should we accept somebody who is doing sex in a sinful way?" Archbishop Philip Naameh, president of the bishops' conference, told The Associated Press. "If you take a stance which is against producing more children, it is a choice which is injurious to the existence of the Ghanaian state."

The Christian Council — whose members include Methodist, Lutheran, Presbyterian and Anglican churches — considers homosexuality "an act of perversion and abomination," according to its secretary general, the Rev. Dr. Cyril Fayose of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church.

"Homosexuality is not a human right and we reject it in all uncertain terms," he declared earlier this year.

In Africa's most populous country, the Christian Association of Nigeria has threatened to sanction any church that shows tolerance for same-sex relationships.

Such acceptance "will never happen," Methodist Bishop Stephen Adegbite, the association's director of national issues, told the AP.

Asked about Nigeria's law criminalizing same-sex relationships with sentences of up to 14 years in prison, Adegbite said there are no alternatives.

"The church can never be compromised," he declared.

Such comments dismay Nigerian LGBTQ activists such as Matthew Blaise, who told the AP of being manhandled by a Catholic priest distraught that Blaise wasn't heterosexual.

"The church has been awful when it comes to LGBTQ issues, instead of using love as a means of communicating," Blaise said.

In Nigeria's commercial capital, Lagos, Catholic Archbishop Alfred Adewale Martins told the AP that Catholic teaching "recognizes in the dignity of every human person." However, he said LGBTQ people who enter into same-sex relationships are leading "a disordered way of life" and should change their behavior.

Nigeria is home to one of the United Methodist bishops, John Wesley Yohanna, who says he plans to break away from the UMC and join the proposed Global Methodist Church. That new denomination, likely to be established next year, results from an alliance between Methodists in the United States and abroad who don't support the LGBT-inclusive policies favored by many Methodists in the U.S.

Bishops Samuel J. Quire Jr. of Liberia and Owan Tshibang Kasap of the UMC's Southern Congo district also have indicated they would join the breakaway.

The Rev. Keith Boyette, a Methodist elder from the United States who chairs the Global Methodist initiative, said the African bishops' views reflect societal and cultural attitudes widely shared across the continent.

"Same-sex orientation is viewed negatively," he said. "That's true whether a person is from a Christian denomination, or Muslim or from a more indigenous religion."

In Uganda, where many LGBTQ people remain closeted for fear of violence and arrests, there is a retired Anglican bishop who in 2006 was barred from presiding over church events because he voiced empathy with gays.

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In decades of ministering to embattled LGBTQ people, Christopher Senyonjo said he learned that sexuality "is a deep, important part of who we are. We should be free to let people be who they are."

"Ignorance is a big problem in all this," Senyonjo told the AP. "When there is ignorance, there is a lot of suffering."

In 2014, Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni signed a harsh anti-gay law that, in its original version, prescribed the death penalty for some homosexual acts. Later that year, amid intense international pressure, a judicial panel annulled the legislation on a technicality.

However, a colonial-era law criminalizing sex acts "against the order of nature" remains in place.

Frank Mugisha, a prominent gay activist in Uganda, described church leaders as "the key drivers of homophobia in Africa." Some Anglican leaders, he said, have deepened their hostility toward LGBTQ people in a bid to not lose followers to aggressively anti-LGBTQ Pentecostal churches.

In all of Africa, only one nation — South Africa — has legalized same-sex marriage. Even there, gay and lesbian couples often struggle to be accepted by churches, let alone have their marriages solemnized by clergy.

"People tell me, 'I grew up in this church, but now I am not accepted,'" said Nokuthula Dhladhla, a pastor with the Global Interfaith Network, which advocates for LGBTQ rights within the religious sector.

She said some religious leaders are privately supportive of same-sex marriage, but reluctant to do so openly for fear of being sidelined by their more conservative peers.

South Africa's Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu, world-renowned for his opposition to apartheid, has been an outspoken supporter of LGBTQ rights.

"I would not worship a God who is homophobic," he once said. "I would refuse to go to a homophobic heaven. No, I would say 'Sorry, I would much rather go to the other place.'"

Caroline Omolo, the activist pastor in Nairobi, said some Kenyan religious leaders blame LGBTQ people for the coronavirus pandemic.

"When we say we are still serving God, they don't see something that's possible," she said. "They think it's something unfamiliar and should be stopped."

However, she said some faculty and students at Kenya's theological schools support her LGBTQ church, which has about 300 members.

"The students, we call them the future generation, leaders of tomorrow," she said. "When we have that population on our side, I believe there's nothing that can shake us."

Asiedu reported from New York, Asadu from Lagos, Nigeria; Muhumuza from Kampala, Uganda; and Magome from Johannesburg, South Africa. Associated Press writers Cara Anna in Nairobi, Kenya, and David Crary in New York contributed.

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Tiny wrists in cuffs: How police use force against children

By HELEN WIEFFERING, COLLEEN LONG and CAMILLE FASSETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Royal Smart remembers every detail: the feeling of the handcuffs on his wrists. The panic as he was led outside into the cold March darkness, arms raised, to face a wall of police officers pointing their guns.

He was 8 years old.

Neither he nor anyone else at his family's home on Chicago's South Side was arrested on that night two years ago, and police wielding a warrant to look for illegal weapons found none. But even now, in nightmares and in waking moments, he is tormented by visions of officers bursting through houses and tearing rooms apart, ordering people to lie down on the floor.

"I can't go to sleep," he said. "I keep thinking about the police coming."

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Children like Royal were not the focus after George Floyd died at the hands of police in 2020, prompting a raging debate on the disproportionate use of force by law enforcement, especially on adults of color. Kids are still an afterthought in reforms championed by lawmakers and pushed by police departments. But in case after case, an Associated Press investigation has found that children as young as 6 have been treated harshly — even brutally — by officers of the law.

They've been handcuffed, felled by stun guns, taken down and pinned to the ground by officers often far larger than they were. Departments nationwide have few or no guardrails to prevent such incidents.

The AP analyzed data on approximately 3,000 instances of police use of force against children under 16 over the past 11 years. The data, provided to the AP by Accountable Now, a project of The Leadership Conference Education Fund aiming to create a comprehensive use-of-force database, includes incidents from 25 police departments in 17 states.

It's a small representation of the 18,000 overall police agencies nationwide and the millions of daily encounters police have with the public.

But the information gleaned is troubling.

Black children made up more than 50% of those who were handled forcibly, though they are only 15% of the U.S. child population. They and other minority kids are often perceived by police as being older than they are. The most common types of force were takedowns, strikes and muscling, followed by firearms pointed at or used on children. Less often, children faced other tactics, like the use of pepper spray or police K-9s.

In Minneapolis, officers pinned children with their bodyweight at least 190 times. In Indianapolis, more than 160 kids were handcuffed; in Wichita, Kansas, police officers drew or used their Tasers on kids at least 45 times. Most children in the dataset are teenagers, but the data included dozens of cases of children ages 10 or younger who were also subject to police force.

Force is occasionally necessary to subdue children, some of whom are accused of serious crimes.

Police reports obtained for a sample of incidents show that some kids who were stunned or restrained were armed; others were undergoing mental health crises and were at risk of harming themselves. Still other reports showed police force escalating after kids fled from police questioning. In St. Petersburg, Florida, for instance, officers chased a Black boy on suspicion of attempted car theft after he pulled the handle of a car door. He was 13 years old and 80 pounds (36 kilograms), and his flight ended with his thigh caught in a police K-9's jaw.

The AP contacted every police department detailed in this story. Some did not respond; others said they could not comment because of pending litigation. Those responding defended the conduct of their officers or noted changes to the departments after the incidents took place.

There are no laws that specifically prohibit police force against children. Some departments have policies that govern how old a child must be to be handcuffed, but very few mention age in their use-of-force policies. While some offer guidance on how to manage juveniles accused of crime or how to handle people in mental distress, the AP could find no policy that addresses these issues together.

That's by design, policing experts said, in part so that officers can make critical decisions in the moment. But that means police don't receive the training they need to deal with kids.

"Adolescents are just so fundamentally different in so many respects, and the techniques that officers are accustomed to using ... it just doesn't lend itself to the interaction going well with youth," said Dylan Jackson, a criminologist at Johns Hopkins University, who is working with the Baltimore Police Department on juvenile encounters.

The trauma lasts. Kids can't sleep. They withdraw, act out. Their brains are still developing, and the encounters can have long-term impact, psychologists said.

"I think that when officers understand the basic core components of development and youth development — their social, emotional, physical, psychological development — it can really help them understand why they might need to take a different approach," Jackson said.

Training offered by the National Association of School Resource Officers includes sessions on the ado-

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lescent brain to help officers understand why kids react and respond the way they do, executive director Mo Canady said. But not every department makes use of the training.

Canady and other policing experts cautioned against blanket policies that would bar force against younger children.

"You can't say just because a student is 12 that we're not going to use force," Canady said. "Most 12-year-olds you wouldn't. But you don't know the circumstances of everything. You could have a 12-year-old who is bigger, stronger and assaulting a teacher, and you may very well have to use some level of force."

Royal, the boy in Chicago, was handcuffed for nearly 30 minutes in the cold, alongside his mother and other adults in the house. Then a police sergeant released him, and an aunt came to look after the children.

Royal's brother Roy, older by one year, stood by watching, not knowing what to say or do. According to a lawsuit filed by the family, police didn't handcuff him because "officers simply ran out of handcuffs." Roy thought his brother was cuffed first because he looked "intimidating": He was wearing a blue hoodie.

That spring, in another pocket of the South Side, Krystal Archie's three children were there when police — on two occasions just 11 weeks apart — kicked open her front door and tore apart the cabinets and dressers searching for drug suspects. She'd never heard of the people they were hunting.

Her oldest child, Savannah, was 14, Telia was 11 and her youngest, Jhaimarion, was 7. They were ordered to get down on the floor. Telia said the scariest moment was seeing an officer press his foot into Savannah's back.

Archie said her children "were told, demanded, to get down on the ground as if they were criminals."

"They were questioned as if they were adults," she said.

Now Savannah's hands shake when she sees a police car coming. "I get stuck. I get scared," she said.

Both families have sued Chicago police, alleging false arrest, wanton conduct and emotional distress. Chicago police did not comment on their specific cases but said revised policies passed in May require extra planning for vulnerable people like children before search warrants are served.

But the attorney for the two families, Al Hofeld Jr., said the incidents are part of a pattern and represent a specific brand of force that falls disproportionately on poor families of color.

"The number of cases that we have is just the tip of the iceberg," he said.

About 165 miles (265 kilometers) due south, in the rural hamlet of Paris, Illinois, 15-year-old Skyler Davis was riding his bike near his house when he ran afoul of a local ordinance that prohibited biking and skateboarding in the business district — a law that was rarely enforced, if ever.

But on that day, according to Skyler's father, Aaron Davis, police officers followed his mentally disabled son in their squad car and chased his bike up over a curb and across the grass.

Officers pursued Skyler into his house and threw him to the floor, handcuffing him and slamming him against a wall, his father said. Davis arrived to see police pulling Skyler — 5 feet (1.5 meters) tall and barely 80 pounds (36 kilograms), with a "pure look of terror" on his face — toward the squad car.

"He's just a happy kid, riding his bike down the road," Davis said, "And 30 to 45 seconds later, you see him basically pedaling for his life."

Video of the pursuit was captured by surveillance cameras outside the police department, and the family has filed a federal lawsuit against the police officers. Two officers received written warnings, according to attorney Jude Redwood. The Paris Police Department declined to comment.

"What they done to him was brutal," Davis said.

Kristin Henning, director of the Juvenile Justice Clinic at Georgetown University's law school, has represented children accused of delinquency for more than 20 years and said many encounters escalate "from zero to 100" in seconds — often because police interpret impulsive adolescent behavior as a threat.

"When you are close to the kids, you work with the kids every day, you see that they are just kids, and they're doing what every other kid does," she said. "Talking back, being themselves, experimenting, expressing their discomfort, expressing their displeasure about something — that's what kids do."

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Meanwhile, attorneys like Na'Shaun Neal say police who use force on minors often depend on the perception that kids lie. Against an officer's word, Neal said, "no one typically believes the children."

Neal represents two boys — identified as R.R. and P.S. in court papers — who were involved in an altercation with police on July 4, 2019.

It was a few hours before midnight when a San Fernando, California, police officer stopped to ask if they were lighting fireworks, according to a complaint filed in federal court. The boys had been walking through a park, accompanied by an older brother and his dog.

According to the complaint, the officers followed the group and told them it was past curfew; they needed to take the boys into custody.

Police said the boys were responsible for the fracas that followed, and they charged them with assaulting an officer and resisting arrest.

But then a cellphone video, taken by R.R.'s brother Jonathan Valdivia, materialized. And as was the case in the death of Floyd — who was blamed for his own death until a video showed Minneapolis officer Derek Chauvin pinning him to the ground with his knee to Floyd's neck as Floyd cried out for help — Valdivia's video told a very different story.

The video shows an officer forcing his 14-year-old brother to the ground and handcuffing him behind his back. His 13-year-old friend struggles next to him, his neck and shoulders pinned by the officer's knees for 20 seconds.

"Get off of my neck! That's too hard!" the 13-year-old screams.

A judge found the boys not guilty at a bench trial. Neal is suing the city and the police officer on their behalf.

The city of San Fernando has denied that officers used excessive force, maintaining that the boys physically resisted arrest.

"They were very confrontational and aggressive verbally," the city's attorney Dan Alderman said. "Unfortunately, the escalation occurred because of the conduct of the minors, not because of anything the officer did."

It is worth noting that R.R. and P.S. are Latinos. Authorities say there are reasons why police officers are more likely to use force against minorities than against white children.

A 2014 study published by the American Psychological Association found that Black boys as young as 10 may not be viewed with the same "childhood innocence" as their white peers and are more likely to be perceived as guilty and face police violence. Other studies have found a similar bias against Black girls.

Tamika Harrell's 13-year-old daughter went to a skating rink with a friend in their mostly white town outside Akron, Ohio, last summer; she was one of only a few Black teens at the crowded, mostly white rink. After a fight broke out, the girl — who was in the bathroom when the brawl began — was grabbed by an officer, roughly handcuffed and thrown into the back of a police car.

Harrell wondered why her kid — the Black kid — was singled out. Before, they had a good relationship with the police. But that's all changed. The incident is still raw. Her daughter won't go out anymore and is having trouble concentrating. The family has filed a lawsuit; the police chief there said he can't comment on pending litigation.

Dr. Richard Dudley, a child psychiatrist in New York, said many officers have implicit bias that would prompt them to see Black children as older, and therefore more threatening, than they are. For instance, police are more likely to think that a Black child's phone is a gun, he said.

It all becomes a vicious cycle, Dudley said. Police react badly to these kids, and to the people they know, so kids react badly to police, leading them to react badly to kids.

Minority children have negative everyday dealings with police and are traumatized by them. "Whatever they've seen police officers do in the past," Dudley said, "all of that is the backdrop for their encounter with a police officer."

So when that encounter occurs, they may be overreactive and hypervigilant, and it may appear that

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they're not complying with police commands when, really, they're just very scared.

The police are not thinking, "I have this panicked, frightened kid that I need to calm down," Dudley said.

To Dudley and to Jackson, the Johns Hopkins criminologist, de-escalation training for police isn't enough. It must include elements of implicit bias and of mental health, and it must be integrated into an officer's everyday work.

Jackson said he's been working very closely with Black kids in Baltimore, and the first thing he hears often is that they can't go talk to an officer unless that officer is in plainclothes.

"There is a visceral reaction," he said. "And that's trauma. And some of these kids, even if they haven't been stopped over and over again, it's embedded in the fabric of what America has been for a really long time, and they know what that uniform represents in their community."

Some of the cases have prompted changes. In the District of Columbia, for example, police officers now do not handcuff children under 13, except when the children are a danger to themselves or others.

The policy was revamped in 2020 after incidents in which two children were arrested: When a 10-year-old was held in a suspected robbery, authorities said that police had correctly followed protocol in handcuffing the child, but then a few weeks later police handcuffed a 9-year-old who had committed no crime.

Age-specific force policies are rare, according to Lisa Thureau, who founded the group Strategies for Youth to train police departments to more safely interact with kids. She said at least 20 states have no policies setting the minimum age of arrest.

Without explicit policies, "the default assumption of an officer is, quite reasonably, that they should treat all youth like adults," Thureau said.

The Cincinnati Police Department also changed its use-of-force policy after an officer zapped an 11-year-old Black girl with a stun gun for shoplifting. The department's policy allowed police to shock kids as young as 7 but changed in 2019 to discourage the use of such weapons on young children.

Attorney Al Gerhardstein, who represented the girl and helped petition for policy change, said the pattern of force he found against kids of color in the city raised alarm bells for him. Records he obtained and shared with the AP show that Cincinnati police used stun guns against 48 kids age 15 or younger from 2013 to 2018. All but two of those children were Black.

But in most departments, there is little discussion around children and policing and few options available to parents aside from a lawsuit. If a settlement is reached, it's often paid by the city instead of by the officers involved.

In Aurora, Colorado, for example, a video of police handcuffing Black children went viral. The video showed the girls, ages 6, 12, 14 and 17, face down in a parking lot. The youngest wore a pink crown and sobbed for her mother. Another begged the police, "Can I hug my sister next to me?"

Police said they couldn't get cuffs on the youngest because her hands were too small.

Their mother, Brittney Gilliam, was taking them to the nail salon. She was stopped by police because they believed she was driving a stolen car. She was not; she had Colorado plates and a blue SUV. The stolen car had Montana plates.

Officials said the officers had made mistakes, but they remained on duty. The officers did not face any criminal charges, and there have been no significant changes to their policies when it comes to children.

The family has since filed a lawsuit.

The family of X'Zane Watts also filed a lawsuit in Charleston, West Virginia, after a 2017 incident that began when police mistakenly suspected the eighth grader of a burglary.

X'Zane said he was playing in an alley near his home with his 2-year-old cousin when three white men in plainclothes got out of their car and started running toward them with weapons drawn, shouting obscenities. They chased him into his house and put a gun to his head, slamming him to the ground.

His mother, Charissa Watts, saw it happen from the kitchen. She didn't know they were police. Neither did X'Zane.

"The wrong flinch, they could have shot him," she said. "The wrong words out of my mouth, they could

have shot me.”

In the years since, Charleston ushered in a new mayor and a new police chief. They pointed to changes they’ve made: banning some weapons and chokeholds, requiring body cameras and offering more mental health and de-escalation training.

“Since I became chief of police, we have worked to review policies and provide our officers with the tools they need to keep all our residents and visitors safe — but together we can always do more,” Chief Tyke Hunt said.

The Watts family sued, charging that officers profiled X’Zane. They reached a settlement in 2019.

The year after the incident was difficult, X’Zane said. His elbow, injured in the altercation, kept him from playing football; he was angry and distracted. The family moved across town to escape the memories of that day.

Today, X’Zane is doing much better. He hopes to join the U.S. Air Force. And he’s been able to put the incident behind him — to a point.

“It has put a longtime fear in me,” he said.

Email AP’s Global Investigations Team at investigative@ap.org or <https://www.ap.org/tips/>. See other work at <https://www.apnews.com/hub/ap-investigations>.

Wieffering is a Roy W. Howard Investigative Fellow.

Camille Fassett is a corps member for the Associated Press/Report for America Data Initiative. Report for America is a nonprofit national service program that places journalists in local newsrooms to report on undercovered issues.

Flooding in Venice worsens off-season amid climate change

By COLLEEN BARRY Associated Press

VENICE, Italy (AP) — After Venice suffered the second-worst flood in its history in November 2019, it was inundated with four more exceptional tides within six weeks, shocking Venetians and triggering fears about the worsening impact of climate change.

The repeated invasion of brackish lagoon water into St. Mark’s Basilica this summer is a quiet reminder that the threat hasn’t receded.

“I can only say that in August, a month when this never used to happen, we had tides over a meter five times. I am talking about the month of August, when we are quiet,” St. Mark’s chief caretaker, Carlo Alberto Tesserin, told The Associated Press.

Venice’s unique topography, built on log piles among canals, has made it particularly vulnerable to climate change. Rising sea levels are increasing the frequency of high tides that inundate the 1,600-year-old Italian lagoon city, which is also gradually sinking.

It is the fate of coastal cities like Venice that will be on the minds of climate scientists and global leaders meeting in Glasgow, Scotland, at a U.N. climate conference that begins Oct. 31.

Venice’s worse-case scenario for sea level rise by the end of the century is a startling 120 centimeters (3 feet, 11 inches), according to a new study published by the European Geosciences Union. That is 50% higher than the worse-case global sea-rise average of 80 centimeters (2 feet, 7 1/2 inches) forecast by the U.N. science panel.

The city’s interplay of canals and architecture, of natural habitat and human ingenuity, also has earned it recognition as a UNESCO World Heritage site for its outstanding universal value, a designation put at risk of late because of the impact of over-tourism and cruise ship traffic. It escaped the endangered list after Italy banned cruise ships from passing through St. Mark’s Basin, but alarm bells are still ringing.

Sitting at Venice’s lowest spot, St. Mark’s Basilica offers a unique position to monitor the impact of rising seas on the city. The piazza outside floods at 80 centimeters (around 30 inches), and water passes the

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narthex into the church at 88 centimeters (34.5 inches), which has been reinforced up from a previous 65 centimeters (25.5 inches).

"Conditions are continuing to worsen since the flooding of November 2019. We therefore have the certainty that in these months, flooding is no longer an occasional phenomenon. It is an everyday occurrence," said Tesserin, whose honorific, First Procurator of St. Mark's, dates back to the ninth century.

In the last two decades, there have been nearly as many inundations in Venice over 1.1 meters — the official level for "acqua alta," or "high water," provoked by tides, winds and lunar cycles — as during the previous 100 years: 163 vs. 166, according to city data.

Exceptional floods over 140 centimeters (4 feet, 7 inches) also are accelerating. That mark has been hit 25 times since Venice starting keeping such records in 1872. Two-thirds of those have been registered in the last 20 years, with five, or one-fifth of the total, from Nov. 12-Dec. 23, 2019.

"What is happening now is on the continuum for Venetians, who have always lived with periodic flooding," said Jane Da Mosto, executive director of We Are Here Venice. "We are living with flooding that has become increasingly frequent, so my concern is that people haven't really realized we are in a climate crisis. We are already living it now. It is not a question of plans to deal with it in the future. We need to have solutions ready for today."

Venice's defense has been entrusted to the Moses system of moveable underwater barriers, a project costing around 6 billion euros (nearly \$7 billion) and which, after decades of cost overruns, delays and a bribery scandal, is still officially in the testing phase.

Following the devastation of the 2019 floods, the Rome government put the project under ministry control to speed its completion, and last year start activating the barriers when floods of 1.3 meters (4 feet, 3 inches) are imminent.

The barriers have been raised 20 times since October 2020, sparing the city a season of serious flooding but not from the lower-level tides that are becoming more frequent.

The extraordinary commissioner, Elisabetta Spitz, stands by the soundness of the undersea barriers, despite concerns by scientists and experts that their usefulness may be outstripped within decades because of climate change. The project has been delayed yet again, until 2023, with another 500 million euros (\$580 million) in spending, for "improvements" that Spitz said will ensure its long-term efficiency.

"We can say that the effective life of the Moses is 100 years, taking into account the necessary maintenance and interventions that will be implemented," Spitz said.

Paolo Vielmo, an engineer who has written expert reports on the project, points out that the sea level rise was projected at 22 centimeters (8 1/2 inches) when the Moses was first proposed more than 30 years ago, far below the U.N. scientists' current worst-case scenario of 80 centimeters.

"That puts the Moses out of contention," he said.

According to current plans, the Moses barriers won't be raised for floods of 1.1 meters (3 feet, 7 inches) until the project receives final approval. That leaves St. Mark's exposed.

Tesserin is overseeing work to protect the Basilica by installing a glass wall around its base, which eventually will protect marshy lagoon water from seeping inside, where it deposits salt that eats away at marble columns, wall cladding and stone mosaics. The project, which continues to be interrupted by high tides, was supposed to be finished by Christmas. Now Tesserin says they will be lucky to have it finished by Easter.

Regular high tides elicit a blasé response from Venetians, who are accustomed to lugging around rubber boots at every flood warning, and delight from tourists, fascinated by the sight of St. Mark's golden mosaics and domes reflected in rising waters. But businesses along St. Mark's Square increasingly see themselves at ground zero of the climate crisis.

"We need to help this city. It was a light for the world, but now it needs the whole world to understand it," said Annapaola Lavena, speaking from behind metal barriers that kept waters reaching 1.05 meters (3 feet, 5 inches) from invading her marble-floored cafe.

"The acqua alta is getting worse, and it completely blocks business. Venice lives thanks to its artisans and tourism. If there is no more tourism, Venice dies," she explained. "We have a great responsibility in trying to save it, but we are suffering a lot."

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Oct. 21, the 294th day of 2021. There are 71 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Oct. 21, 1966, 144 people, 116 of them children, were killed when a coal waste landslide engulfed a school and some 20 houses in Aberfan, Wales.

On this date:

In 1797, the U.S. Navy frigate Constitution, also known as "Old Ironsides," was christened in Boston's harbor.

In 1805, a British fleet commanded by Adm. Horatio Nelson defeated a French-Spanish fleet in the Battle of Trafalgar; Nelson, however, was killed.

In 1879, Thomas Edison perfected a workable electric light at his laboratory in Menlo Park, N.J.

In 1944, during World War II, U.S. troops captured the German city of Aachen (AH'-kuhn).

In 1945, women in France were allowed to vote in parliamentary elections for the first time.

In 1967, the Israeli destroyer INS Eilat (ay-LAH'T') was sunk by Egyptian missile boats near Port Said (sah-EED'); 47 Israeli crew members were lost. Tens of thousands of Vietnam War protesters began two days of demonstrations in Washington, D.C.

In 1969, beat poet and author Jack Kerouac died in St. Petersburg, Fla., at age 47.

In 1971, President Richard Nixon nominated Lewis F. Powell and William H. Rehnquist to the U.S. Supreme Court. (Both nominees were confirmed.)

In 2001, Washington, D.C., postal worker Thomas L. Morris Jr. died of inhalation anthrax as officials began testing thousands of postal employees.

In 2012, former senator and 1972 Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern, 90, died in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

In 2014, North Korea abruptly freed Jeffrey Fowle, an American, nearly six months after he was arrested for leaving a Bible in a nightclub. Former Washington Post executive editor Ben Bradlee, 93, died in Washington.

In 2015, Vice President Joe Biden announced he would not be a candidate in the 2016 White House campaign, solidifying Hillary Rodham Clinton's status as the Democratic front-runner.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama declared that America's long and deeply unpopular war in Iraq would be over by the end of 2011 and that all U.S. troops "will definitely be home for the holidays."

Five years ago: Cyberattacks on server farms of a key internet firm repeatedly disrupted access to major websites and online services including Twitter, Netflix and PayPal across the United States.

One year ago: Republican Sen. Mitt Romney of Utah, the party's 2012 presidential nominee, told CNN that he had voted in the Nov. 3 election, but not for Donald Trump. Former President Barack Obama made his first in-person campaign pitch for Joe Biden, urging voters in Philadelphia, especially Black men, not to sit out the election and risk seeing Trump reelected. Spain became the first western European country to reach more than 1 million confirmed coronavirus cases. The Justice Department said drugmaker Purdue Pharma, the company behind the powerful prescription painkiller OxyContin that experts said had helped touch off an opioid epidemic, would plead guilty to federal criminal charges as part of a settlement of more than \$8 billion. At least 10 bodies were found in an unmarked mass grave in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where investigators were searching for the remains of victims of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Joyce Randolph is 97. Rock singer Manfred Mann is 81. Musician Steve Cropper (Booker T. & the MG's) is 80. Singer Elvin Bishop is 79. TV's Judge Judy Sheindlin is 79. Actor Everett McGill is 76. Musician Lee Loughnane (LAHK'-nayn) (Chicago) is 75. Actor Dick Christie is 73. Former Israeli Prime

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Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is 72. Actor LaTanya Richardson Jackson is 72. Musician Charlotte Caffey (The Go-Go's) is 68. Movie director Catherine Hardwicke is 66. Singer Julian Cope is 64. Rock musician Steve Lukather (Toto) is 64. Actor Ken Watanabe (wah-tah-NAH'-bee) is 62. Actor Melora Walters is 61. Rock singer-musician Nick Oliveri (Mondo Generator) is 50. Christian rock musician Charlie Lowell (Jars of Clay) is 48. Actor Jeremy Miller is 45. Country singer Matthew Ramsey (Old Dominion) is 44. Actor Will Estes is 43. Actor Michael McMillian is 43. Reality TV star Kim Kardashian (kahr-DASH'-ee-uhn) West is 41. Actor Matt Dallas is 39. Actor Charlotte Sullivan is 38. Actor Aaron Tveit (tuh-VAYT') is 38. Actor Glenn Powell is 33. Country singer Kane Brown is 28.