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UpComing Events

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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American Legislative Exchange Council Ranks Governor Noem Best Governor in the Nation

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) announced that Governor Kristi Noem is ranked the best governor in America for 2021. In accepting the award, Governor Kristi Noem issued the following statement:

“ALEC is an incredible resource for legislators in every state, and it is a tremendous honor to receive this recognition from them. We’ve accomplished a lot for South Dakota in my first three years as Governor, but there is still more work to do. South Dakota will continue working to advance policies that protect freedom, cut red tape, and promote continual growth for our state.”

Governor Noem had been ranked first in policy and third overall in last year’s “Laffer-ALEC Report on Economic Freedom: Grading America’s 50 Governors.”

The award was announced at ALEC’s States & Nation Policy Summit.

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!



Pictured are Casey Crabtree, Heartland Director of Economic Development, Hope Block, Groton City Finance Officer, and April Abeln, Groton City Deputy Finance Officer. Not pictured is Kellie Locke, Groton City Assistant Finance Officer. (Courtesy Photo)

Heartland awards grant to city of Groton

GROTON, S.D. - Heartland Consumers Power District recently presented the city of Groton an economic development grant for \$5,000. The funds were awarded to assist with moving city hall and the library to a new location in the building previously occupied by Wells Fargo Bank.

The new allows for residents to pay utility bills and other fees, return library books, purchase passes and more utilizing the drive through. It also allows for more visitors to the library as the previous location could only safely hold up to five at one time. City employees will also be afforded more space to work effectively.

Meeting rooms will also be available for residents to rent, and city meetings will be held at the new location.

Heartland provides wholesale power and energy to the city of Groton as well as other public power utilities throughout the Midwest. They offer economic development grants to assist with community growth and development.

"The community will benefit greatly from this move," said Heartland Director of Economic Development Casey Crabtree. "It will now truly be a community space, able to better serve the residents of Groton."

The grant will specifically be used to purchase new computers for the library as well as bookshelves as community members continue to donate books for the new library.

USDA Invests \$633 Million in Climate-Smart and Resilient Infrastructure for People in Rural Communities, Including \$423,000 for South Dakota

Investments Will Make South Dakota Rural Communities More Energy Independent and Resilient

Huron, S.D. – Dec. 3, 2021 – United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Secretary Tom Vilsack today announced the Department is investing \$633 million to reduce the impacts of climate change on rural communities. As part of the Build Back Better agenda, the Biden-Harris Administration has made investing in rural communities, creating good-paying jobs and combatting the climate crisis top priorities.

“Rural America is on the front lines of climate change, and our communities deserve investments that will strengthen all of our resilience,” Vilsack said. “President Biden has created a roadmap for how we can tackle the climate crisis and expand access to renewable energy infrastructure, all while creating good-paying jobs and saving people money on their energy costs. With the Build Back Better agenda, USDA will be able to fund more and more critical projects like those announced today in the coming months and years.”

Background:

Vilsack highlighted 793 investments that USDA is making in five programs specifically designed to help people and businesses in rural areas. These programs include Community Facilities Disaster Grants, Electric Loan Program, Rural Energy for America Program, Rural Energy Savings Program, and the Higher Blends Infrastructure Incentive Program.

The funding will help people in all 50 states and Puerto Rico. It reflects the many ways USDA Rural Development helps rural residents, businesses and communities address economic development, infrastructure and social service needs.

These investments will help build and improve rural electric infrastructure and connect residents to affordable and dependable power. They will help agricultural producers and rural small businesses purchase and install renewable energy systems and make energy efficiency improvements. They will also help transportation fueling and biodiesel distribution facilities offer higher ethanol and biodiesel blends to customers by sharing the costs to install fuel pumps, equipment and infrastructure.

Secretary Vilsack made the announcement from Saubel’s Markets in Shrewsbury, Pennsylvania, which will receive a \$103,413 USDA Rural Energy for America Program (REAP) grant. With this funding, the small business will install solar panels on the roof of their family-owned grocery store that has been in business since the 1960s. This project is expected to save \$30,852 per year and will replace 395,539 kilowatt hours (kWh) per year, which is enough energy to power 36 homes annually. As part of today’s announcement, Pennsylvania will receive more than \$1 million for 22 projects across the state.

South Dakota projects receiving Rural Energy for America Program funds include:

LDI, LTD is receiving a \$46,693 grant to make energy efficiency improvements with the purchase and installation of a more efficient grain dryer at a farm located near Sisseton. This project will save \$3207 per year in energy costs and will save 217,895 kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity per year (41.72 percent) which is enough electricity to power 20 homes.

Amy Piotter is receiving a \$103,779 grant to make energy efficiency improvements, with the purchase and installation of more efficient grain handling equipment, at a farm located near New Effington. This project will save \$884.45 per year in energy costs and will save 21,832 kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity per year (89.32 percent) which is enough electricity to power two homes.

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Craig Dunker is receiving a \$18,597 grant to make energy efficiency improvements with the purchase and installation of a more efficient grain dryer at a farm located near Conde. This project will save \$6,087.14 per year in energy costs and will save 225,406 kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity per year (55.23 percent) which is enough electricity to power 20 homes.

Holler Farms Partnership is receiving a \$49,939 grant to make energy efficiency improvements with the purchase and installation of a more efficient grain dryer at a farm located near Pierpont. This project will save \$34,567.20 per year in energy costs and will save 876,095 kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity per year (75.14 percent) which is enough electricity to power 80 homes.

KC Dairies, LLP is receiving a \$29,019 grant to make energy efficiency improvements with the purchase and installation of a more efficient chiller system at a dairy located near Elkton. This project will save \$16,782.07 per year in energy costs and will save 282,890 kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity per year (68.35 percent) which is enough electricity to power 26 homes.

Midstates, Inc. is receiving a \$125,000 grant for the purchase and installation of an energy efficient printing press system (1000BE). This project will realize \$95,538.00 per year in savings and is estimated to replace 1,817,542 kilowatt hours (kWh) per year (51.18 percent), which is enough electricity to power 167 homes.

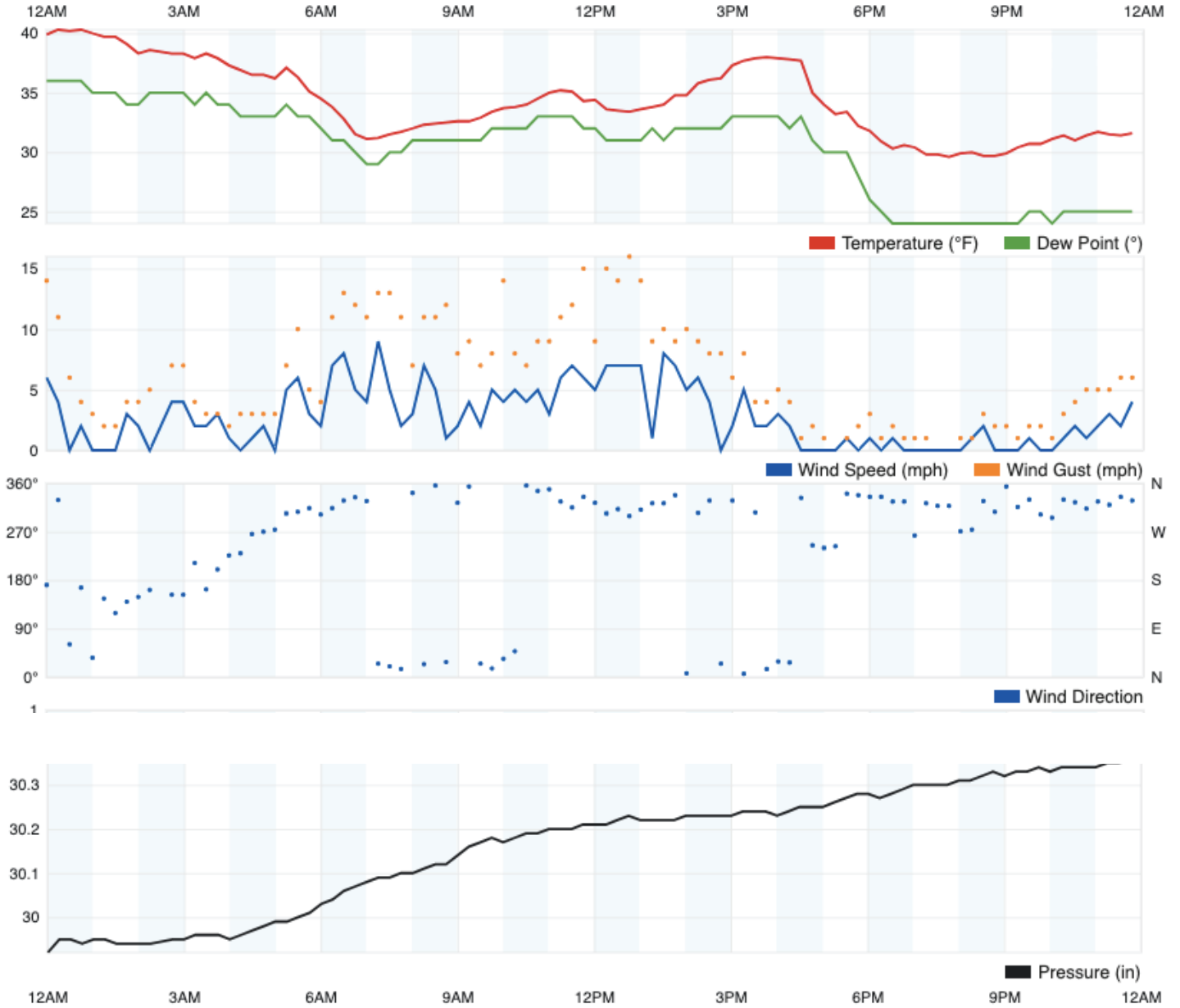
Joshua Metz is receiving a \$49,973 grant to make energy efficiency improvements, with the purchase and installation of a more efficient grain dryer at a farm located near Peever. This project will save \$23,760.18 per year in energy costs and will save 771,528 kilowatt hours (kWh) of electricity per year (49.78 percent) which is enough electricity to power 71 homes.

Under the Biden-Harris Administration, Rural Development provides loans and grants to help expand economic opportunities, create jobs and improve the quality of life for millions of Americans in rural areas. This assistance supports infrastructure improvements; business development; housing; community facilities such as schools, public safety and health care; and high-speed internet access in rural, Tribal and high-poverty areas. For more information, visit www.rd.usda.gov. If you'd like to subscribe to USDA Rural Development updates, visit our GovDelivery subscriber page.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
 20% → 50%	 30%			
Slight Chance Snow then Chance Snow	Breezy. Chance Snow then Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy and Windy	Mostly Cloudy and Blustery	Mostly Sunny
High: 35 °F	Low: 31 °F	High: 37 °F	Low: 6 °F	High: 16 °F

Today and Tonight: Light Snow
Accumulations less than an inch except up to 2 inches in far northeast SD
Highs: 32 to 42°



Sunday: Windy, Colder
Afternoon flurries/snow mainly in the northeast and in west central MN
Winds gusting as high as 60 mph
Highs: 32 to 40° falling in the afternoon

A system will bring light snow to northern SD and west central MN through this evening and again Sunday afternoon. Generally, accumulations will be a dusting to an inch, though isolated areas in the northeast could see more. Southeast breezes this afternoon will shift to the northwest on Sunday and become windy. Temperatures will fall through the day.

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Today in Weather History

December 4, 1993: Winds gusting to 40 to 60 mph combined with snow cover along with new snow to cause blizzard conditions making travel hazardous across north central and northeast South Dakota. Several vehicles were stranded or slid into ditches. The winds toppled a private building under construction at Selby in Walworth County. New snowfall amounts were generally from one to three inches.

December 4, 1952: The month of December started off with chilly temperatures in London. This cold resulted in Londoners to burn more coal to heat up their homes. Then on December 5, a high pressure settled over the Thames River causing a dense layer of smog to develop. The smog became so thick and dense by December 7 that virtually no sunlight was seen in London. Most conservative estimates place the death toll at 4,000, with some estimating the smog killed as many as 8,000 individuals.

A total solar eclipse was experienced by millions of people from Africa to Australia, and from space.

1786 - The first of two great early December storms began. The storm produced 18 inches of snow at Morristown NJ, and twenty inches of snow at New Haven CT. It also resulted in high tides at Nantucket which did great damage. (David Ludlum)

1972 - Winds gusting to 70 mph sent the temperature at Livingston, MT, plunging from 52 degrees to 18 degrees in just twenty minutes. (The Weather Channel)

1982 - The temperature in New York City's Central Park reached 72 degrees to establish a record high for December. The month as a whole was also the warmest of record. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A cold front crossing the Pacific Coast Region brought high winds and heavy rain to California. Thunderstorm winds gusted to 55 mph at Newport Beach CA, and Mount Wilson CA was drenched with 2.17 inches of rain in six hours. Gale force winds prevailed along the Northern Pacific Coast, and winds in the Tehachapis Mountains of southern California gusted to 60 mph. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Gale force winds continued to usher cold arctic air into the northeastern U.S. Winds gusted to 65 mph at Windsor Locks CT. Up to a foot of snow blanketed the higher elevations of Vermont. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Seventeen cities in the eastern U.S., including nine in Florida, reported record low temperatures for the date. Lakeland FL reported a record low of 31 degrees, and Watertown NY was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 20 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2002 - An early season winter storm brought an expansive shield of snow and ice through much of the eastern U.S., from the lower Ohio Valley, southern Appalachians and into the Northeast. Snow accumulations of 4-8 inches were common along the northern edge of the precipitation shield, while a significant accrual of glaze occurred in the Carolinas. The storm caused at least 17 fatalities, mostly from traffic accidents (CNN). In the Carolinas, electric utilities provider Duke Power characterized the ice storm as the worst in the company's history, with 1.2 million customers or nearly half its entire customer base without power on the morning of the 5th. This surpassed electrical outages inflicted by Hurricane Hugo as it swept through the central Carolinas in September 1989.

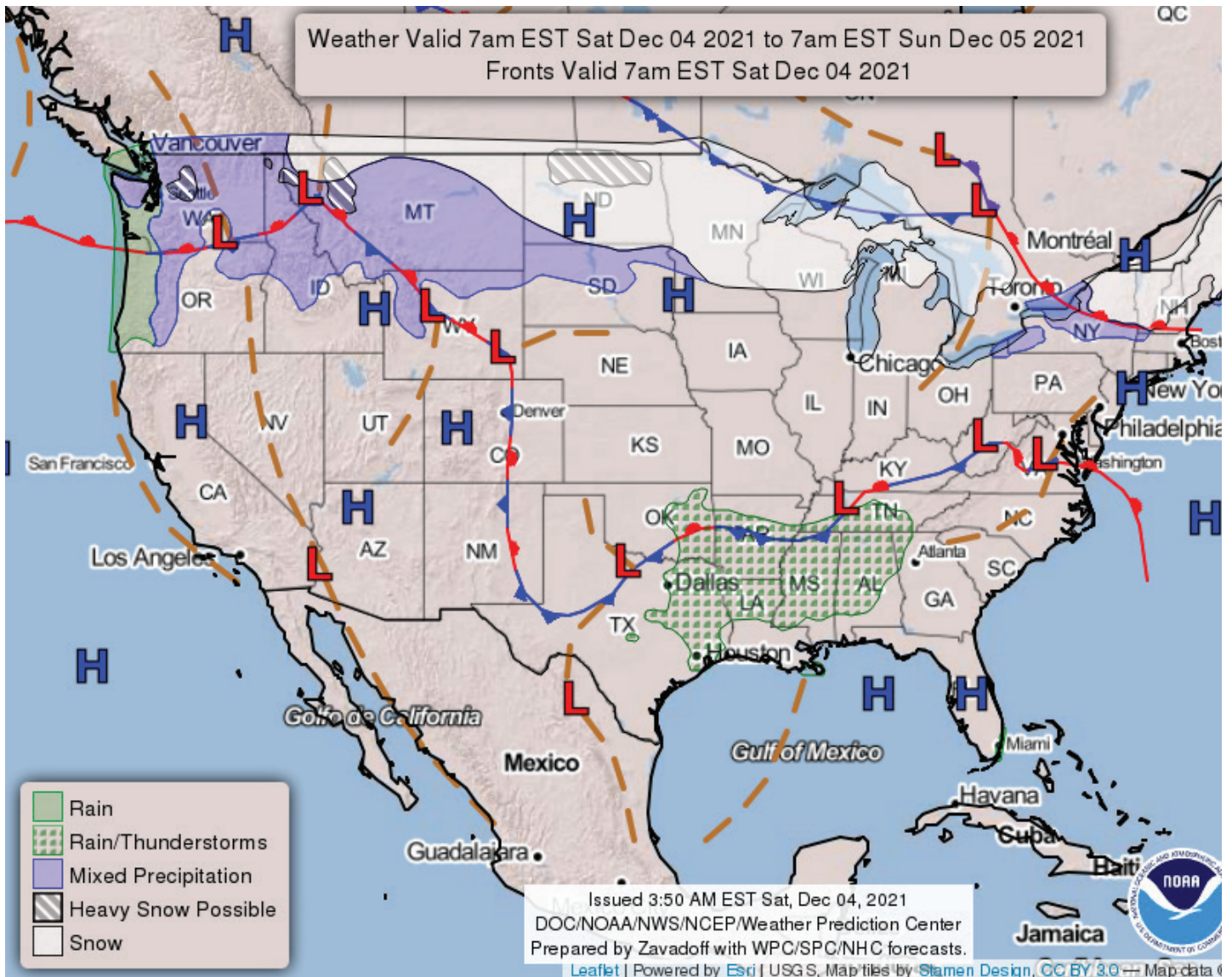
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 40.3 °F at 12:15 AM
Low Temp: 29.6 °F at 7:45 PM
Wind: 16 mph at 12:45 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 56° in 1979
Record Low: -18° in 1927
Average High: 33°F
Average Low: 12°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.08
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.06
Average Precip to date: 21.29
Precip Year to Date: 19.92
Sunset Tonight: 4:51:33 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:55:04 AM



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"LOVE WITH SKIN ON IT"

A young man, who grew up in a housing project, having little hope and few goods, heard an evangelist preaching "love" on a street corner. After listening for a few moments, he shouted to the preacher, "I'm sick and tired of you people talking about love. I want to see love. I want to feel love. I want to see love with some skin on it!"

That's Christmas: "God's love with skin on it."

Paul wrote, "For in Christ the fullness of God lives in a human body!"

In Jesus, we see Someone bringing love to life – but a very special type of love. It is God's love. We see this love coming to life when Jesus fed the hungry, gave sight to the blind, cleansed the lepers, healed the sick, offering water to a thirsty soul, calming the waves to relieve the fears of experienced fishermen, washing dirty feet, spending time with little children, teaching people the truth that brought meaning and purpose to their lives and finally hanging lifeless from a cross – abandoned and alone.

Jesus is God loving through a human heart, healing with a human hand, walking on errands of mercy with human feet, showing love, grace and mercy to those who would do Him harm.

Jesus is God loving the least, the last and the lost. In Jesus, God showed His love with "skin on it."

Prayer: Help us, Father, to put Your "love in our skin" and take Your love to those in need. May we be as faithful in caring for others as You are in caring for us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Colossians 2:9 For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily.

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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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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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- Colored \$42.60/6 months
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News from the Associated Press

Fatal disease has found its way to Badlands bighorn sheep

By MARK WATSON Black Hills Pioneer

SPEARFISH, S.D. (AP) — The bighorn sheep in Badlands National Park are experiencing a die off caused by the same bacteria that has ravaged the other wild sheep herds in the state as well as countless others throughout the West.

Since August, when the first sheep in the park were found suffering from the disease, approximately 50% of the radio-collared ewes have been found dead – all from *mycoplasma ovipneumoniae*, a pneumonia-causing bacteria that nearly wiped out the Custer State Park herd and has wreaked havoc on the Rapid City and Deadwood herds.

The sheep are experiencing the early stages of the die off, and wildlife managers are still taking stock of the situation, the Black Hills Pioneer reported.

"We don't have a real good handle on it at this point, but it's safe to say it is significant at this point," said Trenton Haffley, regional terrestrial resources supervisor for South Dakota Game, Fish, and Parks.

He said the most accurate data wildlife managers can see now is by looking at the number of sheep wearing radio collars. Only ewes in the park's herd, the female sheep, were fitted with collars.

"Adult ewes experienced about a 50% mortality. Generally, lamb mortality is higher," Haffley said. "Then of course rams, it's a wild card. We don't know what's going on there."

A survey was conducted in July and approximately 260 individual sheep were counted.

"Realistically, there were closer to 300 animals," he said.

Wildlife managers know that domestic sheep and goats can carry the bacteria and then transmit it to wild sheep and goats. It is the GF&P's policy to euthanize wild sheep that have come in contact with domestic flocks to prevent further exposure to the remaining bighorns.

"We got reports of wandering rams this summer. We just were not able to track them down and euthanize them. So, likely they went out, found some domestic sheep, came back, and got everyone sick," Haffley said.

Other wildlife departments have the same policy. Grand Teton National Park has, for the past two years, permitted trained hunters to hunt and kill non-native mountain goats inside the park to help prevent the spread of the bacteria to the park's declining but native bighorn herd.

"Usually the bighorns that travel are young rams," Haffley said. "Mom doesn't want them around, and the older rams pick on them. Those are the ones that go out and pioneer."

Because the die-off is in its early stages, a plan on how to manage it has not been set in place.

"All we've done so far is met with the park and said 'we're here for support if you need it,' because we are so early in the die-off. Unfortunately, we just have to let the thing play out," he said.

GF&P employees have seen the sheep actively coughing as recent as last week, but there have been no reports of dead sheep in more than a month, Haffley said.

"That suggests that it might be winding down, but in that country, it's going to be kind of hard to turn up (dead sheep) anyway," he said. "We will likely get to a point where we will partner with Badlands National Park and do some kind of test and cull. But it will be up to the park."

GF&P researchers will likely use lessons learned from the Custer State Park bighorn sheep die off. In 2004, the 200-plus animal herd began to die from pneumonia. Around 80% of the herd died before the adults gained an immunity; however, the lambs born each spring contracted the disease and within months were dead. Then in 2017, biologists discovered that only three of the sheep were shedding the pathogen that spread the disease. Those sheep were removed from the herd, and since then, the lambs survived.

Haffley said that GF&P wildlife managers have responded to reports of and euthanized bighorns throughout the western part of the state.

"We've caught up to them in Ziebach County (northeast of the park and Interstate 90)," he said. "We

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actually had four yearling rams we found on Haines Avenue, which you might not think is a big deal as we have sheep in Rapid City, but at that time, we were so far into the die-off in Rapid City that we didn't have four yearling rams in that herd. We knew those rams did not come from Rapid City. They moved 45-50 miles from Badlands, and actually almost got into our bighorn sheep in Rapid City before we euthanized them. They can move really far really quickly.

"I just can't reiterate enough how important it is for the public to call us. Whenever you see a bighorn sheep and you don't think it is supposed to be there, call us," he said.

Exactly where or how the bighorns contracted the bacteria is not known.

Haffley said there is a domestic goat flock about a mile and a half north of the park boundary. "One of the odd things is the sheep have gone by the domestic flock all the time," he said. "The owners of the goats allowed us to go in and do a bunch of testing, and we definitely found mycoplasma in the goat herd, and those bighorn have lived sympatricly for probably 10 years. It hasn't caused any issues. We are doing some strain typing that may point us in the direction of was it sheep or goats that caused the die-off, but we just don't know."

While the Custer State Park herd is recovering, other herds in the state are not out of the woods yet.

Haffley said the Rapid City herd is beginning to recover from its die off. Only five or six ewes can still give birth, but those lambs are surviving and being recruited into the herd. Between 25-30 sheep are in this herd.

The Deadwood herd, transplanted from Canada in 2015, began showing signs of pneumonia the following year. All had been tested before being relocated, so it is not know how they are contracting the disease.

"In November we tested and thought everyone was clean. There were a few sheep left, but we took some samples from lambs and thought we were in a good place," he said. "But low and behold, about a month ago, we had reports of coughing sheep. We had a lamb die in someone's backyard. We went up there and grabbed some samples, and that one came back positive for pneumonia.

"We're going strain typing to see if it is the same strain we've been dealing with previously," he added. "If that's the cause it means we've missed one, and we'll be in there doing additional testing. If it's a new strain though, or there is evidence of additional contact, that begs the question of some longer-term discussions."

The approximate 30-animal herd may lose some members if the strain is the same; however, if the bacteria is a new strain, a greater number would be expected to be lost, he said.

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Friday:

Mega Millions

22-45-48-58-61, Mega Ball: 13, Megaplier: 5

(twenty-two, forty-five, forty-eight, fifty-eight, sixty-one; Mega Ball: thirteen; Megaplier: five)

Estimated jackpot: \$112 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$278 million

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Freeman Academy/Marion 52, Colome 31

Garretson 53, Baltic 36

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Hanson 63, Centerville 37
Lakota Tech 86, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 21
Northwestern 52, Britton-Hecla 49
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 46, Great Plains Lutheran 45
Sioux Falls Lincoln 42, Yankton 32

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Oliver carries South Dakota over Waldorf College 93-37

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Erik Oliver had 20 points as South Dakota routed Waldorf College 93-37 on Friday night.

Boogie Anderson scored 13 points for the Coyotes (5-3), who have won four straight at home. Kruz Perrott-Hunt added 12 points. Tasos Kamateros had 11 points and seven rebounds.

Lorenzo Smith had six rebounds for the Warriors.

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

Portions of this story were generated by Automated Insights, <http://www.automatedinsights.com/ap>, using data from STATS LLC, <https://www.stats.com>

Wingett carries S. Dakota St. over Minnesota-Morris 112-47

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — David Wingett had 18 points and 10 rebounds off the bench to lift South Dakota State to a 112-47 win over Minnesota-Morris on Friday night.

Zeke Mayo had 14 points for South Dakota State (8-2), which earned its fifth straight home victory. Matt Dentlinger added 11 points. Matt Mims had 11 points.

South Dakota State is undefeated (2-0) when scoring at least 100 points this season.

The 112 points were a season best for South Dakota State, which also registered a season-high 28 assists, justifying their fourth-ranked scoring offense (91 points per game). Meanwhile, the Jackrabbits forced a season-high 20 turnovers.

Dillon Haider had 14 points for the Cougars. Kenneth Riley added 12 points.

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

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Sioux Falls woman sentenced for helping homicide suspects

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A woman accused of helping two people wanted in a Sioux Falls homicide flee from police last year has been sentenced to three years in prison.

Susan Sanchez, 30, of Sioux Falls, pleaded guilty to aggravated eluding and accessory to felony. She was charged after she drove to Colorado to pick up Josue Hernandez, 22, and Crystal Mousseau, 29, both of Sioux Falls.

Hernandez and Mousseau were wanted for the Dec. 30, 2020 homicide of Mitchell Houchins, 30, of Sioux Falls.

Mousseau and Hernandez fled to Denver in a car previously driven by the victim, court documents show. After their car was towed in Henderson, Colorado, the pair called Sanchez to pick them up, and they told

her about the incident. They then returned to Sioux Falls and were arrested, the Argus Leader reported. Hernandez pleaded guilty to first degree manslaughter and is set to be sentenced on Jan. 7. Mousseau has a jury trial set for Jan. 18.

South Dakota woman sentenced in 1981 death of infant son

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota judge on Thursday sentenced a woman to 10 years in the state prison system for her infant son's 1981 death that went unsolved for decades.

Judge Bradley Zell called the sentencing of 60-year-old Theresa Bentaas a difficult decision that he labored for weeks, in part because it was not clear whether her son died from complications during birth or abandonment in the South Dakota cold. Zell suspended nine years of the sentence, meaning Bentaas will likely spend two months in state prison and serve the rest of her time under community supervision.

"This is a terribly sad and difficult human event which now needs to be brought to conclusion," Zell said, acknowledging that the sentence was likely a bitter pill for both Bentaas' family that had begged for her to go free and community members who had pressed for a strict punishment.

Bentaas had entered an "Alford plea" to a first-degree manslaughter charge, meaning that she maintained her innocence but agreed to be sentenced as convicted guilty. Prosecutors dropped first- and second-degree murder charges in the plea deal.

Lawyers defending her maintained that Bentaas had not killed her son, but rather he died soon after a birth that was not expected, even by his mother.

A psychiatrist who interviewed Bentaas as part of a forensic psychiatric evaluation diagnosed her with "complete pregnancy denial syndrome," saying she did not recognize her pregnancy until she woke up in the middle of the night in the pains of childbirth.

The psychiatrist, Dr. Cara Angelotta of Northwestern University, told the court on a video call that Bentaas described her infant son as "lifeless" and "ghost-like" immediately after his birth, but did not remember other details of that night. She said the shock of the birth could have severely impaired Bentaas' memory.

The infant's death was uncovered by the curiosity of two men, witnesses said Thursday. First, Lee Litz told the court he was test driving a jeep with several friends on Feb. 28, 1981 when he spotted blankets in a ditch.

"My curiosity got the best of me and I went over to see what it was," he told the court Thursday. "That's when I found Andrew laying there with his back towards me."

An autopsy determined that the infant likely died from failure to assist in maintaining an airway during his birth and exposure, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported. Recently, a doctor who consulted with Bentaas' defense found that the infant did not die from hypothermia. Police were unable to find the infant's parents and the case quickly went cold. The baby was buried with a headstone that named him Andrew John Doe.

But nearly three decades later, the curiosity of a Sioux Falls detective, Michael Webber, revived the case. He was moving boxes of case files when he spotted "an old, weathered box" scrawled with the word "murder." It contained cold cases, including the infant's file.

The case intrigued Webber and he started working on it in his spare time.

Webber said he did not initially have much to go on — an "extremely small" case file listing physical evidence that had been destroyed. But in 2009, the infant's body was exhumed for DNA evidence.

Initial searches for a family tree came back void. However, in 2019 — once DNA technology progressed and sampling had become more prevalent — a match was revealed. It soon led detectives to a family tree in the Sioux Falls area. Webber said after police suspected Bentaas as the mother and Dirk Bentaas as the father, they found DNA samples in their trash that confirmed them as the parents.

Bentaas was arrested in 2019. After several delays in her trial, she entered the "Alford plea" in October.

During Thursday's hearing, Bentaas' family begged the judge for a lenient sentence, saying she was a caring mother and grandmother who had carried the secret of her first child's death for years.

Bentaas' daughter, Melissa Pheilmeier, told the court, "Andrew and my mother are victims of their situ-

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ation, victims of the culture and the stigma of a young, unwed pregnant girl in 1981.”

This story has corrected the profession of Dr. Cara Angelotta. She is a psychiatrist, not a psychologist.

Permitting process for medical marijuana underway in SD

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota Department of Health is beginning to issue medical marijuana cards, but officials say it could be months before dispensaries will have anything to sell.

Municipalities across the state are also receiving applications for permits from those who want to open a dispensary. The businesses must sell marijuana that is grown in the state. And, with no cultivation facilities licensed in South Dakota, the dispensaries, for now, will have nothing to sell.

Importing cannabis products across state lines remains a federal offense.

State health officials say they’ve received 11 cultivation applications. Commercial grow facilities are now going through the state and local application process. It could take months for them to begin selling cannabis.

In the meantime, medical marijuana cardholders can grow up to three marijuana plants for personal use.

Cities have taken different approaches to selling medical marijuana. Yankton will permit two medical cannabis dispensaries.

“Once those two applicants get state approval, they still have to do a certificate of occupancy with the city,” said Lisa Yardley, the city’s deputy finance officer. “They still have to do a site permit. They still have to do any building permits, building inspection. They are not operational until they meet those standards.”

Yankton will not allow any marijuana cultivation or processing operations.

Across the state, Rapid City is allowing 15 dispensaries within city limits. That’s three times as many as the city of Sioux Falls, the state’s largest city, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

In democracy’s birthplace, pope warns of populist threats

By NICOLE WINFIELD and DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Pope Francis warned Saturday that the “easy answers” of populism and authoritarianism threaten democracy in Europe and called for fresh dedication to promoting the common good.

Arriving in Greece, the birthplace of democracy, Francis used a speech to Greek political and cultural leaders to address Europe at large about the threats facing the continent. He said only robust multilateralism can address the pressing issues of the day, from protecting the environment to fighting the pandemic and poverty.

“Politics needs this, in order to put common needs ahead of private interests,” Francis said. “Yet we cannot avoid noting with concern how today, and not only in Europe, we are witnessing a retreat from democracy.”

Francis, who lived through Argentina’s populist Peronist era as well as its military dictatorship, has frequently warned about the threat of authoritarianism and populism and the danger it poses to the European Union and democracy itself.

He didn’t name any specific countries or leaders during his speech. The EU, however, is locked in a feud with members Poland and Hungary over rule-of-law issues, with Warsaw insisting that Polish law takes precedence over EU policies and regulations.

Outside the bloc, populist leaders in Brazil and the administration of former U.S. President Donald Trump pressed nationalist policies on the environment that contrasted sharply with Francis’ call to care for “our common home.”

Opening the second leg of his five-day trip to Cyprus and Greece, Francis recalled that it was in Greece, according to Aristotle, that man became conscious of being a political animal and a member of a community of fellow citizens.

“Here, democracy was born,” Francis told Greek President Katerina Sakellaropoulou. “That cradle, thou-

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sands of years later, was to become a house, a great house of democratic peoples. I am speaking of the European Union and the dream of peace and fraternity that it represents for so many peoples."

That dream is at risk amid the economic upheaval and other disruptions of the pandemic that can breed nationalist sentiments and make authoritarianism seem "compelling and populism's easy answers appear attractive," Francis said.

"The remedy is not to be found in an obsessive quest for popularity, in a thirst for visibility, in a flurry of unrealistic promises ... but in good politics," he said.

As an example, Francis praised the "necessary vaccination campaign" promoted by government authorities to tame the coronavirus. He referenced another Greek philosopher - Hippocrates - in response to vaccine skeptics and virus deniers, who count many religious conservatives among them.

Francis cited the Hippocratic oath to not only do what is best for the sick, but to "abstain from whatever is harmful and offensive to others," especially the elderly.

Greece's president the sentiment in her speech. "The virus spreads and mutates, helped by the irrational denial of reality and inequalities in our societies," Sakellaropoulou said.

Greece is grappling with its highest level of coronavirus infections since the start of the pandemic with deaths approaching record levels. A quarter of the country's adults remain unvaccinated, and Parliament recently approved a vaccine mandate for people over age 60.

Francis' trip has been clouded by the Dec. 2 death of the Vatican's ambassador to the European Union, Archbishop Aldo Giordano. He and the president of the Italian bishops' conference were among several prelates who tested positive after celebrating Francis' final Mass in Slovakia in September.

The Vatican's EU embassy insisted that Giordano caught the virus days earlier during a European bishops' meeting in Hungary.

Francis' visit to Cyprus and Greece also has focused on the plight of migrants as Europe hardens its border control policies. He is scheduled to travel Sunday to the Aegean Sea island of Lesbos, where he visited five years ago to meet with migrants at a detention camp.

In Athens, Francis is also meeting the leader of Greece's Orthodox Church, Archbishop Ieronymos.

In 2001, Pope John Paul II became the first Catholic leader to visit Greece in more than 1,200 years and Francis' visit 20 years later is expected to further Catholic-Orthodox ties, still wounded by the Great Schism that divided Christianity.

Francis has accelerated inter-faith initiatives, as the two churches attempt to shift from centuries of competition and mistrust toward collaboration.

Orthodox churches are also seeking alliances amid a deepening dispute over the independence of the Ukrainian church, which was historically governed by the Russian Orthodox Church.

"I think the presence of the pope in Greece and Cyprus signals a return to the normal relationship that we should have ... so that we can move toward what is most important of all: the unity of the Christian world," Ioannis Panagiotopoulos, an associate professor of divinity and church history at Athens University, told The Associated Press.

Up to 4,000 police officers were readied for duty in Athens for the pope's visit, and authorities banned protests and large public gatherings in parts of central Athens over the weekend.

The pope's visit ends Monday.

Theodora Tongas in Athens contributed. ____ Follow Winfield at <https://twitter.com/nwinfield> and Gatoopoulos at <https://twitter.com/dgatopoulos>

Parents captured after son charged in Oxford school shooting

By COREY WILLIAMS and ED WHITE Associated Press

PONTIAC, Mich. (AP) — The parents of a teen accused of killing four students in a shooting at a Michigan high school were caught early Saturday, several hours after a prosecutor filed involuntary manslaughter charges against them, officials said.

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James and Jennifer Crumbley were captured in a commercial building in Detroit that housed artwork, Detroit Police Chief James E. White told a news conference. White said the couple "were aided in getting into the building," and that a person who helped them may also face charges.

A Detroit business owner spotted a car tied to the Crumbleys in his parking lot late Friday, Oakland County Undersheriff Michael McCabe said in a statement. A woman seen near the vehicle ran away when the business owner called 911, McCabe said. The couple was later located and arrested by Detroit police.

A prosecutor filed involuntary manslaughter charges against the Crumbleys on Friday, accusing them of failing to intervene on the day of the tragedy despite being confronted with a drawing and chilling message — "blood everywhere" — that was found at the boy's desk.

The Crumbleys committed "egregious" acts, from buying a gun on Black Friday and making it available to Ethan Crumbley to resisting his removal from school when they were summoned a few hours before the shooting, Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald said.

Authorities had been looking for the couple since Friday afternoon. Late Friday, U.S. Marshals announced a reward of up to \$10,000 each for information leading to their arrests.

The Crumbley's attorney, Shannon Smith, said the pair had left town earlier in the week "for their own safety." Smith told The Associated Press they would be returning to Oxford to be arraigned.

However, White said the Crumbleys "appeared to be hiding" in the building where they were found. He added that the parents appeared to be "distressed" when they were captured.

"Head down... just very upset," he said of one of the parents.

The couple was expected to be booked into the Oakland County Jail, McCabe said.

Earlier, the prosecutor offered the most precise account so far of the events that led to the shooting at Oxford High School, roughly 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Detroit.

Ethan Crumbley, 15, emerged from a bathroom with a gun, shooting students in the hallway, investigators said. He's charged as an adult with murder, terrorism and other crimes.

Under Michigan law, the involuntary manslaughter charge filed against the parents can be pursued if authorities believe someone contributed to a situation where there was a high chance of harm or death.

Parents in the U.S. are rarely charged in school shootings involving their children, even as most minors get guns from a parent or relative's house, according to experts.

School officials became concerned about the younger Crumbley on Monday, a day before the shooting, when a teacher saw him searching for ammunition on his phone, McDonald said.

Jennifer Crumbley was contacted and subsequently told her son in a text message: "Lol. I'm not mad at you. You have to learn not to get caught," according to the prosecutor.

On Tuesday, a teacher found a note on Ethan's desk and took a photo. It was a drawing of a gun pointing at the words, "The thoughts won't stop. Help me," McDonald said.

There also was a drawing of a bullet, she said, with words above it: "Blood everywhere."

Between the gun and the bullet was a person who appeared to have been shot twice and is bleeding. He also wrote, "My life is useless" and "The world is dead," according to the prosecutor.

The school quickly had a meeting with Ethan and his parents, who were told to get him into counseling within 48 hours, McDonald said.

The Crumbleys failed to ask their son about the gun or check his backpack and "resisted the idea of their son leaving the school at that time," McDonald said.

Instead, the teen returned to class and the shooting subsequently occurred.

"The notion that a parent could read those words and also know that their son had access to a deadly weapon that they gave him is unconscionable — it's criminal," the prosecutor said.

Jennifer Crumbley texted her son after the shooting, saying, "Ethan, don't do it," McDonald said.

James Crumbley called 911 to say that a gun was missing from their home and that Ethan might be the shooter. The gun had been kept in an unlocked drawer in the parents' bedroom, McDonald said.

Ethan accompanied his father for the gun purchase on Nov. 26 and posted photos of the firearm on social media, saying, "Just got my new beauty today," McDonald said.

Over the long Thanksgiving weekend, Jennifer Crumbley wrote on social media that it is a “mom and son day testing out his new Christmas present,” the prosecutor said.

Asked at a news conference if the father could be charged for purchasing the gun for the son, McDonald said that would be the decision of federal authorities.

In a video message to the community Thursday, the head of Oxford Community Schools said the high school looks like a “war zone” and won’t be ready for weeks. Superintendent Tim Throne repeatedly complimented students and staff for how they responded to the violence.

He also acknowledged the meeting of Crumbley, the parents and school officials. Throne offered no details but summed it up by saying, “No discipline was warranted.”

McDonald was asked about the decision to keep Crumbley in school.

“Of course, he shouldn’t have gone back to that classroom. ... I believe that is a universal position. I’m not going to chastise or attack, but yeah,” she said.

Asked if school officials may potentially be charged, McDonald said: “The investigation’s ongoing.”

White reported from Detroit. Associated Press journalist Mike Householder in Detroit and David Eggert in Lansing, Mich., also contributed to this report.

Gambians vote in 1st post-Jammeh presidential election

By ABDOULIE JOHN and CARLEY PETESCH Associated Press

BANJUL, Gambia (AP) — Lines of voters snaked around corners outside polling stations in Gambia’s capital Saturday as the nation holds a presidential election that for the first time in decades does not include former dictator Yahya Jammeh as a candidate.

Polls opened to high turnout, with many people lining up at the capital’s Independence Stadium before sunrise. Nearly 1 million voters were expected to drop marbles into one of six ballot bins, each adorned with the face and name of a candidate.

They include incumbent President Adama Barrow, who defeated Jammeh in 2016 while running as the candidate for an opposition coalition.

Barrow’s challengers are former mentor and head opposition leader Ousainou Darboe of the United Democratic Party; Mama Kandeh of Gambia Democratic Congress; Halifa Sallah of People’s Democratic Organization for Independence and Socialism; Abdoulie Ebrima Jammeh of the National Unity Party; and Essa Mbye Faal, former lead counsel of Gambia’s truth commission, who is running under an independent ticket.

They have all vowed to run under an agenda for change and a stronger economy in the aftermath of the coronavirus pandemic so fewer Gambians feel compelled to travel the dangerous migration route to Europe.

While the 2016 election that removed Jammeh from power after 22 years saw Gambians go from fear to elation, many are still not satisfied with the progress the nation has made. They want certainty that the new leaders will bring the tiny West African nation of about 2 million toward peace and justice.

Despite the nation continues to suffer from the effects of his rule, including rights abuses and funds taken from state coffers.

“As a country, we cannot heal without justice. We cannot have reconciliation without justice,” Gambia Bar Association lawyer Salieu Taal told The Associated Press.

Jammeh left Gambia in 2017. His two-decade rule was marked by arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances and summary executions that were revealed through dramatic testimony during Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission hearings that lasted for years.

Last week, the commission handed its 17-volume report to President Barrow, urging him to deliver on expectations in ensuring that perpetrators of human rights violations are prosecuted.

“I assure them (victims’ families) that my government will ensure that justice is done, but I urge them to be patient and allow the legal process to take its course,” Barrow told commissioners upon receiving their final report.

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Still, Barrow reelection is uncertain as many Gambians feel betrayal after his National People's Party reached a deal with the top figures of the former ruling party.

Ndey Sambou, a trader at Brikama market, told The Associated Press that the president should clear the air over the content of the memorandum of understanding signed between his party and the Alliance for Patriotic Reorientation and Construction (APRC), which ultimately split with Jammeh.

Sainey Senghore who survived gunshot wounds during an April 2000 crackdown on peaceful students demanding justice for a rape victim made it clear that victims' expectations will be forefront as they head to the polls Saturday.

"This government came to place with a lot of promises. At the end, they are sidelining the victims, working in line with the perpetrators," he said, calling Barrow's rapprochement with APRC "very disheartening, and very disappointing."

Similar sentiments were echoed by Abdoulie H. Bojang, whose son was killed during the violent crackdown on student protesters.

"We need justice to be able to have closure in this ongoing tragedy," he said.

The links to Jammeh are not only an issue for the current president, however. Opposition candidate Kandeh has been supported strongly by a breakaway political faction that Jammeh formed during his exile in Equatorial Guinea.

While Kandeh has maintained silence about Jammeh's possible return to Gambia, his allies are unequivocally saying that Jammeh would come back if they emerge victorious from the election.

Jammeh, who seized power in 1994 in a bloodless coup, was voted out of office in 2016. After initially agreeing to step down, Jammeh resisted, and a six-week crisis saw neighboring West African countries prepare to send in troops to stage a military intervention. Jammeh was forced into exile and fled to Equatorial Guinea.

Of the other candidates, Sallah and Darboe are established politicians, but they face challenges from newcomers such as Faal and Ebrima Jammeh, who are making waves in urban areas.

Gambians, used to violence surrounding polls, worry about a possible confrontation between Barrow and Darboe supporters, as the years have seen a great divide between the two leaders who were once close.

Petesch reported from Dakar, Senegal.

Time is no ally as Dems strain to finish Biden's \$2T bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — If President Joe Biden's \$2 trillion social and environment package was a Broadway show, its seven months on Congress' stage could qualify it as a hit. But lawmaking isn't show business, and many Democrats worry that with the curtain falling soon on 2021, time is not their friend.

Each passing day threatens to push final action into 2022, an election year when control of Congress will be at stake and lawmakers will become ever more wary of casting tough votes.

Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer wants to end his party's disagreements and finally squeeze the bill through his chamber before Christmas. Indeed, holiday deadlines are a time-tested way of prodding lawmakers to solve disputes so they can go home. And momentum toward approving Biden's top domestic initiative — the House passed an initial version last month — seems to make prospects strong.

Yet while Schumer and other Democrats express confidence that his target date will be met, some are anxious it won't and are concerned about damaging consequences.

The New York senator needs time to work out final compromises with resistant party moderates including West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin. Also chewing up the calendar will be tedious but crucial rules sessions with the Senate parliamentarian, plus work on major bills on defense policy and extending the government's borrowing authority to avoid a federal default.

The longer it takes to finish the \$2 trillion package, the longer it can be vulnerable to factors — predict-

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able and unforeseen, economic and political — that might complicate Schumer's task.

"You let things sit around here, particularly past a Christmas vacation and into an election year, and that is toxic," said Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., a leader of her party's progressives.

Facing unanimous Republican opposition, Democrats will need all their votes in the 50—50 Senate. They'll also need all but three in the House, which will need to pass the bill again with Senate revisions before sending it to Biden.

"Everybody knows we can't walk away from this. We've got to do it and we've got to do it as quickly as we can," said Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio. He pointedly added, "There are different definitions of 'as quickly as we can' from different people."

Democrats are frustrated that each week they spend battling with each other reduces the time they'll have to sell the legislation's initiatives to voters. The package includes free preschool, new Medicare hearing benefits and steps to curb climate change, paid for largely with tax boosts on wealthy people and big corporations.

"We should be finishing this up so we can go start talking to people about what's in it, instead of having everybody sort of focused on our navel gazing," said Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn.

Manchin and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., have already forced cuts in the legislation, which not too long ago had a \$3.5 trillion price tag. Neither has promised to heed Schumer's Christmas timetable, and Manchin hasn't dropped his insistence on removing a new paid family-leave program and provisions encouraging cleaner energy.

"I haven't committed to anything, I haven't committed to a thing to anybody, to any human being," Manchin said this week about the bill.

And Democrats' marathon talks over the measure are giving Republicans time to use the country's bout with rising inflation, which is showing no signs of going away, as one of their chief weapons against it. The GOP argues that the \$2 trillion bill would push prices higher by incentivizing a shift to cleaner fuels, and flushing more cash into an already overheated economy.

Democrats say the package's spending and tax credits for health services, child care and education will help families with tight budgets cope with inflation. But the GOP is using rising gasoline and home heating costs, which many voters encounter daily, to help make their argument. Republicans think Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell's testimony to Congress that inflation no longer seems due to "transitory" causes like the pandemic shows their argument will have political staying power.

"Time is definitely on the side that doesn't want this to pass," Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., a member of the Senate GOP leadership, said this week.

Manchin has cited inflation fears as a rationale for slowing work on the bill and paring it, and he will no doubt be watching the government's next measurement of consumer prices, due Dec. 10. His continued insistence on changes despite months of negotiation is rankling colleagues.

"I mean, God bless Joe Manchin, but how many months is this going on?" said No. 2 Senate Democratic leader Richard Durbin of Illinois. "I mean, I told him a month ago, 'For God's sake, Joe, declare victory and close the deal.'"

Further incentive for Democrats to finish the legislation this month is the Dec. 31 expiration of parts of the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill that Congress approved in March.

That includes a larger children's tax credit and monthly payments of those benefits to millions of families, which would end unless lawmakers renew it. Congress could revive the credit retroactively next year, but many lawmakers want to avoid any interruption.

Democrats still must solve other disagreements, including over how to let people deduct more state and local taxes without making the provision a giveaway to the richest Americans. And there are other factors running out the clock.

Senate parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough needs time to decide whether any of the bill's sections must be dropped because they violate the chamber's special rules for budget legislation. A Democratic plan to help millions of immigrants remain in the U.S. is in the balance, and the process is tedious, with lots of back and forth between Senate aides and MacDonough.

"We've been talking about this and working on this for months," said Sen. Tina Smith, D-Minn. "And so let's just get it done."

US intelligence finds Russia planning Ukraine offensive

By AAMER MADHANI, ELLEN KNICKMEYER, NOMAAN MERCHANT and ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has pledged to make it "very, very difficult" for Russia's Vladimir Putin to take military action in Ukraine as U.S. intelligence officials determined that Russian planning is underway for a possible military offensive that could begin as soon as early 2022.

The new intelligence finding estimates that the Russians are planning to deploy an estimated 175,000 troops and almost half of them are already deployed along various points near Ukraine's border, according to a Biden administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the finding.

It comes as Russia has picked up its demands on Biden to guarantee that Ukraine will not be allowed to join the NATO alliance.

The official added that the plans call for the movement of 100 Russian battalion tactical groups along with armor, artillery and equipment.

Intelligence officials also have seen an uptick in Russian propaganda efforts through the use of proxies and media outlets to denigrate Ukraine and NATO ahead of a potential invasion, the official said.

Asked about the intelligence finding as he set out for the presidential retreat at Camp David on Friday evening, Biden reiterated his concerns about Russian provocations.

"We've been aware of Russia's actions for a long time and my expectation is we're gonna have a long discussion with Putin," Biden said.

The risks of such a gambit for Putin, if he actually went through with an invasion, would be enormous.

U.S. officials and former U.S. diplomats say while Putin clearly is laying the groundwork for a possible invasion, Ukraine's military is better armed and prepared today than in past years, and the sanctions threatened by the West would do serious damage to Russia's economy. It remains unclear if Putin intends to go through with what would be a risky offensive, they say.

Earlier Friday, Biden pledged to make it "very, very difficult" for Putin to take military action in Ukraine and said new initiatives coming from his administration are intended to deter Russian aggression.

"What I am doing is putting together what I believe to be will be the most comprehensive and meaningful set of initiatives to make it very, very difficult for Mr. Putin to go ahead and do what people are worried he may do," Biden told reporters.

The Kremlin said Friday that Putin would seek binding guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine during the call with Biden. But Biden sought to head off the demand.

"I don't accept anyone's red line," Biden said.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian officials also warned that Russia could invade next month. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told lawmakers Friday that the number of Russian troops near Ukraine and in Russia-annexed Crimea is estimated at 94,300, warning that a "large-scale escalation" is possible in January. U.S. intelligence officials estimate closer to 70,000 troops are deployed near the border, according to an unclassified intelligence document obtained Friday by The Associated Press.

The intelligence findings were first reported by The Washington Post.

There are signs that the White House and Kremlin are close to arranging a conversation next week between Biden and Putin. Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov told reporters Friday that arrangements have been made for a Putin-Biden call in the coming days, adding that the date will be announced after Moscow and Washington finalize details. The Russians say a date has been agreed upon, but declined to say when.

Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy have also tentatively agreed to have a call next week, according to a person close to the Ukrainian president who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

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White House press secretary Jen Psaki said administration officials have “engaged in the possibility” of a Biden-Putin call. White House officials did not respond to a request for comment on the expected Zelenskyy call.

“It certainly would be an opportunity to discuss our serious concerns about the bellicose rhetoric, about the military buildup that we’re seeing on the border of Ukraine,” Psaki said of a potential Biden-Putin call.

Biden did not detail what actions he was weighing. But Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who met Thursday with Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Sweden, said the U.S. has threatened new sanctions. He did not detail the potential sanctions but suggested the effort would not be effective.

“If the new ‘sanctions from hell’ come, we will respond,” Lavrov said. “We can’t fail to respond.”

Psaki said the administration would look to coordinate with European allies if it moved forward with sanctions. She noted that bitter memories of Russia’s 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula that had been under Ukraine’s control since 1954, are front of mind as the White House considers the way forward.

“We know what President Putin has done in the past,” Psaki said. “We see that he is putting in place the capacity to take action in short order.”

Deep differences were on display during the Blinken-Lavrov meeting, with the Russia official charging the West was “playing with fire” by denying Russia a say in any further NATO expansion into countries of the former Soviet Union. Zelenskyy has pushed for Ukraine to join the alliance, which holds out the promise of membership but hasn’t set a timeline.

Blinken this week said the U.S. has “made it clear to the Kremlin that we will respond resolutely, including with a range of high-impact economic measures that we’ve refrained from using in the past.”

He did not detail what sanctions were being weighed, but one potentially could be to cut off Russia from the SWIFT system of international payments. The European Union’s Parliament approved a nonbinding resolution in April to cut off Russia from SWIFT — the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications — if its troops entered Ukraine.

Such a move would go far toward blocking Russian businesses from the global financial system. Western allies reportedly considered such a step in 2014 and 2015, during earlier Russian-led escalations of tensions over Ukraine.

Then-Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said it would be tantamount to “a declaration of war.”

But some U.S. government officials say Putin also could be seeking attention and concessions from Biden and other Western leaders, using the military escalation to force Russia back into a central role in world affairs as it had in the days of the Soviet Union.

“They are seriously envious for superpower status and ... the parity to the United States that existed during the Cold War. That’s what this is all about,” said John Herbst, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine.

An invasion is possible, but more likely, “they provoke a crisis, they get concessions from us, and then they reduce the crisis. Right? And that, I think, is probably their objective,” Herbst said Friday.

Associated Press writers Vladimir Isachenkov and Dasha Litvinova in Moscow contributed reporting.

AP EXCLUSIVE: Afghan judges in Brazil still fear the Taliban

By MAURICIO SAVARESE and TATIANA POLLASTRI Associated Press

BRASILIA, Brazil (AP) — A female judge, Muska, was hiding with her family from newly empowered Taliban militants in Afghanistan when an apparent reading mistake 7,000 miles away helped to drastically change her life.

Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro opened his nation’s doors to potential refugees from the Asian nation during remarks at the United Nations General Assembly on Sept. 21.

“We will grant humanitarian visas for Afghan Christians, women, children and judges,” he read on the teleprompter — apparently mispronouncing the final word, which was “jovens” — youngsters — in his printed speech as “juizes,” or judges.

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Error or not, his government fulfilled that offer.

Muska and her family were taken by bus to the northern city of Mazar-i-Sharif and were then flown to Greece with six female colleagues.

By the end of October, they found themselves in Brazil — a country with very little in common with Afghanistan beyond their shared love of soccer.

Speaking to international media for the first time, Muska told The Associated Press this week that she and the other judges still fear retribution from the Taliban — some of whose members had been sentenced for various crimes in their courts.

She asked that her true name not be used, nor her precise location — at a Brazilian military installation — be published. Her colleagues declined to speak to the news media.

Muska had been a judge for almost 10 years before the Taliban captured power in August and she said her home in the capital, Kabul, had recently been searched.

Afghanistan had about 300 female judges, Muska said, and many are now in hiding, their bank accounts frozen.

"We knew they (the Taliban) wouldn't let the women judges work. We would have serious threats to our lives," she said. "They released all the criminals from the prison. These were the criminals that we sentenced."

The judges who remain "are very scared, in hiding. They have serious financial problems, no salary, lost their jobs, had their bank accounts blocked. They are still in danger," the judge said. "It is not good in Kabul."

The Taliban won widespread support in Afghanistan in part because the toppled U.S.-backed government was widely seen as corrupt.

"But women judges were the bravest, strongest and most honest officials in the previous administration," said Muska, who said the decision by U.S. President Joe Biden to end American presence in the country meant she quickly had to leave.

"Everything happened suddenly," she said.

Judge Renata Gil, the head of the Brazilian Association of Magistrates that is sponsoring the refugees, said the Afghans arrived "in a lot of fear, still feeling threatened."

"They are being chased because they convicted Taliban fighters," she said noting that she herself had received death threats "because I sentenced drug dealers. For women this is much harder."

Speaking at the association's headquarters in the capital, Brasilia, she said, "I hope they are able to live their lives independently. But as long as they need, we will be here to help."

The judges and their 19 family members — apparently the only Afghan refugees who have come to Brazil since the Taliban returned to power — now have Brazilian bank accounts and health care. Those who can are taking lessons in Portuguese.

It's not clear yet what the future holds for them in Brazil, where at least they are protected. But Muska said they'd like to return home one day.

"I hope I can join my family members in Kabul. I have this dream I am in my house. I miss everything," the judge said.

Muska hasn't seen much of Brazil due to security reasons, difficulties with the language and her own fears. But she has found people with empathy for her situation.

"They cry with us, we know they can sense our feelings," the judge said with tears in her eyes.

Muska's three children, including a toddler, are also having a tough time adapting. The judge used to have her parents and nannies to help, but in Brazil she's largely on her own, while worrying about her future, and theirs.

The children look happy and energetic as they run and jump at a public playground, speaking Dari among themselves. But the judge said her eldest daughter has questions she cannot answer.

"She is always asking about my parents, her friends, her cousins," Muska said. "She always asks us questions about the Taliban, if they will kill us."

Despite the difficulties, Muska said she believes the future will be brighter for her children than for those still in Afghanistan.

"I have hope for them. That they have their studies in a good situation, in a good educational system," she said. "They will have their choice on what they can do."

Parents of Michigan boy charged in Oxford school shooting

By COREY WILLIAMS and ED WHITE Associated Press

PONTIAC, Mich. (AP) — A prosecutor filed involuntary manslaughter charges Friday against the parents of a teen accused of killing four students at a Michigan high school, saying they failed to intervene on the day of the tragedy despite being confronted with a drawing and chilling message — "blood everywhere" — that was found at the boy's desk.

James and Jennifer Crumbley committed "egregious" acts, from buying a gun on Black Friday and making it available to Ethan Crumbley to resisting his removal from school when they were summoned a few hours before the shooting, Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald said.

"I expect parents and everyone to have humanity and to step in and stop a potential tragedy," she said. "The conclusion I draw is that there was absolute reason to believe this individual was dangerous and disturbed."

By mid-afternoon, authorities said they were searching for the couple. Sheriff Mike Bouchard said their attorney, Shannon Smith, had agreed to arrange their arrest if charges were filed but hadn't been able to reach them.

Smith, however, said the Crumbleys weren't on the run and had left town earlier in the week "for their own safety."

"They are returning to the area to be arraigned," Smith told The Associated Press.

U.S. Marshals on Friday night announced a reward of up to \$10,000 each for information leading to the Crumbleys' arrest.

Earlier, the prosecutor offered the most precise account so far of the events that led to the shooting, three days after four students were killed and others were wounded at Oxford High School, roughly 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Detroit.

Ethan Crumbley, 15, emerged from a bathroom with a gun, shooting students in the hallway, investigators said. He's charged as an adult with murder, terrorism and other crimes.

Under Michigan law, the involuntary manslaughter charge filed against the parents can be pursued if authorities believe someone contributed to a situation where there was a high chance of harm or death.

Parents in the U.S. are rarely charged in school shootings involving their children, even as most minors get guns from a parent or relative's house, according to experts.

School officials became concerned about the younger Crumbley on Monday, a day before the shooting, when a teacher saw him searching for ammunition on his phone, McDonald said.

Jennifer Crumbley was contacted and subsequently told her son in a text message: "Lol. I'm not mad at you. You have to learn not to get caught," according to the prosecutor.

On Tuesday, a teacher found a note on Ethan's desk and took a photo. It was a drawing of a gun pointing at the words, "The thoughts won't stop. Help me," McDonald said.

There also was a drawing of a bullet, she said, with words above it: "Blood everywhere."

Between the gun and the bullet was a person who appeared to have been shot twice and is bleeding. He also wrote, "My life is useless" and "The world is dead," according to the prosecutor.

The school quickly had a meeting with Ethan and his parents, who were told to get him into counseling within 48 hours, McDonald said.

The Crumbleys failed to ask their son about the gun or check his backpack and "resisted the idea of their son leaving the school at that time," McDonald said.

Instead, the teen returned to class and the shooting subsequently occurred.

"The notion that a parent could read those words and also know that their son had access to a deadly

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weapon that they gave him is unconscionable — it's criminal," the prosecutor said.

Jennifer Crumbley texted her son after the shooting, saying, "Ethan, don't do it," McDonald said.

James Crumbley called 911 to say that a gun was missing from their home and that Ethan might be the shooter. The gun had been kept in an unlocked drawer in the parents' bedroom, McDonald said.

Ethan accompanied his father for the gun purchase on Nov. 26 and posted photos of the firearm on social media, saying, "Just got my new beauty today," McDonald said.

Over the long Thanksgiving weekend, Jennifer Crumbley wrote on social media that it is a "mom and son day testing out his new Christmas present," the prosecutor said.

Asked at a news conference if the father could be charged for purchasing the gun for the son, McDonald said that would be the decision of federal authorities.

In a video message to the community Thursday, the head of Oxford Community Schools said the high school looks like a "war zone" and won't be ready for weeks. Superintendent Tim Throne repeatedly complimented students and staff for how they responded to the violence.

He also acknowledged the meeting of Crumbley, the parents and school officials. Throne offered no details but summed it up by saying, "No discipline was warranted."

McDonald was asked about the decision to keep Crumbley in school.

"Of course, he shouldn't have gone back to that classroom. ... I believe that is a universal position. I'm not going to chastise or attack, but yeah," she said.

Asked if school officials may potentially be charged, McDonald said: "The investigation's ongoing."

White reported from Detroit. Associated Press journalist Mike Householder in Detroit and David Eggert in Lansing, Mich., also contributed to this report.

SKorea sets daily records for new coronavirus cases, deaths

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea again broke its daily records for coronavirus infections and deaths and confirmed three more cases of the new omicron variant as officials scramble to tighten social distancing and border controls.

The 5,352 new cases reported by the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency on Saturday marked the third time this week the daily tally exceeded 5,000. The country's death toll was at 3,809 after a record 70 virus patients died in the past 24 hours, while the 752 patients in serious or critical conditions were also an all-time high.

As the delta-driven surge threatens to overwhelm hospital systems, there is also concern about the local spread of the omicron variant, which is seen as potentially more infectious than previous strains of the virus.

The country's omicron caseload is now at nine after KDCA confirmed three more cases. The new cases include the wife, mother-in-law and a friend of a man who caught omicron from a couple he drove home from the airport after they arrived from Nigeria on Nov. 24. The couple's teenage child and two other women who also traveled to Nigeria have also been infected with omicron.

Officials say the number of omicron cases could rise as some of the patients had attended a church gathering involving hundreds of people on Nov. 28.

While the emergence of omicron has triggered global alarm and pushed governments around the world to tighten their borders, scientists say it remains unclear whether the new variant is more contagious, more likely to evade the protection provided by vaccines or more likely to cause serious illnesses than previous versions of the virus.

Starting next week, private social gatherings of seven or more people will be banned in the densely populated capital Seoul and nearby metropolitan areas, which have been hit hardest by delta and are now running out of intensive care units.

To fend off omicron, South Korea has required all passengers arriving from abroad over the next two weeks to quarantine for at least 10 days, regardless of their nationality or vaccination status. The country has

banned short-term foreign travelers arriving from nine African nations, including South Africa and Nigeria.

US intelligence finds Russia planning Ukraine offensive

By AAMER MADHANI, ELLEN KNICKMEYER, NOMAAN MERCHANT and ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden pledged Friday to make it “very, very difficult” for Russia’s Vladimir Putin to take military action in Ukraine as U.S. intelligence officials determined that Russian planning is underway for a possible military offensive that could begin as soon as early 2022.

The new intelligence finding estimates that the Russians are planning to deploy an estimated 175,000 troops and almost half of them are already deployed along various points near Ukraine’s border, according to a Biden administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the finding.

It comes as Russia has picked up its demands on Biden to guarantee that Ukraine will not be allowed to join the NATO alliance.

The official added that the plans call for the movement of 100 battalion tactical groups along with armor, artillery and equipment.

Intelligence officials also have seen an uptick in Russian propaganda efforts through the use of proxies and media outlets to denigrate Ukraine and NATO ahead of a potential invasion, the official said.

Asked about the intelligence finding as he set out for the presidential retreat at Camp David on Friday evening, Biden reiterated his concerns about Russian provocations.

“We’ve been aware of Russia’s actions for a long time and my expectation is we’re gonna have a long discussion with Putin,” Biden said.

The risks of such a gambit for Putin, if he actually went through with an invasion, would be enormous.

U.S. officials and former U.S. diplomats say while Putin clearly is laying the groundwork for a possible invasion, Ukraine’s military is better armed and prepared today than in past years, and the sanctions threatened by the West would do serious damage to Russia’s economy. It remains unclear if Putin intends to go through with what would be a risky offensive, they say.

Earlier Friday, Biden pledged to make it “very, very difficult” for Putin to take military action in Ukraine and said new initiatives coming from his administration are intended to deter Russian aggression.

“What I am doing is putting together what I believe to be will be the most comprehensive and meaningful set of initiatives to make it very, very difficult for Mr. Putin to go ahead and do what people are worried he may do,” Biden told reporters.

The Kremlin said Friday that Putin would seek binding guarantees precluding NATO’s expansion to Ukraine during the call with Biden. But Biden sought to head off the demand.

“I don’t accept anyone’s red line,” Biden said.

Meanwhile, Ukrainian officials also warned that Russia could invade next month. Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told lawmakers Friday that the number of Russian troops near Ukraine and in Russia-annexed Crimea is estimated at 94,300, warning that a “large-scale escalation” is possible in January. U.S. intelligence officials estimate closer to 70,000 troops are deployed near the border, according to an unclassified intelligence document obtained Friday by The Associated Press.

The intelligence findings were first reported by The Washington Post.

There are signs that the White House and Kremlin are close to arranging a conversation next week between Biden and Putin. Putin’s foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov told reporters Friday that arrangements have been made for a Putin-Biden call in the coming days, adding that the date will be announced after Moscow and Washington finalize details. The Russians say a date has been agreed upon, but declined to say when.

Biden and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy have also tentatively agreed to have a call next week, according to a person close to the Ukrainian president who was not authorized to speak publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said administration officials have “engaged in the possibility”

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of a Biden-Putin call. White House officials did not respond to a request for comment on the expected Zelenskyy call.

"It certainly would be an opportunity to discuss our serious concerns about the bellicose rhetoric, about the military buildup that we're seeing on the border of Ukraine," Psaki said of a potential Biden-Putin call.

Biden did not detail what actions he was weighing. But Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, who met Thursday with Secretary of State Antony Blinken in Sweden, said the U.S. has threatened new sanctions. He did not detail the potential sanctions but suggested the effort would not be effective.

"If the new 'sanctions from hell' come, we will respond," Lavrov said. "We can't fail to respond."

Psaki said the administration would look to coordinate with European allies if it moved forward with sanctions. She noted that bitter memories of Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula that had been under Ukraine's control since 1954, are front of mind as the White House considers the way forward.

"We know what President Putin has done in the past," Psaki said. "We see that he is putting in place the capacity to take action in short order."

Deep differences were on display during the Blinken-Lavrov meeting, with the Russia official charging the West was "playing with fire" by denying Russia a say in any further NATO expansion into countries of the former Soviet Union. Zelenskyy has pushed for Ukraine to join the alliance, which holds out the promise of membership but hasn't set a timeline.

Blinken this week said the U.S. has "made it clear to the Kremlin that we will respond resolutely, including with a range of high-impact economic measures that we've refrained from using in the past."

He did not detail what sanctions were being weighed, but one potentially could be to cut off Russia from the SWIFT system of international payments. The European Union's Parliament approved a nonbinding resolution in April to cut off Russia from SWIFT — the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications — if its troops entered Ukraine.

Such a move would go far toward blocking Russian businesses from the global financial system. Western allies reportedly considered such a step in 2014 and 2015, during earlier Russian-led escalations of tensions over Ukraine.

Then-Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev said it would be tantamount to "a declaration of war."

But some U.S. government officials say Putin also could be seeking attention and concessions from Biden and other Western leaders, using the military escalation to force Russia back into a central role in world affairs as it had in the days of the Soviet Union.

"They are seriously envious for superpower status and ... the parity to the United States that existed during the Cold War. That's what this is all about," said John Herbst, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine.

An invasion is possible, but more likely, "they provoke a crisis, they get concessions from us, and then they reduce the crisis. Right? And that, I think, is probably their objective," Herbst said Friday.

Associated Press writers Vladimir Isachenkov and Dasha Litvinova in Moscow contributed reporting.

Contact tracing revs up in some states as omicron reaches US

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

The arrival of the omicron variant of the coronavirus in the U.S. has health officials in some communities reviving contact tracing operations in an attempt to slow and better understand its spread as scientists study how contagious it is and whether it can thwart vaccines.

In New York City, officials quickly reached out to a man who tested positive for the variant and had attended an anime conference at a Manhattan convention center last month along with more than 50,000 people. Five other attendees have also been infected with the coronavirus, though officials don't yet know whether it was with the omicron variant.

"As for what we learned about this conference at the Javits Center and these additional cases, our test and trace team is out there immediately working with each individual who was affected to figure out who

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else they came in contact with. That contact tracing is absolutely crucial," New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said.

Once a global epicenter of the pandemic, New York has the country's biggest contract tracing effort. The city identified four omicron cases Thursday, and a fifth was discovered in nearby Suffolk County on eastern Long Island.

The variant has been detected in a handful of other states so far, including California, Colorado and Hawaii.

Contract tracers have been busy in Nebraska after six cases of omicron were confirmed Friday. One of the people had recently returned from a visit to Nigeria, and the other five were close contacts of that person.

In Philadelphia, officials were working to track down contacts of a man in his 30s who is Pennsylvania's first resident infected with the variant, the city's Department of Public Health said.

And in Maryland, officials were rushing to trace, quarantine and test close contacts of three people from the Baltimore area who are the first known cases in the state. Two are from the same household, including a vaccinated person who recently traveled to South Africa, and the third has no recent travel history and is unrelated to the other two.

Dr. Marcus Plescia, chief medical officer of the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials, said "more and more" contact tracing efforts are expected in the coming days, in part because of the uncertainty about how effective vaccines and treatments like monoclonal antibodies will be against omicron.

Contact tracing is a vital tool in the pandemic response, allowing health departments to notify people who had close contact with an infected person and slow the progression of COVID-19.

"Contact tracing can give us information about how it's spreading and hopefully break chains of transmission to stop clusters and outbreaks, or at least delay them until we know more and understand what our next steps need to be," said Crystal Watson, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security at the Bloomberg School of Public Health.

While much is still unknown about the variant, early reports are raising alarms. New COVID-19 cases in South Africa, which first alerted the world to omicron last week, have burgeoned from about 200 a day in mid-November to more than 16,000 on Friday.

Some of the U.S. cases involve people who hadn't traveled recently, meaning the variant was likely already circulating domestically in some parts of the country.

In New York, the three-day anime festival in November is presenting a staffing challenge for tracers due to the large number of attendees. The one known omicron infection involved a man from Minnesota.

Officials cautioned against linking the other five coronavirus cases directly to the event.

"The really important point here is that's five cases from a denominator of tens of thousands of people at this conference. And furthermore, we've not established any sort of link between those five cases and widespread transmission at the conference," said Ted Long, executive director of the NYC Test & Trace Corps, which runs the city's contact tracing program.

Proof of vaccination was necessary for admission, as mandated by city law, and masks were also required.

Officials said they had reached all 36,500 convention attendees, vendors and exhibitors for whom they had contact information, via email, text message or phone call. But they decided it wasn't necessary to contact every single attendee since the infected man did not appear to have close contacts based in New York.

In Minnesota, meanwhile, officials are investigating "a circle of contacts" for the man believed to have been infected at the conference, said Kris Ehresmann, the state's infectious disease director.

"Part of the reason we did indicate where he had been — the anime convention in New York — is because there were so many people that attended that event. It would not be possible for him or really anyone to identify everyone that they were potentially in contact with," Ehresmann said.

Amid the surge of the delta variant, health investigators across the U.S. became overwhelmed and scaled back contact tracing operations, finding it nearly impossible to keep up with the deluge of new infections, administer vaccines and also do tracing at the same time.

Many health officials ultimately focused on exposures at schools or potential super-spreader incidents where large numbers of people were at risk of exposure.

Dr. William Schaffner, a professor of infectious diseases at the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine,

expects that will ultimately happen with omicron.

"Contact tracing and sequencing will allow us to paint with a broad brush," Schaffner said. "But we won't be able to track it down to each and every case, and at a given point, when you know it is here and spreading, why do we need to do that?"

Associated Press writer Dave Kolpack contributed from Fargo, North Dakota.

Pipeline: Cascade of white owners has slowed NFL change

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

Over the past 100 years, around 110 people have owned controlling portions of NFL teams. Of that select group, all but two have been white.

This basic head count might offer the simplest explanation for how, even with rules in place for nearly two decades that are designed to improve diversity, the league has struggled to build a pipeline for bringing Blacks and other minorities into coaching and front-office positions.

The lead investigator for the latest NFL Inclusion and Diversity Report gives a nod to the less-than-satisfying nature of the numbers in that report by leading off his opening message with the reminder: "Progress is a process."

In 2021, the process produced these statistics: Black players make up about 70% of team rosters but the league has only three Black head coaches, while it had eight in 2011; Black coaches who fail in their first try in the jobs get inordinately fewer second and third chances than their white counterparts; the NFL this year recalibrated its much-celebrated Rooney Rule, which ensures minority candidates for front-office positions are identified and interviewed, to make sure teams talk to at least two such candidates for front-office positions and coordinator roles.

Academics who study the subject say the latest set of underwhelming numbers, along with the latest set of changes implemented in an attempt to improve them, are in line with the century-long history of a league that has been controlled by rich white men.

"To understand this problem, you have to look at it from a broader macro-historical lens," said John Singer, who teaches courses on diversity and social justice in sports at Texas A&M. "It goes back to an old-boys network. It's an informal system in which wealthy men, particularly wealthy white men with social and economic backgrounds, help each other out."

In many ways, the academics say, the arc of diversity and inclusion in the NFL mirrors that in America itself. It's more complex than simply saying owners have long been more comfortable hiring people who looked and talked like them, though that certainly could be one element in play in a league that didn't hire a single Black head coach between Fritz Pollard in the 1920s and Art Shell in 1989.

"There's also a matter of who they think is most marketable, who resonates with their fan base," said Anthony Weems, an assistant professor at Florida International University who wrote a dissertation on NFL owners and the social structure they created over a century.

"Over time, a lot of these owners are the same people, or the teams got passed down in the family. So it's almost like, 'Why would things have changed if the actual players in those positions haven't changed?'" Weems said.

The professors agree that it was no surprise earlier this year to see the racist emails that surfaced between Jon Gruden and former Washington executive Bruce Allen. Also not shocking, but far less spotlighted, was the scenario that played out in 2017 when Texans owner Bob McNair said "We can't have the inmates running the prison."

McNair apologized and said he hadn't been speaking about the players. When he died in 2018, ownership of the team passed to his wife.

"There was backlash for sure, but why are they running Gruden out of a job when they allowed McNair to operate just fine and he passed the team down?" Weems said. "It's indicative of a larger culture."

Jaguars owner Shad Khan, one of the league's two minority owners, said he was taken aback when he

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tried to buy a controlling stake in the Rams in 2010.

"I had met some people at that time and the apology that went around, the conjecture was, 'You will never get approved because you're not white,'" he said.

But he said those thoughts didn't match up with the reality. He moved on from the Rams and ended up buying the Jaguars in 2011, and paints a much more optimistic picture about NFL ownerships' relation to race.

"I think the league is at the forefront and they're going to be doing more," Khan said. "And my being in the middle, yes, I've seen a change."

In a short essay that accompanied the latest diversity and inclusion report, lead investigator C. Keith Harrison writes about the academic topic of attribution bias, which, he explains, are errors made when trying to explain why people make decisions they make. It undercuts the idea that, for instance, all decisions made by a largely white group of owners might be based solely on race.

Still, the results remain the same, and Harrison points to other academic studies that conclude the impact of biased behavior does add up over time.

"In the context of the NFL, African Americans and other human beings of color pay their dues, and when it appears to be their turn it is often a white coach hired again. And again. And again," he writes.

He used the example of Urban Meyer's attempt to hire Chris Doyle as an assistant for the Jaguars as a prime example.

Doyle's hiring was squelched after accusations surfaced about his racist remarks and bullying of players during his 22 years at the University of Iowa.

That episode illustrated what many people see as one core problem in the NFL's diversity issue: A century's worth of white owners have built a system in which white coaches and leaders get far more second and third chances, while Black coaches are harder to find and don't have as many chances to fail. For instance, since 1963, 15 white coaches have been given a third head-coaching job, compared to zero coaches of color. (The report says Tom Flores was the lone coach to be afforded a third chance, but authors did not respond to The Associated Press when it asked what the third job was. Flores coached the Raiders and Seahawks.)

Cyrus Mehri, who co-founded the Fritz Pollard Alliance, which, according to its website, "exists to champion diversity in the National Football League," said the league office is not to blame for the systemic diversity issues in the NFL.

"It's the owners," Mehri said, in a quote embedded in the diversity and inclusion report. "We have spectacular candidates, and we still have decision making (among owners) that's irrational."

John Solow, a professor who studied the NFL while teaching at Iowa and now is at Central Florida, who co-wrote a paper on the Rooney Rule in 2011, said that in the universe the owners have created, it can be argued that it's hard to tell if Black assistant coaches are being discriminated against because, compared to whites in the same positions, there haven't been enough of them over the years to do a truly scientific study on the issue.

For instance, between 2012-2021, whites were hired for 168 of the 219 (76%) open coordinator positions, which are considered the top launching pads for head-coaching jobs. That almost mirrors the hiring pattern for head coaches: Whites have been tabbed for 51 of the 62 openings (82%) since 2012.

"But then, you have to go back a step and say 'Why aren't there (more) Black assistant coaches?'" Solow said. "And then you ask 'Was there discrimination?' And we couldn't really find any. But we also couldn't really find any evidence that the Rooney Rule was working."

AP Pro Football Writer Mark Long contributed to this report.

More AP NFL coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/nfl> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

Putin to seek guarantees on Ukraine as invasion fears grow

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By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The Kremlin said Friday that President Vladimir Putin will seek binding guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine during a planned call with U.S. President Joe Biden, while a U.S. intelligence report and the Ukrainian defense minister warned of a possible Russian invasion of Ukraine as soon as next month.

With tensions between Russia and the West escalating, Biden said his administration was "putting together what I believe to be the most comprehensive and meaningful set of initiatives to make it very, very difficult for Mr. Putin to go ahead and do what people are worried he may do" in positioning troops near Ukraine.

The NATO chief and numerous former U.S. diplomats and security officials say Russia's demand that Biden rule out NATO membership for Ukraine, a former Soviet republic eager to ally with the West, is a nonstarter.

"There's absolutely no way in the world that that Russian position will make any progress," John Herbst, a former U.S. ambassador to Ukraine, said Friday. "It's basically a rhetorical point for Moscow." More likely, he said, were U.S. assurances that Western military assistance to Ukraine be for defensive purposes only.

Ukraine, the U.S. and other Western allies are increasingly concerned that a Russian troop buildup near the Ukrainian border could signal Moscow's intention to invade. Officials say it remains unclear if Putin intends to go through with an invasion or appears to be threatening one in hopes of forcing concessions from Ukraine and its Western allies. The U.S. has threatened the Kremlin with the toughest sanctions yet if it launches an attack, while Russia has warned that any presence of NATO troops and weapons on Ukrainian soil would cross a "red line."

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told lawmakers Friday that the number of Russian troops near Ukraine and in Russian-annexed Crimea is estimated at 94,300, warning that a "large-scale escalation" is possible in January.

An unclassified U.S. intelligence report made public later Friday cited recent artillery, troop and materiel movements near Ukraine's border in saying Russia was planning for the possibility of a military offensive with 175,000 troops early next year.

"The plans involve extensive movement of 100 battalion tactical groups ... along with armor, artillery, and equipment," according to the U.S. report, which said about half of those units were already near Ukraine's border. The intelligence finding was first reported by The Washington Post. A Biden administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the finding, confirmed it to The Associated Press.

Amid the mounting tensions, Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov told reporters Friday that arrangements have been made for a Putin-Biden call in the coming days, adding that the date will be announced after Moscow and Washington finalize details.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said later that administration officials have "engaged in the possibility" of a Biden-Putin call.

"It certainly would be an opportunity to discuss our serious concerns about the bellicose rhetoric, about the military buildup that we're seeing on the border of Ukraine," Psaki said.

On Thursday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met face-to-face with his Russian counterpart, Sergey Lavrov, in Stockholm to demand that Russia pull back troops from the border with Ukraine. Lavrov retorted that the West was "playing with fire" by denying Russia a say in any further NATO expansion into countries of the former Soviet Union.

Ukraine has pushed to join the alliance, which has held out the promise of membership but hasn't set a timeline.

Ushakov noted that during the call with Biden, Putin will raise his demand for a legally binding agreement that would "exclude any further NATO expansion eastward and the deployment of weapons systems that would threaten us on the territories of neighboring countries, including Ukraine."

Russia long has pushed for such arrangements, Ushakov said, emphasizing that it has become particularly acute because of the latest buildup of tension. "It simply can't continue like that," he said.

NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said this week that Russia had no say in whether Ukraine joined the Western security alliance.

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"It is up to Ukraine and 30 allies to decide when Ukraine is ready to join the alliance," he said. Russia "has no veto, no right to interfere in that process."

Russia and Ukraine have remained locked in a tense tug-of-war after Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in Ukraine's eastern industrial heartland, known as the Donbas. More than 14,000 people have died in the fighting.

Ukraine's defense minister warned Friday that an escalation "is a probable scenario, but not certain, and our task is to avert it."

"Our intelligence service analyzes all scenarios, including the worst ones," Reznikov said. "The most probable time when (Russia) will be ready for the escalation is end of January."

Konstantin Kosachev, a deputy speaker of the upper house of parliament, reaffirmed Moscow's denial that it was pondering an attack.

"We don't have any plans to attack Ukraine. We don't have any heightened military activity near Ukraine's borders. There is no preparation underway for an offensive," Kosachev told Russia's state TV channel Russia-24.

The Kremlin has voiced concern that Ukraine may use force to reclaim control of the rebel east. And adding to the tensions, the head of a Russian-backed, self-proclaimed separatist republic in eastern Ukraine said Thursday that he could turn to Moscow for military assistance if the region faced a Ukrainian attack.

Reznikov said Ukraine wouldn't do anything to provoke Russia but is prepared to respond in case of an attack. "Ukraine is most interested in political and diplomatic resolution," the defense minister said.

He said that Ukraine will launch construction this month of two naval bases with British assistance — one in Ochakiv on the Black Sea and another one in Berdyansk on the Sea of Azov.

"The development of the navy and the missile program are among our priorities," he said.

Karmanau reported from Kyiv, Ukraine. Ellen Knickmeyer and Aamer Madhani in Washington and Dasha Litvinova in Moscow contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: How unusual to charge parents in school shooting?

By ED WHITE Associated Press

Guns used in U.S. school shootings have often come from the homes of young perpetrators, but parents are rarely charged for the violence that occurs, experts say.

That's what makes the case against Ethan Crumbley's parents uncommon, following the fatal shooting of four students at Oxford High School in southeastern Michigan. Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald said Jennifer and James Crumbley ignored opportunities to intervene, just a few hours before the bloodshed.

They're charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter, while Ethan, 15, is charged as an adult with murder, terrorism and other crimes.

The Crumbley parents and their lawyers haven't commented on the shooting or the charges.

Here's a look at the issues facing the parents:

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THE GUN?

The semi-automatic handgun used in the shooting Tuesday was purchased legally by James Crumbley on Nov. 26 while his son stood by at the shop, according to investigators.

Over the Thanksgiving weekend, Jennifer Crumbley referred to it on social media as a "Christmas present" for her son, and Ethan posted a picture of it on social media, calling it his "new beauty," McDonald said.

With some very limited exceptions, minors in Michigan aren't allowed to possess guns. But there is no Michigan law that requires owners to keep guns locked away from kids.

"So many states do. There's 23 states plus Washington, D.C., that have some form of a secure storage law," Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel said.

WILL INVOLUNTARY MANSLAUGHTER BE TOUGH TO PROVE?

"It's an unusual charge to bring," said Eve Brensike Primus, who teaches criminal procedure at University

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of Michigan law school.

Police said Ethan Crumbley emerged from a bathroom and started shooting other students in the hallway at Oxford High. A few hours earlier, he and his parents had met with school officials. A teacher had found a drawing on his desk with a gun pointing at the words, "The thoughts won't stop. Help me," according to the prosecutor.

Ethan, who had no disciplinary record, was told to get counseling but was allowed to stay in school. His backpack was not checked for a weapon, McDonald said.

Primus said authorities must show gross negligence by the parents and causation, or the act of causing something.

"The prosecutor is going to need facts to support the argument that these parents really knew there was a risk that their son would take a gun and shoot people dead," she said. "Not just that their son was troubled in some way. This is a homicide charge that carries years in prison. This is not a small charge."

In 2000, a Flint-area man pleaded no contest to involuntary manslaughter after a 6-year-old boy who was living with him found a gun in a shoebox and killed a classmate.

WHY AREN'T PARENTS CHARGED MORE OFTEN?

A 2019 assessment by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security found that guns came from the home of a parent or close relative in 76% of school attacks where firearms were used. In about half, the firearms were easily accessible.

But laws aimed at restricting gun access are not always enforced and vary in strength, experts say.

"Our laws haven't really adapted to the reality of school shootings, and the closest we have are these child access prevention laws," said Kris Brown, president of the Brady gun control advocacy group

In 2020, the mother of an Indiana teen was placed on probation for failing to remove guns from her home after her mentally ill son threatened to kill students. He fired shots inside his school in 2018. No one was injured but the boy killed himself.

In Washington state, the father of a boy who killed four students at a high school in 2014 was convicted of illegally possessing firearms. He was not charged for the shooting, although one of his guns was used.

AP reporter Sophia Tareen in Chicago contributed to this story.

Colorado supermarket shooting suspect incompetent for trial

By COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — A judge ruled Friday that a man charged with killing 10 people at a Colorado supermarket earlier this year is mentally incompetent to stand trial and ordered him to be treated at the state mental hospital to see if he can be made well enough to face prosecution.

Ahmad Al Aliwi Alissa, 22, is accused of opening fire at a busy King Soopers in the college town of Boulder in March, killing a police officer, shoppers and several store employees.

Four doctors have now determined that Alissa is not mentally competent to participate in court proceedings, and he has "deteriorated" over the past couple of months while in jail, District Attorney Michael Dougherty said. Given the consensus, Dougherty requested that Judge Ingrid Bakke send Alissa to the state mental hospital in hopes that medication and treatment will enable him to become competent under the law — able to understand legal proceedings and work with his lawyers to defend himself.

Dougherty did not disclose why the experts determined Alissa is not competent, and the report explaining the evaluation's finding is not available to the public, only to the lawyers and judge. Alissa's attorney, Kathryn Herold, said Friday her client has a "serious" mental illness but did not provide details. She also agreed he should be sent to the Colorado Mental Health Institute at Pueblo.

The ruling halts virtually all proceedings in the case indefinitely. Alissa is not scheduled to be back in court again until March 15, nearly a year after the shooting, to discuss whether any progress has been made. There is a possibility he could return before then if doctors believe he has become competent, Dougherty said. Prosecutors will get monthly updates from the hospital on his condition.

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"I'm 100% confident that the day will come that he's held fully responsible for what he did on March 22," Dougherty said after the hearing.

Robert Olds, whose niece Rikki Olds, the supermarket's front-end manager, was killed in the shooting, said he was frustrated by the latest delay, which puts off the day when his family can really begin to grieve by seeing Alissa put on trial. However, he also tries not to become too upset by the justice system's slow pace, to avoid being "revictimized" by Alissa, he said.

Still, Olds noted Alissa seemed competent at his last court hearing when he answered the judge's questions.

"He's incompetent to stand trial, but on the day he did all of this he was pretty dang competent in his actions and everything else," Olds said.

An earlier court-ordered evaluation completed Oct. 1 found Alissa was not mentally competent, but prosecutors asked for a second evaluation to be conducted with an expert of their choosing, the latest to find him incompetent. An earlier evaluation by a defense expert also found him to be incompetent, Dougherty said.

While none of those reports are public either, court filings regarding the Oct. 1 evaluation contained some hints of Alissa's condition.

Alissa was provisionally diagnosed with an unspecified mental health condition that limits his ability to "meaningfully converse with others," and he gave "superficial responses" to questions about hypothetical legal situations that indicate a "passive approach to his defense" and "potential overreliance on his attorneys," according to a prosecution motion.

The defense, meanwhile, disputed the prosecution's earlier claim that Alissa understood the legal process, noting he was fixated on the possibility of the death penalty even though Colorado has abolished it.

Competency issues have also delayed the prosecution of a man accused of killing three people in a 2015 attack on a Planned Parenthood clinic in Colorado Springs.

Robert Dear was repeatedly found incompetent to proceed in his state case. Federal prosecutors then charged him in 2019, but the competency issue has continued to delay the case in federal court.

Competency is a different legal issue than a plea of not guilty by reason of insanity, which hinges on whether someone's mental health prevented them from knowing right from wrong when a crime was committed.

This story has been updated to correct the first name of the defendant to Ahmad and to remove a reference to an Olympic distance runner being killed in the shooting. The runner worked in the store but eventually escaped.

Evidence at Maxwell trial: massage table, unfolded in court

By TOM HAYS undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — A green, folding massage table used by financier Jeffrey Epstein was brought into a Manhattan courtroom and set up in front of a jury on Friday to bolster allegations he teamed up with British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell to sexually exploit underage victims.

The theatrical flourish in federal court in Manhattan, courtesy of an investigator wearing rubber gloves, was meant to corroborate testimony from a key accuser at Maxwell's ongoing sex-abuse trial alleging massages were used as a pretense for the sexual encounters with Epstein that sometimes included Maxwell.

A witness who said the abuse started when she was 14 described seeing a massage table in a "massage room" that police say was in the same location where they recovered one at Epstein's Palm Beach, Florida, mansion in 2005.

A police officer testified that investigators also seized records, computers and sex toys — a photo of which was shown to the jury — from the residence.

Prosecutors showed jurors a police videotape of the residence that captured images of nude photos on the walls - decor that federal prosecutors claim is proof of a sexualized atmosphere encouraged by Maxwell to put pressure on the victims.

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The evidence was presented over defense objections calling it prejudicial. Defense attorney Bobbi Sternheim accused prosecutors of trying to unfairly depict Epstein's home as a "domicile of debauchery."

Prosecutors have alleged the British socialite groomed teen girls by taking them on shopping trips and movie outings, talking to them about their lives and encouraging them to accept financial help from Epstein. The government also says she helped to create a sexually charged atmosphere by talking with the girls about sex and instructing them on the alleged sexualized massages of Epstein.

Maxwell, 59, denies the allegations against her, and her lawyers say prosecutors are going after her because they can't try Epstein, who committed suicide in jail before he could go to trial. She was Epstein's onetime girlfriend and, later, employee.

The accuser, using the pseudonym "Jane" to protect her privacy, testified earlier this week that when she first visited the Epstein home she was disturbed by "some paintings of, like, naked women or half-naked women." In the massage room off of a master bedroom Epstein and Maxwell shared, the pair were "showing me, you know, what he likes, what — you know, what men like, what women like."

Also on Friday, former Epstein housekeeper Juan Patricio Alessi returned to the witness stand to face cross-examination over his testimony that "Jane" and another woman who has accused Epstein of sexually abusing her as a teen were repeated visitors at the Palm Beach mansion, where Maxwell was "the lady of the house."

A lawyer for Maxwell sought to discredit Alessi — who worked for Epstein from 1990 to 2002 — by confronting him with a deposition from a civil case that the defense says was inconsistent with his trial testimony.

Alessi claimed on Friday that none of the many young women who visited the Florida home alerted him to any misconduct.

"I wish they would have because I would have done something," he said.

EXPLAINER: Who are the jurors for trial of Kim Potter?

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A look at the jurors who will hear testimony in the manslaughter trial of former suburban Minneapolis police officer Kim Potter, who is charged in the April shooting death of 20-year-old Black motorist Daunte Wright. Potter says she meant to use her Taser on Wright and drew her gun by mistake. Opening statements are scheduled for Wednesday.

The jurors are anonymous by order of the court. The 12 who will deliberate if no alternates are needed include nine who identify as white, two who are Asian and one who is Black. The two alternates are white. The panel is evenly divided on gender.

JUROR NO. 2

A white man in his 50s with a master's degree, he works as a medical editor. He said he considers himself to be an analytical person, and that in his job he knows how to take a subjective matter and process it as objectively as possible.

He said he has a "very unfavorable" view of the pro-police "blue lives matter" slogan, saying he believes it's more of a counter against the Black Lives Matter movement rather than real support for police. But he also said he opposes cutting funding for 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 think it sends an emotionally loaded message rather than, 'we need reform.' It's 'let's just abolish.' ... I don't agree with that message, and I don't agree with the approach."

He wrote in his questionnaire that he thinks the criminal justice system isn't fair for everyone, and that people with superior legal resources have an advantage.

JUROR NO. 6

A white woman in her 60s, Juror No. 6 is a retired special education teacher who also taught English to immigrants and said she loves true crime shows.

She is a mother of four adult daughters, one of whom died nearly two years ago from breast cancer. She said this time of year is hard, and she worries about becoming emotional during the trial, but didn't

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think it would affect her ability to concentrate.

She said she could be fair and impartial to both sides, recounting a former student calling her "strict-fair."

She said she doesn't understand how something like Wright's death could happen, but also said: "I really feel for any law enforcement because things can happen just so, so quickly."

JUROR NO. 7

Juror No. 7 is a white man in his 20 who works overnights as an operations manager at a large retailer and manages a team of 110 people. He is also a bassist in an alternative rock band.

He has cousins in law enforcement outside of Hennepin County. He also has a friend who was mugged, but said it wouldn't affect his ability to be fair in the case.

He also said that he took a gun safety course when he was about 14 and that he carried a stun gun when he was traveling with his band for protection. The stun gun was confiscated in Canada and he has not gotten a new one.

On his questionnaire, he wrote that he was slightly distrustful of police and believes they have a hard job, but they should also be held to the highest level of scrutiny.

No. 7 told the judge he was concerned that people could discern his identity from questions asked during jury selection, but ultimately said he was comfortable remaining on the panel.

JUROR NO. 11

Juror No. 11 is an Asian woman in her 40s, who described herself as a "rule follower." She said believes police officers should be respected, and on a questionnaire said 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.

She said that she lives "kind of" in an area that was affected by protests last summer and she heard gunshots while at home, something she called "very scary."

She has a friend who was killed in a stabbing but said it would not affect her view of the trial. She has a brother who served in the Marines.

JUROR NO. 17

Juror No. 17 is a white woman in her 20s who said she recently graduated and is working full time, though no specifics were given. She said she didn't know enough about the people involved in the case to have an impression of either Potter or Wright, and said she would keep an open mind and listen to all the evidence before making a decision.

She said the protests in the Twin Cities had a negative impact on the community because of the property damage that happened.

She said she somewhat disagreed with defunding the police, saying, "You're always going to need police officers."

JUROR NO. 19

Juror No. 19 is a Black woman in her 30s, a teacher and mother of two who said she carries a small purple stun gun in her purse for personal protection. She also is a gun owner with a permit to carry.

She said she saw the video of Potter shooting Wright and said it was chaotic.

"I remember panic in the video," she said. She had a somewhat negative impression of both Wright and Potter, saying of Potter: "Having this much experience, you know, in that moment, where did your lapse in judgment come from?"

She lives near a shopping center that was damaged in the unrest following Wright's death. She indicated she considers both Black Lives Matter and blue lives matter to be divisive.

She strongly disagreed that police officers should not be second-guessed for their decisions.

"This is a servitude job, and when you get into this position, you need to understand that it's a tough job and so you have to maintain that level of professionalism when you get into that position."

She said that she believes there is more negative information in the media about people with different

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skin color.

She was asked if she worried about fallout in her community if she decided to acquit Potter, and she said, "No. That is not a concern for me."

No. 19 said she had never been trained on her stun gun nor used it, and could set aside anything she knows about her device in evaluating evidence at trial.

JUROR NO. 21

Juror No. 21 is a white man in his 40s, who served on a jury once before — in a case involving protesters and trespassing roughly 10 years ago. He said it wouldn't affect his ability to be fair in Potter's trial.

He said on his questionnaire that he had "somewhat negative" impressions of both Potter and Wright.

Asked why about Wright, he said, "I don't condone fleeing from a police officer." About Potter, he said, "When training fellow officers, your actions should be more thought out."

He's married with young children, but didn't say how many. He has a brother-in-law who's a federal law enforcement agent in Washington, D.C. He gave no details about his own profession.

He said demonstrations about policing over the past couple of years have had both positive and negative impacts on the community — positive because they started eye-opening conversations but negative because of the looting.

He also wrote on his questionnaire that he was neutral on blue lives matter. "It feels like marketing," he wrote. "Of course all lives matter, but cops aren't dying at nearly the same rate."

JUROR NO. 22

Juror No. 22 is a white man in his 60s, who has been a registered nurse since 1994 and is studying to become a nurse practitioner.

He said he strongly agrees that police make him feel safe and he somewhat agrees that their actions shouldn't be second-guessed. "You know, they've got a difficult job. And maybe it's just me but I, I don't know that I necessarily raise them up to a higher standard, but I certainly expect them to be law abiding."

He also said he trusts the police "until prove otherwise," adding that he expects police will protect him.

He is also a gun owner, and uses his guns for hunting waterfowl. He said: "The ducks are pretty safe when I'm out there," prompting some laughter in the courtroom. He called himself a "responsible gun owner" and said he has been hunting since he was a child.

He said in his questionnaire that Potter "possibly made an error" based on a short video clip he saw. He said he believed Potter when she said she didn't mean to shoot Wright.

JUROR NO. 26

Juror No. 26 is an Asian woman in her 20s who was reluctant to be on the panel, saying she has a lot of friends and family who "are very opinionated in the matter," she said.

She said she could set their influence aside.

She said her workplace was damaged during a recent demonstration over policing, and that it made her "angry and upset" because she thought those who did the damage were just taking advantage of the protests.

The woman said she's finishing a degree and has finals and job interviews coming up in a couple of weeks. She said she wasn't certain if she could postpone them all.

JUROR NO. 40

Juror No. 40 is a white man in his 40s who said he once wanted to become a police officer, but changed his mind before going to college because he was "afraid that I would end up having to use my gun." He has worked in IT security for the last 20 years.

He had a somewhat negative impression of both Potter and Wright, saying Potter should have had enough "muscle memory" to know which side of her body her Taser was on. He said he could be critical of both sides at trial though.

He also said he would have a hard time following the law if he disagreed with it. As an example, he cited an instance in which he was pulled over on his motorcycle because his tailpipe was too loud — something he called subjective.

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He also said he owns a shotgun, but hasn't used it in 20 years, and he said he has been arrested for drunken driving.

The man expressed concerns about serving on the jury, saying that he didn't want his information to come out after a verdict, fearing for his family's safety. He said he didn't fear one particular group or side more than another.

He strongly agreed that police in his community make him feel safe, but said he strongly disagrees that police should not be second-guessed for their decisions.

When it comes to Black Lives Matter, he said has a somewhat favorable impression, saying in his questionnaire that the group is important for raising awareness but he sees little change coming out of it. He explained in court that he believes it takes generations for change to happen. He also has a somewhat favorable opinion of blue lives matter, saying police officers have a risky job.

JUROR NO. 48

Juror No. 48 is a white woman in her 40s, a mother of two who used to work as an IT project manager and has also worked as an elections judge.

She said on her questionnaire that Wright should not have died for something like expired tags, saying what happened did not match the presumed crime. She said she could leave that initial impression aside, as well as other information she heard about the case, and reach a verdict based on what she hears in court.

She also said she had attended a rally at the local U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement building to protest "children being in cages at the border."

She said some of her friends and neighbors have signs in their yard or expressed opinions about police reform on social media but she has not. She said the only bumper sticker she has is "one referencing Dr. Who."

She said she somewhat disagrees that police officers make her feel safe, saying she is just kind of nervous around anyone in authority.

She grew up on a farm outside Minnesota.

JUROR NO. 55

Juror No. 55 is a white man in his 50s, a Navy veteran and former Boy Scout leader who said he competes in medieval steel combat in his spare time.

"I put on steel armor and pick up steel weapons and hit my friends with them," he said. "It's a very fun time. ... it's my Monday night football, so to speak."

The man, who is a field systems engineer for a cybersecurity company, said that he was stunned as part of his Navy training decades ago, but would have no problem setting aside his experience and reaching a verdict based on the evidence.

He said he saw a short video clip of the shooting only once, and thought the situation was stressful because it looked like a lot of things were happening at once, but he had no real opinions on Potter or Wright.

He said he has a somewhat unfavorable impression of blue lives matter, saying "You can choose your vocation, but you can't chose your skin color."

His wife and daughter were victims of an attempted carjacking last year. He said that would not affect his ability to be a juror.

He said protests in the Minneapolis area over the last two years have been positive overall because regularly examining what leaders and law enforcers are doing is good for society.

He said systemic racism is a problem in the system, but he doesn't think that affects this case.

JUROR NO. 57

An alternate, Juror No. 57 is a white woman in her 70s who has lived in Minneapolis almost all her life.

Asked about a statement on her questionnaire that the George Floyd case had made her sad, she said it "caused a lot of trauma in our city." She said one positive of protests in Minneapolis has been that people have been re-examining tough issues.

"I generally trust the police, but there are occasions when we cannot trust the police," she said.

She said her father was an FBI agent and an attorney, and she had other family members who were

attorneys.

JUROR NO. 58

Also an alternate, Juror No. 58 is a white man in his 30s with a 2-year-old at home. He said he is good friends with a St. Paul police officer who is the godfather of his daughter. He said his friend is "an awesome dude," but he recognizes that police officers are all different.

He strongly disagreed that people don't give police officers the respect they deserve, saying in his community, police officers have a lot of respect.

Time is no ally as Dems strain to finish Biden's \$2T bill

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — If President Joe Biden's \$2 trillion social and environment package was a Broadway show, its seven months on Congress' stage could qualify it as a hit. But lawmaking isn't show business, and many Democrats worry that with the curtain falling soon on 2021, time is not their friend.

Each passing day threatens to push final action into 2022, an election year when control of Congress will be at stake and lawmakers will become ever more wary of casting tough votes.

Democratic Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer wants to end his party's disagreements and finally squeeze the bill through his chamber before Christmas. Indeed, holiday deadlines are a time-tested way of prodding lawmakers to solve disputes so they can go home. And momentum toward approving Biden's top domestic initiative — the House passed an initial version last month — seems to make prospects strong.

Yet while Schumer and other Democrats express confidence that his target date will be met, some are anxious it won't and are concerned about damaging consequences.

The New York senator needs time to work out final compromises with resistant party moderates including West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin. Also chewing up the calendar will be tedious but crucial rules sessions with the Senate parliamentarian, plus work on major bills on defense policy and extending the government's borrowing authority to avoid a federal default.

The longer it takes to finish the \$2 trillion package, the longer it can be vulnerable to factors — predictable and unforeseen, economic and political — that might complicate Schumer's task.

"You let things sit around here, particularly past a Christmas vacation and into an election year, and that is toxic," said Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., a leader of her party's progressives.

Facing unanimous Republican opposition, Democrats will need all their votes in the 50—50 Senate. They'll also need all but three in the House, which will need to pass the bill again with Senate revisions before sending it to Biden.

"Everybody knows we can't walk away from this. We've got to do it and we've got to do it as quickly as we can," said Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio. He pointedly added, "There are different definitions of 'as quickly as we can' from different people."

Democrats are frustrated that each week they spend battling with each other reduces the time they'll have to sell the legislation's initiatives to voters. The package includes free preschool, new Medicare hearing benefits and steps to curb climate change, paid for largely with tax boosts on wealthy people and big corporations.

"We should be finishing this up so we can go start talking to people about what's in it, instead of having everybody sort of focused on our navel gazing," said Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn.

Manchin and Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., have already forced cuts in the legislation, which not too long ago had a \$3.5 trillion price tag. Neither has promised to heed Schumer's Christmas timetable, and Manchin hasn't dropped his insistence on removing a new paid family-leave program and provisions encouraging cleaner energy.

"I haven't committed to anything, I haven't committed to a thing to anybody, to any human being," Manchin said this week about the bill.

And Democrats' marathon talks over the measure are giving Republicans time to use the country's bout with rising inflation, which is showing no signs of going away, as one of their chief weapons against it.

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The GOP argues that the \$2 trillion bill would push prices higher by incentivizing a shift to cleaner fuels, and flushing more cash into an already overheated economy.

Democrats say the package's spending and tax credits for health services, child care and education will help families with tight budgets cope with inflation. But the GOP is using rising gasoline and home heating costs, which many voters encounter daily, to help make their argument. Republicans think Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell's testimony to Congress that inflation no longer seems due to "transitory" causes like the pandemic shows their argument will have political staying power.

"Time is definitely on the side that doesn't want this to pass," Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., a member of the Senate GOP leadership, said this week.

Manchin has cited inflation fears as a rationale for slowing work on the bill and paring it, and he will no doubt be watching the government's next measurement of consumer prices, due Dec. 10. His continued insistence on changes despite months of negotiation is rankling colleagues.

"I mean, God bless Joe Manchin, but how many months is this going on?" said No. 2 Senate Democratic leader Richard Durbin of Illinois. "I mean, I told him a month ago, 'For God's sake, Joe, declare victory and close the deal.'"

Further incentive for Democrats to finish the legislation this month is the Dec. 31 expiration of parts of the \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill that Congress approved in March.

That includes a larger children's tax credit and monthly payments of those benefits to millions of families, which would end unless lawmakers renew it. Congress could revive the credit retroactively next year, but many lawmakers want to avoid any interruption.

Democrats still must solve other disagreements, including over how to let people deduct more state and local taxes without making the provision a giveaway to the richest Americans. And there are other factors running out the clock.

Senate parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough needs time to decide whether any of the bill's sections must be dropped because they violate the chamber's special rules for budget legislation. A Democratic plan to help millions of immigrants remain in the U.S. is in the balance, and the process is tedious, with lots of back and forth between Senate aides and MacDonough.

"We've been talking about this and working on this for months," said Sen. Tina Smith, D-Minn. "And so let's just get it done."

Where's the snow? Rockies winter starts with a whimper

By THOMAS PEIPERT and BRITTANY PETERSON Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Denver's winter has started with a whimper, and the parched mountains to the west aren't faring much better.

The Mile High City has already shattered its 87-year-old record for the latest measurable snowfall set on Nov. 21, 1934, and it's a little more than a week away from breaking an 1887 record of 235 consecutive days without snow.

The scenario is playing out across much of the Rocky Mountains, as far north as Montana and in the broader Western United States, which is experiencing a megadrought that studies link to human-caused climate change. It's only the second time since 1976 that Salt Lake City has gone snowless through November, and amid the unseasonably warm weather in Montana, a late-season wildfire fueled by strong winds ripped through a tiny central Montana farming town this week.

The warm and dry weather has drawn crowds to restaurant and bar patios in Denver, and the city's parks and trails have been bustling with people basking in the sunshine in shorts, short sleeves and occasionally flip flops.

As enjoyable as the weather is, climate scientists and meteorologists are warning that prolonged drought could threaten the region's water supply and agriculture industry. It also could hurt tourism, which relies heavily on skiers, snowboarders, rafters and anglers.

"Every day that goes by that we don't see precipitation show up and we see this year-to-year persis-

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tence of drought conditions, it just adds to a deficit. And we continue to add to this deficit year after year, particularly in the Colorado River Basin," said Keith Musselman, a hydrologist at the University of Colorado-Boulder.

Derek Greenough moved to Denver a few months ago and immediately bought a snowboard with the hope of soon hitting the slopes. But on Wednesday, he was enjoying the warm weather in a city park.

"I'm from central New York so I expected it to be somewhat like there, which they have about 5 feet of snow right now," said Greenough, 27, who was wearing a tank top and exercise shorts. "Today I figured that on the first day of December it would be snowing, at least something, but here we are. It's a nice day. ... I don't think I'll be snowboarding anytime soon."

Denver's high Wednesday hit 73 degrees Fahrenheit (23 degrees Celsius), tying the record set in 1973. The National Weather Service is predicting similar conditions over the weekend with only a slight chance of snow at the beginning of next week.

Frank Cooper, a meteorologist for the National Weather Service in Boulder, Colorado, said a La Nina weather pattern is pushing storm tracks farther north into the Pacific Northwest and Canada, allowing highs in the Denver area to reach into the 70s.

"Basically, we haven't had any systems really able to get into the area to cool us off," he said, noting that the average high in Denver this time of year is 45 degrees Fahrenheit (7 degrees Celsius).

Musselman likens mountain snowpack to a natural reservoir that holds moisture during the winter months and releases it in the spring and summer when demand from trees, plants, animals and humans is greater.

"That natural reservoir is being affected by climate change, and warming is reducing the amount of snow that's occurring in the mountains," he said.

The lack of snow in northern Utah is a rarity but the record for the latest snowfall — set twice on Christmas Day in 1939 and 1943 — is likely to stand with snow expected sometime late next week, National Weather Service meteorologist David Church said.

The mountains near Salt Lake City that are home to several ski resorts had a good start to the season when a wet October that dropped rain in the valley made snow in the mountains, but that's slowed in November. Several resorts, including Deer Valley in Park City and Powder Mountain and Snowbasin near Ogden, have delayed opening because of the weather.

With most of Utah stuck in an extreme drought, a wet winter is more important than just making sure skiers have good runs.

"We need a good winter for snowpack out here, so hopefully we can turn the corner as we head into December and January," Church said.

The lack of snow has also led to a mild inversion in the Salt Lake City area, a phenomenon in Utah's urban corridor caused by weather and geography when cold, stagnant air settles in the bowl-shaped mountain basins, trapping automotive and other emissions and creating a brown, murky haze. Storms break up those inversions.

In western Wyoming, Jackson Hole Mountain Resort opened on Thanksgiving, using manmade snow on a handful of low-elevation runs and in an area for children and other inexperienced skiers.

Resort spokesman Eric Seymour said, "we're not sounding the alarm yet," and he is keeping his fingers crossed that snow forecast for this weekend will allow the upper mountain to open.

That has been the attitude at most Rockies ski resorts, which recognize that the season is just getting underway and that all hope is not lost. Even so, one popular Colorado ski town isn't leaving anything to chance.

With such a dearth of skiable terrain open at resorts across the state, Breckenridge is set to hold an annual festival downtown to honor Ullr, the Norse God of Snow and the Patron Saint of Skiers.

Lauren Swanson, a spokeswoman for Breckenridge's tourism office, described the four-day festival starting Dec. 9 as "a town-wide snow dance," parade and party to thank Ullr for bountiful snow and to ask him to bring more.

"We're hopeful that our snow dances and all of our celebrations will inspire Ullr to bless us with a big

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storm soon. That's what this is all about. If the snow is not here, we'll bring it with our energy," she said. "I believe in it. I do think it works."

Associated Press writers Brady McCombs in Salt Lake City and Mead Gruver in Cheyenne, Wyoming, contributed to this report.

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Plumber's find possibly tied to 2014 Texas megachurch theft

By JUAN A. LOZANO Associated Press

HOUSTON (AP) — For more than seven years, no one has known what happened to \$600,000 in checks and cash that was stolen from a safe at Pastor Joel Osteen's Houston megachurch, which has one of the largest congregations in the country.

Now, there's a possible plot twist in the case: The money might never have left the church and a plumber could have helped solve the mystery.

Houston police are investigating whether cash and checks discovered by a plumber during repair work that was being done at Lakewood Church is connected to the money that was stolen in 2014.

The revived investigation comes after a plumber on Thursday called "The Morning Bullpen with George, Mo & Erik on 100.3 The Bull" during a segment on the Houston radio station in which people were asked to talk about the most unusual things of value they had ever found.

Some callers talked about finding \$100 or a ring before the plumber went on the air with his story of what he found while repairing a leaky toilet at the church about four weeks ago.

"I went to go remove the toilet and I moved some insulation away and about 500 envelopes fell out of the wall. I was like 'oh wow.' I got my flashlight, shined up in there," the plumber said in audio provided by the Houston radio station.

The plumber, who only identified himself as Justin, told the radio program he thought the envelopes full of money were connected to the 2014 theft and immediately told the church's maintenance supervisor, who then contacted police. KPRC-TV first reported the plumber's story to the radio station.

George Lindsey, one of the show's hosts, called the plumber's story "the most out there, is this real kind of moment that we've ever had as part of our show."

"It really seemed like this is a movie. This is a movie plot. This is not something that happens in everyday life. We were just absolutely blown away by it," Lindsey said. "You speculate. What is this? What happened? Why didn't somebody come back and get this money? What's it doing in a wall? Why didn't somebody discover it before now?"

Lakewood Church did not confirm the plumber's account of what he found.

In a statement, Lakewood Church said an undisclosed amount of cash and checks were recently found during repair work but did not offer additional details about the discovery or whether it could be tied to the missing \$600,000.

"Lakewood immediately notified the Houston Police Department and is assisting them with their investigation. Lakewood has no further comment at this time," the church said in its brief statement.

In a statement Friday, Houston police said officers were called to the church on Nov. 10 after cash, checks and money orders were found inside a wall.

While the investigation continues, evidence from checks that were found suggests the money discovered in the wall is connected to the 2014 theft, police said.

The undisclosed amount of money found in the wall was inventoried and "left in the custody of Lakewood Church since it was property found on its premises," police said.

In March 2014, the church had reported the theft of \$200,000 in cash and \$400,000 in checks. The

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church had reported that the money and checks taken, as well as some envelopes with written credit card information, were limited to funds given during Saturday and Sunday services days before.

The church had said the stolen funds were fully insured.

Shortly after the burglary, a \$25,000 reward was offered for information on solving the theft. No arrests were made in the case.

Lindsey said the plumber should get some sort of reward for what he found.

About 43,500 people attend weekly services at Lakewood, making it the largest megachurch in the U.S., according to the Hartford Institute for Religion Research. Osteen's televised sermons reach about 100 countries.

Follow Juan A. Lozano on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/juanlozano70>

Biden signs stopgap funding bill to keep government running

By KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Friday signed into law the stopgap spending bill that will keep the federal government running through Feb. 18, after congressional leaders defused a partisan standoff over federal vaccine mandates.

The White House released a statement noting the bill signing and thanking congressional leaders for their work. Earlier in the day, Biden said it was worth praising bipartisanship, but "funding the government isn't a great achievement, it's the bare minimum of what needs to get done."

Both chambers of Congress passed the legislation Thursday avoiding a short-term shutdown of the government into the weekend. The bill keeps the federal government running for 11 more weeks, generally at current spending levels, while adding \$7 billion to aid Afghanistan evacuees.

"I am glad that in the end, cooler heads prevailed. The government will stay open and I thank the members of this chamber for walking us back from the brink of an avoidable, needless and costly shutdown," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

The Senate approved the measure by a vote of 69-28. Nineteen Republican senators joined with Democrats in voting for the measure.

The Democratic-led House passed the measure by a 221-212 vote. The Republican leadership urged members to vote no; the lone GOP vote for the bill came from Illinois Rep. Adam Kinzinger.

Lawmakers bemoaned the short-term fix and blamed the opposing party for the lack of progress on this year's spending bills. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, chair of the House Appropriations Committee, said the measure would, however, allow for negotiations on a package covering the full budget year through September.

Before the votes, Biden said he had spoken with Senate leaders and he played down fears of a shutdown: "There is a plan in place unless somebody decides to be totally erratic, and I don't think that will happen."

Some Republicans opposed to Biden's vaccine rules wanted Congress to take a hard stand against the mandated shots for workers at larger businesses, even if that meant shutting down federal offices over the weekend by refusing to expedite a final vote on the spending bill.

It was just the latest instance of the brinkmanship around government funding that has triggered several costly shutdowns and partial closures over the past two decades. The longest shutdown in history happened under President Donald Trump — 35 days stretching into January 2019, when Democrats refused to approve money for his U.S.-Mexico border wall. Both parties agree the stoppages are irresponsible, yet few deadlines pass without a late scramble to avoid them.

Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, said Democrats knew last month that several Republicans would use all means at their disposal to oppose legislation that funds or allows the enforcement of the employer vaccine mandate. He blamed Schumer for not negotiating and for ignoring their position.

Lee and Sen. Roger Marshall, R-Kan., authored an amendment that prohibited federal dollars from being spent to implement and enforce a series of vaccine mandates put in place by the Biden administration. The amendment went down to defeat with 48 yes votes and 50 no votes.

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Lee said millions were being forced to choose between an unwanted medical procedure and losing their job.

"Their jobs are being threatened by their own government," Lee said.

Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash., countered that the federal government should be using every tool to keep Americans safe and that is why the Biden administration has taken steps to urge employers to make sure their workers are fully vaccinated or test negative before they come to the workplace.

"No one wants to go to work and be worried they might come home to their family with a deadly virus," Murray said.

The White House sees the vaccinations as the quickest way to end a pandemic that has killed more than 780,000 people in the United States and is still evolving, as seen Wednesday with the country's first detected case of a troubling new variant.

Courts have knocked back against the mandates, including a ruling this week blocking enforcement of a requirement for some health care workers.

The administration has pursued vaccine requirements for several groups of workers, but the effort is facing legal setbacks.

A federal judge this week blocked the administration from enforcing a vaccine mandate on thousands of health care workers in 10 states. Earlier, a federal appeals court temporarily halted the OSHA requirement affecting employers with 100 or more workers.

The administration has also put in place policies requiring millions of federal employees and federal contractors, including military troops, to be fully vaccinated. Those efforts are also under challenge.

Polling from The Associated Press shows Americans are divided over Biden's effort to vaccinate workers, with Democrats overwhelmingly for it while most Republicans are against.

Some Republicans prefer an effort from Sen. Mike Braun, R-Ind., to vote to reject the administration's mandates in a congressional review action expected next week, separate from the funding fight.

Separately, some health care providers protested the stopgap spending measure. Hospitals say it does nothing to shield them from Medicare payment cuts scheduled to go into effect amid uncertainty about the new omicron variant.

Associated Press staff writer Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar contributed to this report.

AP Source: NSO Group spyware used to hack State employees

By ALAN SUDERMAN, ERIC TUCKER and FRANK BAJAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The phones of 11 U.S. State Department employees were hacked with spyware from Israel's NSO Group, the world's most infamous hacker-for-hire company, a person familiar with the matter said Friday.

The employees were all located in Uganda and included some foreign service officers, said the person, who was not authorized to speak publicly about an ongoing investigation. Some local Ugandan employees of the department appear to have been among the 11 hacked, the person said.

The hacking is the first known instance of NSO Group's trademark Pegasus spyware being used against U.S. government personnel.

It was not known what individual or entity used the NSO technology to hack into the accounts, or what information was sought.

"We have been acutely concerned that commercial spyware like NSO Group software poses a serious counterintelligence and security risk to U.S. personnel," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said at briefing Friday.

Senior researcher John Scott-Railton of Citizen Lab, the public-interest sleuths at the University of Toronto who have been tracking Pegasus infections for years, called the discovery a giant wake-up call for the U.S. government about diplomatic security.

"For years we have seen that diplomats around the world are among targets," he said, "and it looks like

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the message had to be brought home to the U.S. government in this very direct and unfortunate way. There is no exceptionalism when it comes to American phones in diplomats' pockets."

News of the hacks, which were first reported by Reuters, comes a month after the U.S. Commerce Department blacklisted NSO Group, barring U.S. technology from being used by the company. And Apple sued NSO Group last week seeking to effectively shut down its hacking of all iPhones and other Apple products, calling the Israeli company "amoral 21st century mercenaries."

The State Department employees were hacked on their iPhones, the person familiar with the matter said. NSO Group said in a statement that after being asked Thursday about the Ugandan phones "we immediately shut down all the customers potentially relevant to this case," but did not say who the customers were. The company said its spying technology is blocked from hacking phones based in the U.S. and is only sold to licensed customers.

If the allegations turn out to be true "they are a blunt violation" of contract terms and NSO Group "will take legal action against these customers," it added.

In announcing the lawsuit, Apple sent out notifications globally to people whose iPhones were hacked with Pegasus in countries ranging from El Salvador to Poland. The targeted State Department employees were among them.

Apple declined comment Friday on the Uganda hacks.

Marketed to governments for use solely against terrorists and criminals, Pegasus has been abused by NSO customers to spy on human rights activists, journalists and politicians from Saudi Arabia to Mexico, including such high-profile targets as the fiancée of Jamal Khashoggi, the Saudi journalist murdered in his country's consulate in Istanbul.

NSO Group has been broadly denounced for allowing such targeting, and its placement on the Commerce Department's "entity list" last month was the first time a company outside of China had been added over human rights violations, said Kevin Wolf, an attorney at Akin Gump and former top commerce official in the Obama administration.

Analysts wonder whether NSO Group can survive financially under such circumstances. Last week, Moody's downgraded NSO Group's financial outlook to negative, saying it risked defaulting on more than \$300 million in loans as a result of "high uncertainty" of its ability to sell new licenses. It said NSO Group, which is privately held, has about 750 employees with 60 customers in more than 35 countries.

The impact on companies blacklisted by the Commerce Department, about half of which are Chinese, is often far broader than barring them from using U.S. technology. Wolf said many companies choose to avoid doing business with them completely "in order to eliminate the risk of an inadvertent violation" and the legal costs of analyzing whether they can.

NSO Group was asked by The Associated Press prior to Friday's news whether it could survive as long as it is on the entity list. While not directly responding, it said it was "working on all appropriate channels to reverse the Department of Commerce's decision."

The company again claimed that it does not operate the Pegasus command-and-control system that remotely manages hacks "and has no access to the data collected by its customers." Cybersecurity researchers who have closely tracked NSO's spyware dispute that claim. They say NSO's government clients are incapable of running the online infrastructure and their sleuthing has confirmed centralized control of post-infection operations.

Apple's lawsuit added major heft to a Big Tech legal onslaught against NSO Group. Facebook sued it in 2019 for allegedly hacking its globally popular encrypted WhatsApp messaging app. Last month, a U.S. federal appeals court ruled that the case could go forward, rejecting NSO's claim it should be thrown out because it is a "sovereign entity."

Suderman reported from Richmond, Va., and Bajak from Boston. Josef Federman in Jerusalem contributed to this report.

Court mulls: Was Trump's reply to rape claim part of job?

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Federal appeals judges asked Friday whether a U.S. president's every remark is part of the job as they weighed whether former President Donald Trump can be held liable in a defamation case that concerns his response to a rape allegation.

Trump and the Justice Department say he was acting in his official capacity when he spoke to the media about writer E. Jean Carroll's accusation, so they want to swap the U.S. government in for Trump himself as the defendant in her defamation lawsuit.

The change might sound technical, but it could make a big difference. Federal law makes it difficult to sue U.S. government employees for job-related actions, and a law that sometimes allows such lawsuits specifically excludes libel and slander claims. That could keep Carroll's case from going forward if courts decide Trump was acting as a government worker.

A federal judge rejected that request in October. Friday's panel of 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals judges didn't give a clear indication of how, or when, they would rule.

But the judges floated multiple questions about private and public conduct for the commander-in-chief: Is everything a president says work-related? Does it become so if reporters are there?

Can saying that a woman is "not my type," as Trump did, be part of public service? Should presidents need to mind their language constantly for fear that losing their cool could cross a line into legal responsibility?

Trump's lawyer, Alina Habba, drew the line at "an unprovoked attack on a citizen" and said that wasn't what he did.

"He was on the defensive here" after Carroll went public in 2019 with her allegation that Trump raped her in the 1990s, Habba said. She argued that the claim essentially questioned his fitness for office.

"When somebody says he did a heinous crime 20 years ago, he needs to address it," she said.

But Carroll's lawyers say Trump's response went beyond any job obligation.

"A White House job is not a promise of an unlimited prerogative to brutalize someone who was a victim of a prior attack," attorney Joshua Matz told the court.

Carroll, a former longtime Elle magazine advice columnist, sued Trump in 2019, saying he slandered her in denying her allegation that he raped her in a New York City department store dressing room in the 1990s.

Trump said she was "totally lying" and was "not my type," among other remarks. He said they'd never met, dismissing a 1987 photo of the two and their then-spouses as a momentary encounter at a social event.

In the final months of the Republican's presidency, the Justice Department sought to replace him as defendant in Carroll's case. The department has maintained its position during Democratic President Joe Biden's administration.

Justice Department lawyer Mark Freeman told the appeals court Friday he wasn't out to "defend or justify" Trump's comments, calling them "crude and offensive."

"I'm here because any president facing a public accusation of this kind, with the media very interested, would feel obliged to answer questions from the public, answer questions from the media," Freeman said.

After the hearing, Carroll called on the appeals court to reject what she called a "dangerous strategy" from the government and Trump.

"In no world was Donald Trump upholding the office of the presidency when he claimed I was 'not his type' and called me a liar," she said in a statement. "His comments were personal attacks meant to punish me for daring to speak the truth."

Her lawsuit seeks a retraction and unspecified damages.

The Associated Press generally does not identify people who say they have been sexually assaulted unless they choose to tell their stories publicly, as Carroll has done.

Omicron-stricken South Africa may be glimpse into the future

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — Dr. Sikhulile Moyo was analyzing COVID-19 samples in his lab in Botswana last

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week when he noticed they looked startlingly different from others.

Within days, the world was ablaze with the news that the coronavirus had a new variant of concern — one that appears to be driving a dramatic surge in South Africa and offering a glimpse of where the pandemic might be headed.

New COVID-19 cases in South Africa have burgeoned from about 200 a day in mid-November to more than 16,000 on Friday. Omicron was detected over a week ago in the country's most populous province, Gauteng, and has since spread to all eight other provinces, Health Minister Joe Phaahla said.

Even with the rapid increase, infections are still below the 25,000 new daily cases that South Africa reported in the previous surge, in June and July.

Little is known about the new variant, but the spike in South Africa suggests it might be more contagious, said Moyo, the scientist who may have been the first to identify the new variant, though researchers in neighboring South Africa were close on his heels. Omicron has more than 50 mutations, and scientists have called it a big jump in the evolution of the virus.

It's not clear if the variant causes more serious illness or can evade the protection of vaccines. Phaahla noted that only a small number of people who have been vaccinated have gotten sick, mostly with mild cases, while the vast majority of those who have been hospitalized were not vaccinated.

But in a worrisome development, South African scientists reported that omicron appears more likely than earlier variants to cause reinfections among people who have already had a bout with COVID-19.

"Previous infection used to protect against delta, and now with omicron it doesn't seem to be the case," one of the researchers, Anne von Gottberg of the University of Witwatersrand, said at a World Health Organization briefing on Thursday.

While the study did not examine the protection offered by vaccination, von Gottberg said: "We believe that vaccines will still, however, protect against severe disease."

The findings, posted online Thursday, are preliminary and haven't yet undergone scientific review.

South Africa's hospitals are so far coping with the surge, even those in Gauteng province, which accounts for more than 70% of all new infections, Phaahla said.

The picture could change because most of those infected thus far have been younger people, who generally do not get as sick as older patients. But Moyo expressed hope that vaccines would continue to work against the variant.

"I have a lot of hope from the data that we see that those vaccinated should be able to have a lot of protection," he said.

That dovetails with what officials from WHO in Asia said Friday.

While warning that cases could well rise quickly because of omicron, Dr. Takeshi Kasai, WHO regional director for the Western Pacific, said the measures used against the delta variant — which itself caused surges the world over — should remain at the core of the response.

"The positive news in all of this is that none of the information we have currently about omicron suggests we need to change the directions of our response," Kasai said.

That means continuing to push for higher vaccination rates, abiding by social-distancing guidelines, and wearing masks, among other measures, said WHO Regional Emergency Director Dr. Babatunde Olowokure.

While more than three dozen countries worldwide have reported omicron infections, the numbers so far are small outside of South Africa. That has led many countries to race to impose travel restrictions on visitors from southern Africa — a move WHO officials said may buy some time, though the agency previously urged against the closing of borders.

The travel restrictions have been severely criticized by South Africa, which says it is being punished for being transparent and moving so quickly to alert the world to omicron. WHO said it was notified by the country on Nov. 24 about the new variant.

"What we must reemphasize is that while our scientists and those in Botswana were the first to discover and report on the variant, no one knows where it originated," Phaahla said.

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

Analysis: Why Rodgers got fined and 3 Bucs got suspended

By BARRY WILNER AP Pro Football Writer

Aaron Rodgers flaunts the NFL/NFLPA coronavirus protocols and gets a fine that barely shows up in his paycheck.

Antonio Brown and two others do the same and get three-game suspensions.

What gives?

It's complicated, but in some ways it's also pretty simple why the Packers quarterback was fined \$14,650, a sum negotiated between the league and the players' union while developing the COVID-19 protocols. And why Brown, teammate Mike Edwards and former Buccaneers player John Franklin III took a much bigger hit for falsifying vaccination documents.

Rodgers was fined for not wearing a mask in some instances, at a Halloween party and during press conferences. A joint investigation by the NFL and union revealed that he was wearing a mask at other points and complied with the protocols.

Rodgers did mislead the public and the media, but he informed the club — which told the NFL — and his teammates of his status. Indeed, everyone in his ecosystem was aware he was not vaccinated, and he was testing for COVID-19 daily, and social distancing at the team facility. It was those exceptions when he did not do so that led to the fine.

The Packers were nailed for \$300,000 for their lack of oversight in the Rodgers case. Whether that indicates complicity by the organization is a matter of debate.

Tampa Bay was not fined, though it loses an important defensive back in Edwards for part of the stretch run, and doesn't have Brown, who has missed the last five games with an ankle injury. He also sat out the Bucs' Week 3 loss to the Los Angeles Rams after testing positive for COVID-19.

The actions of Brown, Edwards and Franklin began during the summer and, according to a person familiar with the case, "were acting like they were vaccinated when they were not." The person spoke on condition of anonymity because the players' specific violations have not been announced.

"The league wanted to make an example of these three," the person said, "and wanted to suspend them six to eight games and they settled on three."

The agreement was the players would take the three-game suspensions for repeated protocol violations, not appeal, and there would be no public statements about the fake vaccination cards.

Another person with direct knowledge of the case told The Associated Press that all three players now are vaccinated.

"These players put all of their people at risk, and themselves and family members, their teammates and team personnel," the person said, also speaking on condition of anonymity. "They were not wearing masks when they (needed to) and were not tested every day, acting as if they were vaccinated."

All 32 NFL teams were visited during training camp last summer and advised of the updated COVID-19 protocols. As early as July 22 the league made a presentation to the clubs to be on the lookout for fake vaccination cards, and noted to the teams the potential for that to happen based on media reports of people buying fake cards. The NFL even placed within the slide presentation the logo of the FBI, stressing that acquiring and using a fake vaccination card is a law enforcement issue that could lead to jail time.

And the players' association made sure all of its members were aware that they actually falsified a federal document if they had a bogus vaccination document.

However, the protocols do not outline discipline for such a violation. Thus, the negotiations between the league and union that resulted in the three-game dockings.

There has been speculation that Brown's history of misconduct, which includes an eight-game suspension in 2020 for violating the NFL's personal conduct policy, resulted in stiffer discipline. Both the league and union have insisted that is not the case.

The Brown/Edwards/Franklin case is the first disciplinary action with suspensions, and was announced through a joint statement by the NFL and NFLPA, reflecting the seriousness both take with the protocols.

Will there be more such scenarios? With about 95% of NFL players vaccinated — and providing valid and

verified proof — the numbers say that's not likely. By handing down relatively major penalties for such violations, both the league and union hope a loud message has been sent.

Still, imagine if that message has not been heard or heeded, and one or more star players receive suspensions when playoff time rolls around in six weeks.

More AP NFL coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/nfl> and https://twitter.com/AP_NFL

The AP Interview: Scientist says omicron was a group find

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — The Botswana scientist who may well have discovered the omicron variant of the coronavirus says he has been on a "rollercoaster of emotions," with the pride of accomplishment followed by dismay over the travel bans immediately slapped on southern African countries.

"Is that how you reward science? By blacklisting countries?" Dr. Sikhulile Moyo, a virologist at the Botswana Harvard AIDS Institute Partnership, said in an interview Thursday night with The Associated Press.

"The virus does not know passports, it does not know borders," he added. "We should not do geopolitics about the virus. ... We should be collaborating and understanding."

Moyo was doing genomic sequencing of COVID-19 samples at his lab in Botswana two weeks ago and noticed three cases that seemed dramatically different, with an unusual pattern showing multiple mutations. He continued studying the results and by early last week, decided to publicly release the data on the internet.

Soon scientists in South Africa said they had made the same findings. And an identical case in Hong Kong was also identified.

A new coronavirus variant had been discovered, and soon the World Health Organization named it omicron. It has now been identified in 38 countries and counting, including much of Western Europe and the United States. And the U.S. and many other nations have imposed flight restrictions to try to contain the emerging threat.

Speaking from his lab in Gaborone, Botswana's capital, Moyo bristled at being described as the man who first identified omicron.

"Scientists should work together and the 'who first did that' syndrome should go. We should all be able to be proud that we all contributed in one way or the other," said the 48-year-old scientist.

In fact, he noted that the variant was found to be something entirely new only by comparing it to other viruses online in a public database shared by scientists.

"The only way you can really see that you see something new is when you compare with millions of sequences. That's why you deposit it online," he said.

The Zimbabwe-born Moyo — who is also a research associate at Harvard's school of public health, a married father of three, and a gospel singer — expressed pride in the way he and his international colleagues were transparent about their findings and sounded the alarm to the rest of the world.

"We're excited that we probably gave a warning signal that may have averted many deaths and many infections," he said.

Omicron startled scientists because it had more than 50 mutations.

"It is a big jump in the evolution of the virus and has many more mutations that we expected," said Tulio de Oliveira, director of the Center for Epidemic Response and Innovation in South Africa, who taught Moyo when he was earning his Ph.D. in virology from South Africa's Stellenbosch University.

Little is known about the variant, and the world is watching nervously. It's not clear if it makes people more seriously ill or can evade the vaccine. But early evidence suggests it might be more contagious and more efficient at re-infecting people who have had a bout with COVID-19.

In the coming weeks, labs around the world will be working to find out what to expect from omicron and just how dangerous it is.

"What is important is collaboration and contribution," Moyo said. "I think we should value that kind of

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collaboration because it will generate great science and great contributions. We need each other, and that's the most important."

South Africa is seeing a dramatic surge in infections that may be driven by omicron. The country reported more than 16,000 new COVID-19 cases Friday, up from about 200 per day in mid-November.

The number of omicron cases confirmed by genetic sequencing in Botswana has grown to 19, while South Africa has recorded more than 200. So far, most of the cases are in people who did not get vaccinated.

"I have a lot of hope from the data that we see, that those vaccinated should be able to have a lot of protection," Moyo said. "We should try to encourage as many people to get vaccinated as possible."

Moyo warned that the world "must go to a mirror and look at themselves" and make sure Africa's 1.3 billion people are not left behind in the vaccination drive.

He credited earlier research and investment into fighting HIV and AIDS with building Botswana's capacity for doing genetic sequencing. That made it easier for researchers to switch to working on the coronavirus, he said.

Amid the COVID-19 crisis, Moyo finds some cause for optimism.

"What gives me hope is that the world is now speaking the same language," said Moyo, explaining that the pandemic has seen a new global commitment to scientific research and surveillance.

He added that the pandemic has also been a wake-up call for Africa.

"I think our policymakers have realized the importance of science, the importance of research," Moyo said. "I think COVID has magnified, has made us realize that we need to focus on things that are important and invest in our health systems, invest in our primary health care."

He added: "I think it's a great lesson for humanity."

Rich? Want to be a U.S. senator? Welcome to Pennsylvania!

By MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — Rich, Republican and want to be a U.S. senator?

Pennsylvania might as well hang a welcome sign.

The presidential battleground state's high-stakes race for an open Senate seat is seeing candidates with big bank accounts and big-time connections exchanging their blue-state mansions for decidedly purple Pennsylvania, and pursuing an opportunity they might never have at home.

Introducing Carla Sands, Mehmet Oz — best known as the host of TV's "Dr. Oz Show" — and David McCormick, all three of whom seem prepared to spend millions of their own dollars to win a Senate seat.

Their arrival seems to be a testament to Republican optimism about winning in Pennsylvania, a bellwether state and one of the nation's biggest presidential electoral prizes, backing Democrat Joe Biden in last year's election and former President Donald Trump in 2016.

It's also a test in an increasingly nationalized political environment of whether voters care about how deeply their representatives are tied to the state — or whether carpetbagging will be a pivotal issue in next year's contest to replace retiring two-term Republican U.S. Sen. Pat Toomey.

"Every candidate comes with assets and liabilities," said Charlie Dent, a former seven-term congressman from the Allentown area. "The question is, how big a liability it is and, at the end of the day, will it matter to voters more than any other issue?"

But, Dent said, "every one of those candidates will be doing everything they can to prove their Pennsylvania bonafides. They'll spend a lot of time talking about their roots in Pennsylvania."

The race is wide open, and has attracted Democratic contestants who have far more electoral experience than the Republican field. They include John Fetterman, the state's lieutenant governor, and third-term U.S. Rep. Conor Lamb of suburban Pittsburgh.

For Republicans looking for a homer, they've got a few options.

A super PAC that supports one candidate, real estate investor Jeff Bartos, suggests the recent arrivals are treating Toomey's seat like an "at-large" seat, not a Pennsylvania seat.

"These candidates are opportunists and elitist members of the ruling class, swooping in to a state they

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couldn't be bothered to live in and don't know," said spokesperson David Abrams.

Still, the state Republican Party isn't turning up its nose.

In a statement, chairman Lawrence Tabas said Republican candidates are emerging because electoral successes in 2021 "signal mass sobriety about the toxicity of Democrat leadership."

Legally, they seem on solid ground.

To serve as a senator, a constitutional qualification is to be an inhabitant of the state when elected, but it's a loose requirement.

The Senate has previously decided that someone elected to it must have some sort of residence in the state or at least an intention to establish a residence there, according to a Congressional Research Service analysis in 2015.

Sands, 61, a Pennsylvania native, spent the majority of the last four decades in California before taking a post as Trump's ambassador to Denmark and selling her homes in Malibu and Bel Air.

She returned to the U.S. in early 2021, rented a condo overlooking the Susquehanna River with views of the state Capitol and began campaigning.

Oz, 61, gave a jolt to the race this week, declaring his candidacy and bringing unrivaled wealth and name recognition to the contest.

The longtime resident of Cliffside Park, New Jersey, claims he moved to Pennsylvania a year earlier, renting his in-laws' home in suburban Philadelphia.

However, his social media posts from the past year are full of photos of him in his Cliffside Park home overlooking the Hudson River across from Manhattan, where he practices medicine and films his TV show.

A campaign aide has not answered questions about whether Oz actually sleeps at his in-laws' home in suburban Philadelphia — where he is registered to vote — and makes the long commute to work in New York City.

Born in Cleveland, Oz's main claim to Pennsylvania is that he went to medical school at the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. He married a Pennsylvania native, and had his first two children there before moving to New Jersey.

In his pitch to Pennsylvania GOP officials, Oz stresses how he spent part of his boyhood in Wilmington, Delaware, often traveling across the nearby Pennsylvania line, not far from Philadelphia.

He's already got the endorsement of one member of Congress, Rep. Guy Reschenthaler from southwestern Pennsylvania, and the GOP chairman of a big county came away impressed after speaking with Oz.

"This is not a vanity play for him, he really understands the issues," Allegheny County Republican Party chair Sam DeMarco said.

McCormick, a Pennsylvania native, has not declared his candidacy or even spoken publicly about it. But he is meeting with Republican Party officials this week and next and bought a house near Pittsburgh, advisers say.

McCormick, 56, is the son of a former chancellor of the state university system, and grew up in Pennsylvania before leaving to attend West Point and serve in the Gulf War.

He spent some years in business in Pittsburgh before he left again in 2005 to take high-level jobs with the administration of then-President George W. Bush.

For more than a decade, he has lived in Connecticut, where he is CEO of one of the world's largest hedge funds, Westport-based Bridgewater Associates.

Carpetbagger accusations have trickled into races in Pennsylvania in the past, but not like this, said party officials and campaign veterans.

"I've certainly never seen anything like this," said Dave Ball, the chairman of the Washington County Republican Party.

As Ball and other Republicans take stock of the field, the intramural digs are starting.

U.S. Rep. Dan Meuser, who plans to endorse McCormick should he enter the race, took to Twitter to play up McCormick as a "great American who grew up in my district. Dave would be an America First/PA First Senator for and FROM PENNSYLVANIA!!"

In an interview, Meuser complained that Oz "is just coming in literally out of nowhere. I think Oz wants to be U.S. senator, but not a U.S. senator from Pennsylvania."

Follow Marc Levy on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/timelywriter>.

Struggling Chinese developer warns it could run out of money

By JOE McDONALD AP Business Writer

BEIJING (AP) — A Chinese developer that is struggling under \$310 billion in debt warned Friday it may run out of money to "perform its financial obligations" — sending regulators scrambling to reassure investors that China's financial markets can be protected from a potential impact.

Evergrande Group's struggle to comply with official pressure to reduce debt has fueled anxiety that a possible default might trigger a financial crisis. Economists say global markets are unlikely to be affected but banks and bondholders might suffer because Beijing wants to avoid a bailout.

After reviewing Evergrande's finances, "there is no guarantee that the Group will have sufficient funds to continue to perform its financial obligations," the company said in a statement through the Hong Kong Stock Exchange.

Shortly after that, regulators tried to soothe investor fears by issuing statements saying China's financial system was strong and that default rates are low. They said most developers are financially healthy and that Beijing will keep lending markets functioning.

"The spillover impact of the group's risk events on the stable operation of the capital market is controllable," the China Securities Regulatory Commission said on its website. The central bank and bank regulator issued similar statements.

Beijing tightened restrictions on developers' use of borrowed money last year in a campaign to rein in surging corporate debt that is seen as a threat to economic stability.

The ruling Communist Party has made reducing financial risk a priority since 2018. In 2014, authorities allowed the first corporate bond default since the 1949 communist revolution. Defaults have gradually been allowed to increase in hopes of forcing borrowers and investors to be more disciplined.

Despite that, total corporate, government and household debt rose from the equivalent of 270% of annual economic output in 2018 to nearly 300% last year, unusually high for a middle-income country. Economists say a financial crisis is unlikely but debt could drag on economic growth.

Evergrande, the global real estate industry's biggest debtor, owes 2 trillion yuan (\$310 billion), mostly to domestic banks and bond investors. It also owes \$19 billion to foreign bondholders.

Evergrande said it has 2.3 trillion yuan (\$350 billion) in assets, but the company has struggled to turn that into cash to pay bondholders and other creditors. It called off the \$2.6 billion sale of a stake in a subsidiary last October because the buyer failed to follow through on its purchase.

Evergrande's statement Friday said the company faces a demand to fulfill a \$260 million obligation. It said if that obligation cannot be met, other creditors might demand repayment of debts earlier than normal.

The company has missed deadlines to pay interest on some bonds but made payments before a grace period ended and was declared in default. Evergrande also said some bondholders can choose to be paid by receiving apartments that are under construction.

The Evergrande chairman, Xu Jiayin, was summoned to meet Friday with officials of its home province of Guangdong, a government statement said. The statement said a government team would be sent to Evergrande headquarters to help oversee risk management.

Evergrande's struggle has prompted warnings that a financial squeeze on real estate — an industry that propelled China's explosive 1998-2008 economic boom — could lead to trouble for banks and an abrupt and politically dangerous collapse in growth.

Also Friday, another developer, Kaisa Group Holdings Ltd., warned it might fail to pay off a \$400 million bond due next week.

A midsize developer, Fantasia Holdings Group, announced Oct. 5 that it failed to make a \$205.7 million

payment due to bondholders.

Hundreds of smaller Chinese developers have gone bankrupt since regulators began tightening control over the industry's finances in 2017.

The slowdown in construction helped to depress China's economic growth an unexpectedly low 4.9% over a year earlier in the three months ending in September. Forecasters expect growth to decelerate further if the financing curbs stay in place.

US jobless rate sinks to 4.2% as many more people find jobs

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — America's unemployment rate tumbled last month to its lowest point since the pandemic struck, even as employers appeared to slow their hiring — a mixed picture that pointed to a resilient economy that's putting more people to work.

The government reported Friday that businesses and other employers added just 210,000 jobs in November, the weakest monthly gain in nearly a year and less than half of October's increase of 546,000.

But other data from the Labor Department's report painted a brighter picture. The unemployment rate plummeted from 4.6% to 4.2% as a substantial 1.1 million Americans said they found jobs last month.

The U.S. economy still remains under threat from a spike in inflation, shortages of labor and supplies and the potential impact of the omicron variant of the coronavirus. But for now, Americans are spending freely, and the economy is forecast to expand at a 7% annual rate in the final three months of the year, a sharp rebound from the 2.1% pace in the previous quarter, when the delta variant hobbled growth.

Employers in some industries, such as restaurants, bars, and hotels, pulled back on hiring in November. By contrast, job growth remained solid in areas like transportation and warehousing, which are benefiting from the growth of online commerce.

The fall in the unemployment rate was particularly encouraging because it coincided with an influx of a half-million job-seekers into the labor force, most of whom quickly found work. Normally, many such people would take time to find jobs and would be counted as unemployed until they did. The influx of new job-seekers, if it continues, would help reduce the labor shortages that have bedeviled many employers since the economy began to recover from the pandemic.

"That's good news for job seekers and workers, and for businesses too," said Julia Pollak, chief economist at online jobs site ZipRecruiter. "It looks like the supply constraints are easing a bit with the unemployment rate low and wage growth high" — two factors that often encourage people to search for work.

November's report reflects a divergence in two surveys that the government conducts each month. The unemployment rate is calculated from a survey of households. For last month, this survey found that 1.1 million more people reported that they were employed. A separate survey of employers, called the payroll survey, reported just 210,000 added jobs.

Though the results of the two surveys typically match up over the long run, they can differ sharply in any one month. For November, economists noted that the big employment gain in the household survey brought that figure in line with the larger increases in the payroll survey during previous months.

The hiring gains in the payroll survey have also been revised up substantially in recent months, and some economists suggested that this will likely happen again in coming months.

"My sense is the household estimate is closer to the truth around what is happening in the jobs market and ... should anticipate a significant upward revision to the November data next month," said Joseph Brusuelas, an economist at RSM, a tax and advisory firm.

The household survey also captures self-employed and gig workers, whose ranks have grown steadily since the pandemic struck, unlike the payroll survey. Some economists attribute part of the nation's labor shortage to an increase in people who have recently gone to work for themselves.

Among them is Daniel Nolan of Raleigh, North Carolina. Like millions of other Americans, Nolan, 36, had his life and work upended by COVID-19. His 9-year old son was in virtual school at the outset of the pandemic. And his father-in-law, ill with cancer, moved in with his family, prompting Nolan to leave his job

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as a software engineer at a private equity firm.

Nolan expected this period to last only a few months. But when he began looking for work again, the job offers he got weren't what he was looking for. So in August, he decided to strike out on his own.

So far, Nolan said, he's earning roughly the same income that he did before. He plans to keep consulting for at least two more years — and may never return to a corporate job.

"I'm able to make at least as much as I was making at my previous job and still have the flexibility of being a consultant," he said.

Friday's report showed that the number of unemployed Americans sank in November to 6.9 million, compared with the pre-pandemic number of 5.7 million. And average wages, which have been rising as employers try to attract or keep workers, increased a strong 4.8% from a year ago.

For months, employers have been struggling with worker shortages because many people who lost jobs in the pandemic have not, for various reasons, returned to the workforce. But last month, nearly 600,000 people came off the sidelines to look for jobs and were generally hired quickly. The government classifies people as unemployed only if they're actively seeking work.

As a result, the proportion of Americans who are in the workforce rose from 61.6% to 61.8%, the first significant increase since April. If that much-anticipated development continues, it could point to stronger job growth ahead.

Even as the jobless rate has steadily declined this year, the proportion of Americans who are working or searching for jobs has barely budged, at least until this month. A shortage of job-seekers tends to limit hiring and force companies to pay more to attract and keep employees. Higher pay can help sustain spending and growth. But it can also feed inflation if businesses raise prices to offset their higher labor costs, which they often do.

Whether or not the increase in job-seekers continues is a critical question for the Federal Reserve. If the proportion of people in the workforce doesn't rise much, it would suggest that the Fed is nearing its goal of maximum employment.

With inflation at a three-decade high and far above the Fed's 2% annual target, reaching its employment mandate would heighten pressure on Chair Jerome Powell to raise interest rates sooner rather than later. Doing so would make loans more expensive for many individuals and businesses.

President Joe Biden on Friday highlighted the drop in the unemployment rate, which he called "an extraordinary bit of progress." Still, the slowdown in job growth, if it persists, will pose a challenge for Biden, who has received poor marks in a handful of public opinion polls for how he has handled the economy.

Though most indicators show the economy remains on the rebound, White House aides have privately expressed frustration that the president hasn't earned credit for the improvement and instead is facing criticism over the spike in inflation and gas prices that have burdened Americans in recent months.

The government's survey of businesses suggested that some employers were more cautious about hiring last month. Restaurants, bars and hotels added just 23,000 jobs, down from 170,000 in October. That could reflect the effects of an uptick in COVID-19 cases last month and a reduction in outdoor dining.

Retailers cut 20,000 jobs, a sign that holiday hiring hasn't been as strong as in previous years. But transportation and warehousing firms added 50,000 positions, which indicates that online retailers and shippers anticipate healthy online shopping.

Jeff Crivello, CEO of BBQ Holdings, which owns about 300 restaurants, said that for him, hiring has become a little easier in recent months. None of his restaurants are now closing early because of staff shortages. But it's still a struggle. The company hired more than 300 people in November yet still has about 500 open jobs.

"The pandemic," Crivello said, "ushered in a seismic shift in consumer behavior and demand and the desires of the workforce."

His company has raised average hourly pay 15% since the pandemic struck but is competing with the new opportunities that many restaurant workers have, including higher-paying jobs at warehouses or in trucking. Many younger workers, Crivello said, are finding jobs in the cannabis industry or in gaming or even making money building followings on social media.

The jobs outlook for the coming months has become hazier with the emergence of the omicron variant. Little is definitively known about omicron, and widespread business shutdowns are considered unlikely. Still, omicron could discourage some Americans from traveling, shopping and eating out in the coming months and potentially slow the economy.

AP Writers Mae Anderson in New York and Alexandra Jaffe in Washington contributed to this report.

Mostly white jury seated for trial in Daunte Wright's death

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A mostly white jury was seated Friday for the trial of a white suburban Minneapolis police officer who said she drew her handgun by mistake when she fatally shot Black motorist Daunte Wright following a traffic stop.

Nine of the first 12 jurors seated for Kim Potter's trial are white — roughly in line with the demographics of surrounding Hennepin County, but notably less diverse than the jury that convicted former Minneapolis Officer Derek Chauvin this spring in the death of George Floyd.

Potter, 49, is charged with first- and second-degree manslaughter in the April 11 shooting in the suburb of Brooklyn Center. Opening statements are scheduled for Wednesday.

Legal experts have said juries that are diverse by race, gender and economic background are necessary to minimize bias in the legal system.

The Chauvin jury that was split 50-50 between whites and people of color was "mostly just luck of the draw," said Ted Sampsell-Jones, a professor at Mitchell Hamline School of Law in St. Paul.

He said racial and ethnic diversity matters in terms of the perceived legitimacy of the jury, but attitudes about police and policing are much more important for the case outcome.

"It might be true in general that Black people are more distrustful of police than white people, but it isn't true as to every individual," Sampsell-Jones said. "Lots of young white people in Hennepin County are far more progressive and anti-cop than some older Black people, for example."

Alan Tuerkheimer, a Chicago-based jury consultant, said even a single juror of color can be enough to change the dynamics of deliberations by bringing more depth and another viewpoint to the process.

Potter has said she meant to use her Taser on Wright after he tried to drive away from officers while they were trying to arrest him, but that she grabbed her handgun instead. Her body camera recorded the shooting.

Of the first 12 jurors seated — the ones who will deliberate if no alternates are needed — one juror identifies as Black and two as Asian. The panel is evenly split between men and women. The two alternates are also white.

The jury roughly matches the demographics of Hennepin County, which is about 74% white.

Attorneys and the judge spent considerable time probing potential jurors for their views of protests against police brutality, which were frequent in Minneapolis even before George Floyd's death.

Questionnaires asked about attitudes toward police, including whether officers should be second-guessed, whether they get the respect they deserve and whether jurors personally trust them.

Juror No. 11, for example, said she "somewhat agreed" that officers should not be second-guessed.

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

She was seated after saying she could set that view aside and consider evidence.

Several jurors strongly disagreed that it's unreasonable to question officers' actions. Juror No. 19, the only Black person on the jury, wondered how Potter could show such a "lapse in judgment" with her experience.

"This is a servitude job, and when you get into this position, you need to understand that it's a tough job and so you have to maintain that level of professionalism when you get into that position," she said of police officers in general.

Potter, who resigned two days after Wright's death, has told the court she will testify. Body-camera

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video recorded the shooting, with Potter heard saying, "Taser, Taser, Taser" before she fired, followed by, "I grabbed the wrong (expletive) gun."

Wright, 20, was shot as Chauvin was standing trial 10 miles (16 kilometers) away for killing Floyd. Wright's death sparked several nights of intense protests in the suburb.

The most serious charge against Potter 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 on the second-degree one. Prosecutors have said they would seek a longer sentence.

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

Virginia GOP completes sweep of elections with House win

By BEN FINLEY Associated Press

VIRGINIA BEACH, Va. (AP) — A three-judge panel overseeing a recount in a close Virginia state House race upheld the Republican candidate's victory on Friday, a decision that also reaffirms the GOP's takeover of the chamber and completes the party's sweep of last month's elections.

Republicans also claimed the statewide offices of governor, lieutenant governor and attorney general in the Nov. 2 balloting. Those wins were a dramatic turnaround in a state where the GOP had not won a statewide race since 2009. Democrats still hold a 21-19 majority in the Senate — where elections won't be held until 2023 — splitting control of Virginia's state legislature.

The certified results from the election showed Republicans leading in 52 districts and the Democrats leading in 48. The recount in the 85th District race resulted in Democratic incumbent Alex Askew gaining 12 votes, but he still trailed Republican challenger Karen Greenhalgh by 115 votes. There was one contested ballot. The panel found that the intent of the voter was unclear, so that ballot was not counted for either candidate. The 85th District covers a portion of the city of Virginia Beach.

After Democrats requested recounts in two races with razor-thin margins, that left open the remote possibility of a 50-50 split.

Though the second recount, in the 91st District, is still expected to proceed next week, Democrats no longer have a shot at undoing the GOP's majority. Askew is an incumbent freshman first elected in 2019, when Democrats flipped both the House and Senate.

After the recount results were announced, Askew thanked his supporters, campaign staff and volunteers. "While this is not the outcome we hoped for, I continue to be filled with optimism for the future of our Commonwealth and of the city of Virginia Beach," he said in a statement.

House Republicans — who won 52 districts, according to the certified results — had said they were confident their candidates' leads would hold.

"With only one recount outstanding, House Republicans are excited to begin working for the people of Virginia. Now that the majority is official, we can move forward with a timely transition as to be prepared to work on day one," Speaker-designee Todd Gilbert said in a statement after the results were announced.

Outgoing House Speaker Eileen Filler-Corn praised Askew for his work in the House and congratulated Greenhalgh on her victory.

"While the results of the recount did not change the initial outcome of the election, it was a necessary step to ensuring faith in our Democratic process. And a similar, necessary process to ensure every vote is counted will occur next week in House District 91," Filler-Corn said in a statement.

Minnesota is the only other state with Democrats and Republicans splitting control of legislative chambers. In Alaska, Republicans have the majority in both chambers, but the state House is controlled by a coalition of Democrats, independents and two Republicans. Nebraska has just a single state legislative chamber.

Throughout the day Thursday and into Friday, people packed into a room in the second floor of an elections building in Virginia Beach as the ballots were fed into two scanning machines. Groups of people sat at tables and scrutinized any ballots that were determined by the machines to have write-in candidates,

were not clearly marked or had some other issue.

There were no discussions or arguments during the hearing about who the winner of the race would be. Once the panel of judges ruled that the contested ballot — which had both bubbles filled in for the candidates but a slash through Greenhalgh's name — was too unclear to be counted, they called for a tally of the votes from the registrar's office. Virginia Beach Chief Circuit Court Judge Leslie Lilley then quickly found that Greenhalgh would be the 85th District's next delegate.

Associated Press writer Denise Lavoie in Richmond, Virginia, contributed to this report.

Famously soggy Seattle sees its wettest fall on record

By MANUEL VALDES Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — Seattle, a city known for soggy weather, has seen its wettest fall on record.

The National Weather Service says 19.04 inches (48.4 centimeters) of rain fell between Sept. 1 and Nov. 30, breaking a record set in 2006.

A series of wet storms caused by so-called "atmospheric rivers" pounded the Pacific Northwest, causing widespread flooding and damage. Atmospheric rivers are huge plumes of moisture over the Pacific that carry water from oceans onto land.

"It's really been incredible for Seattle. I think what's really been interesting is that we have just had atmospheric river after atmospheric river after atmospheric river, which is something that you usually don't see even in a very wet place like Seattle," said Justin Shaw, who runs the Seattle Weather Blog.

Areas north of Seattle were hit especially hard. The city of Bellingham recorded 23.55 inches (59.8 centimeters) of rain from Sept. 1 to Nov. 30, 6.5 inches (16.5 centimeters) more than the previous high. Officials have said damages from November flooding in Whatcom County, which includes Bellingham, could reach as high as \$50 million.

The record rain comes after the region saw record breaking heat earlier this year. Scientists say these extreme weather events will be more frequent with climate change worsening.

"We know that climate change makes those kinds of extreme events both more likely to happen and more severe," said Meade Krosby, a climate adaptation scientist at the Climate Impact Group of the University of Washington.

Suspect's parents charged in Michigan school shooting

By COREY WILLIAMS and ED WHITE Associated Press

OXFORD TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — A prosecutor filed involuntary manslaughter charges Friday against the parents of a 15-year-old accused of killing four students and wounding seven other people at a Michigan High School.

James and Jennifer Crumbley were charged with four counts each of involuntary manslaughter.

Authorities have said Ethan Crumbley opened fire shortly before 1 p.m. Tuesday at Oxford High School, roughly 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Detroit. Seven students and a teacher were shot before Crumbley surrendered to sheriff's deputies.

Three of the students died Tuesday. The fourth died Wednesday at a hospital.

The semi-automatic gun used in the shooting was purchased legally by Crumbley's father last week, according to investigators.

"The parents were the only individuals in the position to know the access to weapons," Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald said Thursday. The gun "seems to have been just freely available to that individual."

She said then that the parents' actions went "far beyond negligence."

Ethan Crumbley has been charged as an adult with two dozen crimes, including murder, attempted murder and terrorism.

THIS IS A BREAKING NEWS UPDATE. AP's earlier story is below:

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A prosecutor on Thursday repeated her criticism of the parents of a boy who is accused of killing four students at a Michigan school, saying their actions went "far beyond negligence" and that a charging decision would come by Friday.

"The parents were the only individuals in the position to know the access to weapons," Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald said. The gun "seems to have been just freely available to that individual."

Ethan Crumbley, 15, has been charged as an adult with two dozen crimes, including murder, attempted murder and terrorism, for a shooting Tuesday at Oxford High School in Oakland County, roughly 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Detroit.

Four students were killed and seven more people were injured, including a student who remained in critical condition.

The semi-automatic gun was purchased legally by Crumbley's father last week, according to investigators. Parents in the U.S. are rarely charged in school shootings involving their children, even as most minors get guns from a parent or relative's house, according to experts.

There's no Michigan law that requires gun owners keep weapons locked away from children. McDonald, however, suggested there's more to build a case on.

"All I can say at this point is those actions on mom and dad's behalf go far beyond negligence," she told WJR-AM. "We obviously are prosecuting the shooter to the fullest extent. ... There are other individuals who should be held accountable."

Later at a news conference, McDonald said she hoped to have an announcement "in the next 24 hours." She had firmly signaled that Crumbley's parents were under scrutiny when she filed charges against their son Wednesday.

Jennifer and James Crumbley did not return a message left by The Associated Press.

Sheriff Mike Bouchard disclosed Wednesday that the parents met with school officials about their son's classroom behavior, just a few hours before the shooting.

McDonald said information about what had troubled the school "will most likely come to light soon."

Crumbley stayed in school Tuesday and later emerged from a bathroom with a gun, firing at students in the hallway, police said.

"I just can't get to a space right now to blame anybody who worked at that school. They were terrorized," McDonald said.

"Should there have been different decisions made?" she said when asked about keeping the teen in school. "Probably they will come to that conclusion. ... Again, I have not seen anything that would make me think that there's criminal culpability. It's a terrible, terrible tragedy."

The Oxford school district hasn't commented on the meeting with Crumbley's parents before the shooting.

William Swor, a defense lawyer who is not involved in the case, said charging the parents would require a "very fact-intensive investigation."

"What did they know and when did they know it?" Swor said. "What advance information did they have about all these things? Did they know anything about his attitude, things of that nature. You're talking about a very heavy burden to bring on the parents."

Just over half of U.S. states have child access prevention laws related to guns, but they vary widely. Gun control advocates say the laws are often not enforced and the penalties are weak.

"Our laws haven't really adapted to the reality of school shootings and the closest we have are these child access prevention laws," said Kris Brown, president of the Brady gun control advocacy group.

In 2000, a Flint-area man pleaded no contest to involuntary manslaughter and was sentenced to two years in prison. A 6-year-old boy who was living with him had found a gun in a shoebox and killed a classmate at school.

In 2020, the mother of an Indiana teen was placed on probation for failing to remove guns from her home after her mentally ill son threatened to kill students. He fired shots inside his school in 2018. No one was injured but the boy killed himself.

In Texas, the parents of a student who was accused of killing 10 people at a school in 2018 have been sued over his access to guns.

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Meanwhile, dozens of schools in southeastern Michigan canceled classes Thursday due to concerns about threatening messages on social media following the Oxford shooting. Some schools stayed open with a larger police presence.

Bouchard said no threats in Oakland County were found to be credible. Just to the north in Genesee County, a Flint teenager was charged with making a false threat when she recorded a video while riding a school bus and posted it online.

"If you're making threats, we're going to find you," Bouchard said. "It is ridiculous you're inflaming the fears of parents, teachers in the community in the midst of a real tragedy."

AP reporters Kathleen Foody and Sophia Tareen in Chicago contributed to this story.

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

The Associated Press undefined

Kyle Rittenhouse did not sue LeBron James for defamation

CLAIM: Federal magistrate approved Kyle Rittenhouse's \$110 Million defamation suit against LeBron James.

THE FACTS: No such ruling was made. Rittenhouse has not filed a defamation suit against the Los Angeles Lakers star or anyone else, his spokesperson told The Associated Press. After 18-year-old Rittenhouse was acquitted of homicide charges in connection with the shooting of three people at a protest in Wisconsin, posts emerged on social media suggesting that he had filed defamation suits against some high-profile celebrities, including James. However, the claims are "absolutely not true," according to David Hancock, a spokesperson for Rittenhouse and his family. "No legal actions have been taken against any organization or person in particular," Hancock told the AP. He added that Rittenhouse and his legal team are not currently discussing any plans to file any defamation lawsuits. The report appeared to have originated on a satire website. Similar claims saying Rittenhouse had filed defamation suits have circulated on social media in recent days. On Sunday, the AP reported on false claims saying he had filed lawsuits against CNN, along with Whoopi Goldberg and Joy Behar, both hosts of "The View." Rittenhouse fatally shot two men and injured another during protests that followed the shooting of a Black man, Jacob Blake, by a white police officer, in Kenosha, Wisconsin. Rittenhouse, who faced charges, including first-degree intentional homicide and attempted first-degree homicide, argued he acted in self-defense. A jury acquitted him on all charges on Nov. 19.

— Associated Press writer Josh Kelety in Phoenix contributed this report.

Video of first lady's book reading manipulated to add child's comment

CLAIM: Video captures a child yelling an expletive at Jill Biden as she begins reading a story to a group of students.

THE FACTS: The video clip was manipulated to insert audio of a child yelling a disparaging comment. It emerged Monday after the first lady sat down with a group of second grade students from Maryland to host a story time at the White House as part of the annual unveiling of holiday decorations. The altered video shows a child screaming, "Shut the f--- up," just as Biden introduces the picture book she wrote. But that comes from an unrelated video that has been shared online since at least 2019. While some people commenting on the video acknowledged that it was altered, and linked to the source of the audio, others shared the falsified video as real. The inserted audio has spread online for years, and first emerged in a video that appeared to show a young child cursing during a school graduation ceremony as adults tried to quiet the situation. It is unclear where the video was taken, but it has since become a widely-shared sound effect and has been edited into other videos, often in a comedic way. In the altered Biden video, the first lady began to introduce her 2012 book, "Don't Forget, God Bless Our Troops," saying: "When my son was away, my granddaughter — just like you kids — really, really missed her daddy. So I wrote this book to tell other kids, 'cause there's lots of kids who don't know what it's like —." The sound of the yelling child was then inserted at that point to make it appear a student heckled Biden mid-sentence. A

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video of Biden's full remarks shows she was not interrupted and finished her sentence.

— Associated Press writer Sophia Tulp in Atlanta contributed this report.

Ghislaine Maxwell trial audio isn't accessible by phone line

CLAIM: Members of the public can call the phone number 844-721-7237 and enter access code 9991787 to listen to live audio of Ghislaine Maxwell's trial.

THE FACTS: The phone number is from a previous teleconference and the code is no longer active. Callers to this number who use the code will receive the message: "your access code was not recognized," as verified through an attempt by The Associated Press. Further, there is no such telephone line to listen to the trial audio, according to a statement from the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York. As Maxwell's trial got underway on charges she groomed underage victims to have unwanted sex with the late disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein, social media users circulated a number of false claims related to the trial, as well as incorrect explanations for why it is not being publicly broadcast online or on TV. Among the false claims that emerged this week was the assertion that a phone number and access code published by the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of New York in October would allow callers to listen in on the proceedings. Public telephone access to in-court criminal proceedings was previously provided in some cases "due to substantial restrictions on in-person attendance" during the COVID-19 pandemic, according to a statement from the Office of the District Court Executive. The accommodation was discontinued in early November as in-person viewing was able to resume more regularly. Members of the media are not banned from the trial, either, as other social media users have falsely suggested. Reporters and members of the public are still able to watch the trial live, both in the courtroom, as well as in overflow rooms where it will be streamed for those who don't get a seat, Judge Alison Nathan wrote in a Nov. 24 ruling. There are no other live feeds except those within the courthouse. Federal courts typically do not allow cameras like some state courts do. Maxwell has pleaded not guilty to her charges and denied wrongdoing.

— Sophia Tulp

Stores can't write off customer donations made at checkout

CLAIM: When a customer elects to donate to charity at a store's checkout counter, the store can write off that donation on its own end-of-year taxes.

THE FACTS: Stores can't write off a customer's point-of-sale donations, because they don't count as company income, according to tax policy experts. Stores are only allowed to write off their own donations, such as when a store donates a certain portion of all its proceeds to charity. A widely circulating meme, shared thousands of times this week on Facebook and Instagram, claimed that retailers ask customers to add a little more for charity when checking out in order to fund their own tax write-offs. That's misguided, according to Renu Zaretsky, a writer at the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center. "The only way a company can write off money is if it's income," Zaretsky said. "And this is not counted as income." Rather than receiving a customer's donation as income, the company serves as a holding agent for that money, Zaretsky said. Customers may tally up their cash register donations for their own tax returns, but stores are not allowed to claim those. However, if a company gives to a charity on its own, not through prompting a customer to give, it can write off that money, according to Garrett Watson, a senior policy analyst at the Tax Foundation. Checkout charity campaigns bring in millions of dollars for charitable organizations each year, but customers should know they aren't obligated to give when prompted, according to Zaretsky. They should also know, though, that a donation option at the cash register isn't a sign of a money-hungry organization looking to lower its tax bill.

— Associated Press writer Ali Swenson in New York contributed the report.

The World Economic Forum did not write about the omicron variant in July

CLAIM: The World Economic Forum published a story about the new coronavirus variant, now named omicron, in July 2021, months before South Africa first reported it to the World Health Organization this

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week.

THE FACTS: The WEF first published an article about detecting variants of the virus that causes COVID-19 in July, but archived versions of the story show it did not mention omicron at that time. The article was updated in November after the WHO's announcement, the archives show. Scientists in South Africa identified and reported the new variant, B.1.1.529, on Nov. 24, saying it was behind a recent spike in COVID-19 cases in the country. By Nov. 26, the WHO had declared it a "variant of concern" and given it the name "omicron." The next day, Twitter users circulated posts linking to the WEF article, suggesting that it showed the variant was not new at all. "They're starting to make mistakes. WHO just said that 'Omicron' was first reported by South Africa on 11/24/21. However, WEF reported this EXACT same 'variant'—B.1.1.529, out of South Africa—way back in July. Oops," reads one post that was retweeted over 3,000 times. But previous versions of the WEF article stored by the Wayback Machine, an internet archive, show that it did not mention the new variant until recently, although the forum failed to note that the article had been updated until later. An archive of the page from July 12, when the story was first published, contains no mention of the new variant. Another version archived on Sept. 22 shows the article unchanged. A version from Nov. 26, after omicron was announced, shows the article had then been updated to say "South African scientists have discovered a new COVID-19 variant" and that it is called "B.1.1.529." The article, however, still did not note that it had been updated — retaining the July 12 timestamp — as the false claims began circulating on social media, an archived version shows. A note was added later in the day saying: "This article was last updated on 26 November 2021."

— Associated Press reporter Karena Phan in Sacramento, Calif., contributed this report.

Photos of London Olympics don't show prior knowledge of pandemic

CLAIM: Photos of the London Olympics opening ceremony in 2012 prove that the COVID-19 pandemic has been planned for a long time.

THE FACTS: The opening ceremony didn't predict the COVID-19 pandemic, nor did its imagery relate in any way to the virus that would emerge and shut down the world eight years later, as a widely circulating Facebook post falsely claimed. The post shared images from the ceremony, from a scene featuring hospital beds, women in dresses and a giant, skeletal figure in a black robe with a white wand towering overhead, to falsely claim they prove the COVID-19 pandemic was premeditated. "Remember the London Olympics 2012 opening ceremony, with the giant death figure holding a needle, the dancing nurses and all of the children in hospital beds?" the post read. "It's starting to make a lot more sense now. They have had this planned for a long time." However, the costumes and figures in the ceremony had no relationship to the COVID-19 pandemic, and predated it by years. Instead, they paid tribute to Britain's National Health Service and to iconic British children's literature, including the "Harry Potter" franchise and its robed villain, Voldemort. "To the strains of Mike Oldfield's Tubular Bells, a scene of children in hospital beds was overrun by literary villains including Captain Hook, Cruella De Vil, the Queen of Hearts and Voldemort, before a group of flying nannies – reminiscent of Mary Poppins – arrived from the skies to banish the nightmarish characters," the Olympics website explains. Patients and hospital staff from a London hospital were among the performers in the spectacle, according to local press reports.

— Ali Swenson

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Trump faces flurry of investigations beyond Jan. 6 probe

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, KATE BRUMBACK and JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — As Donald Trump's lawyers try to block the White House from releasing records to the congressional committee investigating the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, the former president faces a

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flurry of other investigations that could come to a head in the coming weeks and the new year.

That includes two major state criminal investigations — one in New York and one in Georgia — and lawsuits concerning sexual assault allegations, a fight over an inheritance and questions of whether he should be held personally liable for inciting the insurrection.

Trump has long dismissed the investigations as nothing more than a politically motivated “witch hunt” that began with the probe into Russian meddling in the 2016 election. But while Trump has spent most of his life dodging legal consequences, he is no longer shielded by the protections against indictment enjoyed by sitting presidents. And any charges — which would be the first against a former president in the nation’s history — could affect both his businesses and his future political prospects as he mulls running for a second term.

Here’s the latest on where the cases stand:

NEW YORK

New York prosecutors are investigating the former president’s business dealings and recently convened a new grand jury to hear evidence after the previous panel’s term ran out.

The Manhattan district attorney’s office is weighing whether to seek more indictments in the case, which resulted in tax fraud charges in July against Trump’s company, the Trump Organization, and its longtime chief financial officer, Allen Weisselberg. They are accused of cheating tax authorities through lucrative, untaxed fringe benefits.

Weisselberg is due back in court in July 2022.

Trump himself remains under investigation after District Attorney Cyrus Vance Jr., who is leaving office at the end of the year, spent years fighting to access the former president’s tax records. Prosecutors have also been considering whether to seek charges against the company’s chief operating officer, Matthew Calamari Sr.

Investigators working for Vance and New York Attorney General Letitia James have spent more than two years looking at whether the Trump Organization misled banks or tax officials about the value of the company’s assets, inflating them to gain favorable loan terms or minimizing them to reap tax savings.

“I think it’s pretty clear that our investigation is active and ongoing,” Vance said Tuesday.

James’ office is involved in Vance’s criminal probe and is conducting its own civil investigation.

Separately, Trump is facing scrutiny over properties he owns in the New York City suburbs. Westchester County District Attorney Mimi E. Rocah subpoenaed records from the town of Ossining as it investigates whether Trump’s company misled officials to cut taxes for a golf course there, two people familiar with the probe told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

GEORGIA

In Atlanta, Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis opened an investigation in January into possible attempts to interfere with the administration of the state’s 2020 election, which Trump narrowly lost.

In letters sent in February to top elected officials in the state — including Gov. Brian Kemp and Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger — Willis instructed them to preserve all records related to the election, particularly those that may contain evidence of attempts to influence election officials.

The investigation includes a Jan. 2 phone call between Trump and Raffensperger in which Trump repeatedly and falsely asserts that the Republican secretary of state could change the certified results of the presidential election. A recording of the call was obtained the next day by multiple news organizations, including The Associated Press.

“I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have,” Trump said. “Because we won the state.”

Willis has been relatively tight-lipped about the investigation, but her office has confirmed it is ongoing.

“All available evidence is being analyzed, whether gathered by this office, another investigative body or made public by the witnesses themselves. A decision on whether criminal charges are appropriate against any individual will be made when that process is complete,” spokesperson Jeff DiSantis said in an email.

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Among the sources sure to be examined by Willis' team is a book written by Raffensperger and published Nov. 2. It includes a transcript of the Jan. 2 call with Trump annotated with the secretary of state's observations, including his belief that the president was threatening him at multiple points.

Willis earlier this year said she was also interested in the circumstances surrounding the sudden resignation on Jan. 4 of Bjay Pak, the U.S. attorney in Atlanta. Pak told the Senate Judiciary Committee that he had originally planned to stay in the position until Inauguration Day, Jan. 20, but resigned weeks earlier because of pressure from Trump.

WASHINGTON

The attorney general for the District of Columbia, Karl Racine, said early this year that district prosecutors were investigating Trump's role in the Jan. 6 insurrection and considering whether to charge him under a local law that criminalizes statements that motivate people to act violently.

There has been no indication, however, that that is likely. If Trump were to be charged, it would be a low-level misdemeanor, with a maximum sentence of six months in jail.

LAWSUITS

In addition to the criminal probes underway, Trump also faces a number of civil suits, from scorned business investors, to his estranged niece, to Democratic lawmakers and Capitol Police officers who blame him for inciting the violence on Jan. 6.

That includes a lawsuit brought by the House Homeland Security chair, Democratic Rep. Bennie Thompson, under a Reconstruction-era law called the Ku Klux Klan Act of 1871, which prohibits violence or intimidation meant to prevent members of Congress or other federal officials from carrying out their constitutional duties.

In October, Trump was questioned behind closed doors under oath in a deposition for a lawsuit brought by protesters who say his security team assaulted them outside Trump Tower in the early days of his presidential campaign in 2015.

Trump is also facing a defamation case brought by columnist E. Jean Carroll, who says Trump raped her in the mid-1990s in an upscale Manhattan department store. Trump has said that Carroll is "totally lying" and that she is "not my type." U.S. Justice Department lawyers argued earlier this year that Trump cannot be held personally liable for "crude and disrespectful" remarks he made about a woman who accused him of rape because he made the comments while he was president. The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals is set to hear oral arguments in the case Friday.

Trump had faced a similar defamation lawsuit from Summer Zervos, a former "Apprentice" contestant who had accused Trump of kissing and groping her against her will in 2007, but she unexpectedly dropped the suit last month.

Separately, Trump's estranged niece, Mary Trump, has sued him and other family members, accusing them of defrauding her of millions of dollars of inheritance money. Trump has filed his own suit against Mary Trump and The New York Times over a 2018 story about his family's finances that was based partly on confidential documents she provided to the paper. He accuses her of breaching a settlement agreement that barred her from disclosing the documents.

Lawyers for Mary Trump filed paperwork Thursday seeking to dismiss her uncle's lawsuit against her.

Brumback reported from Atlanta. Associated Press writers Bernard Condon in New York and Eric Tucker in Washington contributed to this report.

Census Bureau works to improve confidence in 2020 headcount

By MIKE SCHNEIDER Associated Press

The Census Bureau is looking to improve trust in the numbers it gathered during the 2020 census by fixing problems caused by the unprecedented challenges of conducting a U.S. head count during a pandemic, natural disasters and efforts by the Trump administration to politicize the process.

Demographers, advocates and others who rely on census data are watching carefully and like what they see so far, but they want to monitor how the fixes are implemented before passing judgment.

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The Census Bureau announced last week that it will break with past practice and not rely on 2020 census data solely as the basis for creating its annual estimates of the U.S. population. The estimates are used to help distribute \$1.5 trillion in federal funding each year and measure annual population change through 2030. For the first time, bureau statisticians will blend some of the 2020 census numbers with various other data sets for the base when it releases numbers for 2021 and possibly 2022.

Statisticians wanted time to evaluate the census data to make sure it is usable for the estimates, said Christine Hartley, a Census Bureau official.

"Because of how the pandemic impacted census field operations, there also were many questions about quality," Hartley said. "We needed some kind of solution that didn't fully rely on the 2020 census data."

The Census Bureau has also proposed another fix which would allow states, municipalities and tribal nations for the first time to challenge results on the numbers of people living in dorms, prisons, nursing homes and other places where people live in group quarters. These places became especially difficult to count after students on campus were sent home when the pandemic began in the U.S. in March 2020, and prisons and nursing homes went into lockdowns against the spread of the coronavirus.

This one-time change, which is expected to be approved by the Office of Management and Budget after a public comment period, is a response to public feedback seeking to expand the scope of challenges to include group quarters "due to the unique circumstances surrounding the 2020 Census," the Census Bureau said in a statement.

Some experts say the fixes serve as a reality check on a sometimes over-optimistic attitude by bureau officials about a head count that faced formidable challenges and delays caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, wildfires, hurricanes and attempts by the Trump administration to add a citizenship question that failed, but nevertheless may have scared off some people from participating.

Although the Census Bureau has been transparent in releasing quality measures of data gathered in the face of the unprecedented challenges, "in doing so, it always puts the best face possible on what is happening," said Arturo Vargas, CEO of NALEO Educational Fund.

"I have a saying that, 'It's always sunny in Suitland,'" Vargas added, referring to the statistical agency's headquarters in Suitland, Maryland. "But there needs to be an acknowledgment that there are challenges even they can't overcome."

The changes have mostly been well-received by demographers and advocates. They "can increase accuracy, and that's a good thing that increases trust," said Allison Plyer, chief demographer at The Data Center in New Orleans.

Demographer William O'Hare, who has advocated for making sure children are fully counted, said the "blended base" approach would improve estimates for children by using highly accurate birth certificate data. Missed children are a big concern, since an analysis O'Hare did earlier this year showed there was a 4.4% undercount of Hispanic children in the 2020 census.

Concerns about an undercount among Blacks, Hispanics, children and tribal nations are heightened by the risk that those groups could be shortchanged in the distribution of federal funds, some advocates say.

"The National Urban League has every reason to believe that Blacks were undercounted during the 2020 Census at rates exceeding the previous census," said Marc Morial, the civil rights group's president and CEO in an email. "It is a GOOD thing that Census is trying to be more transparent (and more is needed), and that we are talking about options and new data sources to address the differential undercount."

The bureau's own take on the accuracy of its 2020 census won't be officially known until next year, when it releases a report card on how good a job it did. Earlier this year, an American Statistical Association task force said its review found no irregularities indicating the results were unfit for use in the apportionment of congressional seats, or that they were of lower quality than those in 2010.

An analysis by the Urban Institute, however, found that people of color, renters, noncitizens, children and people living in Texas — the state that saw the nation's largest growth — were most likely to be missed, though by smaller margins than some had projected for a count conducted under such difficult circumstances.

There are some concerns about the census data that the announced changes won't fix, such as the Census Bureau's new privacy technique which inserts inaccuracies at very small geographic levels to protect the confidentiality of participants such as, say, the only family of a certain ethnicity living in a particular geographic area. Some small town officials are concerned that sparsely-populated communities aren't being described accurately, said Eric Guthrie, senior demographer at the Minnesota State Demographic Center.

In another effort at protecting confidentiality, the Census Bureau is contemplating not including granular data when it releases the next round of 2020 census numbers next year. That data will deal with housing and family relationships, and the bureau says it has taken great pains to produce accurate information while protecting the privacy of participants in the nation's head count.

Guthrie recently told a National Academies committee studying census data quality that there's a lot of skepticism among small town officials he's spoken to. He said many of them mobilized considerable resources to help with the count and now feel betrayed that they won't get usable data at the smallest geographies.

"This is the one shot they get and they feel like they have been robbed of it," Guthrie said. "There's not a basis of trust anymore."

Follow Mike Schneider on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/MikeSchneiderAP>

Against all odds, disabled teen gymnast in Bosnia excels

By SABINA NIKSIC Associated Press

VISOKO, Bosnia-Herzegovina (AP) — Sara Becarevic was born without a lower left arm in Bosnia, a poor Balkan country notorious for the large-scale social and economic exclusion of people with disabilities. Still, it never occurred to her that that could stop her from pursuing her dream of becoming an internationally recognized rhythmic gymnast.

Sara says the sport has enchanted her since she was a toddler and watched the world championships on television. It didn't take her long to try to imitate the moves at home. Fast forward almost 11 years and Sara, who turns 14 on Dec. 16, is winning medals for her club, Visoko, named after the small Bosnian city where she was born.

"Some people said that it was impossible, that I couldn't do it, but I can," Sara said.

"I don't care about what others say, my own sense of what I can achieve is the only thing that matters."

Neither rhythmic nor artistic gymnastics is represented in the Paralympics, so in order to compete in her chosen sport, Sara has no choice but to compete against able-bodied athletes. She handles the equipment used in the sport with her right arm and the remaining part of her left arm, turning cartwheels with ease despite her disability.

Before choosing Visoko as a rhythmic gymnastics club suitable for her daughter and enrolling her at the age of 9, Sara's mother Sanela was "worried about how she would be accepted." But they "had the good fortune" to come across an open-minded, young coach, Amina Lepic-Milivic.

It was not a small feat in a country where, according to the U.N. children's agency, UNICEF, "children with disabilities and their families still face discrimination, their rights are often not fully met and they still face limited access to basic services."

"At first, it was unusual, I won't say difficult, just unusual, because it was a new experience for me as well. As we were getting acquainted, we were learning from one another," Lepic-Milivic recalled.

It did not take her long, she added, to realize that Sara was different, "but what made her different was her unique resolve, dedication to practice" and talent.

So far, Sara has brought home medals from several national and international rhythmic gymnastics tournaments, but she sees that as just the beginning.

"I thought it would be difficult, but when you practice hard and try even harder, it becomes easy," she said, her eyes filling with the glitter of a shy, yet confident, smile.

"My ultimate goal is to compete in the World Championships and the Olympics, to compete with the best (rhythmic) gymnasts" in the world, she added with resolve.

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Lepic-Milavic said she has faith in her young disciple who has already proven capable of making her dreams reality. She is less certain that Sara will ever get the support she deserves in Bosnia.

Although the Visoko club was founded by the city and competes internationally under the Bosnian flag, its apparatus, uniforms and travel expenses are typically bankrolled by its members — or rather their parents.

Nevertheless, she quickly added: "I really do have faith in this girl, in Sara, and I am proud that she chose me to be her coach. ... I believe that she is capable of one day entering the European or World Championships."

EXPLAINER: Turkey's currency is crashing. What's the impact?

By SUZAN FRASER Associated Press

ANKARA, Turkey (AP) — Turkey's beleaguered currency has been plunging to all-time lows against the U.S. dollar and the euro in recent months as President Recep Tayyip Erdogan presses ahead with a widely criticized effort to cut interest rates despite surging consumer prices.

As a result, families are struggling to buy food and other goods and the Turkish lira has lost around 40% of its value since the start of the year, becoming one of the world's worst-performing currencies.

Here is a closer look at the Turkish currency crisis and its impact on a country with eye-popping inflation: **WHAT IS GOING ON?**

Turkey's Central Bank has cut borrowing costs by 4 percentage points since September, in line with Erdogan's wishes, even though inflation accelerated to around 20%.

Erdogan, who has been in power for some 19 years and has grown increasingly authoritarian, has long argued that high interest rates cause inflation, contrary to what economists generally say: that increasing rates will drive down prices.

The rate cuts have raised concerns over the bank's independence, while the country's unconventional monetary policy has spooked foreign investors, who are dumping Turkish assets. And Turkish citizens are rushing to convert their savings to foreign currencies and gold to protect them from soaring inflation.

"People bring their savings and always want to buy dollars. When will it end, where will this go? They're panicking," said Hulya Orak, a currency exchange office worker. "People are constantly in panic mode and are using money that's under their mattresses."

As a result, the Turkish lira, which had barely recovered from a currency crisis in 2018, has been weakening to record lows against the dollar and the euro.

It crashed to a record low of 13.44 against the American currency on Nov. 23 after Erdogan insisted there would be no turning back from his unconventional policies. On Tuesday, the lira plummeted again to an all-time low of 14 against the dollar after Erdogan reiterated that cuts would continue and amid signs the U.S. Federal Reserve would tighten credit for consumers and businesses as inflation rises.

The lira recovered a bit Wednesday after Turkey's Central Bank announced it was intervening in the foreign exchange market to stem the volatility.

HOW HAVE PEOPLE BEEN AFFECTED?

With inflation running at more than 21%, according to official figures released Friday, the prices of basic goods have soared and many people in this country of more than 83 million are struggling to make ends meet.

The independent Inflation Research Group, made up of academics and former government officials, puts the inflation rate at a stunning 58%. Turkey's opposition parties have long voiced skepticism over the official inflation figures and have questioned the Turkish Statistical Institute's independence.

The devalued lira is driving prices higher, making imports, fuel and everyday goods more expensive in Turkey, which relies on imported raw material. Meanwhile, rents have skyrocketed and prices for home sales, mostly pegged on the dollar, are increasing.

Every morning, long lines form outside kiosks selling bread a lira cheaper than in bakeries and shops.

"We are cutting down on everything," Sinasi Yukselen said as he waited in line. "I used to buy 10 loaves, now I buy five. We've given up trying to buy meat."

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At a shopping center selling discounted goods in Ankara, Emine Cengizer said she wanted to buy her teenage daughter a winter coat but left empty-handed.

"If I buy the coat, we won't have anything to eat for the rest of the week," she said.

Selva Demiralp, economics professor at Istanbul's Koc University, says she's concerned about a possible brain drain.

"When your salary gap between what you can earn in Turkey versus what you can earn abroad widens so much, it's just going to be very difficult for us to keep those highly educated white-collar people at home," she said. "And that's that's a major threat for the future of the country."

WHAT IS ERDOGAN'S ECONOMIC POLICY?

The Turkish president has been pushing for low borrowing costs to stimulate the economy, boost growth and exports, and create jobs. He has vowed to break the cycle of an economy dependent on short-term "hot money" lured by high interest rates.

Economists say raising borrowing costs eases inflation, which has been surging worldwide as the economy recovers from the coronavirus pandemic but is especially acute in Turkey because of the government's unorthodox policies.

A devout Muslim, whose religion regards usury as a sin, Erdogan has described interest rates as "the mother and father of all evil." He has fired three central bank governors who resisted lowering rates. In a further shake-up, Erdogan on Thursday appointed a new finance minister considered to be supportive of the push for low borrowing rates, leading to a slight decline of the lira.

"With the new economic model, we are pushing back the policy of attracting money with high interest rates. We are supporting production and exports with low interests," Erdogan said this week.

The Turkish leader has blamed the currency crash on foreign forces bent on destroying Turkey's economy and says his government is waging "an economic war of independence."

Demiralp, the economist, says the government is doing the opposite of what is normally done to tamp down prices.

"The central bank claims that by cutting interest rates, they're going to contain inflationary pressures. The markets are not buying this story," she said.

Turkey is focused on growing the economy rather than controlling inflation, Demiralp said, "but I think even growth is highly questionable at this point because you are going to see more contraction coming as a result of the panic and uncertainty and escalating costs coming from this crisis."

WHAT'S THE POLITICAL IMPACT FOR ERDOGAN?

His early years in power were marked by a strong economy that helped him win several elections. Recently, soaring consumer prices have hurt his popularity, with opinion polls pointing at unease over his economic policies even among supporters.

Last week, police broke up small demonstrations that erupted in Istanbul and several other Turkish cities by groups protesting the high cost of living. Dozens of people were detained.

An alliance of opposition parties that have formed a bloc against Erdogan's ruling party and its allies has been climbing in opinion polls. Members of the opposition coalition are calling for early elections and accusing Erdogan of "treason" for mismanaging the economy.

Erdogan has refused to call early elections, insisting voting will take place as scheduled in 2023.

He said this week that the government is working on programs that would create 50,000 new jobs and it is expected to raise the minimum wage.

"We are preparing to, one by one, take steps to comfort citizens whose purchasing power has fallen," Erdogan said.

France signs weapons mega-deal with UAE as Macron tours Gulf

By BARBARA SURK and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — France announced multibillion-euro deals Friday to sell fighter planes and combat helicopters to the United Arab Emirates, aiming to boost military cooperation with its top ally

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in the Persian Gulf amid their shared concerns about Iran.

The UAE is buying 80 upgraded Rafale warplanes in a deal the French Defense Ministry said is worth 16 billion euros (\$18 billion) and represents the largest-ever French weapons contract for export. It also announced a deal with the UAE to sell 12 Airbus-built combat helicopters.

They offer a shot in the arm for France's defense industry after the collapse of a \$66 billion contract for Australia to buy 12 French submarines that ultimately went to the U.S. But the deals faced criticism by human rights groups concerned about the UAE's involvement in the yearslong war in Yemen.

The UAE contracts were signed as French President Emmanuel Macron visited the country on the first stop of a two-day visit to the Persian Gulf. France and Gulf countries have long been concerned by Iran's nuclear ambitions and influence across the region, particularly in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon.

France has particularly deep ties to the UAE, a federation of seven sheikhdoms on the Arabian Peninsula. France has a naval base there and French warplanes and personnel also are stationed in a major facility outside the Emirati capital, Abu Dhabi.

Speaking to reporters in Dubai, Macron said they are important contracts for the deepening defense cooperation between France and the UAE that will contribute to the stability of the region and enhance a common fight against terrorism.

In addition, "it's important for our economy because the planes are manufactured in France," he said.

Macron and Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, the crown prince of Abu Dhabi and the UAE's de facto ruler, were present at the Rafale contract signing.

Manufacturer Dassault Aviation said the UAE is buying the upgraded F4 version of its multirole Rafale combat aircraft. That will make the Emirates Air Force the first Rafale F4 user outside of France, it said.

Dassault Aviation boss Eric Trappier called the sale "a French success story" and "excellent news for France and for its aeronautical industry."

The purchase marks a sizable step up for the UAE's military capabilities in the oil- and gas-rich region. Charles Forrester, a senior analyst at Janes, said the fighter "will significantly upgrade UAE's airpower capabilities in terms of strike, air-to-air warfare, and reconnaissance." Abu Dhabi also hopes to buy American stealth F-35 fighters after diplomatically recognizing Israel last year.

Dassault said the Rafale will give the UAE "a tool capable of guaranteeing sovereignty and operational independence" and that it will start delivering the planes in 2027.

French defense officials were jubilant. Defense Minister Florence Parly said the Rafale deal "directly contributes to regional stability." The additional sale of Caracal helicopters also illustrates "the density of our defense relationship," she said.

Human rights groups said weapons the UAE provides to its Gulf allies could be used "for unlawful attacks or even war crimes" in Yemen as well as Libya, a conflict that the UAE has been accused of being involved in through proxies.

"France's support for the UAE and Saudi Arabia is even more objectional as their leaders have failed to improve their countries' disastrous human rights records domestically, although their public relations efforts to present themselves as progressive and tolerant internationally is in full swing," Human Rights Watch said in a statement ahead of Macron's trip to the Gulf.

Macron's keen interest in forging personal relationships with Abu Dhabi's crown prince and his counterpart in Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, makes him a welcome guest in the region. Both Gulf leaders value a degree of pragmatism when discussing democracy and human rights — issues on which their countries have been heavily criticized by rights groups and European lawmakers — while pursuing business opportunities.

Months after Macron was elected in 2017, he traveled to the UAE to inaugurate Louvre Abu Dhabi, built under a \$1.2 billion agreement to share the name and art of the world-famous museum in Paris.

In September, Macron hosted Abu Dhabi's crown prince at the historic Chateau de Fontainebleau outside Paris, which was restored in 2019 with a UAE donation of 10 million euros (\$11.3 million).

The UAE and France also have become increasingly aligned over a shared mistrust of Islamist political parties across the Middle East and backed the same side in Libya's civil strife.

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A senior French presidency official who spoke to reporters ahead of the trip on customary condition of anonymity said Macron will “continue to push and support the efforts that contribute to the stability of the region, from the Mediterranean to the Gulf.”

Gulf tensions will be discussed, the official said, in particular the revived talks about Iran’s nuclear deal with world powers, following then-U.S. President Donald Trump’s withdrawal from the agreement.

“This is a hot topic,” the French official said, adding that Macron discussed the issues in a phone call Monday with Iran’s president. He will talk about the call and the issues — including the nuclear deal talks in Vienna — with Gulf leaders, who are “directly concerned by this subject, like all of us but also because they are (Iran’s) neighbors,” the official said.

France, along with Germany and the United Kingdom, thinks the 2015 nuclear agreement — with minor tweaks — is the way forward with Iran, analysts say. The UAE and Saudi Arabia bitterly opposed the West’s negotiated deal with Iran, though now both have launched talks with Tehran to cool tensions.

“Although the Gulf countries did not like the West’s deal with Iran, the prospect of it falling apart acrimoniously is also bad for them and arguably presents worse risks,” said Jane Kinninmont, a London-based Gulf expert with the European Leadership Network think tank.

“Their view has always been the West should have gotten more out of Iran before sealing the deal,” Kinninmont said. “But if the West walks away with nothing, the Gulf countries are beginning to understand that their security will not improve as a result.”

Surk reported from Nice, France. Associated Press writer John Leicester contributed from Le Pecq, France.

Germany: 1 in 100 infected with virus, health minister says

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany’s health minister said Friday that more than 1% of the population — almost a million people — are currently infected with the coronavirus, and called on citizens to get vaccinated if they haven’t done so yet.

The country confirmed 74,352 new daily COVID-19 cases and 390 additional deaths, figures published by the federal disease control agency showed. According to the Robert Koch Institute’s calculations, some 925,800 people in Germany are considered actively infected with the virus.

Health Minister Jens Spahn noted that the number of unvaccinated residents who are infected and seriously ill is much higher than their share of the overall population.

“If all German adults were vaccinated, we wouldn’t be in this difficult situation,” he told reporters in Berlin.

Spahn spoke a day after federal and state leaders announced tough new restrictions that largely target unvaccinated people, preventing them from entering nonessential stores, restaurants, sports and cultural venues.

The government also plans to submit a general vaccine mandate for parliament to consider. Government spokesman Steffen Seibert said lawmakers could vote on the issue in early January.

Spahn, who is likely to leave office next week when Germany’s new center-left government takes office, has opposed compulsory vaccination and made clear Friday that he would vote against the measure.

About 68.8% of people in Germany are fully vaccinated, while the government has set a minimum target of 75%. For the first time since the summer, more than 1 million doses were administered on a single day Wednesday.

Authorities in Berlin have banned a protest planned Saturday by opponents of the pandemic measures. Police in the capital said past demonstrations had shown that participants failed to abide by infection prevention rules, including refusing to wear masks.

Germany’s association for intensive care medicine, DIVI, has welcomed the newly agreed restrictions. But its head, Gernot Marx, told the dpa news agency that the number of COVID-19 patients treated in ICUs would likely reach a new record high over the festive period.

The head of the Robert Koch Institute, Lothar Wieler, cautioned that a plateau in new cases seen in some

regions could be the result of labs and local health offices reaching the limits of what they can process. "So it's too early to read a trend reversal into this, much less to refrain from tougher measures," he said.

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

Roe 'settled' law? Justices' earlier assurances now in doubt

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — During his confirmation to the Supreme Court, Brett Kavanaugh convinced Sen. Susan Collins that he thought a woman's right to an abortion was "settled law," calling the court cases affirming it "precedent on precedent" that could not be casually overturned.

Amy Coney Barrett told senators during her Senate confirmation hearing that laws could not be undone simply by personal beliefs, including her own. "It's not the law of Amy," she quipped.

But during this week's landmark Supreme Court hearing over a Mississippi law that could curtail if not outright end a woman's right to abortion, the two newest justices struck a markedly different tone, drawing lines of questioning widely viewed as part of the court's willingness to dismantle decades old decisions on access to abortion services.

The disconnect is raising fresh questions about the substance, purpose and theater of the Senate's confirmation process that some say is badly broken. And it's creating hard politics for Collins and another Senate Republican who supports abortion rights, Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, as the nation confronts the potential unraveling of the law.

"I support Roe," Collins said as she ducked into an elevator shortly after Wednesday's arguments at the court. The Maine Republican voted to confirm Kavanaugh but opposed Barrett's nomination as too close to the 2020 presidential election.

Murkowski declined a hallway interview Thursday at the Capitol and has not provided further public comment. She opposed Kavanaugh and supported Barrett, both nominees among the most narrowly confirmed in the split Senate.

The court's ruling on the Mississippi case may not be known until June but the fallout from the week's arguments are reviving concerns that the judicial branch, like nation's other civic institutions, is becoming deeply politicized, and that the Congress — specifically the Senate — must do better in its constitutional role to advise and consent on presidential nominees.

"It's not like the senators have been naive and have trusted too much," said Neil Siegel, a law professor at Duke University, who has served as a special counsel to Senate Democrats, including when Joe Biden was a senator. "I think the problem is primarily that we're deeply polarized, and the Constitution makes nomination and confirmation of federal judges, including justices, a political process."

Confirmation hearings before the Senate Judiciary Committee are intense affairs, hourslong sessions that typically drag for days as one senator after another grills the president's nominees over their approach to the law.

Kavanaugh's hearing in 2018 exploded amid stunning allegations he had sexually assaulted Christine Blasey Ford when they were teenagers at a house party decades ago, claims he vehemently denied.

The abortion debates have been front and center at confirmation hearings, but senators snapped to focus as Republican Donald Trump nominated three conservative justices during his presidential term, potentially tipping the nine-member court away from centrists and liberals.

Suddenly what had been long debates over the legal precedents set by the landmark cases Roe v. Wade and Planned Parenthood v. Casey became very real-life questions for American women as Republicans reached for the long-sought goal of rolling back abortion access.

Kavanaugh repeatedly told the senators under grilling from Democrats and Republicans that the women's right to an abortion has been affirmed.

"The Supreme Court has recognized the right to an abortion since the 1973 Roe v. Wade case — has affirmed it many times," he told Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.

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To Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., Kavanaugh stressed "the importance of the precedent" under the previous court rulings and a "woman has a constitutional right to obtain an abortion before viability," referring to the 24 weeks of pregnancy now in question under the Mississippi law, which would lower the threshold to 15 weeks.

He won over Collins, who is not on the panel, after his assurances during a two-hour meeting.

Yet during this week's court hearing Kavanaugh read from a long list of court cases that have upturned past precedents and questioned why the court couldn't now do the same with abortion.

"If you think about some of the most important cases, the most consequential cases in this court's history, there's a string of them where the cases overruled precedent," he said.

Kavanaugh said during the court hearing that the abortion debate is "hard" and perhaps the court should throw it to the states to decide — essentially ending the federal protection.

Senators said the justices could simply be submitting a line of questioning, forcing the lawyers for the state and the federal government to respond, rather than reflecting their own reading of the law.

But Sen. Amy Klobuchar, D-Minn., who had intense exchanges with Kavanaugh and Coney Barrett during the confirmation battles — and voted against both — said what she heard from the court was about what she expected.

"I'm not one bit surprised," Klobuchar said.

Barrett had told senators that *Roe v. Wade* did not fall in the category of a "super precedent," described by legal scholars as cases that are so settled there are no calls to revisit them.

Yet as a conservative Christian, she insisted one's own views don't play a role. "It's not the law of Amy," she told senators. "It's the law of the American people."

This week, Barrett pressed the lawyers to explain why women couldn't simply give up babies for adoption, now that safe haven laws exist in the states. "Why didn't you address the safe haven laws and why don't they matter?"

Asked about the disconnect between the Senate hearings and the court arguments, Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., and now the Judiciary Committee chairman, acknowledged the hearings have their limits, but refrained from judgment until the court issues its ruling.

Perhaps not since Ruth Bader Ginsburg told senators during her own confirmation hearing in 1993 that the decision to bear a child is "central to a woman's right, her dignity" have nominees been as out-front on their views. The norm now is for nominees to hold their views close.

"We can't ask for sworn affidavits," Durbin said. "My belief is the person and their life experience is more predictive of the outcome of future cases than any declaration they make to a committee."

Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas, a former judge, shrugged off the difference between what's said in committee hearings as a fact of life in politics.

"I've seen too many confirmation conversions, where people basically repudiate things they've done and said in the past in order to get confirmed, but once we've somebody gets confirmed, there's basically nothing we can do about it," said Cornyn, who voted to confirm both Kavanaugh and Barrett.

"I don't think they're a sham," he said. "I think there's useful discussions but obviously there's no consequences associated with voting in a way that's different from what you said in the hearing."

Associated Press writer Mary Clare Jalonick contributed to this report.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Dec. 4, the 338th day of 2021. There are 27 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History:

On Dec. 4, 1942, during World War II, U.S. bombers struck the Italian mainland for the first time with a raid on Naples. President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the dismantling of the Works Progress Administra-

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tion, which had been created to provide jobs during the Depression.

On this date:

In 1783, Gen. George Washington bade farewell to his Continental Army officers at Fraunces Tavern in New York.

In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson left Washington on a trip to France to attend the Versailles (veh-SY') Peace Conference.

In 1954, the first Burger King stand was opened in Miami by James McLamore and David Edgerton.

In 1956, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins gathered for the first and only time for a jam session at Sun Records in Memphis.

In 1965, the United States launched Gemini 7 with Air Force Lt. Col. Frank Borman and Navy Cmdr. James A. Lovell aboard on a two-week mission. (While Gemini 7 was in orbit, its sister ship, Gemini 6A, was launched on Dec. 15 on a one-day mission; the two spacecraft were able to rendezvous within a foot of each other.)

In 1967, actor-comedian Bert Lahr, who played the Cowardly Lion in "The Wizard of Oz," died in New York at age 72.

In 1978, San Francisco got its first female mayor as City Supervisor Dianne Feinstein (FYN'-styn) was named to replace the assassinated George Moscone (mahs-KOH'-nee).

In 1980, the bodies of four American churchwomen slain in El Salvador two days earlier were unearthed. (Five Salvadoran national guardsmen were later convicted of murdering nuns Ita Ford, Maura Clarke and Dorothy Kazel, and lay worker Jean Donovan.)

In 1986, both houses of Congress moved to establish special committees to conduct their own investigations of the Iran-Contra affair.

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush ordered American troops to lead a mercy mission to Somalia, threatening military action against warlords and gangs who were blocking food for starving millions.

In 2000, in a pair of legal setbacks for Al Gore, a Florida state judge refused to overturn George W. Bush's certified victory in Florida and the U.S. Supreme Court set aside a ruling that had allowed manual recounts.

In 2018, long lines of people wound through the Capitol Rotunda to view the casket of former President George H.W. Bush; former Sen. Bob Dole steadied himself out of his wheelchair to salute his old friend and one-time rival.

Ten years ago: Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's party hung onto its majority in Russia's parliamentary election, but faced accusations from opponents of rigging the vote. Rafael Nadal recovered from a terrible start and beat Juan Martin del Potro of Argentina 1-6, 6-4, 6-1, 7-6 (0) to give Spain its fifth Davis Cup title. After going more than two years and 26 tournaments without a victory, Tiger Woods won the Chevron World Challenge.

Five years ago: A North Carolina man armed with a rifle fired several shots inside Comet Ping Pong, a Washington, D.C., pizzeria, as he attempted to investigate an online conspiracy theory that prominent Democrats were harboring child sex slaves at the restaurant; no one was hurt, and the man surrendered to police. (He was later sentenced to four years in prison.)

One year ago: The government reported that America's employers scaled back their hiring in November as the viral pandemic accelerated, adding 245,000 jobs in the fifth straight monthly slowdown. Actor David L. Lander, best known for playing Squiggy on the popular ABC comedy "Laverne & Shirley," died at 73 after a decades-long battle with multiple sclerosis.

Today's Birthdays: Game show host Wink Martindale is 88. Pop singer Freddy Cannon is 85. Actor-producer Max Baer Jr. is 84. Actor Gemma Jones is 79. Rock musician Bob Mosley (Moby Grape) is 79. Singer-musician Chris Hillman is 77. Musician Terry Woods (The Pogues) is 74. Rock singer Southside Johnny Lyon is 73. Actor Jeff Bridges is 72. Rock musician Gary Rossington (Lynyrd Skynyrd; the Rossington Collins Band) is 70. Actor Patricia Wettig is 70. Actor Tony Todd is 67. Jazz singer Cassandra Wilson is 66. Country musician Brian Prout (Diamond Rio) is 66. Rock musician Bob Griffin (formerly with The BoDeans) is 62. Rock singer Vinnie Dombroski (Sponge) is 59. Actor Marisa Tomei is 57. Actor Chelsea Noble is 57. Actor-

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comedian Fred Armisen is 55. Rapper Jay-Z is 52. Actor Kevin Sussman is 51. Actor-model Tyra Banks is 48. Country singer Lila McCann is 40. Actor Lindsay Felton is 37. Actor Orlando Brown is 34. Actor Scarlett Estevez (TV: "Lucifer") is 14.