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UpComing Events

Wednesday, Dec. 1

8:30 a.m. to Noon: ACT Practice Test

Thursday, Dec. 2

LifeTouch Pictures Retake at Elementary, 8 a.m. to 11 a.m.

8:30 a.m. to Noon: ACT Practice Test

JH GBB at Northwestern (7th at 6:30 p.m. followed by 8th)

Friday, Dec. 3

State Oral Interp at Huron

8:30 a.m. to Noon: ACT Practice Test

Saturday, Dec. 4

State Oral Interp at Huron

10 a.m.: JH GBB Jamboree in Groton

10 a.m.: Wrestling Invite at Clark-Willow Lake



Monday, Dec. 6

4 p.m.: School Board planning/work session
JH GBB hosts Langford. 7th at 6 p.m. with 8th to follow

Tuesday, Dec. 7

GBB hosts Flandreau Indian. Varsity only at 6 p.m.
JHGBB at Tiospa Zina (7th at 4 p.m. with 8th to follow)

Thursday, Dec. 9

7 p.m.: MS/HS Christmas Concert

Friday, Dec. 10

GBB hosts Britton-Hecla. JV at 6 p.m. with Varsity to follow

Saturday, Dec. 11

8 a.m. to Noon: ACT testing at GHS

10 a.m.: Wrestling Tourney at LaMoure

Boys Basketball at Britton-Hecla. JV at 1:30 p.m. followed by varsity game.

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

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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- 4 Filet Mignon Burgers (5.3 oz.)
- 4 Boneless Chicken Breasts (1 lb. pkg.)
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- 4 Individual Scalloped Potatoes (3.8 oz.)
- 4 Caramel Apple Tartlets (4 oz.)
- 1 jar Signature Seasoning (3.1 oz. jar)
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H E L P

W A N T E D

Avantara-Groton is rapidly growing its team and hoping to invest in cook, dietary aides and Dietary Manager. Full and part time with after school hours available. Competitive wages, sign-on bonus, etc. Call Shana or Sarah to discuss your future employment opportunities today!

605-397-2365



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*Olive Grove's
5th Annual*

*Christmas
Tour of Homes
& Holiday
Party*

**Weston & Emily Dinger
Cassels House Inn & Events
Julie Schaller (3 of Life)
Wage Memorial Library & City Office
Olde Bank N Café B & B**

**SATURDAY,
DEC. 4, 2021**

**TOUR OF
HOMES
4-7 P.M.**

**HOLIDAY
PARTY**

4-CLOSE

**Silent Basket Items
Bidding closes at 8:30 p.m.
Live Auction begins at 8:30 p.m.**

Coffee, Apple Cider and Goodies at the Club House
A variety of snacks served.

**\$15 tickets available at
Lori's Pharmacy, Groton
Groton Ford**

Hair & Company, Aberdeen

Come on out for a fun evening!

Support your local golf course!

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#490 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

We're through the Thanksgiving holiday now, and we'll see in coming days just what this has meant to the trajectory of this pandemic in the US. For now, we're seeing a dip in seven-day new-case average which might be influenced by a decrease in testing over the long weekend. If so, that will become clear in the coming days. Today's new-case average is just 83,979. We did pass 48 million total cases since we last talked—on the day before Thanksgiving. We are now at 48,190,676 cases total in the pandemic.

Here's the history:

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
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
November 1 – 46 million – 14 days
November 13 – 47 million – 12 days
November 24 – 48 million – 11 days

We still have 30 states and territories in unchecked spread and 23 showing double-digit percentage increases in cases over the past two weeks. Overall, we're not gaining on this thing. Worst cases are Michigan, New Hampshire, New Mexico, Vermont, and Minnesota. Many other states are in seriously bad shape. The surge this winter will be our fifth. It will likely be smaller than last winter's due to vaccination and therapeutics we didn't have widely available last winter; but we can still expect a rough time of it. Expect a rise in cases a week or two down the road in response to Thanksgiving gatherings and then another one after Christmas. The strain on health systems in hard-hit areas is compounded by patients with non-Covid conditions seeking care they've put off throughout the pandemic and staff shortages exacerbated by the pressures of caring for patients through the worst days of the pandemic. We'll add to that the oncoming flu season which is just getting underway; it is not muted as it was last year because we are not employing mitigation measures for respiratory infections this winter as we did last winter. Emergency room wait times have ballooned, ambulance transfers have been delayed, and surgeries have been deferred. Larger hospitals are not always able to accept transfers from smaller ones. We'll hit a breaking point one day relatively soon. I don't know how much longer the system will hold.

Hospitalizations are up to 52,917. Michigan remains in serious trouble with health systems going to crisis status. Darryl Elmouchi, president of Spectrum Health West Michigan, said, "We don't have a darker color.

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So if we're red now, what are we in two weeks?" That's deeply concerning. The state is setting records for new cases and hospitalizations, receiving emergency hospital staffing from the Department of Defense as of last Wednesday.

Deaths are slightly down from my last update at 961, putting us at a total for the pandemic of 777,390. Most of the deaths these days are completely preventable, a tragedy from all accounts.

In 2019 we set records for air travel for Thanksgiving with well over 2.6 million traveling the Wednesday before the holiday. We all know what happened in 2020: That number plummeted to less than half as many. This year, we made up much of that shortfall with around 2.3 million. Today is expected to be a busy one too; we'll see what the numbers show when they're all collected in a few days. I don't know that travel will directly be the culprit in any Thanksgiving surge we experience, more likely the gatherings that result from that travel; but I'm looking for a surge in new case counts over the next week or two. I hope these don't materialize, but so far hope hasn't done much for us in this pandemic. We'll see how things develop.

Meanwhile, Europe is in the middle of a mess. They're in another wave and are the only region in the world where deaths are on the increase by the WHO's reporting, fueled by the high transmissibility of Delta, indoor gatherings without precautions, pockets of people who refuse vaccination, and declining immunity in people who were infected or vaccinated too long ago. I will note that we're about to experience increasing deaths numbers ourselves, and that's the point: Where Europe goes in this pandemic, we tend to follow. The same factors operating in Europe are shaping our picture, and when you figure in this new variant we're about to discuss, that picture is more than a little unsettling. There have been new lockdowns and other precautions imposed across European countries. Of course, none of that will fly here, so we're likely, as usual, to suffer more than they do. I don't expect we'll learn from that either. We'll do this the hard way to the bitter end.

Unless you've been living under a rock, you're likely already aware of the big news from the past few days: On Thursday, South African health authorities announced the identification of a new variant of SARS-CoV-2 that appears to have turned up within the past few weeks in Botswana and then in South Africa, a variant with an unusual number of mutations—as many as 50, several of which are quite concerning. Lawrence Young, virologist and professor of molecular oncology at the UK's Warwick Medical School, told CNN, "It is the most heavily mutated version of the virus we have seen to date." Many of these are mutations we've seen before in other variants, but we haven't ever seen all of them together in one virus. Then there are also some novel mutations, that is, ones we haven't seen before. Worse, it looks like 30 or so of these mutations are in the spike protein, the part of the virus that binds to host cells; and 10 of those are right in the receptor-binding domain (RBD), the actual binding site on that spike. That could be a problem because the spike proteins are the ones targeted by our immune system, which increases the probability of at least a partial immune escape. An additional concern is that the RBD is a location associated with transmissibility and several of the identified mutations are known to be associated with enhanced transmissibility. So the genetic picture gives us cause for concern.

The variant has been assigned the PANGO number B.1.1.529. Since these numbers have fallen out of use among the general public (although scientists still use them), you may have forgotten they are assigned based on the variant's lineage, that is, its evolutionary relationship to other variants of this virus. PANGO stands for Phylogenetic Assignment of Named Global Outbreak lineages and is the name of a software tool used to analyze evolutionary—phylogenetic—relationships of SARS-CoV-2 variants. The WHO assigns a Greek-letter name (like Alpha, Beta, Delta, etc.) only after a variant is determined to be potentially dangerous—which happened on Friday for this one. It debuted as a Variant of Concern (VOC), skipping right over the Variant of Interest (VOI) classification, and has been named Omicron (pronounced AA-muh-kraan); I suspect we'll all have many opportunities to talk about it over the next few months. For the record, a VOC is a variant which has the potential to (1) be more transmissible, (2) cause more severe disease, or (3) escape existing immune responses to this virus, rendering current vaccines and therapies less effective. The last variant named a VOC was Delta, and we know how that went. Even so, we don't know whether any of these things is true of Omicron, and we won't until we gather a whole lot more information. The

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WHO designation simply means urgent action is needed to get a handle on just what we're facing here.

For the record, there are now a total of four VOC: Beta (B.1.351), Gamma (P.1), Delta (B.1.617.2), and now Omicron (B.1.1.529). One other variant was a VOC, but has been deescalated as its importance faded; that one is our old friend Alpha (B.1.1.7). There are, additionally, three VOI, Mu (B.1.621), Lambda (C.37), and an unnamed AY.4.2. Add to those nine variants under monitoring, and we have plenty to think about here. We all know why these things keep coming up, right? There are too many unvaccinated people in the world and too little being done otherwise to limit transmission. In many places people are unvaccinated due to lack of supply and lack of access to the available supply; people also frequently lack the means to limit transmission. Then there's North America and Europe where the problem isn't supply or means; it's individual decisions not to pitch in to end this thing.

Current thinking is that this variant may have evolved inside an HIV patient. This would be someone whose immune system was so weakened by the human immunodeficiency virus that the virus lingered on and on, maybe for months, gathering mutations as it faced various too-weak-to-eliminate-it host defenses. Viruses accumulate mutations as they replicate, especially in the same host. Most of the time these provide no particular competitive advantage and don't end up to be scary at all; but the potential for trouble always exists. In an immunosuppressed host, the potential increases. Dr. Theodora Hatzioannou, virologist at Rockefeller University, said, "This virus has seen a lot of antibodies," and that could turn out to be a problem. Might not too, but it will take a while to know for sure. She also mentioned that Omicron has a lot of mutations in the spike protein that have the potential to give our immune systems trouble. We're not sure just what this means at the moment, but we will want to remember that antibodies are not the entire immune response. It's easy to forget the cell-mediated arm of the immune response because it's so difficult to measure it that we generally don't do it, but these cellular responses do not depend on the spike at all; and we think vaccines in particular elicit a strong cell-mediated response. We also think boosters broaden the range of antibodies we make, which would be useful against new variants like this one. It seems likely vaccines are going to remain important weapons against Omicron, slowing its spread and keeping folks out of hospitals. If you need a refresher on the breadth of the immune response, have a look at my Update #150 posted July 22, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3796230603726651>. There's no good evidence for where the variant arose; it was first identified in South Africa, probably because they're doing good genomic tracking, so they're equipped to spot this sort of thing, but likely not the point of origination. I would guess it arose somewhere in southern Africa, but that's all unknown at the moment—and probably beside the point anyhow.

We're a ways from determining the extent of the threat this variant poses. Some VOC have fizzled out while others, like Delta, have lived up to their billing. William Hanage, epidemiologist at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, told the New York Times, "This could be bad. This could be very bad. But we don't know enough to roll that tape forward." The general thinking among the folks who know things is that vaccines will probably protect against it, but there may be reduced effectiveness—much as we've seen with Delta. We don't have enough data yet to see clearly how this is going to go.

A concern is the amount and rapidity of spread in South Africa. This variant has become dominant within a matter of days in the regions where it occurs. It is also a concern that a sharp spike in overall cases in the country (test positivity increasing from 3.6 percent on Wednesday to 9.1 percent on Friday) is occurring simultaneously with the increase in this variant, which causes us to wonder whether the variant is the cause for the surge. There are three mutations in the furin cleavage site on the spike protein, which may well help the virus to attach more efficiently to host cells. We talked about furin cleavage sites a very long time ago in my Update #42 posted April 6, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3487224904627224>. We still don't have any real information about how quickly it can spread from person to person, so this could all be an artifact of the very low case numbers in South Africa which could be inflated by a superspreader event or two. I'm going to say, however, that it seems at least possible that this one is more transmissible. This rapid take-off is very worrying.

Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University School of Public Health, told CNN this one looks to be more contagious than Delta. That would be a very large problem. What we need most right now is information.

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We don't know what this variant will do when facing off with Delta, and that's going to matter a lot. We've had other worrying variants arise that turned out to be unable to compete successfully. Unfortunately, the only real way to find out is to watch what happens next. What we do not want to see is what we had when Delta showed up: It quickly outcompeted and replaced Alpha, leading to the prolongation of this whole thing and the surges we've seen since over last summer and now into the winter.

We should note that, while genomic sequencing is a slow process, scientists have come up with a novel way to identify Omicron from the standard diagnostic test by looking at just two of the virus's genes. Omicron doesn't test positive for the spike protein because of its many spike mutations, but it still tests positive for the nucleocapsid \square genes. That means finding virus that is positive for nucleocapsid, but negative for spike is a quick way to identify Omicron cases. (It also means Omicron might play hell with some of our antigen tests—any that test for spike protein only—if and when it arrives here.)

So what do we know about Omicron? Not much yet. That will change in coming days as a whole lot of firepower is brought to bear on the problem. We know it's been detected in several countries besides South Africa, among them Botswana, Hong Kong, Belgium, Israel, Australia, Austria, the Czech Republic, the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Canada, and Denmark. That's pretty fast spread. Experts don't know whether it's landed on our shores yet, although some are sure it must have. Dr. Anthony Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, told NBC he "would not be surprised" if it was already in the country; and Dr. Peter Hotez, professor and dean of tropical medicine at the Baylor College of Medicine, told CNN, "Yeah, it's likely here." If it hasn't arrived yet, it certainly will. Several countries, US included, have imposed travel bans on southern African countries; those will probably not do much to help, although they may create enough delay to give us time to formulate a plan for dealing with this one. We know this has already spread beyond southern Africa, how far remains to be seen. We'll be figuring that out over the next couple of weeks too.

Laboratory testing is proceeding on the question whether there will be an effect on vaccine efficacy. It appears experts don't think we'll find our vaccines have suddenly become useless; more likely there could be some impact on efficacy, either small or large. We don't have any evidence at all on this point yet; but there are mutations which could be problematic. It will take a week or two to sort this out, but vaccine makers are watching it carefully and are already at work. Moderna is saying these mutations represent "a significant potential risk to accelerate the waning of natural and vaccine-induced immunity" and is already developing a vaccine modified to cover the variant. BioNTech is testing its vaccine produced in collaboration with Pfizer, and Janssen/Johnson & Johnson are having a look at theirs too.

Scientists will also be devoting energy to figuring out whether this variant causes more severe disease. It's too early to know that too, but there are some early signs it may not. Keeping in mind that it's very, very early, we are not seeing an increase in hospitalizations in South Africa commensurate with the increase in overall cases. Most patients are not experiencing a loss of the senses of taste and smell and have only cough accompanied by fatigue, headache, and body aches. We do want to keep in mind, however, that the initial surge in cases is primarily at universities where you would expect cases to be primarily among the young who tend to be less severely affected overall. Also, we've talked about the fact that hospitalizations lag new cases, so maybe there just hasn't been enough time for the hospitalizations to surge. So the signs are a bit hopeful, but as I've said already, it's probably too soon to know much. I'll keep you updated as information becomes available.

What needs to happen in the US is that we much be more proactive in genomic sequencing, something in which we're seriously lagging. We need to be able to spot this variant as it arrives and track its spread after it does. We also need to support studies of transmissibility; this is a critical piece of information if we hope to deal successfully with this variant. We need to figure out how our current vaccines work against Omicron and do what we need to do to put effective vaccines into arms. And we need to see that more people in less-developed countries, specifically in African countries, are vaccinated. One more thing: We need to get vaccinated ourselves. Just 196 million of us, 59 percent, are fully vaccinated; this is not enough. Only 37.5 percent of us have received boosters. That will not be enough to save us.

Vaccinations in children aged 5 to 11 are lagging in some states, most of them in the South. Eight of the

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10 worst states for child vaccinations are southern: Oklahoma, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, West Virginia, Delaware, and Georgia. Rounding out the bottom 10 are Wyoming and South Dakota. In the South, where only some three percent of children are vaccinated in some places even as they carry some of the highest overall death rates in the country, the recent nadir in case rates may have encouraged complacency; in South Dakota (11 percent of young children vaccinated) and Wyoming (six percent of young children vaccinated), we're seeing a general resistance to any sort of mitigation. Parents don't all say they're opposed to vaccinating children, just that they want to wait and see how things go. I don't know how to fix this though, so I guess the dying will just continue. Since nearly every hospitalization and death is now preventable, this is particularly disheartening. Infections in children have surged by 32 percent over the two weeks just before Thanksgiving; this is a reversal of an earlier trend that saw them decreasing since summer. We expect that only 10 to 12 percent of young children will be fully vaccinated in time for Christmas. Before the winter's over, the wait-and-see approach will continue to have lethal effects.

I read a paper from a group at Massachusetts General Hospital posted in preprint (not peer-reviewed) last week that deals with maternal-fetal antibody transfer. We know that some of the antibodies to SARS-CoV-2 generated in an adult are of the class called IgG which crosses the placenta and appears in a fetus during the course of a pregnancy. What this group did was have a look at 92 infants whose mothers were vaccinated during pregnancy and 12 other infants born to unvaccinated mothers infected with SARS-CoV-2 during pregnancy. They found that 94 percent of infants born to vaccinated moms had detectable antibody at 2 months of age and 60 percent still had antibody at 6 months whereas only eight percent of infants born to unvaccinated infected women had detectable antibody at 6 months. Maternal-derived immunity typically fades by 4 to 6 months, but it appears antibodies resulting from maternal infection are considerably less durable than antibodies resulting from vaccination. Their conclusion was straightforward: "Vaccination resulted in significantly higher maternal and cord titers at delivery and significantly greater antibody persistence in infants at 6 months, compared to natural infection."

There's a new vaccine in development from a research team at the University Hospital Tübingen in Germany; it shows early promise. It is an adjuvanted multi-peptide vaccine including antigens derived from SARS-CoV-2 proteins including spike (S), envelope (E), membrane (M), and nucleocapsid \square . The adjuvant protects the peptides from immediate degradation so that their stimulating effect is prolonged and enhances activation and maturation of antigen-presenting cells. This is a one-dose vaccine in phase 2 clinical trials and aimed at eliciting T-cell responses. You may recall from our earlier discussions of immune responses that T-cell responses act against virus-infected cells and have exceptional durability. Typically, what happens to trigger these responses is that a type of white blood cell called a macrophage engulfs and digests the virus, then presents the viral antigens on its surface where they are recognized by antibodies which clump the viruses together so macrophages can destroy them and also by T-cells which attack cells infected with the virus and stimulate further antibody production. This engages the entire panoply of responses the immune system is capable of mounting. Additionally, T cells have good memory and are long-lived, so they can produce a highly durable response.

The phase 1 clinical trial involved 36 participants between 18 and 80 years of age who had no pre-existing T-cell response to SARS-CoV-2. T-cell responses were measured at several intervals: 7, 14, 28, 56, and 90 days. Every participant showed a response 28 days after vaccination, and the quality of the response was high irrespective of the viral variant. There were no serious side-effects. The vaccine, called CoVac-1, may serve as a complement to the vaccines already on the market because it could lend an additional measure of protection. That action could prove to be especially helpful in providing cellular immunity to persons with B-cell deficiencies, elderly and immunocompromised patients who may not respond optimally to current vaccines.

These results were published in Nature on Tuesday with this conclusion: "[T]he safety and immunogenicity results of this trial indicate that CoVac-1 is a promising multi-peptide vaccine candidate for induction of profound SARS-CoV-2 T-cell immunity, which builds the basis for a presently ongoing Phase II study evaluating CoVac-1 in patients with congenital or acquired B-cell defects, including cancer patients after B-cell-depleting therapy and disease-related immunoglobulin [antibody] deficiency." We'll soon know how

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that looks. As always, more vaccines is better.

The FDA's Antimicrobial Drugs Advisory Committee is scheduled to meet on Tuesday to discuss Merck and Ridgeback Biotherapeutics' application for emergency use authorization (EUA) for their antiviral drug molnupiravir. We've been talking about this drug since January. It is a nucleoside analog, which is a fancy way of saying it provides to our cells modified versions of the building blocks for viral RNA called nucleosides for use in assembling new virus in infected cells. The thing is, these nucleosides are look-alikes that are easily incorporated into the RNA, but because they've been modified, they make the resulting RNA—and any virus it's built into—nonfunctional. This mechanism of action is called lethal mutagenesis, which term refers, roughly, to the production of lethal mutations. The drug is easier to use than the monoclonal antibody treatments we're currently using because this is given as a pill; there's no need to come into a clinic or an infusion center for administration.

The preliminary data from this double-blind clinical trial involved 762 participants, half of whom were treated with the drug and half of whom were given placebo. We haven't seen published results yet, but the company had initially reported the drug reduced hospitalizations and deaths by around 50 percent. To be specific, in the placebo group, 45 participants were hospitalized and nine of those died; in the treatment group 28 were hospitalized and none at all of them died. Those were pretty exciting at the time, but on Friday, the company adjusted the numbers downward, saying now that we're looking at something more like a 30 percent decrease in hospitalizations and deaths. What changed is that an additional 700 or so participants' data were folded into the analysis in this latest update. Now they're showing patients in the treatment group with a 6.8 percent risk of being hospitalized compared with a 9.7 percent risk in the control group, good, but nowhere near as good. I have not seen deaths numbers broken out of the analysis, so it could make a difference if that was still hanging out around zero, whatever hospitalization numbers did.

I foresee the possibility of an impact from this new information on the regulators because this drug's not an unmixed blessing. There's been some theoretical concern about what are called off-target effects, that is spillover of its effects to processes we don't want to mess with. For example, interfering with nucleic acid synthesis could be problematic for developing fetuses who do a lot of growing. Maybe it won't be a problem, but since the drug was not tested in pregnant women so far, it seems unlikely it will be made available during pregnancy. Another may be the potential for the drug to push the development of new variants; any sort of mutagenesis is sort of a warning flag. Merck has some research that shows mutations were not more common in trial participants taking the drug, but folks are going to want to have a good look at those data before they vote on Tuesday. Dr. Peter Hotez, infectious disease specialist at the Baylor College School of Medicine, said, "It's more of a theoretical concern, but it's something to keep in mind. I think I would be concerned about taking this drug if I were pregnant." The expert opinion seems to be that the FDA will still issue EUA—and if they do, I'm certainly not going to argue, but I expect a fairly lively discussion on Tuesday. Could be this drug will be reserved for people who can't get or don't want things like monoclonal antibodies; those show more like 70 percent reduction in hospitalizations and deaths with less of a potential downside. Fluvoxamine, an already available antidepressant that shows some efficacy, is about as effective as molnupiravir. (We first talked about that one a year ago in my Update #276 posted November 25, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4204897856193255>.) We'll see what happens Tuesday.

Here's something different. We know that SARS-CoV-2 infects host cells by binding to ACE2 receptors on the cell's surface, then making its way inside to replicate. Those cells are typically found in the upper respiratory tract—nose, throat, and mouth, all of which are lined with ACE2-covered cells. One approach to prophylaxis is to block the ACE2 receptors on these tissues from viral binding. We have a couple of nasal sprays in trials which appear to reduce viral load in the nose, but we haven't seen much for use in the mouth until now. This is important because the salivary glands are a primary site of initial replication and saliva constitutes a significant means for transmission. Lab test results published in Molecular Therapy a couple of weeks ago are showing that a chewing gum that's been developed may reduce the amount of virus in saliva, reducing viral loads by more than 95 percent; that could render an infected person non-infectious and also reduce the severity of infection in that host. It contains material from plants with the

gene for ACE2 engineered into them for just this purpose. That protein binds to the cells' ACE2 receptor-binding sites, blocking viral binding to those same sites so the viruses cannot infect cells and replicate. There is also a possibility the ACE2 in the gum will bind directly to viral spike proteins, blocking its binding sites as well. The gum has the taste and texture of regular chewing gum, and it has a shelf-life of several years. It doesn't damage the ACE2 receptors on your cells, so it isn't going to hurt anything. It is being contemplated as an adjunct to, not a substitute for, vaccines. We should also note that this same trapping technology should be applicable to other viruses which reproduce in the cells of the mouth—"influenza, SARS, HPV, HSV, Epstein-Barr, Zika, and herpesvirus."

There is a new small study available in preprint (so not yet peer-reviewed) from Northwestern University that deals with duration of protection after booster doses of mRNA vaccines, both the Moderna and the Pfizer/BioNTech versions. This work documents "large antibody responses 6-10 days after booster, with antibody levels that exceed levels documented after natural infection with COVID-19, after two doses of vaccine, or after both natural infection and vaccination." Here are the details: We're looking here at levels of neutralizing antibody of a relatively long-lasting class called IgG; the measurements are in terms of micrograms (μg) of antibody per milliliter (ml) of blood. People with no history of Covid-19 who were fully vaccinated showed 5 to 42 days post-vaccination levels of antibodies around 33.09 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$; those with a prior infection but no vaccination were at 1.92 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$ 14 to 42 days after infection; and those with a history of infection followed by vaccination were at 60.61 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$. The thing is, antibody levels drop over time so that by the time they were measured prior to the booster, the people in this study who had been fully vaccinated 6 to 9 months before the booster had just 4.4 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$. Six to 10 days after the booster, IgG levels had climbed to 101.6 $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$, a 25-fold increase and a far higher level, more than triple, what was seen weeks after initial vaccination. Even if antibodies drop off just as fast after the booster as they did after the initial series, we should have a far longer interval before another booster would be needed simply because the antibody levels are starting out so much higher. Boosters are looking more and more like a smart choice for long-term protection.

We're finally caught up after the holiday. Keep yourself safe, and we'll talk again.

Good Earth Open Houses to be held on December 7

The South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) will host two open house meetings to collect input on recreational development of Spring Creek Country Club.

The South Dakota Parks and Wildlife Foundation purchased the Spring Creek Country Club in 2015 under a ten year contract, and the property is set to be turned over to the Department of Game, Fish and Parks in the fall of 2024.

The Department is seeking input on several development concepts for how this property might be managed and developed for recreational use in the future.

Open house meetings will be held on Dec. 7 at the Sioux Falls Outdoor Campus from 4:00 – 5:30 pm and at the Good Earth State Park Visitor Center from 7:00 – 8:30 pm.

A short presentation will begin the meetings, with breakout sessions to follow. Additional opportunities for public input will be solicited after the open house sessions.

For additional information, please contact Al Nedved, Deputy State Parks Director at 605-773-3391 or email at al.nedved@state.sd.us.

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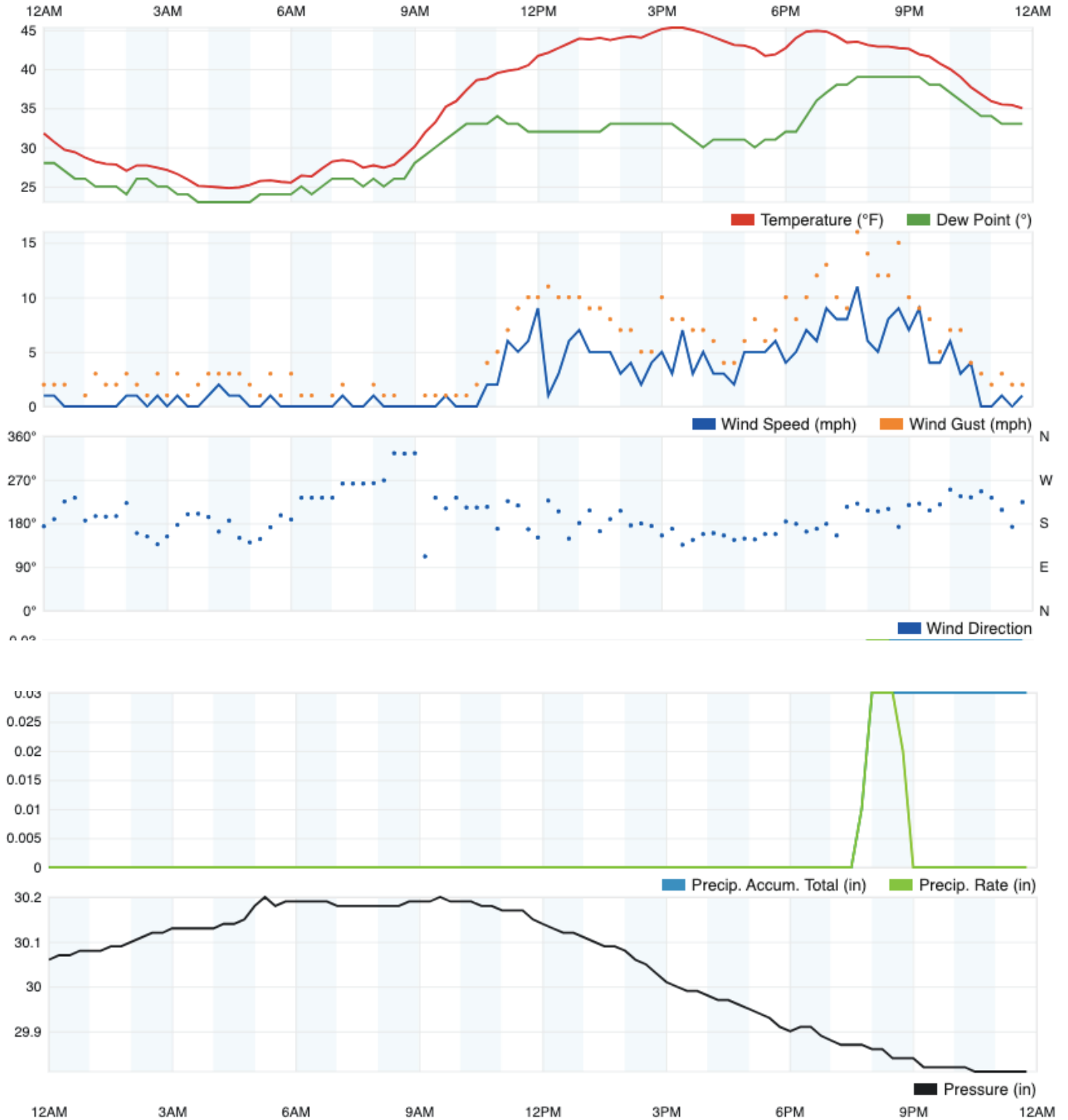
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today in Weather History

December 1, 1985: A storm system with heavy snow, strong winds, and blizzard conditions visited the region on December 1st through 2nd. Most of the snow fell in Minnesota. Snowfall across Minnesota increased from the south during the early morning of December 1st and had spread across most of the state by late morning. Winds in the west-central and southwest parts of the state increased to 40 to 50 mph, causing blizzard conditions. By late morning, drifts had reached 3 feet, and snowplows were pulled off roads from the southwest into central Minnesota due to restricted visibilities. The winds continued through the evening, gradually diminished during the morning of December 2nd. High winds and cold temperatures broke power lines and caused power outages over portions of southern and west-central Minnesota during the afternoon of December 1st and December 2nd. Many highways were impassable, and numerous businesses and schools were closed on the morning of December 2nd until residents could dig out. There were a few travelers that became stranded for up to 6 hours in their vehicles. Traffic accidents also accounted for some injuries and a few deaths. Further west, in South Dakota, strong winds gusted to around 40 mph and produced ground blizzard conditions over most of the state. The low visibilities, road conditions, and strong winds stranded a family for 25 hours south of Colome in Tripp County and another family for eight hours near Lee's Corner in Brule County. Many roads were blocked in the state's central and western parts, and no travel was advised in the east. The blowing and drifting snow reduced visibilities to near zero, and many accidents were reported. The strong winds, along with the previous day's snowfall, caused some damage, including the collapse of the roof of a large barn south of Bemis in Deuel County. Many church services were canceled on December 1, as were many schools on December 2. Temperatures became frigid during the morning of December 2 in the northwest part of the state. Camp Crook in Harding County reported a low of -36 F. Pierre had 2 inches of snow, Aberdeen, Castlewood, Clark, and Redfield had 3 inches, Bryant had 4 inches, Clear Lake, Milbank, and Wilmot had 8 inches. Timber Lake fell to -24F on the 2nd while McLaughlin fell to -30F.

December 1, 1992: A storm system caused numerous traffic accidents and stranded several hundred travelers on December 1st across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota as Interstate 29 was closed between Watertown and Sisseton. Slush on roadways became ice as high wind gusts were up to 60 mph, and snowfall of one to four inches brought blizzard conditions to some areas. Several semi-trucks jackknifed, and many cars ran into ditches, causing minor injuries. Simultaneously, strong northwest winds further west in central and north-central South Dakota gusted up to 67 mph on the 1st. The high winds shattered windows and blew down trees and signs. The wind rolled a van into a car, causing damage to both vehicles. A wind-blown dumpster damaged another vehicle. The wind also blew toppers off several pickup trucks, causing some damage.

December 1, 2007: A strong low-pressure area moving across the central plains brought widespread snowfall of 6 to 12 inches across northeast South Dakota. The snow began between 4 and 8 am and ended between 7 and 9 p.m. on December 1st. The heavy snow mainly affected travel and Saturday activities. Snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Clark, Conde, Faulkton, Redfield, and Watertown, 7 inches at Groton, Roscoe, and Sisseton, 8 inches at Britton, Summit, Bryant, 9 inches at Aberdeen and Kidder, and 12 inches at Big Stone City.

1962: The 50th Grey Cup was played in Toronto, Ontario, between the Hamilton Tiger-Cats and the Winnipeg Blue Bombers. Severe lakefront fog halts the game with 9:22 left to play on December 1st. Winnipeg wins the Fog Bowl the following day by a score of 28-27.

1970: Four tornadoes impacted east-central Wisconsin during the morning hours. The strongest tornado, an F3, formed at 10:15 AM near Medina in Outagamie County. The twister moved northeast at 50 mph and destroyed twenty barns and five houses.

2006: A winter storm produced more than 6 inches of snow along a 1,000-mile-long path from central Oklahoma to northern Michigan from November 30-December 1st. The storm also produced significant freezing rain, which impacted the St. Louis area. An estimated 500 or more homes and businesses were without power in the St. Louis area after this storm.

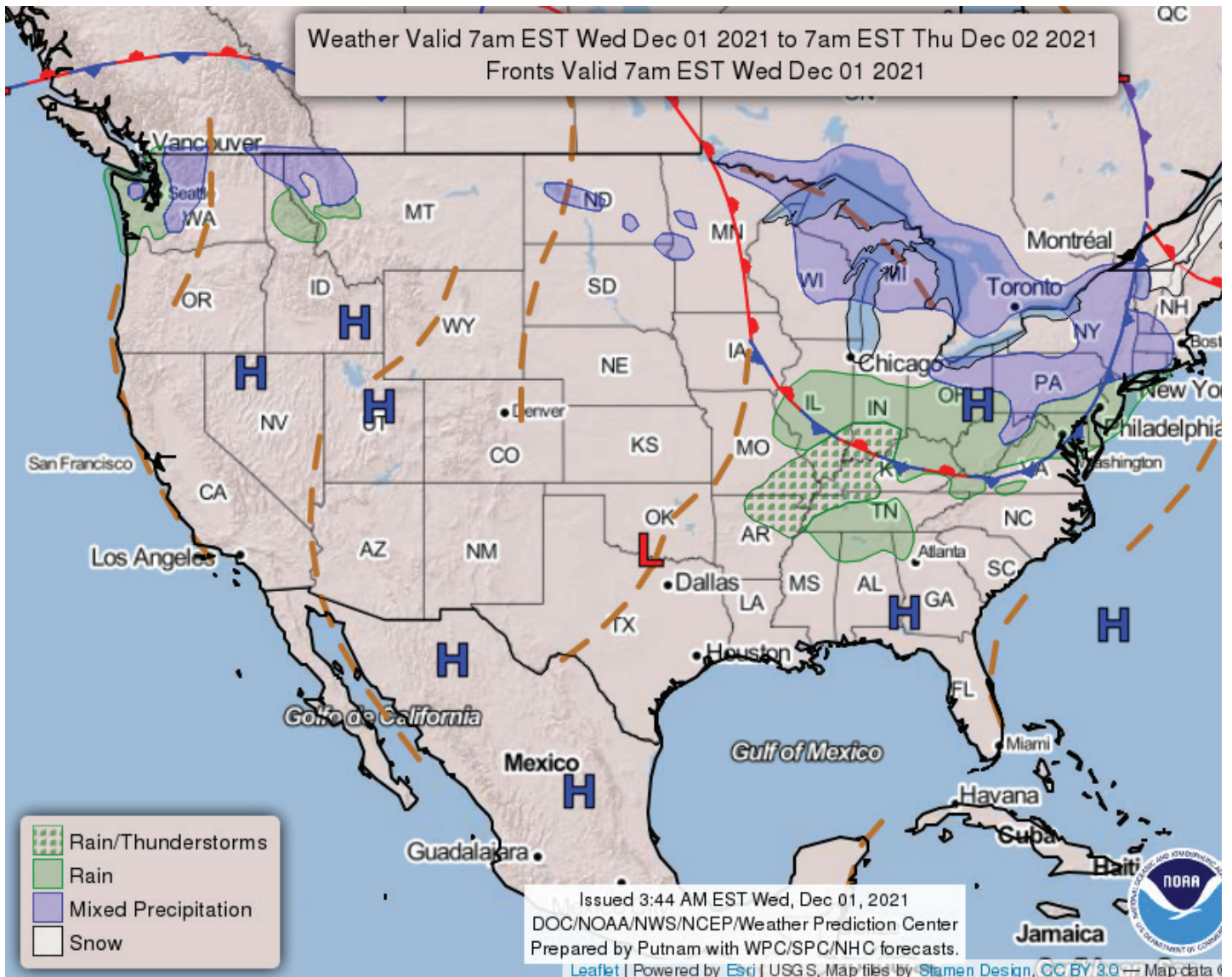
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 45.3 °F at 3:30 PM
Low Temp: 24.8 °F at 4:30 AM
Wind: 16 mph at 7:45 PM
Precip: 0.03

Record High: 62° in 1969
Record Low: -24° in 1893
Average High: 35°F
Average Low: 13°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.02
Precip to date in Nov.: 0.19
Average Precip to date: 21.23
Precip Year to Date: 19.91
Sunset Tonight: 4:52:29 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:51:50 AM



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ARE YOU READY FOR CHRISTMAS?

Hal and Matt, two longtime friends, accidentally met in a department store a few weeks before Christmas. They gave each other a forced smile – as if they were happy to see each other – but wished their meeting was under different circumstances.

“You know,” said Hal, “I’ve come to the conclusion that Christmas has become a wrap race.”

“I agree,” replied Matt. “And I’ll tell you something else. I’ve finally discovered the real meaning of the word Yule.”

“Oh,” responded Hal. “What is it? I’d like to know myself.”

“It’s my wife saying in a very convincing voice, ‘You’ll buy me this and then you’ll buy me that!’ I feel like I have no choice but to buy her whatever she asks for,” replied Matt. “Everything seems to be about things.”

It would be a wise investment of our time this Christmas to try to imagine what God might have seen when He looked into the manger. Certainly it was more, much more, than a Baby. Did He see the crowds ridiculing and mocking His Son? Did He turn His head when He saw the “kiss of betrayal” from Judas? Was His mind troubled by the trial that unjustly condemned His Son? Did He weep when He saw Jesus hanging from the cross? Certainly. But let’s not forget to see the smile that was on His face and the peace that flooded into His heart when He saw the empty tomb.

Prayer: Help us, Heavenly Father, to get ready for Christmas by seeing its sights and sounds through Your eyes. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: John 14:9 Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’”

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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)
11/11/2021 Veteran's Day Program at the GHS Arena
11/21/2021 Groton Area Snow Queen Contest
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
11/30/2021 James Valley Telecommunications Holiday Open House 10am-4pm
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

Editorial Roundup: South Dakota

By The Associated Press undefined
Yankton Press & Dakotan. November 29, 2021.

Editorial: What's Next For South Dakota Recreational Cannabis?

By this point, it probably wasn't all that surprising that the South Dakota Supreme Court last week struck down 2020's Amendment A, the voter-approved measure that paved the way to legalize recreational marijuana, as well as cement the legal standings of both medical cannabis (which was also passed by voters last year with the overwhelming triumph of Initiated Measure 26) and industrial hemp.

It took seven months from the time the case was heard in Pierre until the decision was finally issued on the day before Thanksgiving. Perhaps the release date was a coincidence, but that timing also fed the imaginations of the wearily suspicious.

The 4-1 decision of the court ruled that the three types of marijuana addressed in the amendment constituted three different issues, and state voters a few years ago approved a law limiting such measures could only address one issue at a time. By that parameter, the decision does seem logical, although it should also be remembered that, until about four years ago, the law treated all those items the same anyway. But timing is everything.

However, an argument by Amendment A opponents that voters were confused by the "multiple issues" in the amendment seems insulting. We believe voters knew what they were voting for in Amendment A, otherwise it might have passed with the same 70% approval that IM 26 saw. Whenever lawmakers try to tell you that voters were confused by a decision that said lawmakers opposed in the first place, be wary and maybe a little angry.

Anyway, recreational marijuana in this state seems far from dead, even though the governor, several lawmakers and several law enforcement officials have worked to derail it (and will likely continue to do so).

Overall, lawmakers know how to read election results, which was evident last winter when they bailed on attempts to slow-walk medicinal marijuana toward voter-sanctioned reality. The fact that some legislators have recently been discussing efforts to make recreational marijuana legal through legislative channels suggests that some action will be proposed this coming winter to address the matter and satisfy the will of the electorate.

Meanwhile, groups in favor of legalizing recreational marijuana decided not to wait for the Supreme Court to make its decision. They began circulating petitions this fall to get the matter on the 2022 ballot. So, if the Legislature fails to address the matter, voters may have a chance to reaffirm their decision.

As such, last week's decision, although a major turn of events, may only be a speed bump in the scheme of things. For that, we'll have to watch what happens in Pierre in the months ahead to see how the issue progresses or is impeded.

END

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined
PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Tuesday:

Mega Millions

07-08-26-30-39, Mega Ball: 17, Megaplier: 2

(seven, eight, twenty-six, thirty, thirty-nine; Mega Ball: seventeen; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$102 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$264 million

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Moore carries San Jose State over South Dakota 61-52

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — Omari Moore had 18 points and six rebounds as San Jose State beat South Dakota 61-52 on Tuesday night.

Tibet Gorener had 14 points for the Spartans (3-3). Ibrahima Diallo and Shon Robinson scored 10 apiece. Robinson added eight rebounds.

Mason Archambault scored a career-high 21 points and had seven rebounds for the Coyotes (4-3). Kruz Perrott-Hunt added 14 points.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-basketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

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Freidel leads S. Dakota St. over Prairie View 99-90

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Noah Freidel had 21 points as South Dakota State defeated Prairie View 99-90 on Tuesday night.

Douglas Wilson had 15 points and eight rebounds for South Dakota State (7-2), which earned its fourth straight home victory. Zeke Mayo added 14 points. Baylor Scheierman had 13 points and eight rebounds.

William Douglas scored a career-high 24 points for the Panthers, who have now lost eight consecutive games to start the season. Jawaun Daniels added 12 points. Markedric Bell had 12 points.

D'Rell Roberts, whose 14 points per game heading into the contest led the Panthers, was held to 2 points. He was 0 of 4 from beyond the arc.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-basketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

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Swift selling local media assets to Ogden Newspapers

ASPEN, Colo. (AP) — Swift Communications, which owns a range of daily and weekly newspapers across the American West, announced Tuesday it is selling its local media and publishing businesses to West Virginia-based Ogden Newspapers.

With the acquisition, Ogden Newspapers will publish 54 daily newspapers and a number of weekly newspapers and magazines in 18 states, according to The Aspen Times, which is owned by Swift. Terms of the deal, set to close Dec. 31, were not released.

Swift Communications was founded in 1975. The family-owned business has run magazines, newspapers, websites, book publishing and other digital products in several Western states, including Colorado, Utah, South Dakota and California. It also publishes a handful of national magazines and journals, including Goat Journal and Backyard Poultry Magazine.

"We know the time has come to pass the baton of stewardship to new owners who can carry forward the important mission," Bill Waters, CEO and chairman of the board of Swift Communications, said in announcing the deal.

Swift's Colorado publications include The Aspen Times and Snowmass Sun, Glenwood Springs Post Independent, Vail Daily, Summit Daily News, Steamboat Pilot, Craig Press and Sky-Hi News near Winter Park. Swift also has publications and offices in Park City, Utah; Lake Tahoe and Grass Valley, California; and Carson City, Nevada.

Robert Nutting, CEO of Ogden Newspapers, said he is committed to the industry and understands the

critical role of community newspapers.

"Our company's goal is to be a positive force in the communities we serve — celebrating each market's unique strengths while also working to provide realistic solutions to areas of concern," Nutting said. "We believe that strong, responsible and connected local newspapers are critically important to building and supporting strong communities now more than ever."

Ogden Newspapers is a fifth-generation family-owned and operated newspaper company that was founded in 1890. It will continue to run the existing Swift publications under the name Swift Communications.

After the close date, Swift will change its name to Questor Corp.

South Dakota father charged in killing of 8-week-old infant

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A Sioux Falls father on Tuesday was charged in the killing of his 8-week-old infant who authorities determined died from an apparent assault.

Prosecutors charged Dylan Castimore with second-degree murder and first-degree manslaughter in the baby's death. Police Lt. Terrance Matia said Castimore has been arrested. It was not clear if he has an attorney who can speak on his behalf.

A coroner found the baby's skull was fractured from an assault and he had a lacerated liver, according to court documents.

"The injuries were very extensive and it would shock most people," Matia said at a news conference Tuesday.

Police officers responded Saturday to a 911 call from Castimore who said his infant was not breathing at his apartment in Sioux Falls, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported. After the child died at a hospital, police began investigating his death.

According to court documents, Castimore told authorities that he had been feeding his son with a bottle when the baby's eyes started to "gaze," blood started to come from his nostril and he stopped breathing.

Castimore's Facebook page contained a tribute to his son, saying, "Your daddy will never ever forget the times we had I will never forget your dimples and your ocean blue eyes."

However, according to court documents, a police detective testified that video footage from a security camera contained audio of a baby crying followed by the sound of slapping or hitting as well as loud thuds. Police also found smears that appeared to be blood in Castimore's apartment.

This story has been corrected to show the alleged assault happened Saturday, not Sunday.

2016 Pine Ridge reservation slaying draws 15-year sentence

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — One of three men accused in a fatal shooting on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in 2016 has been sentenced in federal court after reaching a plea deal with prosecutors.

Estevan Baquera, 28, was given 15 years in prison after pleading guilty to accessory to first-degree murder in the death of Vinny Brewer outside of the Boys and Girls Club in Pine Ridge.

Prosecutors said Baquera traveled to Pine Ridge with Adan Corona and Francisco Villanueva to collect a drug debt from Brewer.

Baquera said making that trip was "the worst decision of his life," but he claimed he didn't know of the plan to kill Brewer, KOTA-TV reported.

Judge Jeffrey Viken referred to the slaying as "brutal" as it happened in front of families and children on a Sunday afternoon outside of the Boys and Girls Club as basketball games were being played.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Sarah Collins said part of the reason Baquera was offered the plea deal was the government's concern over not being able to convict him of the felony first-degree murder charge because he wasn't the one to pull the trigger.

Corona and Villanueva were found guilty of first-degree murder, felony murder and conspiracy to commit assault following a trial in September. They will be sentenced in February.

Live updates: Polish PM urges vaccinations as deaths rise

By The Associated Press undefined

WARSAW, Poland – Poland's prime minister got a booster shot against the coronavirus and made an emotional appeal to citizens to get vaccinated as 570 new deaths in one day were reported from COVID-19.

Mateusz Morawiecki's appeal on Wednesday was made to a nation with a vaccination rate of just 54%. The numbers those fully vaccinated have risen very slowly in recent weeks, though fears of the new omicron variant have appeared to spur some to finally get vaccinated.

Poland also reported over 29,000 new infections, the highest infection rate since a virus wave in the spring made central Europe a global hot spot.

Morawiecki said Christmas could be much more peaceful if millions more in the nation of 38 million get shots soon. He stressed that Christmas is a time when children meet their grandparents, and that many such gatherings in the past have "unfortunately ... ended tragically."

He also spoke in favor of a proposal to allow employers to check whether their employees are vaccinated -- an idea meeting with resistance.

HERE'S WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW TODAY ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC:

- U.S. moves to toughen testing requirement for travelers
 - Nigeria detects first case of omicron from an October sample, weeks before South Africa alerted the world about the variant
 - Japan starts booster COVID vaccinations amid omicron scare
 - Austrian lockdown extended through Dec 11 as planned
- Go to <https://APNews.com/coronavirus-pandemic> for updates throughout the day.

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING TODAY:

GENEVA — The World Health Organization says the rate of increase of coronavirus cases held steady over the last week, though its African, Western Pacific and European regions all reported gains.

At the same time, new deaths globally linked to COVID-19 fell 10 percent.

The U.N. health agency, in its latest weekly epidemiological report on the pandemic, said case counts shot up 93% in Africa, though it cautioned about interpreting too much from that high figure because it was largely due to "batch reporting" of antigen tests by South Africa.

The report, for the first time, referred to the new omicron variant that was christened on Friday after being detected in South Africa and Botswana. WHO said the variant has now been reported in a "limited number" of countries — though it has spread widely, into four of the WHO's six regions.

As of Sunday, more than 280 million cases and more than 5.2 million deaths have been tallied due to the pandemic, WHO said.

BERLIN — Germany's intensive care association is calling for nationally uniform restrictions to be imposed immediately and warning that the number of COVID-19 patients requiring intensive care will hit a new high before Christmas.

German federal and state leaders are expected to decide Thursday on new measures to curb a sharp recent rise in coronavirus infections. Chancellor-designate Olaf Scholz says he will back a proposal to mandate coronavirus vaccinations for everybody next year.

The DIVI association said Wednesday that more than 6,000 patients with COVID-19 will need intensive care treatment before Christmas and the all-time high from last year will be exceeded. It said that more than 2,300 new patients were admitted to ICUs in the last week alone, and that transferring patients within Germany isn't a long-term solution.

The association called for at least 1 million vaccinations, including boosters, to be administered per day. The number of vaccinations has risen sharply in recent days but is still short of that mark, at an average 660,000 per day over the past week.

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Germany on Wednesday reported its highest one-day death toll since February, with 446 more deaths bringing the country's total so far to 101,790.

GENEVA — The head of the World Health Organization is hailing steps by its member states to launch work toward an international agreement to help prevent and prepare for future pandemics in the wake of the coronavirus.

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said the consensus decision during a long-planned special session of the U.N. health agency's members was "cause for celebration." It sets off work toward creating an "intergovernmental negotiating body" to draft an agreement, which is likely to take months if not years to be finalized.

"Of course, there is still a long road ahead. There are still differences of opinion about what a new accord could or should contain," he said.

LISBON, Portugal — Portugal is entering a so-called state of calamity -- the second this year -- to curve an upward trend in coronavirus infections despite having one of the strongest vaccination records in Europe.

The state of calamity is one step below the country's top level of alert.

The country is tightening passenger control in airports, seaports and land borders, requiring negative coronavirus tests for most incoming visitors as part of the new set of rules that kick in Wednesday.

Face masks are again required in enclosed spaces and coronavirus vaccination or COVID-19 recovery tests are required to enter restaurants, cinemas, gyms and hotels.

Experts believe that Portugal's vaccination rate, which at 87% of over 10 million residents is one of the highest globally, has shielded the country from the infection spikes experienced by northern European countries recently.

Still, hospitalizations have been rising since September. Authorities on Tuesday recorded 2,907 new infections on Tuesday, with 833 people in hospital, 116 in intensive care units and 15 deaths.

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Saudi Arabia said it detected its first case of the new coronavirus variant omicron.

The kingdom's state-run Saudi Press Agency said the case came from a citizen coming from what it described as a "North African country."

The report said the infected individual and his close contacts had been quarantined.

The case marks the first-known instance of omicron being detected among Gulf Arab nations.

Much remains unknown about the new variant, which has been identified in more than 20 countries, including whether it is more contagious, whether it makes people more seriously ill, and whether it can thwart the vaccine.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, said more would be known about the omicron strain in two to four weeks as scientists grow and test lab samples of the virus.

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Health officials say a concertgoer who attended a gig in northern Denmark with a local DJ has tested positive for the new coronavirus variant omicron.

The concert was attended by nearly 2,000 people on Saturday in Aalborg. The Danish Patient Safety Authority has urged all those who attended the event to be tested, Danish broadcaster DR said Wednesday.

Statens Serum Institut, another government agency that maps the spread of COVID-19 in Denmark, said Tuesday that four cases of omicron had been reported in the Scandinavian country. It was not immediately clear if the concertgoer was included or if it was a new case.

TOKYO — Japan has asked international airlines to stop taking new reservations for all flights arriving in the country until the end of December in a further tightening of already strict border controls.

The transportation ministry says the request is an emergency precaution.

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The move by the world's third largest economy, coupled with its recent return to a ban on foreign visitors, is among the most stringent anywhere, and more in line with cloistered neighbor China than with some other democracies in the region.

It comes as scientists work frantically to determine just how threatening omicron is.

Japan has confirmed a second case of the omicron variant in a person who arrived from Peru, one day after it reported its first case in a Namibian diplomat.

A world ablaze, captured by AP photographers in 2021

By The Associated Press undefined

"Some say the world will end in fire," wrote the poet Robert Frost -- and for much of 2021, Associated Press photographers captured scenes of a world ablaze, amid rumblings of ruin.

In New Delhi, a man sprints amid the funeral pyres of COVID-19 victims -- too many fires, too much heat, too many victims. On a beach near the village of Limni, Greece, the horizon is lit by the flames of wildfires raging across the eastern Mediterranean.

And at La Palma in the Canary Islands, the inferno is in the Cumbre Vieja volcano. But more than 10,000 million cubic meters of ash turn the world into a negative, with black ash taking the place of white snow.

Not all of the combustion is so literal.

There is fury: the astonishing moment when police aimed their guns at rioters trying to break into the House Chamber at the U.S. Capitol; Mexican demonstrators against gender violence, hurling themselves at barricades; an Ethiopian woman's wrath as she fights for every split pea in starving, war-torn Tigray.

And there are the sorrowful embers of violence. Stoic Palestinians carry the body of a child who died in an Israeli airstrike in Gaza, while a continent away, mourners bear the body of a man killed while protesting the coup in Myanmar. And in Haiti, the wife of slain President Jovenel Moise, Martine, leaves a memorial gathering in black widow's weeds and mask.

There was more to 2021, of course. There was fun: Lady Gaga wore one of the world's largest dresses to Joe Biden's inauguration.

There were moments of hope. Even as millions more died of COVID-19, billions were vaccinated. Health care worker Nazir Ahmed ventured to remote Kashmiri meadows to inoculate shepherds, some of them vaccine resistant. He stands in his protective gear on a hillock, like an emissary from COVID times who somehow found himself in a South Asian remake of "The Sound of Music."

There are other images that recall the movies, but askew.

Those men on horseback in 10-gallon hats are not the cowboys of classic Westerns; they're border agents, corralling Haitian migrants as they try to cross the Rio Grande into the United States.

And the man and woman caught in a passionate embrace in Barcelona, Spain, are not characters in a romantic comedy; behind them, a riot rages over the imprisonment of a rapper convicted of insulting the Spanish monarchy. And the streets are on fire.

Student shoots, kills 3, injures 8 at Michigan high school

By RYAN KRYSKA and MIKE HOUSEHOLDER Associated Press

OXFORD TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — A 15-year-old sophomore opened fire at his Michigan high school, killing three students, including a 16-year-old boy who died in a deputy's patrol car on the way to a hospital, authorities said.

Eight other people were wounded, some critically, including a 14-year-old girl who was placed on a ventilator after surgery. Investigators were still trying to determine a motive for the shooting Tuesday at Oxford High School, located in a community of about 22,000 people roughly 30 miles (48 kilometers) north of Detroit, Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said.

"The person that's got the most insight and the motive is not talking," he said at a news conference late Tuesday.

Deputies rushed to the school around lunch time as more than 100 calls flooded 911 dispatchers with

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reports of a shooter. They arrested the student in a hallway within minutes of their arrival. He put his hands in the air as deputies approached, Bouchard said.

The boy's father on Friday bought the 9 mm Sig Sauer used in the shooting, Bouchard said. He didn't know why the man bought the gun, which his son had been posting pictures of and practicing shooting, Bouchard said.

Authorities didn't immediately release the boy's name.

The three students who were killed were 16-year-old Tate Myre, 14-year-old Hana St. Juliana, and 17-year-old Madisyn Baldwin. Bouchard said Myre died in a patrol car as a deputy tried to get him to an emergency room.

A teacher who received a graze wound to the shoulder has left the hospital, but seven students ranging in age from 14 to 17 remained hospitalized through the night with gunshot wounds, he said.

The gun the boy was carrying had seven more rounds of ammo in it when he surrendered, Bouchard said.

Undersheriff Mike McCabe said the student's parents advised their son not to talk to investigators. Police must seek permission from a juvenile's parents or guardian to speak with them, he added.

Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald said in a statement her office expects to issue charges quickly and that an update would be given Wednesday.

Authorities were made aware of posts on social media that said there had been threats of a shooting at the roughly 1,700-student school, but Bouchard said they didn't know about the rumors until after the attack.

He stressed how crucial it is for tips of the kind to be sent to authorities, while also cautioning against spreading social media rumors before a full investigation.

McCabe also downplayed the significance of a situation in early November when a deer head was thrown off the school roof, which he said was "absolutely unrelated" to the shooting. The vandalism prompted school administrators to post two letters to parents on the school's website, saying they were responding to rumors of a threat against the school but had found none.

Bouchard said the student in custody had no previous run-ins with his department and he wasn't aware of any disciplinary history at school.

"That's part of our investigation to determine what happened prior to this event and if some signs were missed how were they missed and why," he said.

The campus was placed on lockdown during the attack, with some children sheltering in locked classrooms. They were later taken to a nearby Meijer grocery store to be picked up by their parents.

The district said in a statement that all of its schools would be closed for the rest of the week.

Isabel Flores, a 15-year-old ninth grader, told WJBK-TV that she and other students heard gunshots and saw another student bleeding from the face. They then ran from the area through the rear of the school, she said.

Authorities said they were searching the suspect's cellphone, school video footage and social media posts for any evidence of a possible motive.

School administrators had posted two letters to parents on the school's website in November, saying they were responding to rumors of a threat against the school following a bizarre vandalism incident.

According to a Nov. 4 letter written by Principal Steve Wolf, someone threw a deer head into a courtyard from the school's roof, painted several windows on the roof with red acrylic paint and used the same paint on concrete near the school building during the early morning hours. Without specifically referencing that incident, a second post on Nov. 12 assured "there has been no threat to our building nor our students."

Both the sheriff and undersheriff emphasized that Tuesday's shooting was unrelated to the deer head or any earlier investigation by their office.

"That was a different incident, different student," McCabe said.

A concerned parent, Robin Redding, said her son, Treshan Bryant, is a 12th grader at the school but stayed home Tuesday. Redding said her son had heard threats that there could be a shooting.

"This couldn't be just random," she said.

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Bryant said he texted several younger cousins in the morning and they said they didn't want to go to school, and he got a bad feeling. He asked his mom if he could do his assignments online.

Bryant said he had heard vague threats "for a long time now" about plans for a shooting.

At a vigil Tuesday night at LakePoint Community Church, Leeann Dersa choked back tears as she hugged friends and neighbors. Dersa has lived nearly all of her 73 years in Oxford. Her grandchildren attended the high school.

"Scared us all something terrible. It's awful," Dersa said of the shooting.

Pastor Jesse Holt said news of the shooting flooded in to him and his wife, including texts from some of the 20 to 25 students who are among the 400-member congregation.

"Some were very scared, hiding under their desks and texting us, 'We're safe, we're OK. We heard gunshots, but we're OK.' They were trying to calm us, at least that's how it felt," he said.

Associated Press writers Corey Williams in West Bloomfield, Michigan, David Aguilar in Oxford Township, Kathleen Foody in Chicago, and Josh Boak in Rosemount, Minnesota, contributed to this report.

Omicron unravels travel industry's plans for a comeback

By DAVID KOENIG and YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

Tourism businesses that were just finding their footing after nearly two years of devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic are being rattled again as countries throw up new barriers to travel in an effort to contain the omicron variant.

From shopping districts in Japan and tour guides in the Holy Land to ski resorts in the Alps and airlines the world over, a familiar dread is rising about the renewed restrictions.

Meanwhile, travelers eager to get out there have been thrown back into the old routine of reading up on new requirements and postponing trips.

Abby Moore, a librarian and associate professor at the University of North Carolina, Charlotte, was scheduled to leave for Prague on Wednesday. But the day before her flight, she started having doubts when she saw that Prague had closed its Christmas markets and imposed a city-wide curfew.

"I wasn't really concerned about my trip until the Czech Republic started what looked like a mini-lockdown process," said Moore, who decided to reschedule her travel to March.

Less than a month after significantly easing restrictions for inbound international travel, the U.S. government has banned most foreign nationals who have recently been in any of eight southern African countries. A similar boomerang was seen in Japan and Israel, both of which tightened restrictions shortly after relaxing them.

While it is not clear where the variant emerged, South African scientists identified it last week, and many places have restricted travel from the wider region, including the European Union and Canada.

For all the alarm, little is known about omicron, including whether it is more contagious, causes more serious illness or can evade vaccines.

Still, governments that were slow to react to the first wave of COVID-19 are eager to avoid past mistakes. The World Health Organization says, however, that travel bans are of limited value and will "place a heavy burden on lives and livelihoods." Other experts say travel restrictions won't keep variants out but might give countries more time to get people vaccinated.

London-based airline easyJet said Tuesday that renewed travel restrictions already appear to be hurting winter bookings, although CEO Johan Lundgren said the damage is not yet as severe as during previous waves. The CEO of SAS Scandinavian Airlines said winter demand was looking up, but now we "need to figure out what the new variants may mean."

"In the past year, each new variant has brought a decline in bookings, but then an increase once the surge dissipates," said Helene Becker, an analyst with financial services firm Cowen. "We expect the same pattern" this time.

Israel's decision to close the country to foreign visitors is hitting the nation's tourism industry as it geared

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up for the Hanukkah and Christmas holidays. The country only opened to tourists in November, after barring most foreign visitors since early last year.

Just over 30,000 tourists entered Israel in the first half of November, compared to 421,000 in November 2019, according to government figures.

Joel Haber, a Jerusalem-based guide, said during a typical Hanukkah holiday his calendar would be chock full of food tours through Jerusalem's colorful Mahane Yehuda market. Instead, he has just one tour a day.

"Tour operators like me are the first to get hit and the last to emerge and are directly prevented from working by a government decision," Haber said.

In the West Bank city of Bethlehem, revered by Christians as Jesus' birthplace, local businesses expected a boost from Christmas tourism. The Bethlehem Hotel, one of the largest in the city, has operated at a fraction of capacity for the past 18 months.

"Everyone who had bookings over the next two weeks has canceled, while others are waiting to see what happens next," said the hotel's manager, Michael Mufdi. "I don't know how much longer we can last, but we are doing our best."

The pandemic already caused foreign tourism in Japan to shrink from 32 million visitors in 2019 to 4 million last year, a trend that has continued through this year.

As worries surfaced about omicron, Japan on Wednesday tightened its ban on foreign travelers, asking airlines to stop taking new reservations for all flights arriving in the country until the end of December. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida has pushed for avoiding "the worst-case scenario" and reversed a relaxation of travel restrictions that had been in effect just three weeks.

The crowds of Chinese shoppers who used to arrive in Tokyo's glitzy Ginza district in a stream of buses to snap up luxury items have long disappeared. Restaurants and bars have been forced to restrict hours.

In Asakusa, a quaint part of town filled with souvenir shops, rickshaw drivers, and stalls selling traditional sweets, news of the omicron variant made little difference this week. Vendors say there hasn't been any business for months except for a few local customers.

Boat charter operator Tokyo Water Taxi started on the city's waterfront in 2015, when hopes were high for cashing in on the booming tourism trade. With the variant pushing the return of foreign visitors far into the future, the company is trying to look on the bright side.

"It's growing popular with Tokyo residents, who have lost other ways to entertain themselves," said company spokeswoman Yuha Inoue.

In Europe, Alpine ski resorts worry about how to keep up with requirements such as ensuring all skiers are vaccinated or recovered from infection and have tested negative for the virus.

Matthias Stauch, head of the German ski lift operators association VDS, said many are small family businesses that lack the staff to perform such checks. Meanwhile, the association is warning about "massive" economic damage to the tourism sector if there is another lockdown.

Travel executives argue that government decisions about restrictions should wait until more is known about omicron, but they admit it's a difficult call.

"If you wait, by the time you have all the data it's probably too late to stop community spread because (the virus) is already here," said Robert Jordan, the incoming CEO at Southwest Airlines. "If you jump ahead, you run the risk of the measures being more impactful than the actual cases."

About a month ago, Javier Barragan and his husband booked a visit to Paris for later this month. When news of omicron hit, they were concerned but decided to go ahead with the trip.

"The way that it was in the news, there's a sense of 'Oh, is this worse? Is this different?'" said Barragan, who lives in New York. France's health protocols — the couple will have to submit vaccine cards to enter the country — made them feel more comfortable. Also, both got booster shots.

They did, however, buy travel insurance that will cover cancellation for most any reason.

Koenig reported from Dallas and Kageyama from Tokyo. Associated Press writers Mae Anderson and Tali Arbel in New York; Dee-Ann Durbin in Detroit; Tia Goldenberg in Tel Aviv, Israel; Jack Jeffery in Bethle-

hem, West Bank; Frank Jordans in Berlin; Pan Pylas in London; and Mogomotsi Magome in Johannesburg contributed.

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

Jan. 6 panel to vote on contempt against former DOJ official

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House panel investigating the Jan. 6 U.S. Capitol insurrection will vote on pursuing contempt charges against a former Justice Department official Wednesday as the committee aggressively seeks to gain answers about the violent attack by former President Donald Trump's supporters.

The vote to pursue contempt charges against Jeffrey Clark, a former Justice Department lawyer who aligned with Trump as he tried to overturn his election defeat, comes as Trump's top aide at the time, chief of staff Mark Meadows, has agreed to cooperate with the panel on a limited basis. Clark appeared for a deposition last month but refused to answer any questions based on Trump's legal efforts to block the committee's investigation.

If approved by the panel, the recommendation of criminal contempt charges against Clark would go to the full House for a vote as soon as Thursday. If the House votes to hold Clark in contempt, the Justice Department would then decide whether to prosecute.

The panel has vowed to aggressively seek charges against any witness who doesn't comply as they investigate the worst attack on the Capitol in two centuries. The Justice Department has signaled it is willing to pursue those charges, indicting longtime Trump ally Steve Bannon earlier this month on two federal counts of criminal contempt.

Attorney General Merrick Garland said then that Bannon's indictment reflects the department's "steadfast commitment" to the rule of law after Bannon outright defied the committee and refused to cooperate.

Clark's case could be more complicated since he did appear for his deposition and, unlike Bannon, was a Trump administration official on Jan. 6. But members of the committee argued that Clark had no basis to refuse questioning, especially since they intended to ask about matters that didn't involve direct interactions with Trump and wouldn't fall under the former president's claims of executive privilege.

In a transcript of Clark's aborted Nov. 5 interview, released by the panel on Tuesday evening, staff and members of the committee attempted to persuade Clark to answer questions about his role as Trump pushed the Justice Department to investigate his false allegations of widespread fraud in the election. Clark had aligned himself with the former president as other Justice officials pushed back on the baseless claims.

But Clark's attorney, Harry MacDougald, said during the interview that Clark was not only protected by Trump's assertions of executive privilege, but also several other privileges MacDougald said Clark should be afforded. The committee rejected those arguments, and MacDougald and Clark walked out of the interview after around 90 minutes.

According to a report earlier this year by the Senate Judiciary Committee, which interviewed several of Clark's colleagues, Trump's pressure culminated in a dramatic White House meeting at which the president ruminated about elevating Clark to attorney general. He did not do so after several aides threatened to resign.

Despite Trump's false claims about a stolen election — the primary motivation for the violent mob that broke into the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Democrat Joe Biden's victory — the results were confirmed by state officials and upheld by the courts. Trump's own attorney general, William Barr, had said the Justice Department found no evidence of widespread fraud that could have changed the results.

Trump, who told his supporters to "fight like hell" the morning of Jan. 6, has sued to block the committee's work and has attempted to assert executive privilege over documents and interviews, arguing that his conversations and actions at the time should be shielded from public view.

Clark is one of more than 40 people the committee has subpoenaed so far. The panel's chairman, Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson, wrote in Clark's subpoena that the committee's probe "has revealed credible

evidence that you attempted to involve the Department of Justice in efforts to interrupt the peaceful transfer of power” and his efforts “risked involving the Department of Justice in actions that lacked evidentiary foundation and threatened to subvert the rule of law.”

After Clark refused to answer questions, Thompson said it was “astounding that someone who so recently held a position of public trust to uphold the Constitution would now hide behind vague claims of privilege by a former President, refuse to answer questions about an attack on our democracy, and continue an assault on the rule of law.”

A lawyer for Meadows, George Terwilliger, said Tuesday that he was continuing to work with the committee and its staff on a potential accommodation that would not require Meadows to waive the executive privileges claimed by Trump or “forfeit the long-standing position that senior White House aides cannot be compelled to testify before Congress.”

Terwilliger said in a statement that “we appreciate the Select Committee’s openness to receiving voluntary responses on non-privileged topics.” He had previously said that Meadows wouldn’t comply with the panel’s September subpoena because of Trump’s privilege claims.

Thompson said that Meadows has provided documents to the panel and will soon sit for a deposition, but that the committee “will continue to assess his degree of compliance.”

Under the tentative agreement, Meadows could potentially decline to answer the panel’s questions about his most sensitive conversations with Trump and what Trump was doing on Jan. 6.

Still, Meadows’ intention to work with the panel is a victory for the seven Democrats and two Republicans on the committee, especially as they seek interviews with lower-profile witnesses who may have important information to share. The panel has so far subpoenaed more than 40 witnesses and interviewed more than 150 people behind closed doors.

Associated Press writer Eric Tucker contributed to this report.

Conservatives eagerly await Supreme Court abortion arguments

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

It’s the moment conservatives have been waiting for.

Oral arguments at the Supreme Court on Wednesday represent the best opportunity leaders on the right have had in decades to gut the landmark 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision, which codified a woman’s constitutional right to an abortion before a fetus can survive outside the womb.

If they are successful, it could validate years of often painstakingly granular work that ultimately remade the Republican Party from an alliance of business-friendly leaders into a coalition of cultural conservatives and evangelicals who turned the issue of abortion into a national flashpoint. Even if the justices don’t explicitly overturn *Roe*, they could open the door to a flurry of new restrictions that would please the right.

Buoyed by a court that is now dominated by a 6-3 conservative majority, some leading Republicans were already expressing confidence on Tuesday.

“We are asking the court in no uncertain terms to make history,” former Vice President Mike Pence, who has been laying the groundwork for a presidential run in 2024, said during a speech in Washington. “We are asking the Supreme Court of the United States to overturn *Roe v. Wade* and restore the sanctity of life at the center of American law.”

The justices will weigh whether to uphold a Mississippi law that bans abortion after 15 weeks, with limited exceptions — well before the current established point of “viability,” at around 24 weeks. The court is also weighing challenges to a Texas law that bans abortions after six weeks — before many women even know they’re pregnant.

The court could decide to uphold current precedent, could let the law stand, effectively doing away with the current viability standard, or could overturn *Roe* entirely.

“This is the first time that they have clearly had a majority of pro-life-leaning justices,” said Columbia Law School’s Carol Sanger, an expert in reproductive rights. “So they have the votes if they choose to use them.”

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The court's decision, which is expected by late June, could dramatically shift the contours of next year's midterm elections, providing a new animating force for Democrats, who largely support abortion rights and have struggled to rally around a unifying issue this year.

Scuttling Roe "will surely embolden efforts of conservatives in many states to craft laws they think might not have held up under Roe," William Martin, a professor of religion and public policy at Rice University who has studied the rise of the anti-abortion movement, said in an email. "Conservatives will regard this as achieving a long-sought goal, but it may come at a significant cost, since Republicans probably already have most of the voters for whom opposition to abortion is the ultimate litmus test."

Still, for conservative activists, the case is a culmination of decades of work electing Republican state legislatures, enacting new barriers to abortion access, and supporting anti-abortion judges, including the new conservative super majority on the Supreme Court.

"Tomorrow the Supreme Court will hear the biggest case for the pro-life movement in two generations," said Marjorie Dannenfelser, president of the Susan B. Anthony List, an anti-abortion group which sponsored Pence's speech and plans to spend \$10 million on TV and digital ads in Washington, D.C., and battleground states to promote the case.

"I think this is that moment of time we've all been waiting for," said Heather Weinger, executive director of Wisconsin Right to Life, an anti-abortion nonprofit in the battleground state. "This is really the pinnacle moment where we can go back to those days where we protect life at the moment of conception."

Weinger said the issue is likely to be "crucial" in her state in the midterms, especially given that it has a GOP-controlled legislature and a Democratic governor, Tony Evers, who is up for reelection. U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson, a Wisconsin Republican, has not yet made a decision on whether he will seek another term, but he has suggested this may be his last, and Rep. Ron Kind, a Wisconsin Democrat, is seen as particularly vulnerable.

"If this decision comes out next summer, this is going to be a key issue in all those races," Weinger said.

If Roe were to be overturned or severely curtailed, it would be thanks to former President Donald Trump, a most unlikely person to have helped social conservatives achieve their long-awaited goal. Trump ran in 2016 promising to nominate justices who would overturn Roe — a pledge that helped the thrice-married former reality TV star win the support of prominent evangelical leaders as well as other conservatives.

Trump followed through, appointing three conservative justices who transformed the court and making it easier to offer new challenges to abortion rights: Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett.

Roe's demise would likely prompt at least 20 Republican-governed states to impose sweeping bans; perhaps 15 Democratic-governed states would reaffirm support for abortion access.

It remains to be seen how motivating the issue will be politically. In the Virginia governor's race — the biggest election of the year — only 6% of voters called abortion the most important issue facing the state, according to AP VoteCast.

The issue seems to be more salient for Republicans. Nationally in 2020, VoteCast found that the 3% of voters who said abortion was the most important issue facing the country voted for Trump over Democrat Joe Biden, 89% to 9%. In the race for governor in Virginia, the margin was much tighter, with Republican Glenn Youngkin winning 56% of those who said abortion was the most important issue facing the state, versus 44% who voted for Democrat Terry McAuliffe.

Still, Republicans have been eager to seize on the issue, especially as they jockey for support heading into 2024.

On Monday, South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, another potential presidential candidate, promised that if the state loses an appeal in a legal fight over a law that would require women seeking abortions to first consult with crisis pregnancy centers, which generally advise women not to get abortions, she would try to get the Supreme Court to consider the case.

"We have a couple of opportunities here to make a case to undermine and remove Roe v. Wade," said Noem, who also signed onto a legal argument in the Mississippi case.

Associated Press writer Emily Swanson in Washington contributed to this report.

Abortion rights at stake in historic Supreme Court arguments

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Abortion rights are on the line at the Supreme Court in historic arguments over the landmark ruling nearly 50 years ago that declared a nationwide right to end a pregnancy.

The justices on Wednesday will weigh whether to uphold a Mississippi law that bans abortion after 15 weeks and overrule the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision.

Mississippi also is asking the court to overrule the 1992 ruling in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, which reaffirmed *Roe*. The arguments can be heard live on the court's website, starting at 10 a.m. EST.

The case comes to a court with a 6-3 conservative majority that has been transformed by three appointees of President Donald Trump, who had pledged to appoint justices he said would oppose abortion rights.

The court had never agreed to hear a case over an abortion ban so early in pregnancy until all three Trump appointees — Justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett — were on board.

A month ago, the justices also heard arguments over a uniquely designed Texas law that has succeeded in getting around the *Roe* and *Casey* decisions and banning abortions in the nation's second-largest state after about six weeks of pregnancy. The dispute over the Texas law revolves around whether the law can be challenged in federal court, rather than the right to an abortion.

Despite its unusually quick consideration of the issue, the court has yet to rule on the Texas law, and the justices have refused to put the law on hold while the matter is under legal review.

The Mississippi case poses questions central to the abortion right. Some of the debate Wednesday is likely to be over whether the court should abandon its long-held rule that states cannot ban abortion before the point of viability, at roughly 24 weeks.

More than 90% of abortions are performed in the first 13 weeks of pregnancy, well before viability, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Mississippi argues that viability is an arbitrary standard that doesn't take sufficient account of the state's interest in regulating abortion. It also contends that scientific advances have allowed some babies who were born earlier than 24 weeks to survive, though it does not argue that the line is anywhere near 15 weeks.

Only about 100 patients per year get abortions after 15 weeks at the Jackson Women's Health Organization, Mississippi's lone abortion clinic. The facility does not provide abortions after 16 weeks.

But the clinic argues that the court doesn't normally assess constitutional rights based on how few people are affected, and that the justices shouldn't do so in this case.

Joined by the Biden administration, the clinic also says that since *Roe*, the Supreme Court has consistently held that the "Constitution guarantees 'the right of the woman to choose to have an abortion before viability.'"

Erasing viability as the line between when abortions may and may not be banned would effectively overrule *Roe* and *Casey*, even if the justices do not explicitly do that, the clinic says.

Justice Clarence Thomas is the only member of the court who has openly called for *Roe* and *Casey* to be overruled. One question is how many of his conservative colleagues are willing to join him.

Among the questions justices ask when they consider jettisoning a previous ruling is not just whether it is wrong, but egregiously so.

That's a formulation Kavanaugh has used in a recent opinion, and Mississippi and many of its allies have devoted considerable space in their court filings to argue that *Roe* and *Casey* fit the description of being egregiously wrong.

"The conclusion that abortion is a constitutional right has no basis in text, structure, history, or tradition," Mississippi says.

The clinic responds by arguing that the very same arguments were considered and rejected by the court nearly 30 years ago in *Casey*. Only the membership of the court has changed since then, the clinic and its allies argue.

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In its earlier rulings, the court has rooted the right to abortion in the section of the 14th Amendment that says states cannot "deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law."

Same-sex marriage and other rights, based on the same provision but also not explicitly mentioned in the Constitution, could be threatened if Roe and Casey fall, the administration argues. Mississippi and its supporters dispute that those other decisions would be at risk.

Abortion arguments normally would find people camped out in front of the court for days in the hope of snagging some of the few seats available to the public. But with the courthouse closed because of COVID-19, there will be only a sparse audience of reporters, justices' law clerks and a handful of lawyers inside the courtroom.

A decision is expected by late June, a little more than four months before next year's congressional elections, and could become a campaign season rallying cry.

Japan suspends new flight reservations as omicron spreads

By MARI YAMAGUCHI and FOSTER KLUG Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japan continued its aggressive stance against a new coronavirus variant on Wednesday, asking international airlines to stop taking new reservations for all flights arriving in the country until the end of December in a further tightening of already strict border controls.

The transportation ministry said the request is an emergency precaution amid growing worry over the spread of the new omicron variant. The move by the world's third largest economy, coupled with its recent return to a ban on foreign visitors, is among the most stringent anywhere, and more in line with cloistered neighbor China than with some other democracies in the region. It comes as scientists work frantically to determine just how threatening omicron is.

Those who have already made reservations are not affected, although flights may be canceled if there are insufficient passengers, the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism said. Japan is a major transit hub for flights to and from Asia, and its huge importance economically means that its actions could have a wider influence. Transit flights won't be affected.

The decision comes as Japan confirmed a second case of the omicron variant in a person who arrived from Peru, one day after it reported its first case in a Namibian diplomat.

Much remains unknown about the new variant, including whether it is more contagious, as some health authorities suspect, whether it makes people more seriously ill, and whether it can thwart the vaccine.

The U.S. is moving to toughen testing requirements for international arrivals, including both vaccinated and unvaccinated people.

The precise testing protocols were still being finalized ahead of a speech by President Joe Biden planned for Thursday. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a statement that it was working toward requiring that all air travelers to the U.S. be tested for COVID-19 within a day before boarding their flight. Currently those who are fully vaccinated may present a test taken within three days of boarding.

Japan banned all foreign visitors starting Tuesday as an emergency precaution against the new variant. The ban tentatively extends through the end of the year. The government is also requiring Japanese citizens arriving in the country to quarantine for up to 14 days.

The World Health Organization warned Monday that the global risk from the omicron variant is "very high" based on early evidence, saying it could lead to surges with "severe consequences."

Recent findings indicate the mutant coronavirus was already in Europe close to a week before South Africa sounded the alarm.

The Netherlands' RIVM health institute disclosed that patient samples dating from Nov. 19 and 23 were found to contain the variant. It was on Nov. 24 that South African authorities reported the existence of the highly mutated virus to the World Health Organization.

That indicates omicron had a bigger head start in the Netherlands than previously believed.

The finding illustrates the difficulty in containing the virus in an age of jet travel and economic globalization. And it left the world once again whipsawed between hopes of returning to normal and fears that

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the worst is yet to come.

The pandemic has shown repeatedly that the virus “travels quickly because of our globalized, interconnected world,” said Dr. Albert Ko, an infectious disease specialist at the Yale School of Public Health. Until the vaccination drive reaches every country, “we’re going to be in this situation again and again.”

Brazil, which has recorded a staggering total of more than 600,000 COVID-19 deaths, reported finding the variant in two travelers returning from South Africa — the first known omicron cases in Latin America. The travelers were tested on Nov. 25, authorities said.

France recorded its first case, in the far-flung island territory of Reunion in the Indian Ocean. Authorities said the patient was a man who had returned to Reunion from South Africa and Mozambique on Nov. 20.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the United States’ top infectious disease expert, said much more will be known about omicron in the next several weeks, and “we’ll have a much better picture of what the challenge is ahead of us.”

In the meantime, a WHO official warned that given the growing number of omicron cases in South Africa and neighboring Botswana, parts of southern Africa could soon see infections skyrocket.

“There is a possibility that really we’re going to be seeing a serious doubling or tripling of the cases as we move along or as the week unfolds,” said Dr. Nicky Gumede-Moeletsj, a WHO regional virologist.

Cases began to increase rapidly in mid-November in South Africa, which is now seeing nearly 3,000 confirmed new infections per day.

Among the other countries with cases confirmed are Britain, 11 European Union nations, Australia, Canada and Israel. American disease trackers said omicron could already be in the United States, too, and probably will be detected soon.

“I am expecting it any day now,” said Scott Becker of the Association of Public Health Laboratories. “We expect it is here.”

While the variant was first identified by South African researchers, it is unclear where and when it originated, information that could help shed light on how fast it spreads.

The announcement from the Dutch on Tuesday could shape that timeline.

Previously, the Netherlands said it found the variant among passengers who came from South Africa on Friday, the same day the Dutch and other EU members began imposing flight bans and other restrictions on southern Africa. But the newly identified cases predate that.

NOS, the Netherlands’ public broadcaster, said that one of the two omicron samples came from a person who had been in southern Africa.

Many health officials tried to calm fears, insisting that vaccines remain the best defense and that the world must redouble its efforts to get the shots to every part of the globe.

After COVID-19 led to a one-year postponement of the Summer Games, Olympic organizers began to worry about the February Winter Games in Beijing. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said omicron would “certainly bring some challenges in terms of prevention and control.”

World markets seesawed on every piece of medical news, whether worrisome or reassuring. Stocks fell on Wall Street over virus fears as well as concerns about the Federal Reserve’s continued efforts to shore up the markets.

Some analysts think a serious economic downturn will probably be averted because many people have been vaccinated. But they also think a return to pre-pandemic levels of economic activity, especially in tourism, has been dramatically delayed.

Japan on Wednesday started offering coronavirus vaccine booster shots to health care workers amid growing concerns over the new variant.

Japan’s vaccination rollout got off to a slow start but surged from late May, and now about 77% of the population has been fully vaccinated — a main reason experts cite for Japan’s steady slowing of infections since September.

AP journalists from around the world contributed to this report.

Loyalty to family — instead of CNN — puts Cuomo at risk

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — There's family, and your job as a journalist. Chris Cuomo's willingness to put the latter at risk in service to his brother has led to his suspension by CNN.

The network took him off the air Tuesday, saying that material released by New York's attorney general shows that he played a greater role than previously acknowledged in defense of his brother, former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, as he fought sexual harassment charges.

Transcripts of emails and Chris Cuomo's testimony before state investigators revealed that he strategized regularly with the governor's aides, and tried to help them learn what other journalists were reporting about harassment allegations.

CNN said that he was more involved than its executives — not just the general public — had been aware of. "As a result, we have suspended Chris indefinitely, pending further evaluation," a CNN spokesperson said.

Neither Cuomo nor the lawyer who represented him in testimony before investigators for state Attorney General Letitia James this summer returned messages seeking comment.

The Cuomos are part of a New York political dynasty that began with their father, Mario, serving three terms as governor from 1982 to 1996. Andrew was in his third term before resigning earlier this year, and he burned to beat his dad's record.

Andrew was his father's most trusted aide and protector during Mario's first campaign and early years as governor — an example of loyalty that Chris grew up watching even though, at 51, he is more than 13 years younger than his brother.

They frequently describe themselves as best friends.

"He's my brother and I love him to death no matter what," Chris Cuomo said in his testimony this past July. "I only got one."

Still, they were fiercely competitive, said Michael Shnayerson, author of "The Contender," an unauthorized biography of Andrew that was published in 2015.

"Always, under the mockery and machismo, was a powerful bond — the Cuomos against the world," Shnayerson said. "I can imagine it all too easy for Chris to let that bond cloud his judgment when it came to reporting the news, and following up on leads about Andrew's political enemies."

Throughout his testimony, Chris Cuomo frequently returns to family when asked to explain his frequent contact — often combative — with Andrew's aides as they tried to figure out a way to save the governor's job.

"This is my brother, and I'm trying to help my brother through a situation where he has told me he did nothing wrong," Chris testified. "And that's it for me. How do I help protect my family? How do I protect him? Probably should have been thinking more about how I protect myself, which just never occurred to me."

James' investigation found that Andrew Cuomo sexually harassed at least 11 women. He resigned as governor in August to avoid a likely impeachment trial.

The last time he talked to his brother about the charges, Chris Cuomo said during his testimony, was to figure out what was going to happen and what he would tell their 90-year-old mother.

Cuomo has insisted he has done nothing to try and influence CNN's coverage of his brother's political problems, and that it would be quickly found out if he did.

While people can relate to wanting to help a family member, his primary obligation as a journalist is to CNN's viewers, said Kathleen Culver, director of the Center for Journalism Ethics at the University of Wisconsin. These revelations can damage CNN's reputation, and all journalists, at a time people are already suspicious of the profession, she said.

Journalists need to establish independence from newsmakers. Cuomo "was not independent of his brother in any sense of the term, and that's a very, very big problem," Culver said.

When it was first reported by The Washington Post last May that Cuomo had strategized with his brother's

aides, CNN said that it was inappropriate but did not discipline him.

"When Chris admitted to us that he had offered advice to his brother's staff, he broke our rules and we acknowledged that publicly," the CNN spokesperson said on Tuesday. "But we also appreciated the unique position he was in and understood his need to put family first and job second."

At the request of his brother's aides, Cuomo also used his contacts to find out what other journalists were going to report, most notably the New Yorker's Ronan Farrow. Cuomo said "the idea of one reporter calling another to find out what's coming down the pipe is completely business as usual."

For competitive reasons, journalists are frequently curious about what rivals are working on, although a phone call for that reason would likely result in an angry hang-up.

In this case, Cuomo was seeking "inside information that would be valuable to his family member," Culver said. "It is not inside information that serves the public. That's what makes this extraordinary."

CNN's ultimate decision on Cuomo's future is complicated, in part because it draws attention to how it has treated the issue in the past and its own efforts to investigate his activities. Cuomo testified that he didn't tell anyone at CNN that he was contacting other journalists to find out about the Farrow piece.

"His suspension from CNN is the correct move, and something that should have happened sooner," said Ben Bogardus, a journalism professor at Connecticut's Quinnipiac University. "The longer it dragged on, the more credibility CNN lost."

"Cuomo Prime Time" has averaged 1.3 million viewers a night so far this year, the Nielsen company said. While its audience is down sharply from the 2020 election year, like it is for many cable news programs, it's still CNN's most-watched show and Cuomo's exit would leave a big hole.

His suspension makes some of the advice that Cuomo told investigators that he gave to his brother during the harassment scandal sound eerily like it could apply to his own situation.

"You have to tell the truth," Cuomo said he advised his brother. "You have to not be coaxed to tell the truth. You have to own what was wrong. You have to apologize. And you have to tell people you've learned from this."

Whether or not he gets that chance is an open question.

Unique effort reopens girls' schools in an Afghan province

By LEE KEATH Associated Press

HERAT, Afghanistan (AP) — High school girls are sitting at home almost everywhere in Afghanistan, forbidden to attend class by the Taliban rulers. But there's one major exception.

For weeks, girls in the western province of Herat have been back in high school classrooms — the fruit of a unique, concerted effort by teachers and parents to persuade local Taliban administrators to allow them to reopen.

Taliban officials never formally approved the reopening after the lobbying campaign, but they also didn't prevent it either when teachers and parents started classes on their own in early October.

"Parents, students and teachers joined hand in hand to do this," said Mohammed Saber Meshal, the head of the Herat teachers' union who helped organize the campaign. "This is the only place where community activists and teachers took the risk of staying and talking to the Taliban."

The success in Herat highlights a significant difference in the Taliban's current rule over Afghanistan from their previous one in the late 1990s. Back then, the militants were uncompromising in their hard-line ideology, banning women from public life and work and barring all girls from education. They used force and brutal punishments to enforce the rules.

This time, they appear to recognize they cannot be as ruthless in an Afghanistan that has changed dramatically in the past 20 years. They have imposed some old rules but have been ambiguous about what is allowed and what is not. The ambiguity might aim to avoid alienating the public as the Taliban wrestle with a near-total economic collapse, a shutdown in international funding, an alarming rise in hunger and a dangerous insurgency by Islamic State group militants.

That has left small margins where Afghans can try to push back.

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When the Taliban seized power in August, most schools were closed because of COVID-19. Under heavy international pressure, the Taliban soon reopened schools for girls in grades 1-6, along with boys' schools at all levels.

But they have not allowed girls in grades 7-12 to return, saying they must first ensure classes are held in an "Islamic manner." The Taliban also barred most women from government jobs, their largest place of employment.

In Herat province, however, teachers quickly began to organize.

"When the Taliban came, we were very worried, because of everything before," said Basira Basiratkah, principal of the Tajrobawai Girls School in Herat, the provincial capital.

Teachers union officials met with the Taliban governor and head of the education department. They didn't raise issue of girls schools at first, focusing on building a relationship until "the Taliban came to see that we represent the community," Meshaal said.

When teachers did ask for a reopening, Taliban officials balked, saying they could not allow it without an order from the government in Kabul.

The teachers kept pressing. About 40 female principals, including Basiratkah, met with senior Taliban education officials in September to address their main concerns.

"We assured them that the classes are segregated, with only women teachers, and the girls wear proper hijab," Basiratkah said. "We don't need to change anything. We are Muslims and we already observe everything Islam requires."

By October, the teachers felt they had the Taliban's tacit agreement not to stand in the way. Teachers began spreading the word on Facebook pages and messaging app channels that girls' high schools would reopen Oct. 3. Parents created a telephone chain to pass along the news, and students told classmates.

Mastoura, who has two daughters attending Tajrobawai in the first and eighth grades, called other parents, urging them to bring their girls to school. Some worried the Taliban would harass the girls or that militants might attack. Mastoura and other women still escort their daughters to school daily.

"We had concerns, and we have them still," said Mastoura, who like many Afghans uses one name. "But daughters must get an education. Without education, your life is held back."

Fadieh Ismailzadeh, a 14-year-old in the ninth grade, said she cried with happiness at the news. "We had lost all hope that schools would reopen," she said.

Not all the students showed up when the doors opened at Tajrobawai. But as parents became more confident, classes filled after a few days, Basiratkah said. About 3,900 students are in grades 1-12.

On a recent day, girls in a 10th grade chemistry class took notes as a teacher explained the elements that make up water. Lines of younger students marched through the halls to the schoolyard.

Shehabeddin Saqeb, the Taliban education director for Herat province, insists the group has no problem with girls going to school.

"We openly tell everyone that they should come to school," he told The Associated Press. "The schools are open without any problem. We never issued any official order saying high-school aged girls should not go to school."

Herat is the only place where girls' high schools are open across the province, although schools also have reopened in a few individual districts in northern Afghanistan, including the city of Mazar-e Sharif.

Meshaal pointed to changes within the Taliban, saying some factions are more open. "They understand that people will resist on the subject of education."

He said the Taliban are not corrupt, unlike the ousted, internationally backed government.

"With the previous government, if we proposed something for the good of the schools, they would throw the idea into the trash because they couldn't profit from it," he said.

"The Taliban spent all their time in the mountains fighting. They don't know administration. So when we meet them, we try to give them advice and, after negotiations, they start to come around," he said.

Still, teachers are struggling. Like other government employees, they have not been paid for months. The education department has not provided funding for other needs like maintenance and supplies, Meshaal said.

And the opening of girls' high school in Herat remains an exception. Other parts of the country have

had less success.

Teachers in the southern city of Kandahar approached local Taliban officials about reopening girls' high schools but were refused, said Fahima Popal, principal of Hino No. 1 High School for girls. Officials said they could do nothing without orders from the central Education Ministry. In the meantime, Popal said parents have been asking her when their daughters can return to class.

"We hope that one day we'll have good news for them," Popal said. But she said she believes it is better to wait for the central government to act rather than repeat the Herat experiment. If provincial authorities allow a reopening, the ministry could reverse their decision, which "would hurt students and teachers," she said.

A full return of girls is a top demand of the international community and likely must take place before U.N. agencies will agree to pay teachers' salaries directly.

So far, the Taliban have refused to set a timetable and most schools are starting a winter break until March. In a speech Saturday, Taliban Prime Minister Mohammed Hassan Akhund insisted "women are already getting an education," adding only: "There is hope to broaden it, as God allows."

—
AP correspondent Rahim Faiez contributed.

Abortion debate epicenter: Mississippi clinic stays open

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — As the U.S. Supreme Court hears a Mississippi case that could topple abortion rights nationwide, the state's only abortion clinic is busier than ever: Volunteers continue to escort patients into the bright pink building while protesters outside beseech women not to end their pregnancies.

In recent years, Jackson Women's Health Organization saw patients two or three days a week. It recently doubled its hours to treat women from Texas, where a law took effect in early September banning most abortions at about six weeks, and from Louisiana, where clinics are filling with Texas patients.

The case being argued before the nation's high court Wednesday is about a 2018 Mississippi law that would ban most abortions after 15 weeks of pregnancy. But the stakes are high because the state's Republican attorney general is asking the court — remade with three conservative justices nominated by former President Donald Trump — to use the case to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the court's 1973 ruling that declared a nationwide right to abortion.

The Supreme Court has never allowed states to ban abortion before viability, the point at roughly 24 weeks when a fetus can survive outside the womb.

"I just hope that the Supreme Court holds precedent on what they're supposed to be doing, but my hopes are not that high," the Mississippi clinic director, Shannon Brewer, said Tuesday from Washington.

Brewer said she has never been more concerned about abortion rights in the U.S. than she is now.

She has good reason: The Guttmacher Institute, a research organization that supports abortion rights, says that if *Roe v. Wade* were overturned or fundamentally weakened, 21 states have laws or constitutional amendments "that would make them certain to attempt to ban abortion as quickly as possible."

Mississippi is one of the states with an abortion ban that was set before *Roe* and would take effect if that precedent is overturned. Republican Gov. Tate Reeves spoke Sunday at "Pray Together for Life," an event hosted by the Family Research Council.

"Abortion is barbaric," Reeves declared. "Abortion is evil. It's probably the greatest evil of our day."

Reeves noted that he presided over the Mississippi Senate in 2018 and helped push the bill with the 15-week abortion ban to the desk of then-Gov. Phil Bryant, a fellow Republican.

Like Bryant, Reeves often says he wants to make Mississippi the safest place in America for unborn children. Yet, Mississippi has the highest infant mortality rate and one of the highest rates of births to teenage mothers, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Valencia Robinson is executive director of Mississippi In Action, an organization that supports abortion rights and works on other sexual health issues. She said restricting access to abortion disproportionately

hurts Black women who are more likely to live in poverty.

A Supreme Court decision is likely months away. As both abortion-rights and anti-abortion activists anxiously wait to see how justices will rule, the clinic will continue operating. Given heightened security concerns amid the court hearing, however, Brewer said she would not allow The Associated Press or other news organizations inside this week. In the past, she has allowed the AP inside the building, which has a small waiting room with magazines and free condoms and a conference room where groups of women receive state-mandated counseling at least 24 hours before an abortion.

Women or girls in the first few weeks of pregnancy receive medication to induce abortion. Those further along receive surgical abortions in one of the clinic's operating rooms. Out-of-state physicians work at the clinic because it's been years since any Mississippi physician has been willing to perform abortions there.

The clinic — known by supporters as the Pink House — is in Jackson's eclectic Fondren neighborhood, a short drive from the Mississippi Capitol, where legislators have been voting to restrict abortion access for decades. On many days, the clinic is enveloped by a cacophony of noise from bullhorn-wielding protesters outside the black iron fence and clinic escorts who blare rock music inside the perimeter.

The scene was similar on Tuesday, when Keith Dalton, pastor of a nondenominational Christian church, raised his voice at men who had driven women there and told a man who sat in a car in the fenced-off parking lot that he would adopt the couple's baby.

"Come on, man ... don't let your child be killed," Dalton yelled. Pointing to the clinic where the man's female companion had gone, he continued: "You want to talk about something that will destroy a relationship? This will destroy your relationship with your girlfriend or fiancée or wife or whatever."

Tanya Britton, a past president of Pro-Life Mississippi, stepped up and said loudly: "In the name of Jesus — have mercy on your child, have mercy on her or him. God loves you and does not desire this for you or your baby."

Sharon Lobert, a retired nurse, wears a rainbow-striped Clinic Escort vest while walking women from the parking lot into the building. She said she has learned to tune out protesters and her goal is to ensure women are treated with dignity.

"My strategy is to only pay attention when I think I can deflect their harassment away from one particular woman," Lobert said.

The Mississippi Health Department website has abortion statistics dating back to 1980. The largest number of abortions in a single year since then was 7,574 in 1991. The smallest was 4,272 in 2015. White people received the most abortions until about the mid-1990s, when they were surpassed by Black people.

About 59% of Mississippi residents are white, and about 38% are Black. During the past five years, about 75% of those receiving an abortion in Mississippi were Black and about 21% were white. Race was listed as "other" or "unknown" for the rest.

"The right to decide whether or when to have a child is essential for social, economic and racial equality, reproductive autonomy and the right to determine our own future," Robinson said. "Mississippians know what's best for them and their families."

Follow Emily Wagster Pettus on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/EWagsterPettus>.

Authorities: Student kills 3, wounds 8 at Michigan school

By MIKE HOUSEHOLDER and RYAN KRYSKA Associated Press

OXFORD TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — A 15-year-old sophomore opened fire at his Michigan high school on Tuesday, killing three students, including a 16-year-old boy who died in a deputy's patrol car on the way to a hospital, authorities said. Eight other people were wounded, some critically.

Oakland County Sheriff Michael Bouchard said late Tuesday that investigators were still trying to determine a motive for the shooting at Oxford High School in Oxford Township, a community of about 22,000 people roughly 30 miles (48 kilometers) north of Detroit.

"The person that's got the most insight and the motive is not talking," Bouchard said at a news conference.

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The suspect's father had bought the 9 mm Sig Sauer used in the shooting on Friday, Bouchard said, adding that he did not know why the man bought the gun. Bouchard said the suspect had practiced shooting with the gun and "posted pictures of the target and the weapon."

The three students who were killed were 16-year-old Tate Myre, 14-year-old Hana St. Juliana, and 17-year-old Madisyn Baldwin. Bouchard said Myre died in a patrol car as a deputy tried to get him to a hospital.

Bouchard said authorities were made aware of allegations circulating on social media that there had been threats of a shooting at the roughly 1,700-student school, but he said they didn't know about the rumors until after the attack. Bouchard stressed how crucial it is for tips of the kind to be sent to authorities, while also cautioning against spreading social media rumors about the attack before a full investigation.

Undersheriff Mike McCabe downplayed the significance of an incident in early November when a deer head was thrown off the school roof, which he said was "absolutely unrelated" to the shooting. The vandalism prompted school administrators to post two letters to parents on the school's website earlier in November, saying they were responding to rumors of a threat against the school but had found none.

Authorities didn't immediately release the shooting suspect's name, but Bouchard said deputies arrested him within minutes of arriving at the school in response to a flood of 911 calls about the attack, which happened shortly before 1 p.m. He said the deputies arrested him after he emerged from a bathroom with the gun, which he said had seven rounds of ammunition still in it.

"I believe they literally saved lives having taken down the suspect with a loaded firearm while still in the building," Bouchard said.

McCabe said the suspect's parents visited their son where he's being held and advised him not to talk to investigators, as is his right. Police must seek permission from a juvenile suspect's parents or guardian to speak with them, he added.

Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald issued a statement Tuesday evening saying her office expects to issue charges quickly and that an update would be given Wednesday.

Bouchard said the suspect had no prior run-ins with his department and he wasn't aware of any disciplinary history at school.

"That's part of our investigation to determine what happened prior to this event and if some signs were missed how were they missed and why," he said.

President Joe Biden, before delivering remarks at a community college in Rosemount, Minnesota, said: "As we learn the full details, my heart goes out to the families enduring the unimaginable grief of losing a loved one."

The school was placed on lockdown after the attack, with some children sheltering in locked classrooms while officers searched the premises. They were later taken to a nearby Meijer grocery store to be picked up by their parents.

The district said in a statement that all of its schools would be closed for the rest of the week.

Isabel Flores, a 15-year-old ninth grader, told WJBK-TV that she and other students heard gunshots and saw another student bleeding from the face. They then ran from the area through the rear of the school, she said.

Authorities said they were searching the suspect's cellphone, school video footage and social media posts for any evidence of a possible motive.

School administrators had posted two letters to parents on the school's website in November, saying they were responding to rumors of a threat against the school following a bizarre vandalism incident.

According to a Nov. 4 letter written by Principal Steve Wolf, someone threw a deer head into a courtyard from the school's roof, painted several windows on the roof with red acrylic paint and used the same paint on concrete near the school building during the early morning hours. Without specifically referencing that incident, a second post on Nov. 12 assured "there has been no threat to our building nor our students."

Both the sheriff and undersheriff emphasized that Tuesday's shooting was unrelated to the deer head or any earlier investigation by their office.

"That was a different incident, different student," McCabe said.

A concerned parent, Robin Redding, said her son, Treshan Bryant, is a 12th grader at the school but

stayed home Tuesday. Redding said her son had heard threats that there could be a shooting.

"This couldn't be just random," she said.

Bryant said he texted several younger cousins in the morning and they said they didn't want to go to school, and he got a bad feeling. He asked his mom if he could do his assignments online.

Bryant said he had heard vague threats "for a long time now" about plans for a shooting.

At a vigil at Lakepoint Community Church on Tuesday night, Leeann Dersa choked back tears as she hugged friends and neighbors. Dersa has lived nearly all of her 73 years in Oxford and her grandchildren attended the high school.

"Scared us all something terrible. It's awful," Dersa said of the shooting.

Pastor Jesse Holt said news of the shooting flooded in to him and his wife, including texts from some of the 20 to 25 students who are among the 400-member congregation.

"Some were very scared, hiding under their desks and texting us, 'We're safe, we're OK. We heard gunshots, but we're OK.' They were trying to calm us, at least that's how it felt," he said.

Associated Press writers Corey Williams in West Bloomfield, Michigan, Kathleen Foody in Chicago, Josh Boak in Rosemount, Minnesota, and David Aguilar in Oxford Township contributed to this report.

The spelling of one of the victim's names has been corrected to Hana St. Juliana, instead of Hanna St. Julian.

3 lawyers readying arguments in high court abortion case

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Leading up to Wednesday's major abortion case at the Supreme Court, the justices have heard from thousands of people and organizations urging the court to either save or scrap two historic abortion decisions.

But on Wednesday they'll hear from just three lawyers: one representing the state of Mississippi, another representing Mississippi's only abortion clinic and the last representing the Biden administration. For each, it's a chance to be part of what is likely to be a historic case.

The three are scheduled to appear before the justices for just over an hour's worth of arguments in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, though the arguments will likely go longer. Mississippi is asking the justices to overturn two seminal decisions, *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, decisions that say women have a constitutional right to abortion before a fetus is viable.

Lawyers who argued those historic cases became famous in their own ways. Sarah Weddington was just 26 when in 1971 she argued *Roe v. Wade* on behalf of Norma Jean McCorvey, who was known by the pseudonym Jane Roe. Weddington went on to a career in government and academia.

Opposing her was Texas attorney Jay Floyd, who became infamous for opening his argument with a failed attempt at humor. "It's an old joke, but when a man argues against two beautiful ladies like this, they're going to have the last word," he said. When the high court ordered the case re-argued, Floyd was replaced.

Two decades later, when the court heard arguments in the *Casey* case, Pennsylvania Attorney General Ernest D. Preate Jr. argued in support of his state's abortion law. He later spent time in prison for secretly taking campaign contributions from the operators of illegal gambling machines. The lawyer arguing on behalf of President George H.W. Bush's administration and in support of Pennsylvania, meanwhile, was Ken Starr. It was two years before he was tapped to lead the investigation that led to President Bill Clinton's impeachment. The third attorney who argued in the case, Kathryn Kolbert, co-founded the Center for Reproductive Rights, which is involved in Wednesday's case.

Here are some things to know about the advocates arguing this week:

SCOTT G. STEWART

Scott G. Stewart will defend a Mississippi law that would ban abortions after 15 weeks. Lower courts declared the law unconstitutional.

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Though the case marks the first Supreme Court appearance for Stewart, 39, he will be familiar to some of the justices. A graduate of Princeton and Stanford's law school, he was a law clerk to Justice Clarence Thomas in 2016 when the court dealt abortion opponents a loss, striking down Texas' widely replicated rules that required doctors who perform abortions to have admitting privileges at nearby hospitals and forced clinics to meet hospital-like standards for outpatient surgery.

Thomas dissented from that decision, and Stewart's argument that the justices should overturn Roe and Casey is a position that Thomas himself has taken.

Before becoming Mississippi's solicitor general, Stewart worked for the Department of Justice during the Trump administration. In that role, he defended administration policies including making asylum-seekers wait in Mexico for hearings in U.S. immigration court and preventing a pregnant teen who entered the country illegally from obtaining an abortion while in federal custody.

JULIE RIKELMAN

Arguing against the state of Mississippi is Julie Rikelman of the Center for Reproductive Rights who represents the Jackson Women's Health Organization, Mississippi's lone abortion clinic. The clinic sued after the state passed its ban on abortions after 15 weeks.

Because of other restrictions the state has put on abortions, the clinic only performs abortions up to 16 weeks. It says about 100 of the abortions it performs every year occur after 15 weeks.

Rikelman, 49, will be arguing before the court for the second time. Last year, before the death of liberal Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her replacement by conservative Justice Amy Coney Barrett, the Harvard law graduate argued and won another abortion case. In that case, the center represented a clinic and doctors asking the court to strike down a Louisiana law regulating abortion clinics. Rikelman has said she made the argument on very little sleep, not because she was nervous but because her hotel's fire alarm was blaring much of the night.

Rikelman immigrated to the United States when she was six. Her family is Jewish and fled Ukraine and to escape discrimination. Rikelman says her background made her "more aware of issues of fairness and discrimination" and helped spark an interest in reproductive rights.

ELIZABETH PRELOGAR

The Biden administration's top Supreme Court lawyer, Elizabeth Prelogar, will argue for the federal government. The administration's position is that Roe and Casey were correctly decided and that overturning them would cause "grave harm."

Prelogar, 41, will be making her eleventh argument before the court. Just weeks ago she argued a different Supreme Court case involving abortion. That case was about a restrictive Texas abortion law that prohibits abortion after cardiac activity is detected in a fetus. That's usually around six weeks and before some women know they are pregnant. Prelogar was arguing that the federal government can mount a federal court challenge to the law. The justices have not yet announced their decision in that case.

Before being confirmed to her current position, Prelogar served on special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation of Russian meddling in the 2016 election. She speaks Russian and lived there as a Fulbright scholar. A graduate of Emory and Harvard law school, she has the rare distinction of having been a law clerk for two Supreme Court justices, Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Elena Kagan. She is also a former Miss Idaho.

Prelogar is only the second woman to lead the solicitor general's office on a permanent basis. Kagan led the office during President Barack Obama's administration before becoming a justice.

Associated Press researcher Jennifer Farrar contributed to this report.

Councilman Andre Dickens wins Atlanta mayor race over Moore

By JEFF AMY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — City Council member Andre Dickens won a runoff election Tuesday to become Atlanta's next mayor, riding a surge of support that powered him past the council's current president, Felicia Moore, after finishing second to her in November.

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Dickens won a campaign dominated by concern over rising violent crime in the city, arguing he would be more effective than Moore, who had often been a sometimes-lonely critic of previous mayors in her 20 years on the City Council. Moore had been the leading candidate by a wide margin in the first round of voting on Nov. 2 among 14 candidates in a nonpartisan race.

Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms created a wide-open succession race when she announced in May that she wouldn't seek a second term.

The 47-year-old Dickens, an Atlanta native and engineer by training, joined the council in 2013. He argued that his broad range of experience would allow him to address crime and other city issues including affordable housing and improving opportunity for poorer residents. Other issues in the race included bolstering struggling city services and keeping the wealthy Buckhead neighborhood from seceding.

"We voted for progress and a problem solver, for a bridge builder, for transformation," Dickens told a crowd of hundreds during his victory speech Tuesday night. "And this work will start right now. We can't wait any longer to address these issues."

Dickens went from trailing the pack to take second on Nov. 2 and make the runoff, ending the comeback attempt of two-term former Mayor Kasim Reed, who finished third. That snowballing support continued in the runoff, with endorsements by Bottoms, U.S. Rep. and Democratic Party of Georgia Chair Nikema Williams, Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis and Sharon Gay, an attorney who finished fourth in Nov. 2 voting.

"I draw circles, I don't draw lines," Dickens said. "And the circle tonight got real large."

Like many cities across the country, Atlanta has been dealing with a spike in killings. As of Nov. 13, homicides rose 10% over the same period last year and 57% compared with 2019, Atlanta police data shows. Several of those killings captured widespread attention.

Dickens has pledged to increase the number of police officers, arrest gang leaders and implement community policing. He says he may keep current Police Chief Rodney Bryant, who came out of retirement in 2020 after a previous chief stepped down following a fatal police shooting of a Black man that led to unrest.

Dickens also wants to increase affordable housing, improve infrastructure and ensure current residents qualify for high-paying jobs. He acknowledged the city's problems Tuesday night, but then pivoted to optimism about the city's ability to change.

"Like they say, Atlanta influences everything," Dickens said. "And it's time that we use that influence to make some real change. Atlanta needs to show the world that we are leading, that we are leading on public safety, on criminal justice reform, that we are leading on affordable housing and eliminating the inequality that we have."

Moore, 60, made a call for unity in her concession speech, saying there's no difference between her supporters and Dickens' because "we're all camp Atlanta."

"We have to be called to do the thing that we wanted everyone else to do, and that's bring this city together," Moore said, specifically calling on Buckhead residents to work with Dickens and spurn secession and for Dickens to make sure he gives access to all groups.

Alexander Dawes, a 25-year-old Black man, said he voted for Dickens on Tuesday at Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church. Dickens' transparency — and his stance on public safety — were key factors in his decision, Dawes said.

Getting more officers on the streets is only part of the solution, he said.

"I think there are multiple approaches to address crime," Dawes said. "Of course, staffing is important but also having officers present in the community. That's important to build back that trust between the police and the community."

Jennifer and Joe Moyers, both 60, said they voted for Moore. She was the candidate who had the most focus on curbing crime, Jennifer Moyers said.

Some of Moore's critics attacked her as the favorite of white voters, a frequent tactic in a city where many white and Black voters are divided by income and geography. Both Moore and Dickens are Black. Moore dismissed the notion that her support should be held against her.

Moore touted her record to appeal to voters hungry for change and position herself as someone who

would bring accountability and transparency to City Hall. But Dickens portrayed Moore as a naysayer and someone who has been unable to work with others.

Dickens currently works for TechBridge, a nonprofit that tries to use technology to aid other charitable groups. Dickens also founded a program to train people for technology work, trying to broaden access to high-paying jobs in Atlanta. He earlier ran a family-owned furniture store chain that collapsed in bankruptcy a decade ago, something that Dickens blamed on the effects of the Great Recession.

EXPLAINER: What are Colombia's ex-FARC splinter groups?

By ASTRIN SUÁREZ and MANUEL RUEDA Associated Press

BOGOTA, Colombia (AP) — The Biden administration revoked the terrorist designation of Colombia's former FARC guerrilla army on Tuesday, five years after the rebel group signed a peace deal with the government. However, it imposed the same designation on two splinter groups that are still fighting in remote pockets of the South American country.

The FARC holdouts newly designated by the United States as foreign terrorist organizations are the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army — known by the Spanish acronym of FARC-EP --- and Segunda Marquetalia.

Here are more details on these newly designated terrorist groups:

HOW DID THE SPLINTER GROUPS ARISE?

After five decades of internal conflict that killed an estimated 26,000 people and forced more than 6 million to flee their homes, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia signed a peace deal in which 13,000 fighters gave up their weapons in exchange for numerous concessions from the government, including development programs for rural areas and the opportunity for former guerrilla leaders to participate in local politics and avoid time in prison.

But a group of about 1,000 fighters led by commander Néstor Gregorio Vera refused to lay down their weapons and continued to conduct attacks and kidnappings in southeastern Colombia. These fighters now use the acronym FARC-EP.

In 2019, three years after the peace deal was signed, former FARC commander Iván Márquez announced he would be taking up arms again in a video shot at an undisclosed location, creating the Segunda Marquetalia group.

Márquez, whose real name is Luciano Marin, was the FARC's lead negotiator during peace talks with the government. He accused the Colombian government of not keeping its promises and of failing to stop the murders of dozens of former FARC fighters. When Márquez announced his return to arms, the former FARC commander and some of his close associates were under investigation for drug trafficking in Colombia and the United States.

HOW LARGE ARE THESE HOLDOUTS AND HOW DO THEY OPERATE?

The FARC splinter groups are fragmented and lack a central command structure. Security analysts in Colombia also say they are not ideologically oriented and are mainly focused on controlling drug trafficking routes, illegal mines and other illicit economies.

A report published in September by the Institute for Peace and Development Studies, a Colombian research group, estimates the splinter groups have around 5,000 members, most are new recruits, though there are also hundreds of former FARC fighters in their ranks.

The Colombian government says the FARC-EP and Segunda Marquetalia have assassinated human rights leaders, as well as dozens of former fighters who gave up their weapons during the 2016 peace deal. Colombian officials also say these splinter groups were behind a recent attempt to assassinate President Iván Duque in northeastern Colombia.

WHAT DOES BEING DESIGNATED A TERRORIST ORGANIZATION ENTAIL?

Members of Segunda Marquetalia and FARC-EP cannot hold accounts in U.S. banks or receive any kind of support from the U.S. government or its contractors, and any private organization that does business with them also risks being sanctioned. Being designated as terrorist groups could also make these organizations a priority for the U.S. military.

WHAT HAPPENS WITH THE ORIGINAL FARC GROUP?

The group formerly known as the FARC are now a political party in Colombia called the Common People's Party, which has 10 seats in the nation's congress. After being removed from the U.S. terrorist list the group's members will be able to participate in U.S. funded activities such as programs to remove landmines in Colombia's countryside or rural development programs that benefit farmers in Colombia.

The State Department said removing the FARC's terrorist designation will facilitate peace building efforts in Colombia and work with former combatants, but it also pointed out that former FARC leaders can still face charges in the United States for drug trafficking and other crimes.

Case against Jussie Smollett focuses on how 'hoax' unraveled

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Prosecutors' case against Jussie Smollett has focused on how Chicago police say they determined that what they initially believed was a horrific hate crime was actually a fake assault staged by the ex-"Empire" actor with help from two brothers.

Testimony will continue Wednesday in the trial, which is expected to last about a week.

A lead investigator in the case, Michael Theis, said Tuesday that the brothers — who worked with Smollett on the Chicago set of "Empire" — detailed for police how the actor orchestrated the hoax. They said Smollett told them via text message to meet him "on the low," paid for supplies including a clothesline later fashioned into a noose and took them for a "dry run" prior to the January 2019 alleged attack.

Theis, who now is assistant director for research and development for the Chicago Police Department, said roughly two dozen detectives clocked some 3,000 hours on the investigation, rebutting a defense attorney's statement that they rushed to judgment. He said police were excited when they were able to track the movements of two suspected attackers using surveillance video and cellphone and records from ride-sharing services.

"The crime was a hate crime, a horrible hate crime," Theis said, noting Smollett — who is Black and gay — reported that his attackers put a noose around his neck and poured bleach on him. He said the case had become national and international news and that "everybody from the mayor on down" wanted it solved, a reference to then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

Defense attorney Nenyé Uche has said the brothers — who also worked on the set of "Empire" — attacked Smollett because they didn't like him "because of who he is" and suggested Tuesday that the brothers were homophobic.

Smollett is charged with felony disorderly conduct for making what prosecutors say was a false police report. The class 4 felony carries a prison sentence of up to three years, but experts have said if Smollett is convicted he likely would be placed on probation and perhaps ordered to perform community service.

After police arrested brothers Abimbola and Olabingo Osundairo, the men said Smollett wanted to stage the attack because he was unhappy about how the TV studio handled hate mail the actor had received, Theis said. He said investigators checked out the brothers' account — including that the actor picked them up days before the attack and drove them around the downtown neighborhood where he lived and talked about what would happen — and corroborated their version of events using GPS, cellphone records and video evidence. Police found no instance where they concluded the men were lying, he added.

"At the end of the investigation, we determined that the alleged hate crime was actually a staged event," Theis said, and the Osundairo brothers were released.

Jurors were shown surveillance video of the brothers buying supplies, including a red hat they told police Smollett wanted them to wear to resemble supporters of then-President Donald Trump, and a piece of clothesline police said was later fashioned into the noose. Jurors also saw a still image from a video that Theis said showed Smollett returning home the night of the alleged attack, with the clothesline draped around his shoulders. The clothesline was wrapped around his neck when officers arrived, Theis said, leading detectives to believe Smollett may have retied it.

Uche has portrayed the Osundairo brothers as unreliable, and said when police searched their home

they found heroin and guns. The brothers will testify during the trial, but it's unknown if Smollett will.

Uche asked Theis on cross-examination about a homophobic word one of the brothers used. Theis said there was a message containing a slur but that he doesn't know if that makes the man homophobic. Uche also asked Theis if he was aware one of the brothers attacked someone at the TV studio where "Empire" was filmed because he was gay.

"One individual said it happened, but I don't know that it happened," Theis said.

Uche also sought to discredit the police investigation, suggesting detectives ignored possible leads. And he said a \$3,500 check the actor paid the brothers was for personal training so he could prepare for an upcoming music video, not for carrying out the hoax, as prosecutors allege. Theis said the memo on the check said it was for "nutrition" and "training."

Uche also has suggested that a third attacker was involved. One area resident said she saw a white man with "reddish brown hair" who appeared to be waiting for someone that night, according to police reports. She told a detective that when the man turned away from her, she "could see hanging out from underneath his jacket what appeared to be a rope."

Under cross-examination, Theis acknowledged that he saw that statement but did not send a detective to re-interview the woman. He said she had seen the man a few hours before the alleged attack and that "the rope was a different color."

Check out the AP's complete coverage of the Jussie Smollett case.

4 jurors seated for Kim Potter trial, many more needed

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Prosecutors and defense attorneys for the suburban Minneapolis police officer charged in Daunte Wright's death are to resume jury selection Wednesday after seating four the first day.

Kim Potter, 49, sat quietly Tuesday as attorneys and Judge Regina Chu probed potential jurors' for what they knew about the case and about their views of protests against police brutality that had become frequent in Minneapolis, even before George Floyd's death.

Potter's attorneys made clear that jurors would hear directly from the former officer herself, who resigned two days after she shot and killed Wright, a Black motorist, on April 11. Potter, who is white, has said she made a mistake by grabbing her handgun instead of the Taser she meant to draw.

"Officer Potter will testify and tell you what she remembers happened, so you will know not just from the video but from the officers at the scene and Officer Potter herself what was occurring," Paul Engh, one of her attorneys, told one potential juror.

"I think (you) should be quite interested in hearing what she had to say."

Six days have been set aside for jury selection, with opening statements Dec. 8.

Wright was shot in Brooklyn Center in the midst of former Minneapolis Officer Derek Chauvin's murder trial in Floyd's death, just 10 miles (16 kilometers) away. Jury selection for Potter frequently followed a similar path as at Chauvin's trial, with potential jurors questioned about their attitudes toward Black Lives Matter, policing and protests.

Potter is charged with first- and second-degree manslaughter. She shot Wright as he tried to drive away from a traffic stop. Wright's death sparked several nights of protests in Brooklyn Center.

The jurors seated Tuesday are a medical editor, a retired special education teacher, a Target operations manager and a woman whose occupation wasn't given. The court described the four as two white men, one in his 20s and one in his 50s; a white woman in her 60s; and an Asian woman in her 40s.

The medical editor said he has a very unfavorable view of the "blue lives matter" slogan, saying he believes it's less about supporting police than about countering the Black Lives Matter movement.

But he also said he opposes the movement to abolish or defund the police.

"I absolutely believe there's a need for change," he said. "But I think defund the police sends a message, a negative message. ... I don't agree with that message and I don't agree with the approach that

was taken to defund the police.”

The Target employee, who also plays bass in a rock band, described himself as somewhat distrustful of police but said he recognized “that it’s a very hard job.”

The woman whose occupation wasn’t given described herself as a “rule follower” who said she felt police officers should be respected. She said on a questionnaire that she somewhat agreed that police officers should not be second-guessed for decisions they make on the job.

“I think sometimes you just react, and sometimes it might be a wrong reaction, but, you know, mistakes happen,” she said. “People make mistakes.”

Still, she said she would make a decision based on the evidence.

Seven jurors were dismissed, including a handful who expressed strong views of the case. One woman said on the jury questionnaire that she viewed Potter very unfavorably and that she should have known the difference between her gun and her Taser. A man expressed wonder that a seasoned officer could make such a mistake, and told defense attorneys, “I don’t know if you’d want to select me.”

One man questioned in court described Black Lives Matter as “Marxist Communist” and suggested Wright was to blame for his death: “I think if he would’ve listened to the (police) directions, he would still be with us.”

Jurors’ names were being withheld and they were not shown on the livestream of the trial. But efforts to protect their identities slipped at times, with defense attorney Earl Gray appearing to say two prospective jurors’ names aloud.

“I don’t want that to happen again,” Judge Regina Chu warned. “I know it was a mistake.”

Potter’s defense team can dismiss up to five jurors without giving a reason, compared with three for the prosecution, which is standard in Minnesota courts. Neither side needs to justify such a peremptory strike unless the other side argues it was because of a juror’s race, ethnicity or gender.

Prosecutors used one strike to eliminate a retired fire captain who said he has had good experiences working with police and has a nephew who is an officer. The defense used one on a woman who briefly worked for Keith Ellison’s campaign for attorney general; Ellison’s office is prosecuting the case.

Potter said she made an innocent mistake when she shot Wright. She and two other officers at the scene moved to arrest Wright after learning there was a warrant out for him on a gross misdemeanor charge.

As Wright tried to drive off, Potter can be heard on her body camera video saying “Taser, Taser Taser” before she fired, followed by, “I grabbed the wrong (expletive) gun.”

Prosecutors say she was an experienced officer who was trained to know better. The most serious charge she faces requires prosecutors to prove recklessness; the lesser only requires them to prove culpable negligence. Minnesota’s sentencing guidelines call for a sentence of just over seven years on the first-degree manslaughter count, and four years for second-degree. Prosecutors have said they’ll seek a longer sentence.

The jury pool comes from Hennepin County, which includes Minneapolis and is the state’s most populous county. Hennepin is 74% white, 14% Black, 7.5% Asian and 7% Latino, according to census data. Brooklyn Center is one of the most diverse cities in the state, at 46% white, 29% Black, 16% Asian and 15% Latino.

Find the AP’s full coverage of the Daunte Wright case: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-daunte-wright>

Investigators track ammunition in fatal film set shooting

By MORGAN LEE Associated Press

SANTA FE, N.M. (AP) — Authorities pursued new leads Tuesday on possible sources of live ammunition involved in actor Alec Baldwin’s fatal shooting of a cinematographer on the New Mexico set of a western movie, as they searched the premises of an Albuquerque-based firearms and ammunition supplier.

The search took place after a provider of firearms and ammunition to the ill fated movie production for “Rust” told investigators that he “may know” where live rounds came from, describing ammunition he received from a friend in the past that had been “reloaded” by assembly from parts.

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A revolver fired by Baldwin during a "Rust" rehearsal on Oct. 21 killed cinematographer Halyna Hutchins and left a projectile lodged in the shoulder of director Joel Souza, for doctors later to remove. Baldwin was told the revolver was "cold" and had no live rounds, investigators say.

Seth Kenney and his business PDQ Arm & Prop provided movie-prop ammunition and weapons to the "Rust" production. Kenney told a detective on Oct. 29 that "a couple years back, he received 'reloaded ammunition' from a friend," and that the ammunition stood out in his memory because of a star-shaped company logo, according to an affidavit from the Santa Fe County Sheriff's Office that is leading the investigation.

Kenney could not be reached independently for comment. A sheriff's office spokesman declined to elaborate on details in the search warrant.

Investigators initially found 500 rounds of ammunition at the movie set on the outskirts of Santa Fe — a mix of blanks, dummy rounds and what appeared to be live rounds. Industry experts have said live rounds should never be on set.

Investigators have described "some complacency" in how weapons were handled on the "Rust" set. They have said it is too soon to determine whether charges will be filed, amid independent civil lawsuits concerning liability in the fatal shooting.

Tuesday's search-warrant affidavit contains some new details about the handling and loading of the gun that killed Hutchins before it was handed to Baldwin by an assistant director.

Investigators say that the armorer on the film, Hannah Gutierrez Reed, loaded the gun with five dummy rounds on Oct. 21, but struggled to add a sixth round before a lunch break, when the revolver was locked in a truck. The final round was added after lunch when the gun was cleaned.

Gutierrez Reed "stated the guns were checked on set, however she 'didn't really check it too much' (the firearm), due to it being locked up at lunch," according to the new affidavit.

Another movie crew member — the prop master for "Rust" — told investigators that ammunition was purchased from at least three sources for the production.

Jason Bowles, an attorney for Gutierrez Reed, called the search for evidence in Albuquerque a huge step forward toward determining the source of ammunition on the "Rust" set.

Investigators also described conversations with Gutierrez Reed's father — sharpshooter and movie consultant Thell Reed, who isn't listed as a participant on "Rust."

Thell Reed said that prior to the "Rust" production he supplied Kenney with a can of live ammunition, during a firing-range training session for film actors. Reed said Kenney took a can of that ammunition back to New Mexico.

After the shooting, the prop master on the set shook a box of dummy rounds on the set for their characteristic rattle and said they did not rattle, possibly indicating live rounds.

The Monster: Japanese star Inoue targeting boxing's big time

By YURI KAGEYAMA Associated Press

YOKOHAMA, Japan (AP) — They don't call Japanese boxer Naoya Inoue "The Monster" for nothing.

The WBA and IBF bantamweight world champion is undefeated, with all but three of his wins by knock-out — mostly in the early rounds.

Drawing praise as one of the best "pound for pound" active boxers around, and the best out of Asia since the legendary Manny Pacquiao, Inoue has his eyes on the big time.

Inoue (21-0, 18 KOs) made his Las Vegas debut last year with a knockout victory over Jason Moloney, which followed a fight in California in 2019. Signed with Bob Arum's boxing promotion company Top Rank, Inoue fought again in Las Vegas this year, knocking out Michael Dasmarinas.

His next fight is in Japan on Dec. 14, widely seen as a tuneup for a title unification bout in America next year.

And so Inoue is setting out to please his Japanese fans, who haven't seen him in action locally for two years.

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When he enters Ryogoku Kokugikan, the Tokyo venue for the traditional sport of sumo wrestling, to take on Thailand's Aran Dipaen (12-2, 11 KOs), Inoue will be decked out in red.

The crowd will be a sea of white, the dress code for the evening, symbolizing the Japanese flag — and symbolizing the enormous hope this nation has riding on Inoue.

"Each and every fan is going to have expectations. And I want to defy and go beyond each and every one of their expectations," Inoue, 28, told The Associated Press after sparring recently at the Ohashi Boxing Gym in Yokohama, southwest of Tokyo.

Inoue said he is looking forward to fighting John Riel Casimero (31-4, 21 KOs), the WBO bantamweight champion. The bout, scheduled for last year, was put on hold because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Casimero is fighting Paul Butler of Britain on Dec. 11.

Nonito Donaire (41-6, 27 KOs), the WBC bantamweight champion, has a fight the same day against Reymart Gaballo.

Inoue beat Donaire by unanimous decision in 2019, a grueling bout that was voted the best fight of the year by the Boxing Writers Association of America.

Once his unification mission for the bantamweight belts is complete, the already three-division world champion Inoue plans to move up a weight in 2023.

But the former WBC light flyweight champion and former WBO super flyweight champion shrugged his monster reputation off.

"I am not called a Monster at home," he said, smiling. "They call me Naoya or Nao."

Inoue loves eating "yakiniiku," or Japanese-style barbecue, especially beef tongue, and he loves watching horror movies. He enjoys karaoke.

For Inoue, who started boxing at 6, it's always been about family. His younger brother, Takuma, is also a professional boxer.

Their father, a former amateur boxer, devised training methods for his sons like having to push a car with the engine off, or climb a rope dangling from the second-floor veranda of their house.

Naoya Inoue recalled he never questioned the techniques.

"You only rebel probably when you don't agree with what's being done," he said.

Having married his high school sweetheart, Inoue is already a father himself. He has a son, 4, and two daughters, 2 and a newborn.

His son Akiha, whom he has held in the boxing ring as a baby, is showing intense interest in daddy's bouts, but Inoue isn't sure he wants him to be a boxer.

"I just hope he can find something he truly loves doing," he said.

The best way to succeed, he added, is not stressing out.

"You can't keep at this unless you really like it. There may be injuries and a risk to your life. It's a dangerous sport," Inoue said. "It's not something you can do without liking it."

Inoue is part of a legacy in Japan, which has produced some Hall of Famers, including Yoko Gushiken and Masahiko "Fighting" Harada. More recently, the popularity of boxing was apparent in the Japanese women medalists at the Tokyo Olympics.

Boxing gym chairman and former world champion Hideyuki Ohashi came up with the "kaibutsu" or "monster" moniker when Inoue turned pro. He said Inoue is a cut above any of the boxers he has seen — and he's seen quite a few.

"It's not one thing or the other, but he excels in every aspect. In boxing skills, his speed, the power of his punches, his timing. And most importantly he has mental strength," Ohashi said. "He is having fun."

Ohashi said Inoue is the only boxer he knows who has already decided he will retire at 35. After a rest, he'll go on to something else. He declined to say what that might be.

But for now, Inoue is looking at this career path.

"I am still far from the ideal style of boxing I am pursuing. If I get contented now, then I will just hit a wall when I go to super bantamweight," he said. "There's so much farther to go before I reach my peak, and I still don't know my true potential."

"I still have seven or eight years as a pro, and so I'm going to keep heading higher."

Yuri Kageyama is on Twitter <https://twitter.com/yurikageyama>

Leftist wins Honduran presidential vote after rival concedes

By CHRISTOPHER SHERMAN and MARLON GONZÁLEZ Associated Press

TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras (AP) — Honduras' ruling party conceded defeat Tuesday in presidential elections held two days earlier, giving victory to leftist opposition candidate Xiomara Castro and easing fears of another contested vote and violent protests.

Tegucigalpa Mayor Nasry Asfura, presidential candidate of the National Party, said in a statement that he had personally congratulated Castro, despite only about half the voting tallies being counted from Sunday's election.

The former first lady had 53% of the votes and Asfura 34%, with 52% of the tallies counted, according to the National Electoral Council. It has 30 days from the election to declare a winner.

Asfura said he had met with Castro and her family.

"Now I want to say it publicly," the conservative candidate said. "That I congratulate her for her victory and as president elect, I hope that God illuminates and guides her so that her administration does the best for the benefit of all of us Hondurans, to achieve development and the desire for democracy."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken congratulated Castro minutes later.

"The United States congratulates the people of Honduras on their election and Xiomara Castro on her historic victory as Honduras' first female president," Blinken said in a statement. "We look forward to working with the next government of Honduras."

Castro said via Twitter that Asfura had recognized her triumph. "People, I am not going to fail you!"

Asfura's recognition of the outcome was a relief to many Hondurans who had feared a contested election after a debacle in 2017 led to street protests that left 23 people dead. Following that vote, the government imposed a curfew and only three weeks later declared now-outgoing President Juan Orlando Hernández the winner despite the Organization of American States observation mission calling for an election re-do.

Fearing a similar prolonged vote standoff and social unrest, many businesses in Honduras' capital had boarded up their windows for this election.

Mabel Plata, a 28-year-old nursing student, said she appreciated Asfura's recognition of the outcome. "It is a sign that he is a professional and polite person and went to see Xiomara for the good of the country."

Plata couldn't remember another who did the same. "Most always claim to be winners and it's hard for them to accept defeat."

Luis Guillermo Solís, former president of Costa Rica and head of the Organization of American States observation mission, said Tuesday in presenting the regional body's preliminary report that Hondurans had overcome some technical difficulties to vote in great numbers.

"Honduran society voted with conviction, happiness and responsibility in a context marked by the pandemic and violence, which was denounced opportunely by the mission," Solís said. He said the mission had not received reports of other irregularities or fraud.

Castro rode a wave of popular discontent with 12 years of National Party governance, which peaked in Hernández's second term.

She will face major challenges as the Central American country's president. Unemployment is above 10%, northern Honduras was devastated by two major hurricanes last year and street gangs drag down the economy with their extortion rackets and violence, driving migration to the United States.

On Tuesday, Vielka Yossira López folded jeans at a stand in the sprawling Comayaguela street market.

The 24-year-old single mother of two said she didn't vote, but hoped for change.

"How am I going to lose a day of work to go vote," López said. "I don't work, I don't eat."

When López contracted COVID-19, she wasn't able to work for two months. In that time she sold her bed, her refrigerator, television and cellphone so she could buy food and diapers for her children, ages 3 and 6.

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López makes 200 lempiras, about \$8.25 per day. She pays \$1.60 of that just for transportation to and from work each day. Her 6-year-old has been out of school for more than a year.

López is hopeful that when Castro becomes president she will bring with her a better understanding of what it takes to raise a family.

"Hopefully there will be a change by having a woman," López said. "She has children and everything."

Castro's government could present challenges, but also opportunities for the Biden administration, which has sought to keep Hernández at arm's length.

Many Castro supporters remember the U.S. government's initial sluggishness in calling the ouster of Castro's husband Manuel Zelaya from the presidency in 2009 a coup, and then proceeding to work closely with the National Party presidents who followed. And from the U.S. perspective, Washington remembers how Castro and Zelaya cozied up to then-Venezuela President Hugo Chávez.

Analysts say common ground between Castro and the U.S. government exists in at least three areas: immigration, drug trafficking and corruption. And with tense relations prevailing between Washington and the leaders of El Salvador and Guatemala, the U.S. government could use a productive relationship with Honduras.

Despite opponents' efforts to paint Castro as a communist, experts expect her to govern as a centrist with a desire to lift up Honduras' poor while attracting foreign investment.

A speech Castro made to her Liberty and Re-foundation party in June remains one her clearest expressions of how she will navigate the U.S. relationship.

"In the first 100 days, we will execute and propose to the administration of President Joe Biden and Kamala Harris a plan to combat and address the true causes of migration," Castro said.

Castro describes Hondurans' emigration in terms of flight to escape inequality, corruption, poverty and violence. That sounds a lot like Harris' assessment of the root causes the Biden administration wants to focus U.S. aid on.

But Castro also puts some of the blame on the U.S. government.

"I believe the Biden administration has an enormous opportunity to address the issue of migration," Castro said in the June speech. "First, recognizing that they have part of the responsibility for what happens in our country," she added, noting the 2009 coup.

Castro has hammered the outgoing Hernández administration for corruption. It was Hernández's administration that let the Organization of American States' anti-corruption mission in Honduras expire in 2020 after its work had touched some of the National Party's lawmakers for alleged misuse of public funds.

She has said she's interested in having an international anti-corruption mission return to Honduras. That combined with a strong, independent attorney general, could begin to tackle one of the country's most profound problems.

U.S. federal prosecutors have put corruption under the microscope in drug trafficking cases that have reached up to high-ranking Honduran politicians. The most notable was the conviction of Hernández's brother, a former federal lawmaker, on drug trafficking charges that earned him a life sentence in the United States.

In a speech late Sunday night, Castro told supporters: "Get out war! Get out hate! Get out death squads! Get out corruption! Get out drug trafficking and organized crime!"

In shadow of Texas gas drilling sites, health fears escalate

By CATHY BUSSEWITZ and MARTHA IRVINE Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — At a playground outside a North Texas day care center, giggling preschoolers chase each other into a playhouse. Toddlers scoot by on tricycles. A boy cries as a teacher helps him negotiate over a toy.

Uphill from the playground, peeking between trees, is a site where Total Energies is pumping for natural gas. The French energy giant wants to drill three new wells on the property next to Mother's Heart Learning Center, which serves mainly Black and Latino children. The three wells, along with two existing ones,

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would lie about 600 feet from where the children planted a garden of sunflowers.

For the families of the children and for others nearby, it's a prospect fraught with fear and anxiety. Living too close to drilling sites has been linked to a range of health risks, especially to children, from asthma to neurological and developmental disorders. And while some states are requiring energy companies to drill farther from day cares, schools and homes, Texas has taken the opposite tack: It has made it exceedingly difficult for localities to fight back.

The affected areas go beyond day care centers and schools close to drilling sites. They include communities near related infrastructure — compressor stations, for example, which push gas through pipelines and emit toxic fumes, and export facilities, where gas is cooled before being shipped overseas.

On Tuesday, the City Council in this city situated between Dallas and Fort Worth voted to advance Total's latest drilling plan, setting it up for an expected final approval in a matter of weeks.

Last year, the council denied Total's request. The rejection came at a time when Black Lives Matter protests after George Floyd's murder by police had led many American communities to take a deeper look at racial disparities. But with time having passed and turnover on the City Council, and the pressure of a state law that strips power from local governments, Total gained the support it needed for its drilling plan with a 5-4 vote.

Many residents fear the consequences.

"I'm trying to protect my little one," said Guerda Philemond, whose 2-year-old, Olivia Grace Charles, attends the day care. "There's a lot of land, empty space they can drill. It doesn't have to be in the backyard of a day care."

Total declined a request for an interview to discuss the matter. But in a statement, the company said it has operated near Mother's Heart for more than a decade without any safety concerns expressed by the City of Arlington.

Asked by a council member if he would send his own children to the day care next to the drilling site, Total spokesman Kevin Strawser said he would. "I'm very comfortable with what we do and how we do it," he said.

The clash in Arlington comes against the backdrop of pledges from world leaders to reduce emissions, burn less fossil fuel and transition to cleaner energy. Yet the world's reliance on natural gas is growing, not declining. As soon as next year, the United States is set to become the world's largest exporter of liquid natural gas, or LNG, according to Rystad Energy.

As a result, despite pressure for energy companies to shift their spending to cleaner technologies, there will likely be more drilling for natural gas in Arlington and other communities. And children who spend time near drilling sites or natural gas distribution centers — in neighborhoods that critics call "sacrifice zones" — may face a growing risk of developing neurological or learning problems and exposure to carcinogens. A report by Physicians for Social Responsibility and Concerned Health Professionals of New York, which reviewed dozens of scientific studies, found that the public health risks associated with these sites include cancers, asthma, respiratory diseases, rashes, heart problems and mental health disorders.

Most vulnerable are non-white families. Many of the wells Total has drilled in Arlington are near Latino and Black or low-income communities, often just a few hundred feet from homes. A statistical analysis by The Associated Press of the locations of wells Total operates in Arlington shows that their density is higher in neighborhoods that many people of color call home.

Asked about that finding, Total did not respond directly but said its "decisions on future drilling are driven by the geological data."

"America is segregated, and so is pollution," said Robert Bullard, director of the Bullard Center for Environmental and Climate Justice at Texas Southern University. "The dirty industries, and what planners call locally unwanted land uses, oftentimes followed the path of least resistance. Historically, that's been poor communities and communities of color."

The pattern is evident well outside the Arlington area, too. When gas pumped in Texas is shipped out for export, it goes to liquid natural gas facilities along the Gulf Coast. Many of those facilities are near

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communities, like those in Port Arthur, Texas, that are predominantly non-white.

"There's constant talk of expansions here," said John Beard, founder of the Port Arthur Community Action Network, which opposes the expansion of export facilities. "When you keep adding this to the air, the air quality degrades, and so does our quality of life and so does our health.

"Once again, we're being sacrificed."

At the Arlington day care, Wanda Vincent, the owner, has been cautioning parents about the health risks and gathered signatures to petition the City Council to reject Total's drilling request. When she opened the facility nearly two decades ago, Vincent wanted to provide a refuge for children in her care, some of whom suffer from hunger and poverty.

That was before natural gas production accelerated in the United States. Around 2005, energy companies discovered how to drill horizontally into shale formations using hydraulic fracturing techniques. With this technique, known as fracking, water and chemicals are shot deep underground into a well bore that travels horizontally. It is highly effective. But fracking is known to contribute to air and water pollution and to raise risks to people and the environment.

Vincent had worried that the political winds in Arlington shifted since last year, and that the council would approve Total's new request.

"The world was dealing with what happened with George Floyd," she said. "The meeting was emotional, just listening to the speakers that were talking and then sharing their hearts and saying, 'Well, we want to do more. We want to, you know, racially do better.' And I was encouraged. But you know what? Nothing has really changed since then."

Some states have acted to force fracking away from residents. Colorado last year required new wells to be drilled at least 2,000 feet from homes and schools. California has proposed a limit of 3,200 feet. Los Angeles has taken steps to ban urban drilling. Vermont and New York state banned fracking years ago.

In Arlington, drilling is supposed to occur no closer than 600 feet from day care centers or homes. But companies can apply for a waiver from the City Council to drill as close as 300 feet.

France, Total's home country, bars fracking. But that ban is largely symbolic because no meaningful oil or gas supplies exist in France. So Total, one of the world's largest players in natural gas, drills in 27 other countries. It turns much of that gas into liquid, then ships it, trades it and re-gasifies it at LNG terminals worldwide.

The gas wells next to Mother's Heart represent just a tiny fraction of Total's global operations. Yet the company holds tight to its plans to drill there despite the community's resistance.

"Nobody should have a production ban unless they have a consumption ban, because it has made places like Arlington extraction colonies for countries like France, and they have shifted the environmental toll, the human toll, to us," said Ranjana Bhandari, director of Liveable Arlington, the group leading the opposition to Total's drilling plans.

In Arlington, companies that are rejected for a drilling permit may reapply after a year. Several Arlington council members said they fear litigation if they don't allow the drilling. That's because a Texas law bars localities from banning, limiting or even regulating oil or gas operations except in limited circumstances.

"Legally, our hands are tied," said Councilwoman Barbara Odom-Wesley, who voted against the drilling plan last year but switched to support it Tuesday. "Our City Council hands are tied by the state Legislature." She added that she learned more about Total over the last year and believes the company will act responsibly.

"If I'm able to reach out to the French and speak to them directly, I would let them know, 'Would you be able to allow somebody to go in your back yard and do natural gas drilling where you know your wife lays her head or your kids lay their head?'" said Philemond, the day care center parent. "And the answer would absolutely be 'No' within a second."

A mile or so from the day care, in the back yard of Frank and Michelle Meeks, a high-pitched ringing blares like a school fire alarm as the sun sets. Just beyond their patio and grill looms the wall of another Total

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well site, where one of the wells was in the “flowback” stage, according to the City of Arlington. Flowback occurs when fracking fluids and debris are cleared from the wellbore before gas production begins. This site, which stretches behind many neighborhood houses, is near two day care centers.

The ringing goes on and on. When the wells were initially drilled, Michelle Meeks said, the sound and vibrations were a full-body experience. At this point, she and her husband barely notice it.

After the drilling started a decade ago at the site, a few hundred feet behind their house, they noticed cracks in their foundation and across their backyard patio. They now receive royalty checks for \$15 or \$20 a few times a year. That money wouldn’t make a dent in the cost of repairing the cracks in their foundation. But when the oil and gas developers came knocking years ago, the couple thought that saying no would have been futile.

“In Texas, you really can’t fight oil and gas production,” said Frank Meeks, a 60-year-old machine operator. “We don’t have the money to go and get big-time lawyers to keep them out of our back yards.”

A few miles away, Pamela Polk cares for her autistic 21-year-old grandson in a modest home she rents across the fence from another Total gas well site. She has chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. And since they moved in a decade ago, her grandson developed asthma.

Arlington’s air quality exceeds federal ozone pollution standards set by the EPA. In 2012, at the height of the fracking boom, asthma rates for school-age children in Tarrant County were 19%-25% — far above national and state norms.

“You’d think they would at least put a flyer in the mailbox or something, you know?” Polk said. “I’m frustrated. I mean, we pay taxes, you know, even though we’re renters, we still pay taxes.”

The site is a quarter-mile from two day cares. Polk notices teenagers playing on the other side of the fence in the field adjacent to the drill site.

“The biggest thing that worries me,” she said, “is kids.”

Around Arlington, drilling has imposed higher costs — literally — on lower-income neighborhoods than on more affluent areas. As the fracking boom took off, “land men” from the oil and gas companies went door to door in Arlington, asking permission to drill beneath homes of those who owned mineral rights. Some homeowners were offered signing bonuses and royalties. Renters like Polk, and others who don’t own the rights to the minerals beneath their homes, had no choice but to yield to drilling — and received nothing for it.

By contrast, when land men came knocking in Bhandari’s wealthier neighborhood 15 years ago, her neighbors, a lawyer among them, joined forces. Some, like Bhandari, opposed fracking altogether. Others wanted higher royalty payments. In the end, the company, which had sought to drill next to a park, situated its well pad a mile away. Now, Bhandari is trying to help less affluent neighborhoods push back on drilling.

Arlington sits atop the Barnett Shale, one of the largest on-land natural gas fields in the United States. Gas production, which peaked in the Barnett Shale a decade ago, has been declining. Even with natural gas prices rising, few large U.S. companies plan to drill new wells at a time when investors are increasingly seeking environmentally responsible companies.

“Total is a publicly traded company. They claim to be very interested in the energy transition and so forth,” said Bruce Bullock, director of the Maguire Energy Institute at Southern Methodist University. “If a U.S. company were to do that here that was publicly traded, their stock would be hammered.”

Not only is Total among the few operators that are actively seeking new wells in the Barnett Shale. It’s also drilled closer to population centers than have other companies over the past eight years, according to an analysis by S&P Global Platts.

Some in Arlington have managed to benefit from the drilling. At Cornerstone Baptist Church recently, a dozen choir members belted out hymns while congregants clapped and waved hands. A rainbow of lights illuminated a cross hanging above. Balloons and ferns decorated the stage, flanked by outsize screens showcasing the singers.

The church, which allowed Total to drill for gas on its land about a decade ago, collected royalties that

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helped support food giveaways, as well as other churches, said Jan Porter, a former church elder. "It's enabled us," he said, "to do ministries that we might not have been able to do."

After natural gas is pumped from underground, it moves through pipelines, passing through compressor stations, which help keep the gas moving. About a half-mile west of Polk's house is a compressor station. Occasionally, a sour smell wafts through the air. As the gas moves through a series of curved pipes, a sound like a giant vacuum arises constantly.

Exposure to emissions of volatile organic compounds from natural gas pipeline compressor stations has been linked to higher death rates, according to a study by Indiana University. When released, these compounds can create ozone, which may exacerbate asthma, bronchitis, emphysema or cause chest pain, throat irritation or reduced lung function, especially in children and older adults. Compressor stations in New York state emitted 39 carcinogenic chemicals, including benzene and formaldehyde, according to a study by the University of Albany. Compressor stations also release methane, a potent climate-warming gas.

A few blocks away, the same sour smell clings to the air as Patrick Vancooper prunes tomato plants and okra he grows on a strip of land between the street and a fence. Many of his neighbors, in a community with pockmarked roads and weathered apartments, don't know they live near a compressor station.

Greg and Gloria Allen were among them. They noticed a smell like raw eggs or a skunk, with a chemical odor too pungent to be an animal. They didn't know the cause.

When the couple drives down the block near the compressor station, hidden behind a row of commercial properties and a doctor's office, the fumes are so severe that Gloria Allen, a 59-year-old bus driver for the City of Dallas, gets headaches.

"If they build something like that over there, they should tell us," she said. "Any time that can be a danger to me and my family, that's not a place for me."

After two years living on the block, in a home they share with their 14-year-old grandson, Gloria Allen was diagnosed with asthma. On her day off, she visited her doctor to discuss her symptoms.

"It's driving me crazy," she said of the odor. "It's coming through the fence. I smell it in the house. I'm going to move. I can't take it."

After the fracking boom reshaped communities like Arlington, America wound up with too much natural gas. Yet at the same time, the world's thirst for it grew. Developers, Total among them, poured billions of dollars into expanding LNG export terminals along the U.S. Gulf Coast, often near communities made up predominantly of people of color.

The nation's largest LNG export facility sits just outside Port Arthur, which is three-quarters non-white. A second export facility is being expanded in Port Arthur. And a third export facility has been proposed.

Beard, of the Port Arthur Community Action Network, worries that chemical leaks could cause a devastating explosion. An LNG export terminal just outside Port Arthur was recently fined for safety violations after hundreds of barrels of liquid natural gas escaped through cracks, vaporized and released 825,000 cubic feet of natural gas into the atmosphere.

Back in Arlington, where the gas supply chain begins, Rosalia Tejada worried about the health of her three children, who live with her a few blocks from the well site at Mother's Heart. Tejada wasn't looking forward to telling her 13-year-old son about the outcome of the vote.

"It's sad that I have to go home and tell him that, yet again, they're not a priority," she said tearfully. "I was hoping for my faith in humanity to be revived and it's not."

AP staffers Angeliki Kastanis in Los Angeles and Francois Duckett in New York contributed to this report.

US moving to toughen testing requirement for travelers

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

Washington (AP) — The Biden administration is moving to toughen testing requirements for international

travelers to the U.S., including both vaccinated and unvaccinated people, amid the spread of the new omicron variant of the coronavirus.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said in a Tuesday statement that it was working toward requiring that all air travelers to the U.S. be tested for COVID-19 within a day before boarding their flight. Currently those who are fully vaccinated may present a test taken within three days of boarding.

"CDC is working to modify the current Global Testing Order for travel as we learn more about the Omicron variant; a revised order would shorten the timeline for required testing for all international air travelers to one day before departure to the United States," the agency said.

The precise testing protocols were still being finalized ahead of a speech by President Joe Biden planned for Thursday on the nation's plans to control the COVID-19 pandemic during the winter season, according to a senior administration official who said some details could still change.

"CDC is evaluating how to make international travel as safe as possible, including pre-departure testing closer to the time of flight and considerations around additional post-arrival testing and self-quarantines," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said earlier Tuesday.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the administration's plans before the announcement, said options under consideration also include post-arrival testing requirements or even self-quarantines.

CDC currently recommends post-arrival testing 3-5 days after landing in the U.S. from overseas and self-quarantine for unvaccinated travelers, though compliance is voluntary and is believed to be low.

The move comes just weeks after the U.S. largely reopened its borders to fully vaccinated foreign travelers on Nov. 8 and instituted a two-tiered testing system that allowed fully vaccinated travelers more time to seek a pre-arrival test, while requiring a test within a day of boarding for the unvaccinated.

Much remains unknown about the new variant, which has been identified in more than 20 countries but not yet in the U.S., including whether it is more contagious, whether it makes people more seriously ill, and whether it can thwart the vaccine. Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, said more would be known about the omicron strain in two to four weeks as scientists grow and test lab samples of the virus.

As he sought to quell public concern about the new variant, Biden said that in his Thursday remarks, "I'll be putting forward a detailed strategy outlining how we're going to fight COVID this winter -- not with shutdowns or lockdowns but with more widespread vaccinations, boosters, testing, and more."

Asked by reporters if he would consult with allies about any changes in travel rules, given that former President Donald Trump had caught world leaders by surprise, Biden said, "Unlike Trump I don't shock our allies."

CNN suspends Chris Cuomo for helping brother in scandal

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — CNN indefinitely suspended anchor Chris Cuomo on Tuesday after details emerged about how he helped his brother, former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, to face charges of sexual harassment earlier this year.

The network said documents released by New York's attorney general Monday indicated Cuomo took a greater level of involvement in his brother's efforts than CNN executives previously knew.

"As a result, we have suspended Chris indefinitely, pending further evaluation," the network said.

The CNN anchor pressed sources for information on his brother's accusers and reported back to the governor's staff, and was active in helping craft their response to the charges, according to emails and a transcript of his testimony to investigators working for state Attorney General Letitia James. Her office found Andrew Cuomo sexually harassed at least 11 women.

Chris Cuomo previously acknowledged talking to his brother and offering advice when the governor faced harassment charges. But the information released Monday revealed far more details about what exactly Chris Cuomo did. Andrew Cuomo resigned in August to avoid a likely impeachment trial.

Cuomo's program, which airs at 9 p.m. Eastern time on weeknights, averaged 1.3 million viewers, nar-

rowly outpacing Anderson Cooper as CNN's most popular show, according to the Nielsen company. Like many cable newscasts, viewership is down significantly after being swollen during the election year.

Cuomo appeared on his program on Monday night, talking about COVID-19 and politics without mentioning his own issues.

There was no immediate response to a request for comment sent to Cuomo and the lawyer who represented him during this summer's testimony.

Anderson Cooper subbed for Cuomo on his show Tuesday.

During the first two months of the pandemic, Cuomo interviewed his brother on the air a number of times. It was a hit with viewers, although it violated CNN's policy of not having Cuomo report on his brother, and was a programming choice that has grown worse with time and additional revelations.

Chris Cuomo frequently consulted with his brother's aides when Andrew was fighting the charges last May, sometimes disagreeing with their advice.

"This is my brother, and I'm trying to help my brother through a situation where he told me he did nothing wrong," Cuomo testified last July to investigators at the attorney general's office.

He has said he did nothing to influence his own network's coverage of the story.

Cuomo also said he reached out to other journalists to find out whether they were writing stories about his brother, most notably seeking information on what Ronan Farrow of the New Yorker was writing. He acknowledged he didn't tell CNN he was doing this, and characterized his actions as nothing out of the ordinary for a journalist.

Critics have called on CNN to take action following the attorney general's release, with David A. Graham of The Atlantic saying Cuomo should resign — or be fired by CNN if he doesn't.

After it was first revealed last May by The Washington Post that Cuomo had consulted with his brother's aides, CNN released a statement saying that his actions were inappropriate, but it did not discipline him.

Cuomo, a lawyer, is 13 years younger than Andrew Cuomo, who he has described as his best friend. They are the sons of former New York Gov. Mario Cuomo, who was in office from 1982 to 1996.

He worked for several years at ABC News, joining CNN in 2013 as co-host of the network's morning show.

A veteran TV executive, Shelley Ross, wrote a column for The New York Times in September saying Cuomo had groped her at a party 16 years ago. Cuomo told the newspaper that "I apologized to her then, and I meant it."

Detective: Brothers detailed how Jussie Smollett staged hoax

By DON BABWIN and SARA BURNETT Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — Two brothers arrested for an alleged attack on Jussie Smollett recounted for Chicago police how the ex-"Empire" actor orchestrated the hoax, telling them via text message to meet him "on the low," paying for supplies and holding a "dry run" in downtown Chicago, a lead investigator testified Tuesday.

Taking the stand as prosecutors began their case against Smollett, former police detective Michael Theis said he initially viewed the actor as a victim of a homophobic and racist attack and that police "absolutely" didn't rush to judgment as Smollett's defense attorney alleged during opening statements Monday.

Theis, who now is assistant director for research and development for the Chicago Police Department, said roughly two dozen detectives clocked some 3,000 hours on what they thought was a "horrible hate crime" in January 2019. He said they were excited when they were able to track the movements of two suspected attackers using surveillance video and cellphone and records from ride-sharing services.

"The crime was a hate crime, a horrible hate crime," Theis said, noting Smollett — who is Black and gay — reported that his attackers put a noose around his neck and poured bleach on him. He said the case had become national and international news and that "everybody from the mayor on down" wanted it solved, a reference to then-Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

Smollett is charged with felony disorderly conduct for making what prosecutors say was a false police report about the alleged attack. The class 4 felony carries a prison sentence of up to three years, but experts have said if Smollett is convicted he likely would be placed on probation and perhaps ordered to

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perform community service.

After police arrested Abimbola and Olabingo Osundairo — brothers who also worked on the set of “Empire” in Chicago — as they returned to Chicago from Nigeria, the men said Smollett wanted to stage the attack because he was unhappy about how the TV studio handled hate mail the actor had received, Theis said. He said investigators checked out the brothers’ account — including that the actor picked them up days before the attack and drove them around the downtown neighborhood where he lived and talked about what would happen — and corroborated their version of events using GPS, cellphone records and video evidence. Police found no instance where they concluded the men were lying, he added.

“At the end of the investigation, we determined that the alleged hate crime was actually a staged event,” Theis said, and the Osundairo brothers were released.

Jurors were shown surveillance video of the brothers buying supplies, including a red hat they told police Smollett wanted them to wear to resemble supporters of then-President Donald Trump, and a piece of clothesline police said was later fashioned into the noose. Jurors also saw a still image from a video that Theis said showed Smollett returning home the night of the alleged attack, with the clothesline draped around his shoulders. The clothesline was wrapped around his neck when officers arrived, Theis said, leading detectives to believe Smollett may have retied it.

Muhammad Baig, the first officer on the scene after Smollett’s manager reported the attack, said he asked Smollett if he wanted to take the rope off his neck and “he responded by saying that he’d like to take it off but he wanted us to see it first.” He also said Smollett asked officers to turn off their body-worn cameras, which they did.

Defense attorney Nenyé Uche said during opening statements Monday that Smollett “is a real victim” and that the brothers attacked Smollett because they didn’t like him “because of who he is.”

On Tuesday, Uche suggested the brothers were homophobic, asking Theis on cross-examination about a homophobic word one of the brothers used. Theis said there was a message containing a slur but that he doesn’t know if that makes the man homophobic. Uche also asked Theis if he was aware one of the brothers attacked someone at the TV studio because he was gay.

“One individual said it happened, but I don’t know that it happened,” Theis said.

Uche also sought to discredit the police investigation, suggesting detectives ignored possible leads. And he said a \$3,500 check the actor paid the brothers was for personal training so he could prepare for an upcoming music video, not for carrying out the hoax, as prosecutors allege. Theis said Tuesday that the memo on the check said it was for “nutrition” and “training.”

The brothers will testify during the trial, but it’s unknown if Smollett will.

Uche has portrayed the siblings as unreliable, and said when police searched their home they found heroin and guns.

Special prosecutor Dan Webb told jurors that Smollett told police he was attacked by Trump supporters, inflaming political divisions nationwide.

Webb said Smollett thought the TV studio didn’t take hate mail he received seriously. Police haven’t determined who wrote the letter, which included a drawing of a stick figure hanging from a tree and “MAGA,” a reference to Trump’s Make America Great Again campaign slogan. Webb said Smollett told the brothers to shout racial and homophobic slurs and “MAGA” during the staged attack.

Uche also suggested that a third attacker was involved. One area resident said she saw a white man with “reddish brown hair” who appeared to be waiting for someone that night, according to police reports. She told a detective that when the man turned away from her, she “could see hanging out from underneath his jacket what appeared to be a rope.”

Uche referenced the woman during his cross-examination of Theis on Tuesday, and Theis acknowledged that he saw that statement but did not send a detective to re-interview her. He said the woman had seen the man a few hours before the alleged attack and that “the rope was a different color.”

Outside the courtroom, Smollett’s brother said it has been “incredibly painful” for the family to watch Smollett be accused of something he “did not do.”

"We're confident in his legal team, and we look forward to people hearing the actual facts of this case," Jojo Smollett said.

Judge James Linn expects the trial to last about one week.

Check out the AP's complete coverage of the Jussie Smollett case.

Elizabeth Holmes gets emotional under fire by prosecutors

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — One-time entrepreneur Elizabeth Holmes, under questioning by prosecutors, struggled Tuesday to recall key events that led to her facing criminal fraud charges for allegedly fleecing investors and customers of her failed blood-testing startup Theranos.

Her cross-examination began the day after she shared painfully vivid memories of alleged abuse by her ex-lover and business partner, Sunny Balwani.

In between bouts of hazy recollection, Holmes wept on the witness stand after the federal prosecutor interrogating her asked to read aloud some of the amorous texts that she and Balwani exchanged during a five-year period while they were running Theranos and living together in a stealth romantic relationship.

"U are God's tigress and warrior. You are extraordinary," Balwani cooed to Holmes in a 2015 documents displayed in court Tuesday. Holmes quickly responded with this text: "Coming from my tiger means the whole universe to me."

While poring over the old texts, Holmes occasionally dabbed away tears and wiped her nose with a tissue. The jury watched and listened along with a packed courtroom that included one person who trained a pair of binoculars on Holmes from a back row.

The drama unfolded the day after Holmes cast herself as a victim of Balwani's abusive and controlling behavior while they were romantically involved from 2005 to 2016. Balwani, 56, also served as Theranos' chief operating officer from 2009 to 2016 while Holmes, 37, was the CEO and controlling shareholder.

As part of her testimony, Holmes said she was raped at Stanford — a traumatic experience that she asserted Balwani exploited to control everything from her diet to her friendships.

Both Holmes and Balwani are now fighting criminal charges of duping investors and patients into believing that Theranos has invented a device that could scan for hundreds of potential health problems with a few drops of blood. After raising nearly \$1 billion, Theranos collapsed amid revelations that the purportedly revolutionary technology she was peddling was horribly flawed.

Holmes' trial, which began in early September, is now heading toward its climax. Holmes will return to the stand on Dec. 7. Her testimony could wrap up that day, raising the possibility that jury deliberations could begin by the end of next week.

Balwani, who is being tried separately, is expected to face the court early next year. His attorney, Jeffrey Coopersmith, has denied Holmes' allegations of "intimate partner abuse." Coopersmith on Tuesday also told U.S. District Judge Edward Davila that Balwani would assert his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination if he were called to testify in Holmes' trial.

Although Holmes has been on the stand since Nov. 19, Tuesday marked the first opportunity for federal prosecutors to grill her under oath.

Robert Leach, the government lawyer confronting Holmes, didn't touch upon Holmes' alleged rape nor her testimony about Balwani berating her, sometimes in profane terms. Instead, he used roughly 12,000 texts sent between Holmes and Balwani to counter her contention that they had a relationship that was more toxic than romantic.

At one point, Leach asked Holmes if she would be surprised if the word "love" appeared 594 times in the texts obtained by the government and the word "loving" was used 105 times. "No," Holmes said with a slight smile.

But Holmes spent much of Tuesday responding "I don't remember" and "I don't know" to Leach's questions about key incidents in the startup's history. She claimed forgetfulness so frequently that Leach made

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the phrase "let's see if I can refresh your memory" a common refrain as he presented her with document after document related to the fraud charges.

Leach seemed intent on proving that Holmes she knew she was making false statements to investors and Walgreens, which briefly used Theranos' blood tests in its pharmacies.

Holmes' apparent forgetfulness contrasted sharply with her clear recall of her interactions with Balwani — some of them dating back more than a decade.

But she also seemed to have reflected on her behavior at Theranos. She expressed remorse for the way she responded to the concerns of two former employees and her attempts to stop the 2015 publication of a Wall Street Journal expose that helped lead to Theranos' collapse.

"I could not say more strongly the way that we handled the Wall Street Journal process was a total disaster. We really messed up," Holmes said.

John Carreyrou, the reporter who wrote the Wall Street Journal story and a book about Theranos' rise and fall, sat in the back of the courtroom during Holmes' moment of contrition while taking notes for a podcast he has been doing about the trial.

Holmes also acknowledged she was too quick to dismiss warnings from the two former employees, Erika Cheung and Tyler Shultz, who reported that Theranos' blood-testing device — dubbed Edison — was delivering inaccurate results that could endanger patients' health.

"I sure as hell wished we treated her differently and listened to her," said Holmes of Cheung, who quit Theranos in exasperation after concluding her complaints were being ignored.

Shultz, the grandson of former U.S. Secretary of State and Theranos board member George Shultz, also resigned from Theranos in 2015 under similar circumstances.

Both Cheung and Shultz became whistleblowers and provided information to Carreyrou for his Journal story. After discovering that Cheung and Shultz were talking to Carreyrou, Theranos attorney David Boies sent letters to both of them threatening to sue them. Holmes on Tuesday insisted she was trying to protect trade secrets.

The tactics sullied Holmes' relationship with George Shultz, who initially backed her even after his grandson began sounding alarms about Theranos' technology.

George Shultz, who died earlier this year, became fed up after Theranos sent over attorneys to pressure Tyler to sign non-disclosure documents at his house in May 2015, prompting him to call Holmes and complain that it was "one of the worst things I have ever seen anyone do," according to Leach.

Holmes told Leach she didn't recall precisely what George Shultz said during that conversation. "I remember George being angry," she said.

Holmes could face prison time of up to 20 years if convicted.

Appeals court orders release of some Mueller report passages

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal appeals court on Tuesday directed the Justice Department to disclose certain redacted passages from special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation report that relate to individuals who were investigated by prosecutors but not ultimately charged.

The ruling came in a public records complaint from the news organization BuzzFeed, which sued for an unredacted version of Mueller's report examining Russian election interference and possible ties to Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

Though the three-judge panel said a lower court judge was correct in ruling that certain portions of the report should remain redacted, it said in its opinion that other passages that BuzzFeed fought to see can be disclosed because they involve facts available elsewhere in the report and "do not contain new facts or stigmatizing material."

In particular, the appeals court said the Justice Department must disclose redacted information about the Mueller team's decision to not prosecute an unnamed person — whom BuzzFeed contends is likely Donald Trump Jr., Trump's oldest son — for potential campaign finance violations.

The Mueller report detailed how prosecutors looking at potential campaign finance crimes investigated a 2016 Trump Tower meeting at which Trump Jr. expected to receive pejorative information about his father's Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, from a Russian lawyer. Ultimately, prosecutors decided against any charges related to that meeting.

"The redacted passages contain no new facts; they contain no new information or descriptions of conduct that have not been made public elsewhere in this very Report. The privacy interests, then, are not robust, as no additional reputational or stigmatizing harm can result from the disclosure of the information contained therein," said the opinion from Judge Karen LeCraft Henderson.

Other requested information can remain redacted, she said, because it contains "additional facts about individuals that are not disclosed or even intimated elsewhere in the Report."

In a statement, BuzzFeed News Editor in Chief Mark Schoofs said it "enthusiastically applauds and welcomes today's unanimous ruling from three federal judges — the result of months of dedicated, relentless legal work and investigative journalism to ensure that the workings of our government are transparent and readily accessible to the public."

Mueller's 448-page report identified extensive contacts between Russians and Trump associates but ultimately found insufficient evidence to charge a criminal conspiracy to sway the outcome of the 2016 presidential election. Though investigators found multiple instances in which Trump sought to seize control of the Russia investigation, they did not reach a conclusion as to whether he had illegally obstructed justice.

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

US panel backs first-of-a-kind COVID-19 pill from Merck

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — A panel of U.S. health advisers on Tuesday narrowly backed a closely watched COVID-19 pill from Merck, setting the stage for a likely authorization of the first drug that Americans could take at home to treat the coronavirus.

The Food and Drug Administration panel voted 13-10 that the antiviral drug's benefits outweigh its risks, including potential birth defects if used during pregnancy.

"I see this as an incredibly difficult decision with many more questions than answers," said panel chair Dr. Lindsey Baden of Harvard Medical School, who voted in favor of the drug. He said FDA would have to carefully tailor the drug's use for patients who stand to benefit most.

The recommendation came after hours of debate about the drug's modest benefits and potential safety issues. Most experts backing the treatment stressed that it should not be used by anyone who is pregnant and called on FDA to recommend extra precautions before the drug is prescribed, such as pregnancy tests for women of child-bearing age.

The vote specifically backed the drug for adults with mild-to-moderate COVID-19 who face the greatest risks, including older people and those with conditions like obesity and asthma. Most experts also said the drug shouldn't be used in vaccinated people, who weren't part of Merck's research and haven't been shown to benefit.

The FDA isn't bound by the panel's recommendation and is expected to make its own decision before year's end. The antiviral is already authorized in the U.K.

The drug, molnupiravir, could provide a much-needed weapon against the virus as colder weather pushes case counts higher and U.S. officials brace for the arrival of the new omicron variant.

Merck hasn't specifically tested its drug against the new variant but said it should have some potency based on its effectiveness against other strains of coronavirus.

That uncertainty frustrated many panelists as they grappled with whether to back the treatment for millions of Americans.

"With no data saying it works with new variants, I really think we need to be careful about saying that this is the way to go," said Dr. David Hardy of Charles Drew University School of Medicine and Science,

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who ultimately voted to back the drug.

On Friday, Merck released updated data that paint a less compelling picture of the drug's effectiveness than just a few weeks earlier.

Merck said final study results showed molnupiravir reduced hospitalization and death by 30% among adults infected with the coronavirus, when compared with adults taking a placebo. That effect was significantly less than the 50% reduction it first announced based on incomplete results.

For many panelists, the modest effect wasn't enough to outweigh the drug's potential toxicity to human fetuses.

"Given the large potential population affected, the risk of widespread effects on potential birth defects has not been adequately studied," said Dr. Sankar Swaminathan of the University of Utah School of Medicine, who voted against the drug.

FDA scientists told the panelists earlier Tuesday that company studies in rats showed the drug caused birth defects when given at very high doses. FDA staffers concluded the data "suggest that molnupiravir may cause fetal harm when administered to pregnant individuals."

The agency is weighing a blanket restriction against any use in pregnant women or allowing doctors to use the drug in rare cases. Some panelists said that option should be left open for pregnant mothers who have high-risk COVID-19 and may have few other treatment options.

Dr. Janet Cragan, who backed the drug, said that even with tight restrictions some pregnant women would inevitably take the antiviral.

"I don't think you can ethically tell a woman with COVID-19 that she can't have the drug if she's decided that's what she needs," said Cragan, a panel member and staffer with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "I think the final decision has to come down to the individual woman and her provider."

Merck's drug uses a novel approach to fight COVID-19: It inserts tiny errors into the coronavirus' genetic code to stop it from reproducing. That genetic effect has raised concerns that the drug could spur more virulent strains of the virus. FDA regulators said Tuesday that risk is theoretical but many panelists said it should be carefully tracked in follow-up studies.

Antiviral pills have long been seen as a key advance beyond currently used antibody drugs, which must be injected or infused by health professionals. But given the shortcomings of Merck's data, several experts said they would prioritize patients to receive the older drugs.

While Merck and its partner Ridgeback Biotherapeutics were the first to submit their COVID-19 pill to the FDA, rival drugmaker Pfizer is close behind with its own pill under review.

Pfizer's drug is part of a decades-old family of antiviral pills known as protease inhibitors, a standard treatment for HIV and hepatitis C. They work differently than Merck's pill and haven't been linked to the kind of mutation concerns raised with Merck's drug.

Pfizer said this week that its drug shouldn't be affected by the omicron variant's mutations.

Both drugs require patients to take multiple pills, twice a day for five days.

The U.S. government has agreed to purchase 10 million treatment courses of Pfizer's drug, if it's authorized. That's more than three times the government's purchase agreement with Merck for 3.1 million courses of molnupiravir.

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.

Attorney: Potter will testify at trial; 4 jurors seated

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The suburban Minneapolis police officer who shot Daunte Wright will testify at her trial, her attorney said Tuesday as jury selection began with potential panelists questioned closely about their attitudes on policing, protests and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Four jurors were seated in a process that may take as much as a week or more. Opening statements

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are Dec. 8.

One of Kim Potter's attorneys, Paul Engh, told a potential juror that she would hear directly from Potter about the traffic stop that ended in the death of the 20-year-old Black motorist in April. Potter, who is white, has said she meant to use her Taser on Wright but grabbed her handgun by mistake.

"Officer Potter will testify and tell you what she remembers happened, so you will know not just from the video but from the officers at the scene and Officer Potter herself what was occurring," Engh said. "I think (you) should be quite interested in hearing what she had to say."

Potter, 49, is charged with first- and second-degree manslaughter. She shot Wright as he tried to drive away from a traffic stop in Brooklyn Center on April 11 — a time when former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin's trial was underway for the killing of George Floyd and tensions were high in the area. Wright's death sparked several nights of protests in Brooklyn Center and revived painful memories of the sometimes violent unrest that erupted after Floyd's death in May 2020.

The prospective jurors summoned Tuesday had already responded to questionnaires similar to those used in Chauvin's murder trial. Roughly 200 people were asked what they knew about the Potter case, their impressions of her and Wright, and their views on protests and policing in the Minneapolis area in recent years.

The jurors seated Tuesday are a medical editor, a retired special education teacher, a Target operations manager and a woman whose occupation wasn't given. The court later released demographic information describing the four as two white men, one in his 20s and one in his 50s; a white woman in her 60s; and an Asian woman in her 40s.

The medical editor said he has a very unfavorable view of the "blue lives matter" slogan that has emerged in recent years. He said he believes it's less about supporting police than about countering the Black Lives Matter movement.

But he also said he opposes the movement to abolish or defund the police.

"I absolutely believe there's a need for change," he said. "But I think defund the police sends a message, a negative message. ... I don't agree with that message and I don't agree with the approach that was taken to defund the police."

The Target employee, who also plays bass in a rock band, described himself as somewhat distrustful of police but said he recognized "that it's a very hard job."

The woman whose occupation wasn't given described herself as a "rule follower" who said she felt police officers should be respected. She said on a questionnaire that she somewhat agreed that police officers should not be second-guessed for decisions they make on the job.

"I think sometimes you just react, and sometimes it might be a wrong reaction, but, you know, mistakes happen," she said. "People make mistakes."

Still, she said she would make a decision based on the evidence.

Seven jurors were dismissed, including a handful who expressed strong views of the case. One woman said on her questionnaire that she viewed Potter very unfavorably and she should have known the difference between her gun and her Taser. A man expressed wonder that a seasoned officer could make such a mistake, and told defense attorneys, "I don't know if you'd want to select me."

One man questioned in court Tuesday described Black Lives Matter as "Marxist Communist" and suggested Wright was to blame for his death: "I think if he would've listened to the (police) directions, he would still be with us."

Jurors' names were being withheld and they were not shown on the livestream of the trial. But efforts to protect their identities slipped at times, with defense attorney Earl Gray appearing to say two prospective jurors' names aloud. Judge Regina Chu warned attorneys to be more careful.

"I don't want that to happen again," she said. "I know it was a mistake."

Potter's defense team can dismiss up to five jurors without giving a reason, compared with three for the prosecution, standard in Minnesota courts. Neither side needs to justify such a peremptory strike unless the other side argues it was because of a juror's race, ethnicity or gender.

Prosecutors used one such strike to eliminate a retired fire captain who said he'd had good experiences

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working with police and has a nephew who is an officer. The defense used one on a woman who had briefly worked for Keith Ellison's campaign for attorney general; Ellison's office is prosecuting the case. Engh said during questioning that he saw she smiled at Ellison on the way in.

Potter said she made an innocent mistake when she shot Wright. She and two other officers at the scene, including one she was training, moved to arrest Wright after learning there was a warrant out for him on a gross misdemeanor charge.

As Wright tried to drive off, Potter can be heard on her body camera video saying "Taser, Taser Taser" before she fired, followed by, "I grabbed the wrong (expletive) gun."

Prosecutors charged Potter, who resigned two days after the shooting, with first- and second-degree manslaughter, saying she was an experienced officer who was trained to know better. The most serious charge requires prosecutors to prove recklessness; the lesser only requires them to prove culpable negligence. Minnesota's sentencing guidelines call for a sentence of just over seven years on the first-degree manslaughter count, and four years for second-degree. But prosecutors have said they'll seek a longer sentence.

The jury pool comes from Hennepin County, which includes Minneapolis and is the state's most populous county. Hennepin is 74% white, 14% Black, 7.5% Asian and 7% Latino, according to census data. Brooklyn Center is one of the most diverse cities in the state, at 46% white, 29% Black, 16% Asian and 15% Latino.

Dozens of pro-Wright demonstrators gathered outside the courthouse for the first day of jury selection, and skirmished briefly with a car that drove through their midst as daylight faded. Video posted online showed a person riding atop the car for half a block before jumping off when it slowed, and others trying to open its doors. Police spokesman Garrett Parten said no injuries were reported.

Associated Press/Report for America Statehouse News Initiative reporter Mohamed Ibrahim contributed to this story.

Find the AP's full coverage of the Daunte Wright case: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-daunte-wright>

Brazil and Japan report first cases of the omicron variant

By RAF CASERT and CARLA K. JOHNSON Associated Press

Brazil and Japan joined the rapidly widening circle of countries to report cases of the omicron variant Tuesday, while new findings indicate the mutant coronavirus was already in Europe close to a week before South Africa sounded the alarm.

The Netherlands' RIVM health institute disclosed that patient samples dating from Nov. 19 and 23 were found to contain the variant. It was on Nov. 24 that South African authorities reported the existence of the highly mutated virus to the World Health Organization.

That indicates omicron had a bigger head start in the Netherlands than previously believed.

Together with the cases in Japan and Brazil, the finding illustrates the difficulty in containing the virus in an age of jet travel and economic globalization. And it left the world once again whipsawed between hopes of returning to normal and fears that the worst is yet to come.

Much remains unknown about the new variant, including whether it is more contagious, as some health authorities suspect, whether it makes people more seriously ill, and whether it can thwart the vaccine.

The pandemic has shown repeatedly that the virus "travels quickly because of our globalized, interconnected world," said Dr. Albert Ko, an infectious disease specialist at the Yale School of Public Health. Until the vaccination drive reaches every country, "we're going to be in this situation again and again."

Brazil, which has recorded a staggering total of more than 600,000 COVID-19 deaths, reported finding the variant in two travelers returning from South Africa — the first known omicron cases in Latin America. The travelers were tested on Nov. 25, authorities said.

Japan announced its first case, too, on the same day the country put a ban on all foreign visitors into effect. The patient was identified as a Namibian diplomat who had recently arrived from his homeland.

France likewise recorded its first case, in the far-flung island territory of Reunion in the Indian Ocean.

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Authorities said the patient was a man who had returned to Reunion from South Africa and Mozambique on Nov. 20.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the United States' top infectious disease expert, said much more will be known about omicron in the next several weeks, and "we'll have a much better picture of what the challenge is ahead of us."

In the meantime, a WHO official warned that given the growing number of omicron cases in South Africa and neighboring Botswana, parts of southern Africa could soon see infections skyrocket.

"There is a possibility that really we're going to be seeing a serious doubling or tripling of the cases as we move along or as the week unfolds," said Dr. Nicky Gumede-Moeletsi, a WHO regional virologist.

Cases began to increase rapidly in mid-November in South Africa, which is now seeing nearly 3,000 confirmed new infections per day.

Before news of the Brazil cases broke, Fauci said 226 omicron cases had been confirmed in 20 countries, adding: "I think you're going to expect to see those numbers change rapidly."

Those countries include Britain, 11 European Union nations, Australia, Canada and Israel. American disease trackers said omicron could already be in the U.S., too, and probably will be detected soon.

"I am expecting it any day now," said Scott Becker of the Association of Public Health Laboratories. "We expect it is here."

While the variant was first identified by South African researchers, it is unclear where and when it originated, information that could help shed light on how fast it spreads.

The announcement from the Dutch on Tuesday could shape that timeline.

Previously, the Netherlands said it found the variant among passengers who came from South Africa on Friday, the same day the Dutch and other EU members began imposing flight bans and other restrictions on southern Africa. But the newly identified cases predate that.

NOS, the Netherlands' public broadcaster, said that one of the two omicron samples came from a person who had been in southern Africa.

Belgium reported a case involving a traveler who returned to the country from Egypt on Nov. 11 but did not become sick with mild symptoms until Nov. 22.

Many health officials tried to calm fears, insisting that vaccines remain the best defense and that the world must redouble its efforts to get the shots to every part of the globe.

Emer Cooke, chief of the European Medicines Agency, said that the 27-nation EU is well prepared for the variant and that the vaccine could be adapted for use against omicron within three or four months if necessary.

England reacted to the emerging threat by making face coverings mandatory again on public transportation and in stores, banks and hair salons. And one month ahead of Christmas, the head of Britain's Health Security Agency urged people not to socialize if they don't need to.

After COVID-19 led to a one-year postponement of the Summer Games, Olympic organizers began to worry about the February Winter Games in Beijing. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian said omicron would "certainly bring some challenges in terms of prevention and control."

World markets seesawed on every piece of medical news, whether worrisome or reassuring. Stocks fell on Wall Street over virus fears as well as concerns about the Federal Reserve's continued efforts to shore up the markets.

Some analysts think a serious economic downturn will probably be averted because many people have been vaccinated. But they also think a return to pre-pandemic levels of economic activity, especially in tourism, has been dramatically delayed.

AP journalists from around the world contributed.

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

Author Alice Sebold apologizes to man cleared in 1981 rape

By KAREN MATTHEWS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Author Alice Sebold publicly apologized Tuesday to the man who was exonerated last week in the 1981 rape that was the basis for her memoir "Lucky" and said she was struggling with the role she played "within a system that sent an innocent man to jail."

Anthony Broadwater, 61, was convicted in 1982 of raping Sebold when she was a student at Syracuse University. He served 16 years in prison. His conviction was overturned Nov. 22 after prosecutors reexamined the case and determined there were serious flaws in his arrest and trial.

In a statement released to The Associated Press and later posted on Medium, Sebold, the author of the novels "The Lovely Bones" and "The Almost Moon," wrote to Broadwater that she was truly sorry for what he'd been through.

"I am sorry most of all for the fact that the life you could have led was unjustly robbed from you, and I know that no apology can change what happened to you and never will," she wrote.

She wrote that "as a traumatized 18-year-old rape victim, I chose to put my faith in the American legal system. My goal in 1982 was justice — not to perpetuate injustice. And certainly not to forever, and irreparably, alter a young man's life by the very crime that had altered mine."

In a statement issued by his lawyers, Broadwater said he was "relieved that she has apologized."

He went on, "It must have taken a lot of courage for her to do that. It's still painful to me because I was wrongfully convicted, but this will help me in my process to come to peace with what happened."

Sebold wrote in 1999's "Lucky" of being raped and then spotting a Black man in the street several months later who she believed was her attacker.

Sebold, who is white, went to police. An officer said the man in the street must have been Broadwater, who had supposedly been seen in the area.

After Broadwater was arrested, Sebold failed to identify him in a police lineup, picking a different man as her attacker because she was frightened of "the expression in his eyes."

But prosecutors put Broadwater on trial anyway, telling Sebold . He was convicted based largely on Sebold identifying him as her rapist on the witness stand and testimony that microscopic hair analysis had tied him to the crime. That type of analysis has since been deemed junk science by the U.S. Department of Justice.

Broadwater, who was released from prison in 1998, told the AP last week he was crying "tears of joy and relief" after his conviction was overturned by a judge in Syracuse.

Publisher Simon & Schuster and its imprint Scribner said Tuesday they had ceased distribution of "Lucky" in all formats and were working with the author to consider how it might be revised.

Sebold, who has not previously commented on Broadwater's exoneration, said in her statement, "I am grateful that Mr. Broadwater has finally been vindicated, but the fact remains that 40 years ago, he became another young Black man brutalized by our flawed legal system. I will forever be sorry for what was done to him."

Broadwater remained on New York's sex offender registry after he was released from prison and has worked as a trash hauler and a handyman.

"It has taken me these past eight days to comprehend how this could have happened," said Sebold, now 58. "I will continue to struggle with the role that I unwittingly played within a system that sent an innocent man to jail. I will also grapple with the fact that my rapist will, in all likelihood, never be known, may have gone on to rape other women, and certainly will never serve the time in prison that Mr. Broadwater did."

Space junk forces spacewalk delay, too risky for astronauts

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — NASA called off a spacewalk Tuesday because of menacing space junk that could puncture an astronaut's suit or damage the International Space Station.

Two U.S. astronauts were set to replace a bad antenna outside of the space station. But late Monday night, Mission Control learned that a piece of orbiting debris might come dangerously close. There wasn't

enough time to assess the threat so station managers delayed the spacewalk until Thursday.

It's the first time a spacewalk has been canceled because of threat from space junk.

The space station and its crew of seven have been at increased risk from space junk since Russia destroyed a satellite in a missile test two weeks ago.

It wasn't immediately clear whether the object of concern was part of the Russian satellite wreckage. During a news conference Monday, NASA officials said the Nov. 15 missile test resulted in at least 1,700 satellite pieces big enough to track, and thousands more too small to be observed from the ground but still able to pierce a spacewalker's suit.

NASA officials said astronauts Tom Marshburn and Kayla Barron faced a 7 percent greater risk of a spacewalk puncture because of the Russian-generated debris. But they said it was still within acceptable limits based on previous experience.

Marshburn and Barron arrived at the space station earlier this month.

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.

States: Sackler family members abusing bankruptcy process

By GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A federal judge should reject a sweeping settlement to thousands of lawsuits against OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma, a group of states said at a hearing Tuesday, arguing that the protections it extends to members of the Sackler family who own the firm are improper.

States have credible claims that family members took more than \$10 billion from the company, steered it toward bankruptcy, and then used a settlement crafted in bankruptcy court to gain legal protections for themselves, Washington state Solicitor General Noah Purcell told U.S. District Judge Colleen McMahon.

"If that is not an abuse of the bankruptcy process," Purcell said, "it's unclear what would be."

The plan, crafted largely by those with claims against Purdue and approved in September by a federal bankruptcy judge, calls for members of the Sackler family to contribute more than \$4 billion in cash, plus the company itself, to fight the opioid epidemic, which has been linked to more than 500,000 U.S. deaths in the past two decades, including deaths linked both to prescription and illicit drugs.

In exchange, members of the family are to be protected from lawsuits accusing them of spurring the crisis. The suits accuse the company and family members of helping to spark the overdose crisis by aggressively marketing OxyContin, a powerful opioid painkiller.

They would not be protected from criminal charges. They're not facing any now, though a group of activists has been pushing federal authorities to bring charges against some members of the family, which includes some people who were executives and board members at the company and others with no involvement other than receiving money from it. Much of their fortunes are held in offshore trusts that could be hard to access in U.S. lawsuits.

Most state and local governments and thousands of individual victims of the epidemic agreed to the deal, though many did so grudgingly. Those groups are now joining with Purdue and Sackler family members to defend the plan from appeals from an office of U.S. Department of Justice, eight states, the District of Columbia, some Canadian local governments and Native American tribal groups, plus some individual victims.

In the hearing Tuesday in a New York City courtroom, McMahon focused on the \$10.4 billion in transfers from Purdue coffers to family trusts from 2008 to 2018. Nearly half of that was used to pay taxes on the earnings.

The judge said that by taking bigger distributions over the decade leading to the company's bankruptcy filings, Sackler family members "made themselves necessary" to the negotiations over how much money would be available for claimants.

Lawyers for the family said that distributions were bigger because the company was making more money

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and that there's no evidence any of them were trying to manipulating the bankruptcy system.

Those appealing the plan contended that the protections the Sacklers got are more generous than what they could have received had they filed for bankruptcy themselves. Bankruptcy would also protect the company from lawsuits.

They also said that allowing the deal would usurp states' ability to sue Sackler family members to hold them accountable.

"What confirmation of this plan does in this case is strip the states of police powers," Maryland Assistant Attorney General Brian Edmunds said, "to protect the public from harm."

Marshall Huebner, a lawyer for Stamford, Connecticut-based Purdue, said the states were misstating some details of the settlement plans, including how U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Robert Drain insisted that Sackler family members would receive protections from lawsuits involving only opioids made by Purdue.

He also noted that the overwhelming majority of governments agreed to the plan, which would funnel money to individual victims of the opioid crisis and to efforts to fight the crisis.

McMahon cut him off. "My questions focus on aspects of legality of the releases," she said. "I don't want to hear about the wonderful things it's going to do. I know it was approved by a supermajority."

Still, Huebner noted, there would be far less money to work on the crisis without money from Sackler family members. He said that if they could be sued and prevailed, they might not pay the settlement. And if they lost other lawsuits — they now face about 860 of them — they might not be able to afford to.

Kenneth Eckstein, a lawyer for a group of government entities supporting the settlement, said they also wanted the releases for Sackler family members.

If some states could sue the family, he said, the others would not accept a payment plan that stretches over nine years because of a risk that the Sacklers' money would dry up before the installments could all be paid.

Mitchell Hurley, a lawyer for unsecured creditors who were seeking pieces of Purdue's assets, said that if most of those groups had not joined to agree to a settlement, "the value of Purdue was going to be wasted and go to lawyers" rather than addressing the opioid crisis.

He noted that the government and private creditors — except the individual victims — have agreed to use all the money they receive to fight opioids, which are claiming 200 lives a day in the U.S. And that money, he said, could start flowing soon if it's allowed.

"If it fails, if it blows up," Hurley told McMahon, "it's going to be the creditors who uniquely suffer the consequences."

But Maria Ecke, who lost her son Jonathan in 2015 to an addiction that began 17 years earlier when he was prescribed opioids after being injured in a car crash, said the settlement hurts.

The Connecticut resident on Tuesday showed McMahon a poster of photos of her son and pleaded that the settlement not be allowed.

"The plaintiffs have suffered and continue to suffer physical and mental injuries," she said.

McMahon has said she hopes to rule by next week, though a decision could take longer. Hers almost certainly won't be the last word; whatever decision she reaches is likely to be appealed to a higher court.

Putin warns West: Moscow has 'red line' about Ukraine, NATO

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday sternly warned NATO against deploying its troops and weapons to Ukraine, saying it represents a red line for Russia and would trigger a strong response.

Commenting on Western concerns about Russia's alleged intention to invade Ukraine, he said that Moscow is equally worried about NATO drills near its borders.

Speaking to participants of an online investment forum, Putin said that NATO's eastward expansion has threatened Russia's core security interests. He expressed concern that NATO could eventually use the Ukrainian territory to deploy missiles capable of reaching Moscow in just five minutes.

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"The emergence of such threats represents a 'red line' for us," Putin said. "I hope that it will not get to that and common sense and responsibility for their own countries and the global community will eventually prevail."

He added that Russia has been forced to counter the growing threats by developing new hypersonic weapons.

"What should we do?" Putin said. "We would need to develop something similar to target those who threaten us. And we can do that even now."

He said a new hypersonic missile that is set to enter service with the Russian navy early next year would be capable of reaching targets in comparable time.

"It would also need just five minutes to reach those who issue orders," Putin said.

The Zircon hypersonic cruise missile, capable of flying at nine times the speed of sound to a range of 1,000 kilometers (620 miles), has undergone a series of tests, most recently Monday.

Ukrainian and Western officials have expressed worries this month that a Russian military buildup near Ukraine could signal plans by Moscow to invade its ex-Soviet neighbor. NATO foreign ministers warned Russia on Tuesday that any attempt to further destabilize Ukraine would be a costly mistake.

The Kremlin has insisted it has no such intention and has accused Ukraine and its Western backers of making the claims to cover up their own allegedly aggressive designs.

Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 after the country's Kremlin-friendly president was driven from power by mass protests and also threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency that broke out in Ukraine's east.

Earlier this year, a spike in cease-fire violations in the east and a Russian troop concentration near Ukraine fueled war fears, but tensions abated when Moscow pulled back the bulk of its forces after maneuvers in April.

Putin argued that to avoid tensions, Russia and the West should negotiate agreements that would safeguard each party's security interests.

"The matter is not whether to send troops or not, go to war or not, but to establish a more fair and stable development and taking into account security interests of all international players," he replied when asked if Russia was going to invade Ukraine. "If we sincerely strive for that, no one will fear any threats."

The Russian leader noted that Russia has worried about NATO drills near its borders, pointing at a recent exercise that involved U.S. strategic bombers.

"Strategic bombers, which carry precision weapons and are capable of carrying nuclear weapons, were flying as close as 20 kilometers (12 miles) to our border," Putin said. "That represents a threat for us."

After the buildup of Russian troops near Ukraine early this year, Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden held a June summit in Geneva, where they agreed to launch a dialogue on strategic stability and cybersecurity. Putin on Tuesday hailed the cybersecurity discussions between Russian and U.S. experts, saying "just as with the pandemic, it's necessary to pool efforts to work efficiently."

Asked about reports on plans for a Biden-Putin call next month, White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters Tuesday aboard Air Force One that she doesn't have "anything to predict or preview at this point," adding that "obviously, we remain in touch as a follow up to the summit this summer, at a high level with Russian counterparts."

Responding to a question about the threat of a Russian invasion in Ukraine, Psaki said "we're deeply concerned about the heightened rhetoric, about the reported military buildup on the border."

In Russia, when asked about Biden possibly seeking a second term, Putin said he thought that would help political stability in the U.S. The Russian leader drew a parallel with his own reelection plans.

Even though Putin hasn't decided yet whether to seek another term before his current one ends in 2024, he said the possibility of him staying on has helped Russia's stability.

The 69-year-old president has been in power for more than two decades — longer than any other Kremlin leader since Soviet dictator Josef Stalin. Constitutional amendments approved in 2020 reset Putin's previous term limits, allowing him to run for president two more times and hold onto power until 2036.

"In line with the constitution, I have the right to get elected to seek a new term, but I haven't yet made

up my mind whether to do it or not," Putin said. "But the very existence of that right already stabilizes the domestic political situation."

Asked about China's nuclear buildup, Putin said that Russia isn't worried about it, adding that close ties between Moscow and Beijing are a "major factor of global stability."

Associated Press writer Alexandra Jaffe contributed to this report from aboard Air Force One.

Ex-Trump aide Meadows cooperating with House Jan. 6 panel

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Mark Meadows, Donald Trump's former chief of staff, is cooperating with a House panel investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, putting off for now the panel's threat to hold him in contempt, the committee's chairman said Tuesday.

The panel "will continue to assess his degree of compliance," Mississippi Rep. Bennie Thompson said in a statement. He said Meadows has produced records and will soon appear for an initial deposition.

The agreement comes after two months of negotiations between Meadows and the committee and after the Justice Department indicted longtime Trump ally Steve Bannon for defying a subpoena. Meadows' lawyer had previously indicated that his client would not comply, a stance the committee said was unacceptable.

"The Select Committee expects all witnesses, including Mr. Meadows, to provide all information requested and that the Select Committee is lawfully entitled to receive," Thompson said.

Under the tentative agreement, Meadows could potentially decline to answer the panel's questions about his most sensitive conversations with Trump and what Trump was doing on Jan. 6 as hundreds of rioters violently broke into the Capitol and interrupted the certification of Joe Biden's 2020 election victory.

Trump — who told his supporters to "fight like hell" that morning — has attempted to hinder much of the committee's work, including in an ongoing court case, by arguing that Congress cannot obtain information about his private White House conversations.

Meadows' lawyer, George Terwilliger, said in a statement that "we appreciate the Select Committee's openness to receiving voluntary responses on non-privileged topics."

Terwilliger said he was continuing to work with the committee and its staff on a potential accommodation that would not require Meadows to waive the executive privileges claimed by Trump or "forfeit the long-standing position that senior White House aides cannot be compelled to testify before Congress."

The deal with Meadows highlights how the committee is trying to balance its need for information about Trump's role in the Jan. 6 insurrection against the desire to complete the investigation quickly. While the committee has rejected Trump's legal arguments and Biden has waived executive privilege to hand over documents and records, the panel wants to avoid lengthy legal entanglements that could delay their work.

Still, Meadows' intention to work with the panel is a victory for the seven Democrats and two Republicans on the committee, especially as they seek interviews with lower-profile witnesses who may have important information to share. The panel has so far subpoenaed more than 40 witnesses and interviewed more than 150 people behind closed doors.

Terwilliger had previously said that Meadows wouldn't comply with the panel's September subpoena because of Trump's privilege claims. But the House panel insists it has questions for Meadows that do not directly involve conversations with Trump.

In the committee's September subpoena, Thompson cited Meadows' efforts to overturn Trump's defeat in the weeks before the insurrection and his pressure on state officials to push false claims of widespread voter fraud.

"You were the president's chief of staff and have critical information regarding many elements of our inquiry," Thompson wrote. "It appears you were with or in the vicinity of President Trump on January 6, had communication with the president and others on January 6 regarding events at the Capitol and are a witness regarding the activities of the day."

Lawmakers on the committee had hinted for several weeks that they were prepared to hold Meadows in

contempt, as they had Bannon. But Thompson said just before Thanksgiving that the committee “won’t rush the effort” to make clear that they had given Meadows, a former Republican congressman from North Carolina, every chance to cooperate.

On Wednesday, the committee will vote on whether to pursue contempt charges against a separate witness, former Justice Department official Jeffrey Clark, after he appeared for a deposition earlier this month but declined to answer questions. The House could vote to hold him in contempt as soon as this week. It would be up to the Justice Department to decide whether to indict him.

A report from Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee detailed how Clark championed Trump’s efforts to undo the election results and clashed as a result with Justice Department superiors who resisted the pressure, culminating in a dramatic White House meeting at which Trump ruminated about elevating Clark to attorney general. He did not do so after several aides threatened to resign.

US tracking of virus variants has improved after slow start

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

After a slow start, the United States has improved its surveillance system for tracking new coronavirus variants such as omicron, boosting its capacity by tens of thousands of samples per week since early this year.

Viruses mutate constantly. To find and track new versions of the coronavirus, scientists analyze the genetic makeup of a portion of samples that test positive.

They’re looking at the chemical letters of the virus’s genetic code to find new worrisome mutants, such as omicron, and to follow the spread of known variants, such as delta.

It’s a global effort, but until recently the U.S. was contributing very little. With uncoordinated and scattershot testing, the U.S. was sequencing fewer than 1% of positive specimens earlier this year. Now, it is running those tests on 5% to 10% of samples. That’s more in line with what other nations have sequenced and shared with global disease trackers over the course of the pandemic.

“Genomic surveillance is strong,” said Kelly Wroblewski, director of infectious diseases at the Association of Public Health Laboratories.

Contributing to the effort are nearly 70 state and local public health labs, which are sequencing 15,000 to 20,000 specimens each week. Other labs, including those run by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and its contractors, bring the total to 40,000 to 80,000 weekly.

Nine months ago, about 12,000 samples each week were being analyzed in this way.

“We’re in a much, much better place than a year ago or even six or nine months ago,” said Kenny Beckman of the University of Minnesota, who credited federal dollars distributed to public and private labs. He directs the university’s genomics laboratory, which now sequences about 1,000 samples a week from states including Minnesota, Arkansas and South Dakota. A year ago, the lab did no sequencing.

Relying on \$1.7 billion in President Joe Biden’s coronavirus relief bill, the U.S. has been setting up a national network to better track coronavirus mutations.

Still, about two dozen countries are sequencing a larger proportion of positive samples than the U.S., said Dr. William Moss of the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. Omicron’s emergence could “stimulate the United States to do this better.”

“I think we still have a long way to go,” Moss said.

Some states are sequencing only about 1% of samples while others are in the range of 20%, noted Dr. Phil Febbo, chief medical officer for Illumina, a San Diego-based company that develops genomic sequencing technologies.

“We could be more systematic about it and more consistent so we ensure there are no genomic surveillance deserts where we could miss the emergence of a variant,” Febbo said.

Aiding the surveillance effort, standard PCR tests that use nasal swabs sent to laboratories can detect a sign that someone probably has the omicron variant. If a PCR test is positive for only two of the three target genes — a so-called S-dropout test result — it’s a marker for omicron even before the extra step

of genetic sequencing to prove it.

"It's fortuitous," said Trevor Bedford, a biologist and genetics expert at Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center. "If you need to do sequencing to identify the variant you're always going to be lagged a bit and it's going to be more expensive. If you just rely on this S-dropout as identification then it's easier."

He said other variants also have sparked this quirk in PCR test results, but not the delta variant. With delta so dominant in the U.S. right now, an S-dropout result will get noticed, Bedford said. (Bedford receives funding from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, which also supports The Associated Press Health and Science Department.)

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, said it is "inevitable" that omicron will make its way into the United States.

Many experts said it's probably already here and will be picked up by the surveillance system soon. But the question is, then what?

University of Wisconsin AIDS researcher David O'Connor noted: "We don't have the sorts of interstate travel restrictions that would make it possible to contain the virus in any one place."

Instead, genomic surveillance will tell officials if omicron is spreading unusually fast somewhere and whether more resources should be sent to those places, he said.

When omicron does surface, public health authorities will have to consider other variables in their triage efforts, such as the level of infection already present in that community and the vaccination rate. Serious outbreaks in highly vaccinated areas would be particularly concerning.

Still, the University of Minnesota's Beckman sees little upside in vastly ramping up sequencing.

"You don't need to sequence more than a few percent of positive cases to get a feel for how quickly it's growing," he said.

Unlike in some other countries, U.S. government officials haven't exercised the authority to force people to quarantine if they test positive for worrisome variants. Given that, sequencing is mainly a surveillance tool for tracking mutations' spread.

"I think it's important to track variants, but I don't think it's practical to think that we're going to be able to sequence quickly and broadly enough to stop a variant in its tracks," Beckman said.

AP writers Luran Neergaard, Matthew Perrone and Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed.

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November delivers another hit to sinking consumer confidence

By MARTIN CRUTSINGER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. consumer confidence fell to a nine-month low in November, clipped by rising prices and concern about the coronavirus.

The Conference Board reported Tuesday that its consumer confidence index dropped to a reading of 109.5, down from 111.6 in October. It was the lowest reading since the index stood at 95.2 in February.

The survey was completed on Nov. 19 and would not include the ramifications of omicron, a new variant of the coronavirus that has begun to spread with few solid answers about the damage it might do to the U.S. and global economies.

Even before the omicron variant appeared, consumer optimism was being tested by price spikes across the board, particularly for gasoline and food.

The Conference Board's present situation index, which measures consumers' assessment of current business and labor conditions, fell to 142.5, down from 145.5 in October. The expectations index, based on consumers' outlook for income, business and labor market conditions, fell to 87.6 in November from 89.0 in October.

The Conference Board said that concerns about rising prices and to a lesser degree, lingering worries

about the delta variant, were the primary drivers of the November decline.

But economists believe rising prices and any jolt from the omicron variant will not have a major impact on holiday spending this year, something that can have a sizable impact on the U.S. economy.

Nancy Vanden Houten, lead U.S. economist at Oxford Economics, said she expected the omicron variant would have only a "moderate negative impact on growth." She is looking for the overall economy, as measured by the gross domestic product, to expand at an annual rate of 7.9% in the current quarter ending in December, a big improvement from the lackluster 2.1% GDP gain in the July-September quarter.

The decline in the Conference Board confidence index followed an even bigger drop reported last week in the University of Michigan's gauge of consumer sentiment, which fell in November to a decade-low of 7.4, compared to a final October reading of 71.7.

The smaller decline in the Conference Board survey reflects the fact that this index places more emphasis on the labor market, which has been performing well this year.

Iran strikes hard line as talks over nuclear deal resume

By NASSER KARIMI Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — Iran struck a hard line Tuesday after just one day of restarted talks in Vienna over its tattered nuclear deal, suggesting everything discussed in previous rounds of diplomacy could be renegotiated.

Speaking to Iranian state television, Ali Bagheri, Iran's top nuclear negotiator, referred to everything discussed thus far as merely a "draft." It remained unclear whether that represented an opening gambit by Iran's new president or signaled serious trouble for those hoping to restore the 2015 deal that saw Tehran strictly limit its enrichment of uranium in exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions.

The United States left the deal under then-President Donald Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran in 2018. Since the deal's collapse, Iran now enriches small amounts of uranium up to 60% purity — a short step from weapons-grade levels of 90%. Iran also spins advanced centrifuges barred by the accord, and its uranium stockpile now far exceeds the accord's limits.

President Joe Biden has said America's willing to re-enter the deal, though the negotiations continue with U.S. officials not in the room as in previous rounds of talks since Washington's withdrawal.

"Drafts are subject to negotiation. Therefore nothing is agreed on unless everything has been agreed on," Bagheri said. "On that basis, all discussions that took place in the six rounds are summarized and are subject to negotiations. This was admitted by all parties in today's meeting as well."

That directly contradicted comments Monday by the European Union diplomat leading the talks.

"The Iranian delegation represents a new administration in Tehran with new understandable political sensibilities, but they have accepted that the work done over the six first rounds is a good basis to build our work ahead, so no point in going back," Enrique Mora said.

Another state TV segment saw Bagheri in Vienna saying Iran demanded a "guarantee by America not to impose new sanctions" or not re-impose previously lifted sanctions.

Mohammed Eslami, the country's civilian nuclear chief, reiterated that demand in comments to Iran's state-run IRNA news agency.

"The talks (in Vienna) are about return of the U.S. to the deal and they have to lift all sanctions and this should be in practice and verifiable," he said. He did not elaborate.

The U.S. has imposed a slew of sanctions on Iran since the 1979 takeover of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran. Some eventually directly dealt with the country's nuclear program, while others targeted Tehran for what Washington describes as destabilizing actions in the Mideast. Under the 2015 nuclear deal, the U.S. lifted nuclear sanctions, which returned when Washington pulled out of the accord.

Iran maintains its atomic program is peaceful. However, U.S. intelligence agencies and international inspectors say Iran had an organized nuclear weapons program up until 2003. Nonproliferation experts fear any brinkmanship could push Tehran toward even more extreme measures to try to force the West to lift sanctions.

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Making matters more difficult, United Nations nuclear inspectors remain unable to fully monitor Iran's program after Tehran limited their access. A trip to Iran last week by the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency, Rafael Grossi, failed to make any progress on that issue.

Talks in Vienna aimed at re-imposing curbs on Iran's nuclear program resumed Monday after a more than five-month hiatus as hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi took power. Raisi, a protégé of Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, campaigned on getting sanctions lifted. However, fellow hard-liners within Iran's theocracy long have criticized the nuclear deal as giving too much away to the West.

Mikhail Ulyanov, Russia's top representative to the talks, tweeted Tuesday that the resumption of negotiations was "quite successful."

"Participants decided to continue without delay the drafting process in two working groups — on sanctions lifting and nuclear issues," he wrote. "This work starts immediately."

Israel, Iran's regional, nuclear-armed rival, kept up its own pressure amid the negotiations. Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, in a video address delivered to nations negotiating in Vienna, warned that he saw Iran trying to "end sanctions in exchange for almost nothing."

"Iran deserves no rewards, no bargain deals and no sanctions relief in return for their brutality," Bennett said in the video that he later posted to Twitter. "I call upon our allies around the world: Do not give in to Iran's nuclear blackmail."

Associated Press writer Jon Gambrell in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, contributed to this report.

Supply chain problems hit charities' holiday gifts for kids

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

With less than four weeks to go until Christmas, Kristyn Begari has been rushing to find enough doll styling heads to give to kids in need.

But, the purchasing coordinator for the California-based nonprofit Family Giving Tree says it's been difficult to find them, or racially diverse Barbies or Disney princess dolls. Other charities who give to kids during the holidays say they're also facing challenges finding enough gaming consoles, laptops and other electronic items amid the global shortage of chips used in cars, phones and other devices.

"I've never seen something like this," Begari said. "Our biggest fear is we're not going to get the quality of gifts that we want, or we're not going to have enough in general."

Attempting to grant thousands of holiday wish requests has always been challenging for Begari. But it's been downright miserable this year as the global supply chain bottlenecks create shortages on many items, making it difficult to grant many holiday wishes for the 34,000 children and adults the organization expects to aid in the Bay Area this holiday season.

Some wholesale vendors have already informed her that purchases will not arrive -- giving her the option of getting a refund, or buying another item. If a child doesn't get their preferred gift, she said the organization will attempt to grant their "second wish," or find another replacement item.

Similar worries are being felt across the country as COVID-related supply chain snafus — produced by clogged U.S. ports, a lack of workers to move the cargo and skyrocketing shipping costs -- lead to empty store shelves and higher prices on some products.

The supply chain slowdown is one of the main reasons why donations of new toys to The Toy Foundation have declined by nearly 80% in dollar value this year compared to 2019, according to Pamela Mastrotta, the executive director of the group, which was formed by a toy industry trade association to act as an industry-wide charitable collective for manufacturers.

The lack of trade shows due to the COVID-19 pandemic also put a wrench in their collection efforts for the second year in a row, straining their ability to get gifts for sick, impoverished or other vulnerable children who are in need.

"It's been a real challenge this year, and last year," Mastrotta said. "But this year especially."

Mastrotta's only hope now is if more toys are donated quickly. But such donations might further stress

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the profit margins of manufacturers who are facing high shipping costs and pressure to pass on increased costs to consumers.

Jim Silver, CEO of Toys, Tots, Pets & More, a toy industry review website, says charities are bound to see less toy donations from manufacturers this holiday season because many containers holding their products are stuck at U.S. ports, which have been experiencing record volumes of shipping containers as the economy recovers from the pandemic.

"There is going to be a shortage," he said. "Without a doubt."

Last month, President Joe Biden announced plans to establish around-the-clock operation at the Port of Los Angeles, the nation's largest, to tamp down the inflation being caused by ships waiting to dock and a shortage of truck drivers to haul goods. Port officials have said some of the bottleneck has since eased, but experts note it will take a long time before things get back to normal.

Silver notes small and mid-size manufacturers who largely produce toys in countries like China are feeling squeezed by the supply chain problems more than larger ones. However, the disruption is also being felt at MGA Entertainment, the American toy giant which makes Bratz! and L.O.L. Surprise! Dolls.

Isaac Larian, the company's CEO, says they've only been able to meet 70% of the demand for items because the company is waiting for hundreds of containers full of toys to clear the California ports.

"These goods are not going to make it to Christmas," Larian said. And the toys that are in stores now cost 23% higher than they did last year, he noted. His advice for anyone looking to get a toy is simple: shop now.

Despite an earlier planning process, many gift requests for gaming systems and other items submitted to One Simple Wish have been out of stock, or are facing major shipping delays, said Daniella Gletow, the founder of the organization, which works with social service agencies across the country to facilitate holiday wishes anyone can grant for children in need.

"That's obviously holding up our ability to make sure that we're going to be able to fulfill all these needs in time for the holidays," Gletow said. "Because our goal is to get everything out by the week before Christmas."

To avoid further delays, she says the organization is encouraging donors to grant wishes earlier than they have in prior years.

Toys for Tots, the nation's most well known toy donation drive run by the United States Marine Corps Reserve, is not expecting shortages, said David Cooper, the organization's vice president of operations. He said the organization purchased about \$16.5 million worth of toys this spring to mitigate any impact supply chain issues might have on donations.

There are concerns more families might register to receive toys from them this year due to higher costs. However, a Toys for Tots spokesperson says early indicators for their holiday collection efforts point in a positive direction.

Some of their donations in the past have gone towards The Salvation Army's Angel Tree program, which also collects gifts for children and families in need during the holidays. The organization estimates about 5 million gifts are donated each year through the program. Though this year, Kenneth Hodder, Salvation Army's commissioner, says there are concerns many kids might not receive their gifts on time.

"We are encouraging everyone who has generously supported us in the past, and who would like to do so again this year, to shop early and to get those toys to us as quickly as they can," he said.

At the Christian relief charity Samaritan's Purse, the concerns center around shipping delays. David Thompson, the senior director for the international portion of the group's "Operation Christmas Child" project, says the organization is aiming to send 9.7 million shoeboxes filled with Christian materials and gifts to children in more than 100 countries. But a shortage of truckers, delivery equipment and other factors have slowed things down.

"We have to be flexible," Thompson said. "But our in-country teams, volunteers and logistical networks are strong. And we're confident that the program will be carried out at the same level of excellence in scope that it has been in the past."

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Migrant crisis front and center in pope's Greece-Cyprus trip

By DEREK GATOPOULOS and THEODORA TONGAS Associated Press

LESBOS, Greece (AP) — When Pope Francis visited the Greek island of Lesbos in 2016, he was so moved by the stories he heard from families fleeing war in Iraq and Syria that he wept and brought a dozen refugees home with him.

Speaking to reporters on the way home that day, he held up a drawing handed to him by a child from the island's sprawling refugee camp.

"Look at this one," he said, revealing a bird neatly decorated in colored pencil, the word "peace" scrolled in English underneath it. "That's what children want: Peace."

Francis is returning to Lesbos this week for the first time since that defining day of his papacy, making a repeat visit to the island where hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrants have passed through on their journey to Europe.

But he will find attitudes toward migrants here have only hardened in the intervening five years, as they have elsewhere in Europe, with tensions flaring on the border between European Union country Poland and Belarus and more deadly crossings — most recently in the English Channel.

Francis will first stop in Cyprus, another predominantly Orthodox Christian country in the Mediterranean that is also coping with a rise in refugees so significant that the government is seeking to stop processing asylum claims.

As he did in Lesbos five years ago, Francis has arranged for around 50 would-be refugees in Cyprus to travel to Italy after his visit, Cypriot officials say. And Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni wouldn't rule out that Lesbos-based migrants might also be transferred after the visit.

"They are our brothers and sisters," Francis said in a video message to Greek and Cypriot faithful before the trip. "How many have lost their lives at sea! Today our sea, the Mediterranean, is a great cemetery."

The pontiff starts his five-day trip on Thursday in Cyprus before heading to Greece on Saturday. He returns home on Monday.

While Francis' renewed messages of compassion and welcome for migrants isn't quite resonating in European capitals, they are a welcome salvo for the migrants themselves.

"His presence here will strengthen us, spiritually, and give us hope, some comfort," said Christian Tango Muyaka, a 30-year-old asylum-seeker from Congo who is due to participate in a Sunday service with the pope at a new migrant camp on Lesbos.

"It gives us faith, it strengthens our faith," he said.

Muyaka was separated from his wife and youngest daughter a year ago on the Turkish coast when they scrambled to board a boat bound for Greece. He has had no news of what happened to them since.

The north coast of Lesbos, just 10 kilometers (six miles) from Turkey, served as the main landing point for boats crossing into Europe during the 2015-16 migration crisis.

Piles of discarded orange life vests covered beaches, local fishermen helped daily rescue operations, and island residents took pride in setting up campaigns to provide hundreds of refugees arriving daily with food and clothing.

Fast forward five years, and the welcome mat is gone.

Migrants reaching the eastern Greek islands are now being held in detention camps, newly built and funded by the EU. Coast guard patrols are instructed to intercept dinghies and boats heading west and send them back to Turkey.

The overcrowded camp on Lesbos that Francis was taken to in 2016 burnt to the ground last year during protests against pandemic restrictions.

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And along Greece's land border with Turkey, a new steel wall and hi-tech sensor network have been installed to stop illegal crossings.

Eva Cosse at Human Rights Watch said Francis' visit will serve as an urgent reminder of the human nature of the crisis.

"At a time when people are suffering and their rights are threatened, having the pope standing up for them and expressing these concerns is more important than ever," she told The Associated Press. "Since the pope's last visit, Greece continues to host large numbers of asylum-seekers while failing to protect their rights.

"Thousands seeking refuge in Greece are violently pushed back to Turkey. Migrant children face homelessness and a lack of access to health care, education and food. And nongovernmental groups face legislative restrictions and criminal harassment by officials."

Greek authorities deny allegations of summary deportations. They argue that tougher border policing is necessary to counter hostility by several EU neighbors accused of exploiting the crisis and to limit arrival numbers to manageable levels.

"(Francis') message is that we are one world, that we don't have borders, that everybody is a child of God. Look, this is the religious point of view," said Dimitris Vafeas, the deputy director of Mavrovouni migrant camp on Lesbos where the pope will visit.

"In practical terms, I think Greece has delivered ... so I think (Francis) will see calm faces. I don't dare say happy faces, but calm for sure."

Derek Gatopoulos reported from Athens. Nicole Winfield, in Rome, and Vangelis Papantonis, on Lesbos, contributed to this report.

Follow AP's global migration coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/migration>

'The Lost Daughter' wins big at 31st Gotham Awards

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Maggie Gyllenhaal's Elena Ferrante adaptation "The Lost Daughter" won four Gotham Awards including best feature film at the 31st Gotham Awards, the annual New York independent film celebration that serves as a boozy kickoff to Oscar season.

Gyllenhaal won breakthrough director and best screenplay for her directorial debut, and star Olivia Colman shared the award for outstanding lead performance with Frankie Faison, "The Killing of Kenneth Chamberlain," a drama based on the 2011 police shooting in White Plains, New York. "The Lost Daughter," a Netflix release, opens in theaters Dec. 17.

As one of the first stops in the long march to the Oscars, Monday evening's Gothams was the first real attempt since the pandemic began to summon all the season's usual glitz and pomp. Stars including Kristen Stewart, Tessa Thompson and Dakota Johnson walked the red carpet. Inside the crowded banquet hall, attendees were required to provide proof of vaccination and a negative COVID-19 test. Last year's Gotham Awards (where "Nomadland" won the top award) was held virtually, with winners accepting awards by Zoom and an online poker platform deployed to digitally sit guests at tables.

This year, even with the recent discovery of the omicron variant spooking a film industry still trying to rebound from the pandemic, the Gothams got back to normal — even while tweaking traditions.

For the first time, the Gothams were presented without gendered acting categories. While the season's top award shows — the Oscars, the Emmys, the Tonys — haven't yet embraced such a move, the Gothams are part of a growing number of awards bodies, including the Grammys and the MTV Film and TV Awards, to ditch "best actor" and "best actress."

Several times during Monday night's show that was applauded. Ethan Hawke, a co-winner for his performance in the series "The Good Lord Bird," said he never understood the separate categories in the first place.

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"True talent shines through the divisions meant to separate us," said "Billions" actor Asia Kate Dillon, a presenter, who identifies as nonbinary.

Other borders seemed to disintegrate at the Gothams, once a more narrow celebration of independent film. Among the series winners was Netflix's "Squid Game," the pop-culture sensation that has been watched for more than 2 billion hours, according to the streaming service. At the Gothams, speeches have often exalted the hard work and sometimes lesser-seen rewards of indie film.

"CODA," the celebrated coming-of-age drama about a hearing daughter in a deaf family, won several awards. Troy Kotsur, the veteran deaf actor who plays the film's fisherman father, won outstanding supporting performance. Emilia Jones, who stars as the daughter, won breakthrough performer. After an award-winning debut at a virtual Sundance Film Festival, the film's awards hopes had seemed to lag somewhat after a muted streaming debut on Apple TV+ in August. But the Gothams gave "CODA" a boost.

"First off, I'm absolutely handless right now," Kotsur said through sign language, shaking his hands.

Nominees and winners (except for best film) are chosen by juries for the Gothams. In a few categories, they elected multiple winners — like for outstanding lead performance where Colman and Faison both won from a pool of 10 nominees.

Other winners included Ryusuke Hamaguchi's intimate epic "Drive My Car" for best international film and Jonas Poher Rasmussen's "Flee," an animated film about an Afghanistan migrant's life, for best documentary.

But the Gothams also trot out a number of tribute awards, some of them going to a handful of filmmakers and performers expected to play starring roles throughout awards season. Those included honors for Jane Campion, director of "The Power of the Dog"; Stewart for her performance at Princess Diana in "Spencer"; Peter Dinklage for the upcoming "Cyrano"; and the cast of Jeymes Samuel's Black Western "The Harder They Fall."

Often, the tribute introductions are as dramatic as the acceptance speeches. "Spencer" director Pablo Larraín, alongside Julianne Moore, told Stewart that she changed his life and called her "a miracle of cinema."

"I feel so visible to him," Stewart said.

Dinklage, introduced with exuberance by Hawke ("If he was British, he'd be a knight"), stood aside and went "off-podium" for his speech because, he noted, the lectern was too high for him.

"The podium, not me," he said. "Although..."

But Dinklage, who plays Cyrano de Bergerac in the film, spoke warmly about his life in movies and his love of "you tribe of weirdos."

"When it's good, it's not precious," said Dinklage of acting. "It's work."

Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 1, the 335th day of 2021. There are 30 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 1, 1862, President Abraham Lincoln sent his Second Annual Message to Congress, in which he called for the abolition of slavery, and went on to say, "Fellow-citizens, we can not escape history. We of this Congress and this Administration will be remembered in spite of ourselves."

On this date:

In 1824, the presidential election was turned over to the U.S. House of Representatives when a deadlock developed among John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, William H. Crawford and Henry Clay. (Adams ended up the winner.)

In 1941, Japan's Emperor Hirohito approved waging war against the United States, Britain and the Netherlands after his government rejected U.S. demands contained in the Hull Note.

In 1942, during World War II, nationwide gasoline rationing went into effect in the United States; the

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goal was not so much to save on gas, but to conserve rubber that was desperately needed for the war effort by reducing the use of tires.

In 1955, Rosa Parks, a Black seamstress, was arrested after refusing to give up her seat to a white man on a Montgomery, Alabama, city bus; the incident sparked a year-long boycott of the buses by Blacks.

In 1965, an airlift of refugees from Cuba to the United States began in which thousands of Cubans were allowed to leave their homeland.

In 1969, the U.S. government held its first draft lottery since World War II.

In 1973, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, died in Tel Aviv at age 87.

In 1974, TWA Flight 514, a Washington-bound Boeing 727, crashed in Virginia after being diverted from National Airport to Dulles International Airport; all 92 people on board were killed. Northwest Orient Airlines Flight 6231, a Boeing 727, crashed near Stony Point, New York, with the loss of its three crew members (the plane had been chartered to pick up the Baltimore Colts football team in Buffalo, New York).

In 1990, British and French workers digging the Channel Tunnel between their countries finally met after knocking out a passage in a service tunnel.

In 1991, Ukrainians voted overwhelmingly for independence from the Soviet Union.

In 2005, a roadside bomb killed 10 U.S. Marines near Fallujah, Iraq.

In 2009, President Barack Obama ordered 30,000 more U.S. troops into the war in Afghanistan but promised during a speech to cadets at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point to begin withdrawals in 18 months.

Ten years ago: Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton met with opposition leader and Nobel peace laureate Aung San Suu Kyi (ahng sahn soo chee) during a visit to Myanmar. Bobby Valentine was named the 45th manager of the Boston Red Sox. (He would be fired after one season.)

Five years ago: During the first stop of a "Thank you" tour, President-elect Donald Trump made a surprise announcement from the stage in Cincinnati, saying he had decided to offer the post of defense secretary to retired Marine Corps Gen. James Mattis. French President Francois Hollande announced in a televised address that he would not seek a second term. Former NFL player Joe McKnight, 28, was shot to death in Louisiana in what authorities said was a road-rage incident. (Ronald Gasser, who said he was defending himself when he shot McKnight, was convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to 30 years in prison but was granted a new trial after the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed split-jury verdicts.)

One year ago: Disputing President Donald Trump's persistent, baseless claims, Attorney General William Barr told The Associated Press that the U.S. Justice Department had uncovered no evidence of widespread voter fraud that could change the outcome of the 2020 election. Trump filed a lawsuit in Wisconsin seeking to disqualify more than 221,000 ballots in a longshot attempt to overturn Democrat Joe Biden's win in the battleground state. Republicans attempting to undo Biden's victory in Pennsylvania asked the U.S. Supreme Court to take up their lawsuit, three days after it was thrown out by Pennsylvania's highest court. Florida joined Texas and California in surpassing 1 million confirmed COVID-19 cases.

Today's Birthdays: Actor-director Woody Allen is 86. World Golf Hall of Famer Lee Trevino is 82. Singer Dianne Lennon (The Lennon Sisters) is 82. Television producer David Salzman is 78. Rock singer-musician Eric Bloom (Blue Oyster Cult) is 77. Rock musician John Densmore (The Doors) is 77. Actor-singer Bette Midler is 76. Singer Gilbert O'Sullivan is 75. Former child actor Keith Thibodeaux (TV: "I Love Lucy") is 71. Actor Treat Williams is 70. Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., is 69. Country singer Kim Richey is 65. Actor Charlene Tilton is 63. Actor-model Carol Alt is 61. Actor Jeremy Northam is 60. Actor Katherine LaNasa is 55. Producer-director Andrew Adamson is 55. Actor Nestor Carbonell is 54. Actor Golden Brooks is 51. Actor-comedian Sarah Silverman is 51. Actor Ron Melendez is 49. Contemporary Christian singer Bart Millard (MIL-urd) is 49. Actor-writer-producer David Hornsby is 46. Singer Sarah Masen is 46. Rock musician Brad Delson (Linkin Park) is 44. Actor Nate Torrence is 44. Rock/Christian music singer-songwriter Mat Kearney is 43. Actor Riz Ahmed (Film: "Rogue One: A Star Wars Story") is 39. Actor Charles Michael Davis is 37. Actor Ilfenesh Hadera is 36. R&B singer-actor Janelle Monae is 36. Actor Ashley Monique Clark is 33. Pop-rock-rap singer Tyler Joseph (Twenty One Pilots) is 33. Actor Zoe Kravitz is 33. Pop singer Nico Sereba