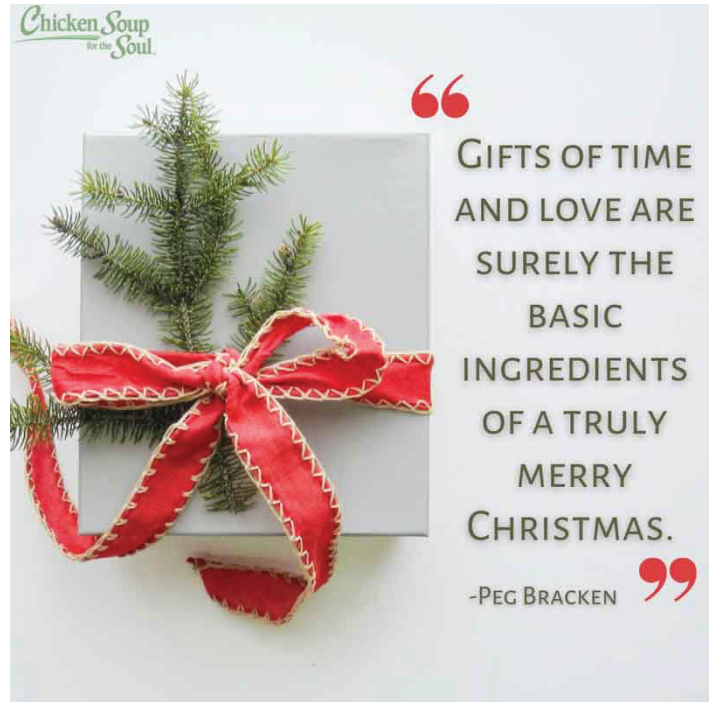


Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 1 of 90

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- The Life of Hazel Swenson](#)
- [3- Dacotah Bank Ad](#)
- [4- The Life of Arlene Anderson](#)
- [5- Facts and Stipulations](#)
- [5- Gov. Noem Announces Fairness in Girls' Sports Legislation](#)
- [6- Covid-19 Update: By Marie Miller](#)
- [12- Weather Pages](#)
- [16- Daily Devotional](#)
- [17- 2021 Community Events](#)
- [18- Subscription Form](#)
- [19- News from the Associated Press](#)



UpComing Events

Thursday, Dec. 16

Basketball Double Header with Hamlin at Groton. Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5 p.m., Girls Varsity at 6:15 p.m. followed by boys varsity.

Friday, Dec. 17

Brookings Bell Debate

Saturday, Dec. 18

Brookings Bell Debate

10 a.m.: Wrestling at Sioux Valley High School

Boys Basketball at Sioux Falls Lutheran. JV at 3 p.m. with varsity at 4 p.m.

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.

© 2021 Groton Daily Independent

The Life of Hazel Swenson



Funeral services for Hazel B. Swenson, 102, of Aberdeen, SD, was held December 13, 2021, at Bethlehem Lutheran Church, with Pastor Jeff Whillock officiating. Burial at Scandinavia Lutheran Cemetery. Hazel died Monday, December 6, 2021, at home in Aberdeen.

Hazel Beatrice Sandve was born October 22, 1919, to Tom and Helen Sandve, at Langford, SD. She grew up in the Langford area and attended school there. She was baptized and confirmed in the Falnes Lutheran Church in Langford. In 1943, she moved to Seattle, WA, where she worked in the Seattle-Tacoma Shipyards until the end of WWII. She attended Griffin-Murphy Business College of Seattle and graduated in 1948 from the Lutheran Bible Institute of Seattle, now known as Trinity Lutheran College of Everett, WA. Hazel then entered the field of Lutheran parish work and was employed by the First Lutheran Church of Kennewick, WA, until 1951, then by Bethlehem Lutheran Church of Aberdeen, SD, until 1958. She was active in the state and national Lutheran Parish Worker's Association and served as national president one year.

On October 12, 1958, Hazel married Ernest Swenson in Aberdeen, SD. They engaged in farming on his farm near Bath until retired in 1991. They moved to Aberdeen in 2005. Hazel taught Sunday School, confirmation, and Vacation Bible School. She served as youth advisor and was on the Education Board, member of BLC Martha Circle, and held many offices in the WELCA. She was a member of the Golden Pheasant Extension Club and held local and county offices in the Extension Homemaker's Club. She also served on the Gem Township election board.

Hazel liked reading, writing, sewing quilts for missions, and crafts. She also enjoyed gardening, flowers, baking and canning. She loved devotional times and being with her family.

Grateful for having shared Hazel's life are her sister, Deloris Torguson, Willmar, MN; sister-in-law, Esther Sandve, Webster, SD; nieces and nephews: Loren (Charlene) Langager, Craig (Sarah) Langager, Lana (Gary) Nelson, Curtis (Susan) Langager, Eunice (Bob) Knight, Carole Levercom, Marilyn (Dan) Mattson, June (Steve) Baker, David (Mary) Sandve, Leo Sandve, Darvin (Linda) Sandve, Joan (Tim) Wolf, Tom (Mary) Sandve, Terry (Cheri) Sandve, Marcia (David) Olson, Tim Sandve, Chad (Jill) Sandve, Gail (Bill) Rockeman, Annette (Clyde) Tiffany, Patty (Chuck) Rud, Nancy Stange, Jeanne Swenson, Stewart Swenson, Reed (Kathy) Swenson, Louise Hoefert, Kathy (Jim) Bitzer, and Kirk (Sheila) Hoefert; nephew-in-law, Pat Pins; and many great and great-great nieces and nephews.

Preceding Hazel in death are her parents: Tom and Helen Sandve; husband, Ernest Swenson; seven brothers: Marvin, Lawrence, Howard, Lloyd, Henry, Rueben, and Tamlin; sister: Maybelle Langager; nephews: Rodney Torguson and Rick Hoefert; niece, Barb Pins; and nephews-in-law: Leland Stange and Wayne Levercom.

The family prefers memorials be made to: ELCA World Hunger, ELCA Gift Processing Center, P.O. Box 1809, Merrifield, VA 22116-8009, Bethlehem Lutheran Church, 1620 Milwaukee Ave NE, Aberdeen, SD 57401, or Avera@Home, 201 S Lloyd St #210w, Aberdeen, SD 57401



DACOTAH BANK

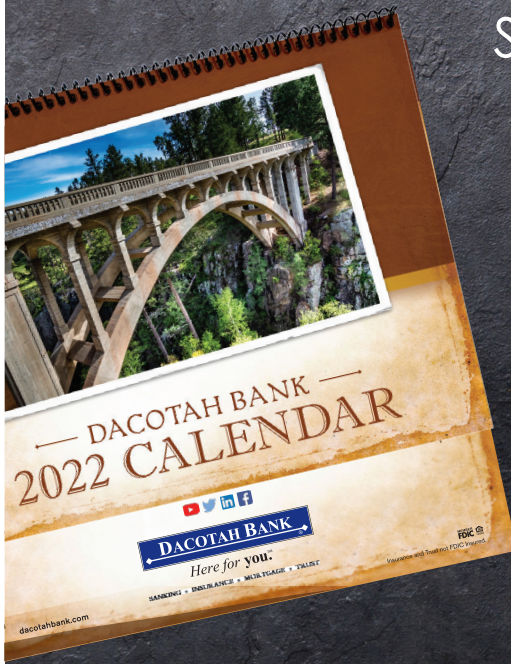
Cookies & Calendar OPEN HOUSE

Stop by the Groton Dacotah Bank
for cookies, coffee, cider
& a calendar

FRI. *December 17*

9:00 am - 5:00 pm

7 East US Hwy 12 • (605) 397-2711



The Life of Arlene Anderson



Arlene Anderson, 95, of Aberdeen and formerly of Andover passed away December 6, 2021 at Bethesda Home of Aberdeen surrounded by her family. Memorial services will be held at a later date under the direction of Paetznick-Garness Funeral Chapel, Groton.

Arlene P. was born on December 11, 1925 in Webster to Helmer and Irene (Cavanaugh) Torguson. She attended rural grade school and graduated from Pierpont High School in 1943. She worked at the Peabody Clinic in Webster.

Deciding to further her education, Arlene went to Minneapolis, MN. And after graduation, was employed by radiologists Hanson, Iverson and Nord. On September 20, 1952, she was united in marriage with Robert Anderson of Andover. Their family became complete with the addition of a son, Kevin, and daughter, Karma.

In line with her view on education, Arlene served on the Andover and Groton Boards of Education; worked on the development of the Day County Museum and helped negotiate the service of the Brown County Bookmobile into rural areas of Day County.

Arlene continued her own education at Northern State College, receiving a BS in English and Business and later adding a MS in English. She taught at Langford High School and retired from Webster High School. Arlene and Bob traveled extensively and eventually purchased a home in Yuma, Arizona. Arlene substituted in various Yuma schools.

When Bob's health began to deteriorate, the couple returned to Andover. In 2003, Arlene moved to Groton and her "bridge" life began. In 2013, she moved to Arbor Springs, Aberdeen.

Arlene is survived by her son, Kevin (Donna) Anderson of Andover, daughter, Karma (LeRoy) Smith of Loveland, CO, grandchildren; Amber (Mark) Surls, of Denver, CO, Kory Anderson (Ali Fisher) of Andover, Scott (Jady) Anderson of Turton, Chance Smith of Loveland, CO, great-grandchildren; Drake Anderson, Sofia Surls, Wolfgang and Serena Anderson.

Honorary Urn Bearers will be Arlene's Grandchildren-Amber Surls, Kory Anderson, Scott Anderson and Chance Smith.

Memorials may be directed to St. John's Lutheran Preschool, Groton, James Valley Threshing Association, Andover, Prairie Heart Guest House (Attention Jessica, 4500 West 69th St., Sioux Falls, SD 57108) or Hearts and Horses Therapeutic Riding Center (163 North Co. Road 29, Loveland, CO 80537).

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 5 of 90

Facts and Stipulations

Folks,

Truth matters. Today, the media breathlessly ran with a claim by Ms. Sherry Bren that there had never been a "stipulation agreement" prior to Ms. Cassidy Peters' case.

The only problem? That claim was false. Worse, Ms. Bren uttered this false claim under oath. Worse yet, when given an opportunity to clarify, Ms. Bren doubled down on the falsehood.

The committee was presented with an example of a previous stipulation agreement with another appraiser upgrade candidate from 2017. Who was courtesy copied on that previous agreement?

Ms. Sherry Bren.

Those are the facts.

Moreover, she wasn't just copied on the agreement. Ms. Bren had a direct hand in shaping the specific stipulation agreement in question. She edited the document before it was approved. That is another fact.

Falsus in uno, falsus in omnibus is a Latin phrase meaning "false in one thing, false in everything." It is the legal principle that a witness who testifies falsely about one matter is not credible to testify about any matter.

Whether that applies to Ms. Bren is for others to judge.

Sincerely,

Ian Fury

Gov. Noem Announces Fairness in Girls' Sports Legislation

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, Governor Kristi Noem released the text of draft legislation to defend fairness in girls' sports at both the K-12 and collegiate level. This legislation will codify Governor Noem's executive orders and extend further protections to women and girls.

"This is about fairness. Every young woman deserves an equal playing field where she can achieve success, but common sense tells us that males have an unfair physical advantage over females in athletic competition. It is for those reasons that only girls should be competing in girls' sports," said Governor Kristi Noem. "Women have fought long and hard for equal athletic opportunities, and South Dakota will defend them, but we have to do it in a smart way."

"Only female athletes, based on their biological sex, shall participate in any team, sport, or athletic event designated as being for females, women, or girls," the legislation reads. The legislation describes "biological sex" as "the sex listed on the student's official birth certificate issued at or near the time of the athlete's birth."

"This legislation does not have the problematic provisions that were included in last year's House Bill 1217," continued Governor Noem. "Those flawed provisions would have led to litigation for our state, as well as for the families of young South Dakota athletes – male and female alike."

Governor Noem previously protected fairness in girls' sports earlier this year when she signed two executive orders to defend it, both at the K-12 and collegiate levels. Now she is asking the Legislature to put it into law.

Following widespread misconceptions about Governor Noem's position on this issue, she published an op-ed in National Review to correct the record.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 6 of 90

#495 in a series Covid-19 Update: By Marie Miller

It was two years ago Sunday that the first cluster of patients in Wuhan, Hubei, China, started experiencing shortness of breath and fever on the way to being diagnosed with, as scientists say, a pneumonia of unknown etiology—which means no one knew what was causing it. It took a while for news to filter out to the rest of the world and a while longer yet to figure out something serious was afoot. We know what's causing it now, and some of us have figured out that it's serious.

We did it! Passed 50 million cases like it was standing still. At midday today, we're at 50,083,493. The New York Times pointed out early this morning this is more than the combined populations of Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, and Ohio; more than the population of Spain; almost 18 times the number of dollars the average American college graduate can expect to earn-ever. And it's nowhere near the real number of cases; we've known that all along. Here's the history:

April 28, 2020 – 1 million – 98 days
June 11 – 2 million – 44 days
July 8 – 3 million – 27 days
July 23 – 4 million – 15 days
August 9 – 5 million – 17 days
August 31 – 6 million – 22 days
September 24 – 7 million – 24 days
October 15 – 8 million – 21 days
October 29 – 9 million – 14 days
November 8 – 10 million – 10 days
November 15 – 11 million – 7 days
November 21 – 12 million – 6 days
November 27 – 13 million – 6 days
December 3 – 14 million – 6 days
December 7 – 15 million – 4 days
December 12 – 16 million – 5 days
December 17 – 17 million – 5 days
December 21 – 18 million – 4 days
December 26 – 19 million – 5 days
December 31 – 20 million – 5 days
January 5 – 21 million – 5 days
January 9 – 22 million – 4 days
January 13 – 23 million – 4 days
January 18 – 24 million – 5 days
January 23 – 25 million – 5 days
January 30 – 26 million – 7 days
February 7 – 27 million – 8 days
February 19 – 28 million – 12 days
March 7 – 29 million – 16 days
March 24 – 30 million – 17 days
April 8 – 31 million – 15 days
April 24 – 32 million – 16 days
May 18 – 33 million – 23 days
July 16 – 34 million – 59 days
July 31 – 35 million – 15 days

August 11 – 36 million – 11 days
August 17 – 37 million – 6 days
August 23 – 38 million – 6 days
August 30 – 39 million – 7 days
September 5 – 40 million – 6 days
September 12 – 41 million – 7 days
September 18 – 42 million – 6 days
September 27 – 43 million – 9 days
October 6 – 44 million – 9 days
October 18 – 45 million – 12 days
November 1 – 46 million – 14 days
November 13 – 47 million – 12 days
November 24 – 48 million – 11 days
December 4 – 49 million – 10 days
December 13 – 50 million – 9 days

Our seven-day new-case average is up to 120,056, first time over 120,000 since September 25—almost three months ago. This is a 49 percent increase in the past two weeks, and our rate of increase continues to accelerate. Hospitalizations are at 66,395, highest in two months. The seven-day deaths average is 1276, and total deaths sit at 797,208. We'll hit 800,000 later this week, likely Friday, so we have that to look forward to.

There are 1440 minutes in a day. We are averaging just short of one Covid-19 death per minute in the US and lead the developed world in per capita deaths—not, I suspect, exactly the way we wanted to be a world leader. The death rate among people 65 and over is one percent. To be clear, this isn't the death rate for people over 65 with Covid-19; it's the death rate from Covid-19 among people over 65—all

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 7 of 90

of us, sick or not. The death rate from Covid-19 for people 65 and over in this country is one percent. Meanwhile, one-third of us in the US say we've lost a family member or close friend to this virus. Life insurance companies say they paid out 15.4 percent more in 2020 than in 2019, just in case you needed excess deaths in dollars. And our average daily deaths from the entire pandemic is 1218; today at midday, we were over that. Not really getting better, is it?

In what I hope is an isolated thing, not a harbinger of our future, Cornell University closed its Ithaca, New York, campus today just a few days before the semester was scheduled to end and sent everyone home. This is in response to nearly 500 Covid-19 cases, with the Omicron variant figuring "in a significant number of Monday's positive student samples," according to the university president, Martha Pollack. Final exams have been moved online, activities and athletics are canceled, and libraries are closed, according to a letter sent from Pollack to students.

We've talked before about the way the trajectory of this pandemic in the US seems to follow on the heels of what's happening in Europe. If so, batten the hatches. The UK is reporting that infections with the Omicron variant are doubling every two to three days and the variant was responsible for 44 percent of infections in London on Monday and was expected to become the dominant variant in the city by Wednesday, according to their Health Secretary in a report to Parliament. Their first Omicron death was also reported on Monday. A consensus seems to be developing that the variant is, indeed, more infectious, much more; there isn't really any alternative explanation for the speed with which this is spreading. More people infected means more in the hospital, even if it is a less virulent virus, something we're not at all sure about anyhow. Not what we needed to hear.

The latest out of the CDC is that the Omicron variant has been detected in 33 states of the US. Prevalence across the US jumped seven-fold from 0.4 percent of new infections to 2.9 percent in a week. It's higher in some places—13 percent in some Northeastern states and in Houston, which expects to hit 20 percent this week. If it follows anything like the pattern we're seeing now in Europe, that picture's going to change almost daily.

Another thing that's changing almost daily is the current state of knowledge about Omicron. I just disposed of a chunk of writing I did yesterday because today a large study dropped from Discovery Health, a large health insurance company in South Africa with summarized findings on 211,000 Covid-19 cases from a three-week period, November 15 to December 7, 2021. Of these, 78,000 were due to Omicron, and 41 percent of those are adults who have received two doses of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. I'll emphasize that this is very preliminary, given this variant is only an infant (to the best of our knowledge) and the experience is limited to one country with demographic and environmental differences from the US and much of the rest of the world. There is, however, a wealth of information here. I am working directly from Discovery's summary here; I do not have access to their data. I will also note that all of the data relative to vaccination have to do with the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine; this is because vaccination in South Africa was almost exclusively with this vaccine, so they simply don't have anything to report about the others.

According to the report, "Omicron infection accounts for over 90% of new infections in South Africa, and has displaced the formerly dominant Delta variant. The Omicron-driven fourth wave has a significantly steeper trajectory of new infections relative to prior waves. National data show an exponential increase in both new infections and test positivity rates during the first three weeks of this wave, indicating a highly transmissible variant with rapid community spread of infection." So on the question of transmissibility, the jury is leaning toward a guilty verdict. We were thinking that anyhow, but this adds weight to the evidence.

There were four basic conclusions drawn from this study. Here they are.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 8 of 90

(1) The two-dose vaccine regimen has diminished effectiveness, but still offers “robust protection” against severe disease and hospitalization. They found effectiveness against infection dropped from 80 percent against earlier variants to 33 percent against Omicron, likely due to spike mutations on this variant. Protection against hospitalization dropped from 93 percent to 70 percent compared to unvaccinated individuals. This is reduced, but still substantial. No data were reported from folks who had received a third dose as a booster. This effect held in all age groups from 18 to 79 years of age with only small reductions at the older end of this spectrum—67 percent in ages 60-69 and 60 percent in 70-79—and also across co-morbidities.

(2) Reinfection risk is significantly higher compared to earlier variants. The three prior waves of Covid-19 in South Africa correspond roughly to D614G (the first variant from the original wild-type virus), Alpha, and Delta. Reinfection risk for those who were infected in the first D614G wave is 73 percent, for those infected by Alpha is 60 percent, and for those infected by Delta is 40 percent. Short version: Prior infection isn't going to be much help here.

(3) It does appear severe disease and hospitalization are less likely with this variant. It's still early, so we really do need to keep that in mind, but the news here looks pretty good. Hospitalizations are not increasing at anything like the rate new infections are increasing. This could be due to the high rate of vaccinated and previously-infected people in this population. Nonetheless, they are reporting a 29 percent lower admission risk compared to their first wave (D614G) and “a lower propensity to be admitted to high-care and intensive-care units, relative to prior waves.”

(4) While children are still showing low incidence of severe disease, the report shows a 20 percent higher risk of admission for Covid-19 in those under 18 years of age. A few days ago, we talked about the number of children being diagnosed incidentally after admission to the hospital for some other cause; I want to be clear this is not what they're talking about here. This 20 percent increase is in hospitalizations needed due to complications of Covid-19. They report this is similar to the increase seen in children's admissions during the third (Delta) wave. Children are still testing positive at a lower rate than adults, but we don't know whether this is because they're being infected at a lower rate or simply because children don't get tested as frequently.

I'll add to this report the following based on more anecdotal reports from South Africa. Doctors in place after place are reporting that despite skyrocketing case numbers, they are sending fewer to the hospital and seeing less severe disease and fewer deaths than they did during previous waves of Covid-19 in the country. They report patients able to manage their disease at home and rapid recoveries, even in older people and people with co-morbidities that predispose to severe disease. What is being reported is milder, more flu-like symptoms instead of the breathing problems and reduced oxygen levels that were more commonly seen in earlier waves.

And we have a little data as well from South Africa's National Institute for Communicable Diseases, helpfully distilled by the AP for us: (1) New cases have increased from around 200 per day to 20,000 per day nationwide with Omicron responsible for 70 percent of them; (2) 75 percent of hospitalized patients have incidental disease, that is, they're diagnosed only because they are tested, not because they have Covid-19 symptoms; (3) about half the rate of severe illness has been seen in hospitalized patients in this wave; (4) average hospital stays have reduced from eight days to 2.8 days with quick recovery the norm; (5) death rates among hospitalized patients have fallen from 20 percent to three percent. We should also note that 85 percent of hospitalized patients have not been vaccinated.

South Africa's case numbers increased by 83 percent this week compared to last week. We here in the US are starting at much higher new-case numbers than they had when this thing started. We'd better hope we don't see anything like an 83 percent increase in a week ourselves, but I wouldn't bet on it.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 9 of 90

I'll leave this topic with just one more call for caution in interpreting all of this because, honestly, there's too much left to figure out. For example, it's only been a few weeks since this thing showed up, and it often takes longer than that for people who are going to get really sick to do that and show up in hospitals. South Africa has an unusually young population which could account for the trends here; in fact the doctors note the patients they're seeing are younger than they were earlier in the pandemic with two-thirds of them under 40. South Africa has a low vaccination rate (even compared to us) but a high rate of prior infections. It is possible a high proportion of the people getting sick have some level of protection from prior infections and vaccinations, which may be moderating their symptoms. Glenda Gray, president of the South African Medical Research Council, told the Washington Post that up to 80 percent of the population in some areas of the country have had Covid-19, which would definitely have an effect. "We don't think it's a question of virulence, but more a question of exposure to vaccination and prior infection. . . . We'll have to see what happens in other parts of the world before we make a call on this." It does appear we're going to have plenty of opportunity to study this variant in "other parts of the world;" it has now been detected in 63 countries, which has caused the WHO to designate the variant as carrying "very high" global risk.

Bottom line: It really is too soon to be sure just what we have here. Let's also remember that, even if this variant is less virulent, a huge wave of infection is still capable of swamping hospitals—a lower hospitalization percentage in an enormous number of infected people still stacks up to more than they can handle. With our health care system strained to breaking in parts of the country already, that remains a large concern with a highly transmissible variant on the scene.

To that point, the CDC's been at work modeling possible scenarios for how Omicron might spread across the US. I am reading that academic modeling projects are coming up with projections that look a whole lot like these, so they're certainly not outliers. One scenario projects a small surge in the spring. That would give the winter surge of Delta time to clear before this smaller wave of Omicron makes its way through the population. While hospitals wouldn't have much time to recover before that hit, the impact would at least be spread out so that this next wave didn't pile on already strained resources.

The other scenario doesn't look so rosy, projecting an Omicron surge peaking in January, layering it on top of a still-surgling Delta and the peak of flu season, which is expected to be worse than usual this year. One expert referred to this as the "triple whammy," and I think our health care system would have great difficulty holding up in that scenario. As I mentioned above, even if hospitalization rates are lower with Omicron, if case numbers are huge, then there will be a whole lot of folks needing a bed. Hospitals have been so stretched out for so long that, if we hit them with another huge surge in demand, it seems probable things are going to start falling apart.

The problem, as always, is the unvaccinated and also the low rate of fully-vaccinated people receiving boosters—only 54 million of those have been given out to our 200 million fully-vaccinated people. Even with reduced effectiveness, we see that vaccination can tamp down the worst of this, if only we were to employ it. The other means to mitigate is the other stuff we also don't want to do. You know the drill—no point in me repeating it. We're left with this: Take exceptionally good care of yourselves over the next couple of months until we know which way this is going to go. It could pay dividends to drive extra-safely, stay off teetering ladders, be careful around knives and firearms, etc. The last thing you want is to need a hospital bed between now and February because right now it's hard telling whether there will be one available for you.

Pfizer announced today that additional data on its oral Covid-19 therapy, Paxlovid, strengthen those they've already submitted to the FDA for its emergency use authorization (EUA). They are reporting that, given within three to five days of symptom onset, Paxlovid reduces the risk of hospitalization and death

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 10 of 90

by 88 to 89 percent in unvaccinated persons. Remembering that this is given to people who are already showing symptoms, just 0.7 percent of patients who received the drug were hospitalized within four weeks of entering the trial; none died. Of patients receiving placebo, 6.5 percent were hospitalized or died. These data come from a trial done with 2246 people at high risk for severe disease. In a separate trial involving 662 participants, including vaccinated people with a risk factor for severe disease, Paxlovid reduced the risk of hospitalization and death by 70 percent.

Also today, the company announced the results of lab tests for Paxlovid shows it performs well against the Omicron variant. This shouldn't come as a surprise: You may recall that this drug functions as a protease inhibitor, preventing the host cell from producing functional proteins for new virus particles it is assembling. If you want to brush up on that whole process, have a look at my Update #484 posted November 6, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5276107965738900>. Because proteases don't appear to be the subject of any of Omicron's vaunted mutations, it makes sense that the drug is expected to work as well against Omicron as against the Delta patients were infected with in the clinical trials. I would expect we'll hear something soon on the drug's EUA.

We talked a while back about where this Omicron variant might have come from. We've had this part of the conversation enough times by now that the story is familiar: A variant arises and then, over months of spread and replication, further mutates to produce a new variant which then also mutates later to produce yet another one. Those Pango numbers scientists use to name variants—B.1.1.7, B.1.351, etc.—are shorthand expressions of the genetic relationships among all those lineages. The question of origins for Omicron (B.1.1.529) is particularly interesting because this variant doesn't seem to be a descendant of the other lines of variants we've been serially tracking since Alpha's big breakout just about a year ago and the subsequent "descendant" variants, but more directly from a version that was circulating closer to 18 months ago. So where's it been all that time?

Good question. The three kinds of theories that scientists are kicking around are (1) that it could have arisen in a remote place—probably in Africa given where it first turned up—and just took a while to really spread and get identified; (2) that it engaged in reverse zoonosis, making its way into another animal species, mutated there, and then made the jump back to humans; and (3) that it spent a great deal of time in a very immunocompromised host, mutating at leisure as it dealt with more feeble defenses than it had previously encountered. The way this happens is that a compromised host cannot clear the virus, but doesn't die, setting up a long-term (sometimes months-long) relationship that can provide the opportunity for mutation and the selection pressure that increases the likelihood a more successful variant will emerge. We discussed just how that works way back in my Update #278 posted November 27, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4210859298930444>

That matters because this third possibility seems to be gaining support from emerging evidence. Consider that this thing emerged where it did, in the part of the world with two-thirds of the global population living with HIV, many of whom are not receiving effective anti-HIV therapy. At least two other important variants, Alpha and Beta, are thought to have evolved in the same way after a long-term infection in a compromised patient. The reason for the lack of HIV treatment is the same reason that people in this part of the world aren't very highly vaccinated against Covid-19—lack of resources and global inattention—things that also make it a great place for a new and dangerous variant to gain a foothold.

You know where this is going, right? A group of researchers at University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban, South Africa, and the country's National Health Laboratory Services, have published a letter in the journal *Nature*, pointing out these connections. They explained, "We described a case from South Africa in June in which SARS CoV-2 persisted in a person with advanced uncontrolled HIV for more than six months.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 11 of 90

Repeated genomic sequencing revealed significant step changes in the evolution of SARS-CoV-2, and some of the variants emerging had similar mutations to those observed in three of the VOCs.”

The authors call for four actions by the global community: vaccinate Africa, prioritize research on the interaction of Covid-19 and HIV, maintain HIV services which have been damaged by the pandemic and resource allocation to address this, and integrate health systems for people suffering both infections. They make the expected and compelling humanitarian case for this sort of attention, and they extend the case to each country and population’s self-interest. “The best way for governments to protect their citizens is not by further stigmatizing those infected with HIV; it is by quickly providing vaccines to protect the world’s most vulnerable. Only global solidarity — not discrimination, blockage or the hoarding of resources — will end the COVID-19 pandemic.” That’s because the current situation is highly likely to prolong the pandemic by continuing to encourage and support the emergence of new variants. Makes sense to me.

Occasionally, we’ve talked about classes of immunoglobulins (Ig) or antibodies, and pretty much every time the class we would discuss would be either IgG or IgM. That’s because those are the predominant circulating antibodies that protect us against infections of various kinds. Another class of antibody is called IgA, one form of which is also called secretory antibody. It’s called secretory because it tends to show up in mucous secretions like tears, saliva, sweat, and secretions from the genitourinary, gastrointestinal, and respiratory tracts. It should not surprise you that the effects of this class of antibodies tend to be local right in the tissues where it is produced.

A team at Yale University and the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York that knew IgA-producing cells can be important in fighting intestinal infections decided to check out whether something similar occurs in the respiratory tract with respect to respiratory viruses. The benefit of a response at this level would be that it can stop a virus before it ever really establishes a toehold in the host at all. Senior author, Akiko Iwasaki, explained in a news release from Yale, “The best immune defense happens at the gate, guarding against viruses trying to enter.”

I haven’t been able to access a copy of their peer-reviewed paper published a few days ago in *Science Immunology*, but I’ve read the news release, the abstract, and a summary, and their findings look pretty promising. They found that a protein-based intranasal vaccine—one administered through the nose—does elicit IgA antibody production. Further, the protection that results is broad-based, that is, it protects against more than just one form of a virus: An intranasal vaccine they developed against influenza protected against a variety of strains of the virus, not just the one for which it was formulated, and in fact, the intranasal vaccine protected mice better than did an injected vaccine. They are now testing a similar candidate against SARS-CoV-2, and in animal tests there, only the intranasal vaccine induced IgA secretion in the respiratory tract. The key would be if this kind of vaccine would also give the kind of broad protection against multiple strains that was seen with the influenza vaccine, rendering the likelihood of a either a complete or a partial immune escape by a new variant far less likely. If this thing works in humans as well as it does in animals—and we’re still a ways from showing that—it seems likely this would be used to supplement current vaccines to broaden and reinforce the protections those provide. As always, more vaccines is better. And better ones is better yet.

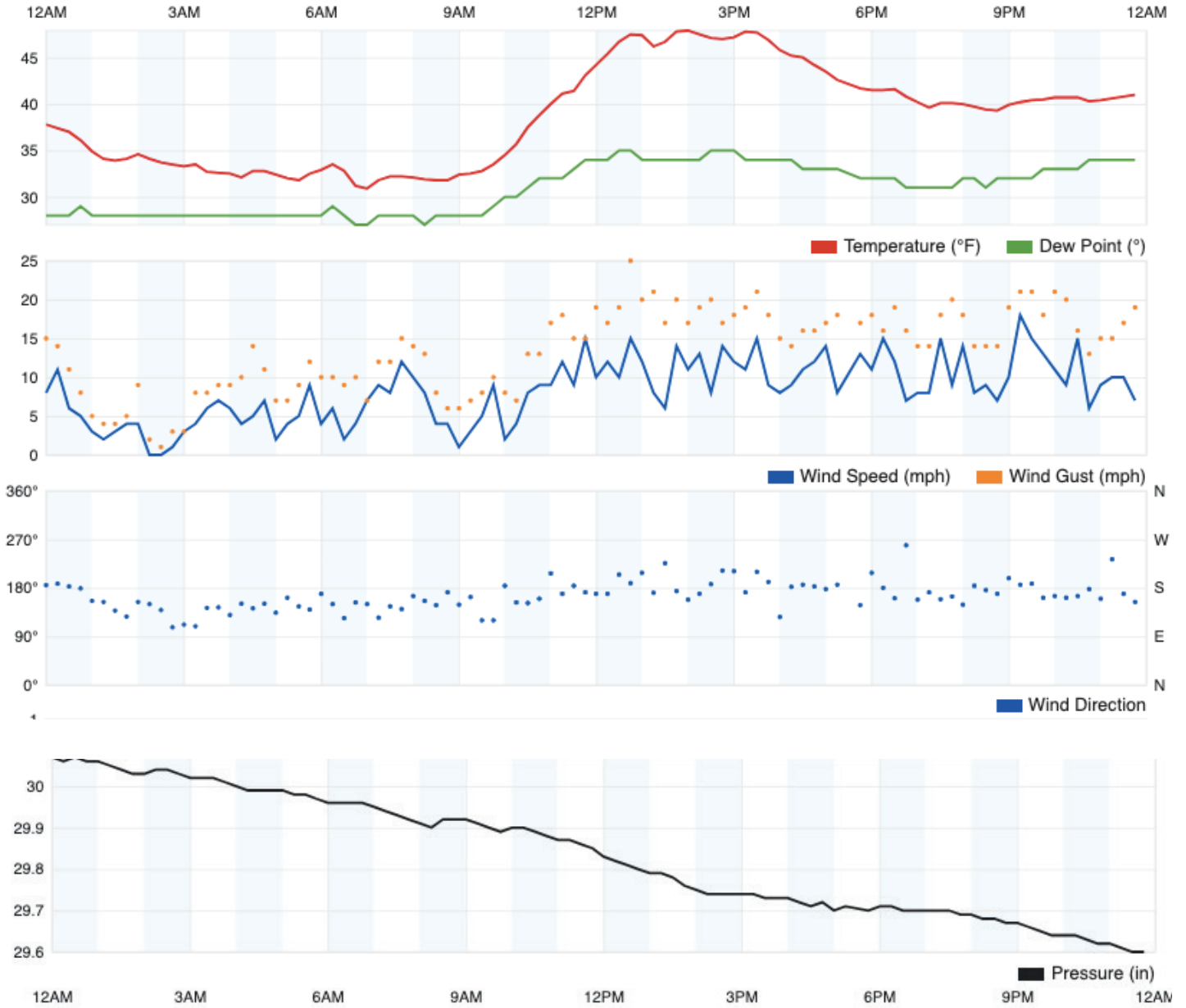
I realize this is very long. Yesterday I didn’t really have enough to post, but then today a huge quantity of information plunked itself down in front of me. I tried to decide what to leave out for another day, taking things out and putting them back in until I finally just said, “Enough!” and here we are. Only the persistent will ever read this paragraph. Oh well.

That’s really it for today. Stay careful. I’ll see you in a few days.

Groton Daily Independent

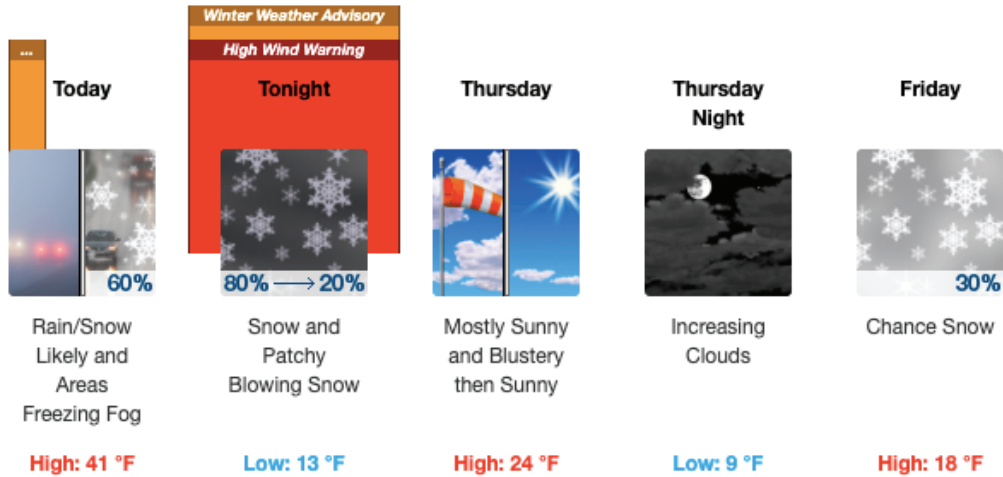
Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 12 of 90

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



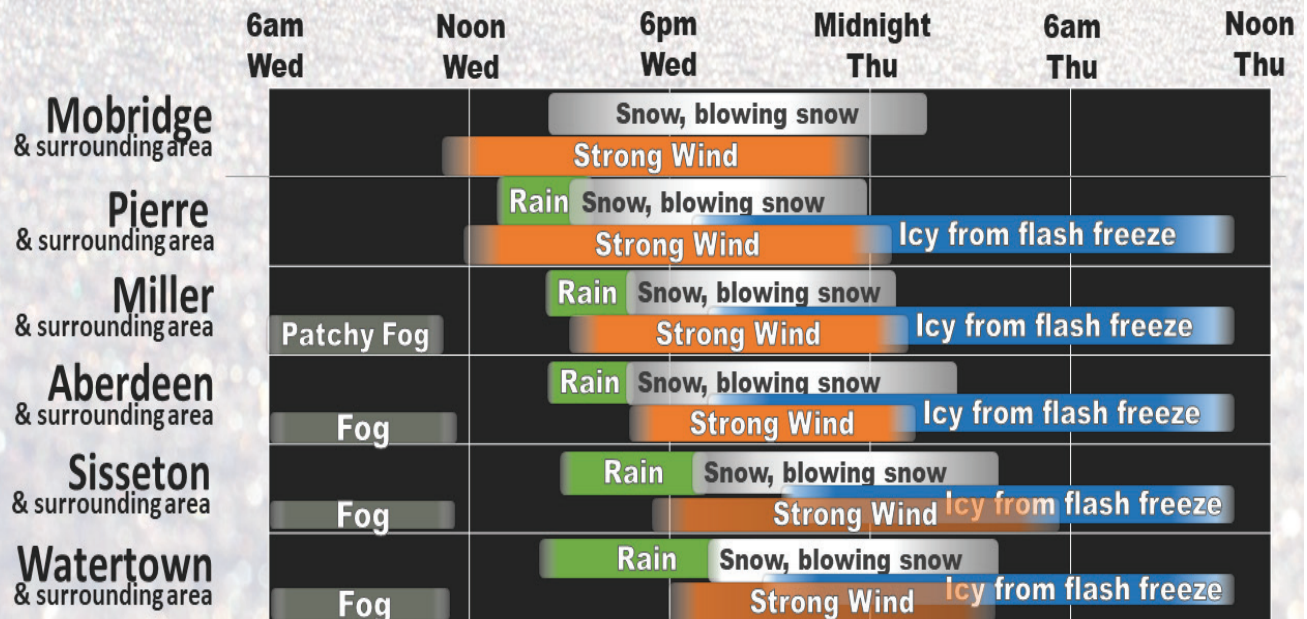
Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 13 of 90



Winter Weather Threats Timeline

A potent, quick-moving storm system will bring hazardous travel conditions across the area. Thunder and brief wintry mix possible prior to rain's changeover to snow. Wind gusts of 45 to 60 mph likely. Dropping temperatures this evening will lead to a freezing of wet surfaces, leading to potentially icy roadways.



Visit www.weather.gov/abr for a detailed forecast for your specific location

Updated: 12/15/2021 4:53 AM CT



Several weather hazards are possible today through Thursday morning, as a strong storm system moves through the area. These hazards including reduced visibility from fog and blowing snow, and hazardous road conditions from snow, ice and high winds. Conditions may change quickly - don't get caught off guard if traveling.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 14 of 90

Today in Weather History

December 15, 1983: A storm system impacted the region on the 14-15th with five inches of snow and high winds to produce blocked roads and numerous school closings on the 15th throughout most of the eastern third of South Dakota. No travel was advised from late afternoon on the 14th due to low visibility and blocked roads in Roberts and Brookings Counties. The conditions contributed some to several traffic accidents. Meanwhile, snow also spread across Minnesota on December 13th and diminished late on the 15th. Snow accumulations ranged from 1 to 2 inches in west central Minnesota to higher amounts over 10 inches to the east. Winds increased and temperatures began to fall on December 14th as an arctic cold front pushed through the state. The strongest winds occurred during the night of December 14th and into the morning of December 15th. Near-blizzard conditions developed in the southwest and west-central sections of Minnesota where the visibility was reported to be near zero with winds of 20 to 30 mph. The wind chill index dropped to 30 below to 60 below zero. Blowing and drifting snow conditions occurred to some degree throughout all of Minnesota. Snow drifts caused many roads to close. Drifting snow continued during the evening of December 15th as the winds and snowfall gradually diminished. This event, associated with an arctic cold front, was the beginning of what would become, and remains, the coldest stretch of December days on record across most of the area. For the next nine days, beginning on December 16th, Aberdeen did not warm above -6 degrees, enduring temperatures as low as -34 F and high temperatures as low as -15 F. Other stations around the region had very similar cold temperatures during the December 16th through December 24th period, with temperatures warming into single digits above zero on Christmas Day.

December 15, 1992: Cyclone John hit the sparsely populated northwest coast of Australia with winds gusting to 185 mph. John was the strongest cyclone to hit Australia in over 100 years.

1839 - The first of triple storms hit Massachusetts Bay. The storm produced whole gales, and more than 20 inches of snow in interior New England. There was great loss of life at Gloucester MA. (David Ludlum)

1901 - An intense cold front swept across the eastern U.S. The cold front produced heavy rain in Louisiana, and heavy snow in the northeastern U.S. (David Ludlum)

1945 - A record December snowstorm buried Buffalo, NY, under 36.6 inches of snow, with unofficial totals south of the city ranging up to 70 inches. Travel was brought to a halt by the storm. (14th-17th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A major winter storm hit the Great Lakes Region, intensifying explosively as it crossed northern Illinois. High winds and heavy snow created blizzard conditions in southeastern Wisconsin. Winds gusted to 73 mph, and snowfall totals ranged up to 17 inches at LaFarge. The barometric pressure at Chicago IL dropped three quarters of an inch in six hours to 28.96 inches, a record low reading for December. Up to a foot of snow blanketed northern Illinois, and winds in the Chicago area gusted to 75 mph. O'Hare Airport in Chicago was closed for several hours, for only the fourth time in twenty years. High winds derailed train cars at Avon IN. Light winds and partly sunny skies were reported near the center of the storm, a feature typical of tropical storms. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - High pressure in the Pacific Northwest and low pressure in the southwestern U.S. combined to produced high winds from Utah to California. Winds gusting to 70 mph in the San Francisco area left nearly 300,000 residents without electricity. Winds in Utah gusted to 105 mph at Centerville. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A couple of low pressure systems spread heavy snow across the northeastern U.S. Up to two feet of snow was reported along Lake Erie in northeastern Ohio, and up to ten inches was reported in Connecticut. Heavy snow squalls developed over Michigan for the third day in a row. Three Oaks MI reported 25 inches of snow in two days. Twenty-six cities in the north central U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. The low of 10 degrees below zero at Wichita KS was a December record for that location. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2005 - Freezing rain and ice pellets fell throughout portions of the southeast U.S. The accumulation of ice caused about 683,000 utilities customers to lose power from northern Georgia northward through the western Carolinas. The power outages were the result of ice accretions of up to three-quarter inch in thickness. The ice storm was blamed for at least four deaths (Associated Press).

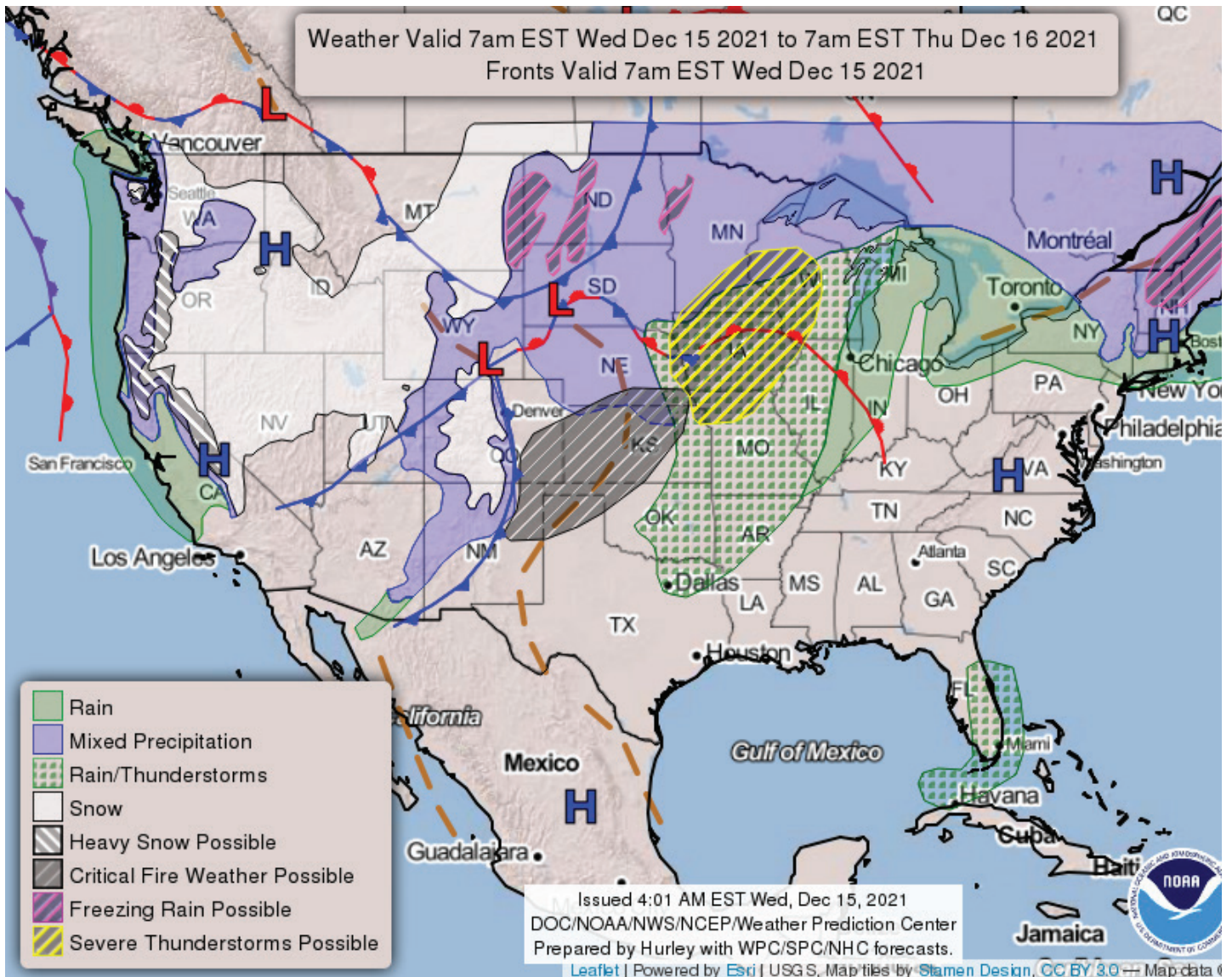
Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 15 of 90

Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 47.9 °F at 2:00 PM
Low Temp: 30.9 °F at 7:00 AM
Wind: 25 mph at 12:45 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 60° in 1939
Record Low: -24° in 1917
Average High: 29°F
Average Low: 8°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.29
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.11
Average Precip to date: 21.50
Precip Year to Date: 19.97
Sunset Tonight: 4:51:33 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:04:40 AM



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 16 of 90



PLANNING AHEAD

It was the Sunday before Christmas and the teacher of the fifth-grade class was reviewing the details of the birth of Jesus. With carefully chosen words, she talked about the difficult journey to Bethlehem. Then she said with sadness, "And when they arrived, there was no room for them in the inn. Wasn't that terrible?"

George, after thinking for a moment about the vacations his family had taken and the careful, detailed plans they made said without thinking, "Why didn't Joseph make a reservation?"

There will be many around us during this holiday season who will make no room – no reservation – for Jesus to be with them this year. We often remind each other that "He's the reason for the Season" but do not take time to explain to others what that "reason" is. We are quick to condemn those who want to take "Christ out of Christmas" but do not take time to plant the message of Christ in their minds and hearts at Christmas. We place the manger scene under the tree, cover it with presents and then wrap it back up and forget about His birth and its significance for another year.

Hanging next to Jesus on a cross was a thief who was dying for crimes he committed. In his final moments, he turned to Him and said, "Jesus, remember me." And Jesus said, "I certainly will! Today you will be with me in paradise." The best day to make your reservation to be with Him is this day if you have not done so. Don't delay!

Prayer: Your Word, Lord, declares with certainty: "Today is the day of salvation." May we take advantage of this day and not risk the uncertainties of life! In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:1-7 And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 17 of 90

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

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 18 of 90

The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

- Black & White \$41.54/year
- Colored \$74.55/year
- Colored \$42.60/6 months
- E-Weekly* \$21.30/year

* The E-Weekly is a PDF file emailed to you each week. It does not grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

City _____

State, Zip Code _____

E-mail _____

Phone Number _____

Mail Completed Form to:

Groton Independent

P.O. Box 34

Groton, SD 57445-0034

or scan and email to paperpaul@grotonsd.net

Groton Daily Independent

www.397news.com

Subscription Form

This option will grant you access to the GDI/Video Archives.

- 1 Month \$15.98
- 3 Months..... \$21.30
- 6 Months..... \$26.63
- 9 Months..... \$31.95
- 12 Months..... \$42.60

Name: _____

Mailing Address: _____

City _____

State, Zip Code _____

Phone Number _____

The following will be used for your log-in information.

E-mail _____

Password _____

Pay with Paypal. Type the following into your browser window:

paypal.me/paperpaul



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 19 of 90

News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

33-35-44-55-69, Mega Ball: 20, Megaplier: 3

(thirty-three, thirty-five, forty-four, fifty-five, sixty-nine; Mega Ball: twenty; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$148 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$333 million

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 47, Warner 23

Aberdeen Roncalli 72, Mobridge-Pollock 53

Alcester-Hudson 45, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 42

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 49, Ethan 39

Belle Fourche 40, Sturgis Brown 28

Bennett County 51, Colome 26

Brandon Valley 55, Sioux Falls Jefferson 49

Castlewood 56, Elkton-Lake Benton 48

Centerville 68, Freeman Academy/Marion 24

Colman-Egan 64, Canistota 30

Corsica/Stickney 74, Avon 38

Dakota Valley 59, Beresford 38

DeSmet 63, Wolsey-Wessington 56, OT

Dell Rapids St. Mary 65, Mitchell Christian 16

Deubrook 38, Deuel 15

Estelline/Hendricks 40, Langford 26

Faulkton 55, Sunshine Bible Academy 17

Flandreau 57, Hamlin 56, OT

Freeman 36, McCook Central/Montrose 28

Garretson 61, Canton 47

Gayville-Volin 44, Wausa, Neb. 33

Herreid/Selby Area 61, Timber Lake 47

Higmore-Harrold 73, James Valley Christian 67, OT

Howard 58, Chester 47

Huron 54, Brookings 41

Jones County 52, Kadoka Area 39

Miller 54, Potter County 38

Newell 37, Lead-Deadwood 16

North Central Co-Op 35, Ipswich 30

Northwestern 42, Wilmot 36

Parker 46, Baltic 44

Parkston 50, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 18

Platte-Geddes 45, Kimball/White Lake 33

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 20 of 90

Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 60, Hitchcock-Tulare 41
Scotland 36, Menno 21
Sioux Falls Christian 56, Dell Rapids 28
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 53, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 26
Sioux Falls Washington 75, Yankton 36
Sisseton 63, Milbank 50
Sully Buttes 61, Lyman 40
Tri-Valley 47, Madison 16
Viborg-Hurley 54, Bridgewater-Emery 35
Wagner 56, Irene-Wakonda 48
Watertown 33, Mitchell 29
Wessington Springs 56, Iroquois/Doland 42
West Central 51, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 42
Winner 64, Stanley County 24

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 64, Warner 40
Belle Fourche 48, Sturgis Brown 32
Brookings 55, Huron 49
Canton 60, Garretson 44
Chamberlain 51, Gregory 49
Corsica/Stickney 58, Avon 22
Dakota Valley 60, Beresford 14
DeSmet 60, Clark/Willow Lake 57
Dell Rapids St. Mary 41, Mitchell Christian 34
Deubrook 67, Deuel 62
Elkton-Lake Benton 69, Castlewood 67, OT
Estelline/Hendricks 64, Langford 45
Ethan 69, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 33
Faith 68, Philip 50
Faulkton 60, Sunshine Bible Academy 25
Florence/Henry 44, Waverly-South Shore 40
Freeman Academy/Marion 56, Centerville 30
Hamlin 60, Flandreau 56
Hanson 48, McCook Central/Montrose 40
Harrisburg 71, Sioux Falls Lincoln 63
Hitchcock-Tulare 58, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 56
Howard 58, Chester 41
Ipswich 56, North Central Co-Op 24
Irene-Wakonda 60, Wagner 48
Lead-Deadwood 49, Newell 15
Lyman 67, Sully Buttes 33
Madison 56, Tri-Valley 38
Milbank 62, Sisseton 38
Mitchell 76, Watertown 62
Mobridge-Pollock 52, Aberdeen Roncalli 27
Northwestern 50, Wilmot 48
Oakes, N.D. 54, Leola/Frederick 46
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 61, Alcester-Hudson 19
Parkston 59, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 32

Potter County 76, Miller 33
Rapid City Stevens 57, Rapid City Central 38
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 61, Sioux Falls O’Gorman 60
St. Thomas More 64, Douglas 31
Timber Lake 57, Herreid/Selby Area 48
Viborg-Hurley 37, Bridgewater-Emery 34
Waubay/Summit 61, Webster 36
Wausa, Neb. 58, Gayville-Volin 54
West Central 72, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 58
Winner 55, Stanley County 36
Wolsey-Wessington 61, Lake Preston 24
Yankton 66, Sioux Falls Washington 53

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

Official: License for Noem’s daughter got unusual treatment

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem’s daughter received unusual treatment in an application for her real estate appraiser license, including an extra opportunity to obtain it after failing to meet federal requirements, the former director of a state appraiser agency told lawmakers Tuesday.

Sherry Bren’s testimony before a legislative panel was the first time that she has spoken in depth in public about Cassidy Peters’ application and about a meeting that her mother called last year to discuss the appraisal process. The panel began looking into the July 2020 meeting at the governor’s mansion after The Associated Press first reported on it in September.

Noem called the meeting a week after the state’s Appraiser Certification Program notified her daughter that her application was headed for denial. Peters ultimately obtained the certification four months later, in November 2020, and Bren said she was subsequently “forced to retire” from a program that she had led since its inception in 1991.

Bren testified that she felt “intimidated” at the July meeting, where she said Peters’ unsuccessful application was discussed in detail and a plan was formulated that gave her another chance to apply.

Bren said that she could not remember the agency forming what’s called a “stipulation agreement” for any other appraiser at that point in their application. She said it broke with established procedures, giving Peters a third chance to pass a work review; applicants are usually granted two opportunities.

Even before that, Bren said, Peters’ application had departed from established practice, when Noem’s labor secretary took an unusual, hands-on role that spring.

The legislative panel’s inquiry comes as Noem has positioned herself as a prospect for the GOP presidential ticket in 2024 and shown a willingness to jab at potential rivals.

Noem has denied wrongdoing, casting her actions as an effort to cut red tape to address a shortage of appraisers. Noem also has insisted the agreement was not broached at the July meeting and said her daughter had only given “her personal experiences through the program.”

“There’s been a continual narrative that I did something to help her get licensed, which is absolutely false,” Noem said at an event Monday.

In testimony Tuesday, Bren said she had expected to see Noem and her labor secretary at the July meeting, but was surprised it included others, including Peters and the governor’s top aides.

“Once I got there, I was very nervous, and, quite frankly, intimidated,” Bren said.

As she testified, Noem spokesman Ian Fury posted on Twitter that the agreement showed that Peters had to meet additional requirements to get her license.

In an email, Fury also questioned Bren’s credibility, pointing out that the agency had previously entered into a “stipulation agreement” with an applicant in 2017.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 22 of 90

But Bren said that 2017 agreement was reached as part of the proceedings of a third-party review board, called the Office of Hearing Examiners, to which appraisers can appeal if they believe the agency mishandled their license.

"Once our case goes to hearing, then these documents are outside of my authority or control, and it would not be the same thing as what we're talking about today," Bren told the committee.

The 2017 agreement laid out a plan for an applicant to withdraw his application and submit a new one; Peters' agreement allowed her to complete her initial application.

In another departure from normal procedure, Bren said Secretary of Labor Marcia Hultman had pushed in the spring for her to strike from Peters' first agreement a requirement that she take additional classes as she tried for a second time to meet federal requirements. Bren said she could not remember a cabinet secretary ever getting involved in that process.

Hultman previously testified that Peters' application was handled in the same way as many other applicants. Hultman also said the meeting in the governor's mansion did not influence how Peters' application was handled because regulators had already shaped the agreement.

But Bren told lawmakers, "I recall the discussion focused on crafting a second agreement requiring Peters to complete the classes. Peters agreed to complete the classes, correct and rewrite the appraisal reports, and submit them for review to the examiner."

The agreement was signed more than a week after the meeting.

Bren's appearance was compelled by subpoena. After she was pressured to retire last year, she filed an age discrimination complaint and accepted a \$200,000 settlement that bars her from disparaging state officials.

Bren testified that she was "forced to retire." Asked later to say why, she said: "I believe that it was age discrimination and beyond that would be strictly speculation on my part."

Several lawmakers said they would like to see the state remove the nondisparagement clause from Bren's agreement because it would let them get more information.

"This is a question about, was a longtime, dedicated employee, was she wrongfully fired? Was she wrongfully fired on behalf of a relative of the governor? And did the state end up paying \$217,000 to cover that up?" said Sen. Reynold Nesiba, a Democrat. "And we're not going to know the answer to that question because of this nondisparagement clause."

The committee will draft a report on its findings, said Rep. Randy Gross, the Republican co-chair. He said that would "let the facts of what we learned stand on their own."

This story has corrected the attribution of a statement to Sherry Bren and that she filed an age discrimination complaint, not a lawsuit.

Follow Stephen Groves on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/stephengroves>

Noem proposes ban on transgender women from female sports

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem said Tuesday she would propose a bill to ban transgender women and girls from participation in female school sports leagues.

The proposal, which will be considered during the legislative session in January, revives a debate in the Capitol that split Republicans last year. A similar bill ultimately died in March after the governor issued a "style and form veto" against it.

Noem had argued that bill would have been easily defeated in court and had other technical problems. But she also faced political fallout among social conservatives and issued executive orders that pushed high school sports and public universities to only allow women to compete in women's sports if their birth certificate listed them as female.

Noem's proposed bill would codify those orders, her office said Tuesday. She described them as an effort to ensure "an equal playing field" for women.

"Common sense tells us that males have an unfair physical advantage over females in athletic competition," the Republican governor said in a statement.

But advocates for transgender people said it was an attack on transgender women and girls and did nothing to address the challenges like underfunding, a lack of media coverage and sexist stereotypes that girls and women actually face.

"Gov. Noem's proposed legislation is clearly fueled by a fear and misunderstanding of transgender people in our state," said Jett Jonelis, the advocacy manager at the American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota.

Gosch appoints attorney for AG impeachment investigation

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota House Speaker said Tuesday he had appointed special counsel to guide a committee considering whether the state's attorney general should be impeached.

The Republican Speaker, Rep. Spencer Gosch, said Sara Frankenstein, a Rapid City attorney who specializes in government affairs, would counsel lawmakers in the first impeachment investigation in state history.

The Republican-dominated House voted last month to have the committee investigate whether Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg should be impeached for his conduct surrounding a fatal car crash. He pleaded no contest in August to a pair of misdemeanors in the crash that killed 55-year-old Joseph Boeve.

Gosch said the committee will resume its investigation later this month.

Event featuring teachers crawling for cash prompts apology

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The organizers of a fundraiser that featured teachers on their hands and knees grabbing for dollar bills at a junior hockey league game in South Dakota are apologizing after the event drew criticism.

The "Dash For Cash" Saturday night in Sioux Falls was a competition in which 10 local teachers were selected to collect money for school projects. They had five minutes to collect as many of the 5,000 \$1 bills that were spread out on carpet at center ice between periods at the Sioux Falls Stampede's arena.

Critics on social media called the event demeaning. Loren Paul, president of the South Dakota Education Association, said it showed that the state needs to do better for its teachers and students when it comes to funding education.

"While the Dash for the Cash may have been well-intentioned, it only underscores the fact that educators don't have the resources necessary to meet the needs of their students," Paul said. "As a state, we shouldn't be forcing teachers to crawl around on an ice rink to get the money they need to fund their classrooms."

The Sioux Falls Stampede and CU Mortgage Direct, which donated the cash, together issued an apology Monday, the Argus Leader reported.

"Although our intent was to provide a positive and fun experience for teachers, we can see how it appears to be degrading and insulting towards the participating teachers and the teaching profession as a whole," the apology stated.

In their apology, the Sioux Falls Stampede along with CU Mortgage Direct said they would be providing an additional \$15,500 to area teachers.

Blaze traps hundreds in Hong Kong tower, 13 hospitalized

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Firefighters on Wednesday rescued hundreds of people who fled to the rooftop of a Hong Kong skyscraper and became trapped there after a major fire broke out. Hours later, the fire service said the blaze was extinguished.

In addition to those on the roof, dozens jammed into narrow areas in an open-air area on the fifth floor, peering over the edge as they awaited rescue. Firefighters had used an extendable ladder to reach them.

In all, firefighters brought 770 people out of the building, said Ng Yau Sheung, Hong Kong Fire Services Department's senior divisional officer. Another 40 people left on their own, he added.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 24 of 90

At least 13 people were sent to hospital for treatment, according to authorities. Three of them suffered injuries while 10 others suffered from smoke inhalation.

The fire started in the early afternoon at the World Trade Centre on Gloucester Road in the city's popular Causeway Bay shopping district, according to a government notice. The 38-story tower houses both offices and a mall.

Dense smoke was seen billowing out from the building, and photos and videos from those trapped inside showed poor visibility as smoke filled restaurants and stairways of the building.

Authorities said that the fire spread from the building's bottom two floors, which is occupied by a mall undergoing extensive renovations.

The fire services system had been shut off in the mall area, according to fire department officer Ng.

"If the system is under repair, it's possible that the contractor will shut down the area affected," he said during a news conference Wednesday evening.

Authorities said they were still looking into whether fire safety regulations had been breached.

Earlier, police had told local media that about 300 people had evacuated to the top of the building while waiting to be rescued.

Preliminary investigations by the police suggested that the fire had broken out in the electrical switch room located on the first floor of the shopping mall, before spreading to the scaffolding that surrounded part of the building, according to local newspaper South China Morning Post.

Authorities said the fire was under control by around 3:06 p.m. and was largely put out by 4:30 p.m.

The fire services department deployed 176 firefighters to the site. Two breathing apparatus teams and two water jets were mobilized to help fight the blaze, police said.

How a Kennedy built an anti-vaccine juggernaut amid COVID-19

By MICHELLE R. SMITH Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Robert F. Kennedy Jr. strode onto the stage at a Southern California church, radiating Kennedy confidence and surveying the standing ovation crowd with his piercing blue Bobby Kennedy eyes. Then, he launched into an anti-vaccine rant. Democrats "drank the Kool-Aid," he told people assembled for a far right conference, branded as standing for "health and freedom."

"It is criminal medical malpractice to give a child one of these vaccines," Kennedy contended, according to a video of the event, one of his many assertions that ignored or went against legal, scientific and public health consensus.

Then, Kennedy hawked his book. If just 300 attendees preordered it on Amazon that night, he told the crowd, it would land on the bestseller list and they could "stick it to Amazon and Jeff Bezos."

All profits, he said, would go to his charity, Children's Health Defense.

While many nonprofits and businesses have struggled during the pandemic, Kennedy's anti-vaccine group has thrived. An investigation by The Associated Press finds that Children's Health Defense has raked in funding and followers as Kennedy used his star power as a member of one of America's most famous families to open doors, raise money and lend his group credibility. Filings with charity regulators show revenue more than doubled in 2020, to \$6.8 million.

Since the pandemic started, Children's Health Defense has expanded the reach of its newsletter, which uses slanted information, cherry-picked facts and conspiracy theories to spread distrust of the COVID-19 vaccines. The group has also launched an internet TV channel and started a movie studio. CHD has global ambitions. In addition to opening new U.S. branches, it now boasts outposts in Canada, Europe and, most recently, Australia. It's translating articles into French, German, Italian and Spanish, and it's on a hiring spree.

According to data from Similarweb, a digital intelligence company that analyzes web traffic and search, Children's Health Defense has become one of the most popular "alternative and natural medicine sites" in the world, reaching a peak of nearly 4.7 million visits per month. That's up from less than 150,000 monthly visits before the pandemic.

As Children's Health Defense has worked to expand its influence, experts said, it has targeted its false

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 25 of 90

claims at groups that may be more prone to distrust the vaccine, including mothers and Black Americans. It's a strategy that experts worry has deadly consequences during a pandemic that has killed more than 5 million people, when misinformation has been deemed a threat to public health.

As vaccines have become a wedge political issue, Kennedy's opposition to the shot has at times brought him close to anti-democracy forces on the right who have made common cause with the anti-vaccine movement. The scion of the country's most prominent Democratic family has appeared at events that pushed the lie that the 2020 election was stolen and associated with people who have celebrated or downplayed the violent Jan. 6. attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Kennedy has been a key part of the anti-vaccine movement for years, but doctors and public health advocates told the AP that COVID-19 launched him to a new level.

"With the pandemic, he's been turbocharged," said Dr. David Gorski, a cancer surgeon at Wayne State University School of Medicine in Detroit and a critic of the anti-vaccine movement.

Dr. Richard Allen Williams, a cardiologist, professor of medicine at UCLA and founder of the Minority Health Institute, said Kennedy is leading "a propaganda movement," and "absolutely a racist operation" that is particularly dangerous to the Black community.

"He's really the ringleader of the misinformation campaign," said Williams, who has written several books about race and medicine. "So many people, even those in scientific circles, don't realize what Kennedy is doing."

Even Kennedy's own family members call his work "dangerous."

MISINFORMATION PIPELINE

Kennedy, 67, is a nephew of President John F. Kennedy and the son of his slain brother. He carved out a career as a bestselling author and top environmental lawyer fighting for important public health priorities such as clean water.

His work as a leading voice in that movement likely would have been his legacy, but more than 15 years ago, he became fixated on a belief that vaccines are not safe. While there are rare instances when people have severe reactions to vaccines, the billions of doses administered globally provide real world evidence that they are safe. The World Health Organization says vaccines prevent as many as 5 million deaths each year.

During the pandemic, Kennedy has become a near-ubiquitous source of false information about COVID-19 and vaccines. Earlier this year, Kennedy was named one of the "Disinformation Dozen" by the Center for Countering Digital Hate, which says he and the Children's Health Defense website are among the top spreaders of false information about vaccines online.

Kennedy's spokeswoman, Rita Shreffler, told the AP on Dec. 6 that he was not available for an interview for this story.

On Dec. 2, however, she had written to AP complaining of a "complete blackout by mainstream media" about Kennedy's book, and offering him for interviews.

An AP reporter responded within 20 minutes and sent multiple follow-up emails. When Shreffler finally responded, she asked for "your list of interview questions to be approved prior to scheduling an interview by the team." AP declined that restriction, and Shreffler then said Kennedy would not speak with AP.

More than 200 million Americans have been given a COVID-19 vaccine, and serious side effects are extremely rare, according to government safety tracking. That tracking and testing in tens of thousands of people has shown that the vaccines are safe and effective at reducing the risk of serious disease and death and that any health risks posed by the vaccine are far lower than the risks posed by the virus.

Children's Health Defense and its followers, seeking to undermine that message, use canny techniques to bring anti-vaccine misinformation even to those not looking for it.

The AP found links to Children's Health Defense articles all over Facebook. While many were shared as posts on the pages of fellow anti-vaccine activists, many more could be found in the comments sections on pages that people turn to for reliable information, including official government Facebook pages in all 50 states, and in health departments in nearly every state.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 26 of 90

"The vaccine was not created to save us all from a pandemic. The pandemic was created to get us to take the vaccine and more," one person wrote in February below a North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Facebook post.

Then, they linked to a January Children's Health Defense article that claimed 329 deaths following the COVID-19 shot had been reported to VAERS, a federal vaccine safety surveillance system that has been misused by anti-vaccine activists.

"Every Friday, the true American hero Robert F Kennedy Jr. pulls the data from the VAERS report. Here is the latest up until 1/22," the commenter wrote. Another user replied that the comment had been reported for dishonesty, but it was still up 10 months later.

People also shared CHD links under posts made by governors, schools, hospitals, military outposts, universities, news outlets, even a major league soccer team. One state senator from Alaska has shared CHD links on her Facebook page at least four times since March. They were also shared outside the United States, on Facebook pages in places such as Canada, Norway and Greece.

Kennedy has hundreds of thousands of followers on Facebook and Twitter, although he was kicked off Facebook's Instagram platform earlier this year. Children's Health Defense remains on all three platforms.

Since January, Children's Health Defense's COVID-19 vaccine-related posts were shared more frequently on Twitter than links to vaccine content on mainstream sites including CNN, Fox News, NPR and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, according to Indiana University's Observatory on Social Media, which tracks COVID-19 vaccine-related content on Twitter. In some weeks, it found, CHD COVID-19 vaccine content was shared more often than that of The New York Times and The Washington Post.

A different research team found Kennedy's group, along with the now-removed group called Stop Mandatory Vaccination, bought more than half of the anti-vaccine advertising on Facebook prior to the pandemic. A member of that team, David Broniatowski, of George Washington University, said the groups had targeted Facebook ads to reach women of childbearing age using demographic data.

"They're much more effective at it than our public health infrastructure," he said. "That's in part because they just have a centralized foundation with a very clear sense of what it is they want to do."

CHD's effectiveness is in part because it's central to a network of anti-vaccine websites that link to and amplify each other, creating a disinformation echo chamber that reinforces false narratives that downplay the dangers of COVID-19 while exaggerating the risks of the vaccine. For example, the day after the FDA granted full approval to Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine, Kennedy and CHD sent out an article falsely claiming that the vaccine that was licensed was not the one that was available, said Dorit Reiss, a professor at UC Hastings College of the Law and an expert in vaccine law.

"It started with CHD the day after the licensure and then was picked up by right wing outlets," Reiss said.

The idea circulated on fringe media outlets on the far right. Then, more than a month after the article was published, Republican Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin went on Tucker Carlson's show on Fox News and repeated the incorrect idea that the approved vaccine was not available in the United States.

It became one of CHD's biggest articles of the past year, with about 40,000 interactions on Facebook, according to CrowdTangle, a Facebook-owned tool that helps track material on the platforms.

In comments on CHD's website, people expressed anger, fear and calls to action. "You know, the more I read the news the more my stomach tightens up into a little ball," one wrote. "And they wonder why we don't trust them and why people won't get the 'jab,'" said another. One suggested people march on Washington on the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks, writing, "Make Jan 6 look like a picnic."

In addition to its rise on social media, CHD's website has also seen an explosion in traffic. According to Similarweb, in November 2019, a few months before the pandemic began, Children's Health Defense received 119,000 visits. That had grown to around 3 million visits last month, after peaking in August at nearly 4.7 million.

And its daily newsletter reaches more than 8 million people a month via email, according to a CHD fund-raising appeal that sought to raise \$1 million by Nov. 30. AP was not able to independently verify the claim.

In November, Kennedy released his book, "The Real Anthony Fauci," in which he accuses the nation's leading infectious disease doctor of helping orchestrate "a historic coup d'etat against Western democracy."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 27 of 90

A spokesperson for Fauci did not comment.

Kennedy also uses the book to push unproven COVID-19 treatments such as ivermectin, which is meant to treat parasites, and the anti-malaria drug hydroxychloroquine, and he contends that childhood vaccines are not properly safety tested, even though the FDA requires three phases of testing that involves hundreds of thousands of people before approving a childhood vaccine.

His sister, Kerry Kennedy, who runs Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, the international rights group founded by their mother, Ethel, told AP that it was irresponsible to attack doctors and scientists. Many, including Fauci, have received death threats, which can deter people from entering the profession.

"Our family knows that a death threat should be taken seriously," she said.

The group, which supports government-mandated vaccinations and steps such as requiring proof of vaccination, awarded Fauci its "Ripple of Hope Award" last year.

Kennedy Jr. by contrast has spent months hyping his book, including at the far right Reawaken America conference in Southern California in July. Last month, CHD urged supporters to buy the book right away so it would make the New York Times bestseller list. Some commenters on CHD's site said they bought multiple copies to drive sales. One said they had bought nine and were planning to buy more to put in neighborhood book exchange boxes "to help boost the book to number one on the New York Times bestseller list."

Kennedy's wish was granted. "The Real Anthony Fauci" reached No. 5 on the Times' list last month and hit No. 1 at Amazon. It sold nearly 166,000 copies through the beginning of December, according to NPD BookScan, which tracks around 85 percent of print sales.

Kennedy's anti-vaccine message has brought him close to many leading figures who have attacked the nation's democratic norms and institutions. A photo posted on Instagram July 18 and apparently taken backstage at the Reawaken America event, shows Kennedy alongside former President Donald Trump's ally Roger Stone, anti-vaccine profiteer Charlene Bollinger and former National Security Adviser Michael Flynn, all of whom have pushed the lie that the 2020 election was stolen.

Kennedy has appeared at multiple events with Bollinger and her husband, even after their Super PAC sponsored an anti-vaccine, pro-Trump rally near the Capitol on Jan. 6, when, as AP previously reported, Bollinger celebrated the attack and her husband tried to enter the Capitol. Kennedy filmed a video conversation for their Super PAC in the spring.

He has also courted major GOP donors including Leila and David Centner, who were listed as CHD board members for 2021 on a filing the group made in August with Georgia charity regulators, and which AP obtained in a public records request. The couple are best known for the private school they established in Miami, Centner Academy, which put in place anti-vaccine policies for children and teachers.

BUILDING A POWERHOUSE

Kennedy often says he started looking at vaccines after a mother told him she believed her son developed autism from exposure to mercury in a vaccine. The theory has been thoroughly debunked. The form of mercury, thimerosal, was removed from childhood vaccines years ago with no effect on the levels of autism. Still, Kennedy and others continue to argue, against the scientific consensus, that vaccines are linked to autism, food allergies and a host of other medical problems. Among the ingredients he tells people to watch out for are common substances such as aluminum, acetaminophen, fluoride and food additives.

In 2015, Kennedy joined up with Eric Gladen, who in 2007 had founded a group called World Mercury Project in Southern California. Gladen believes he got mercury poisoning from a tetanus shot and had made a film called Trace Amounts.

Gladen told AP that Kennedy family members urged him to distance himself from the group after they screened the movie at Kennedy's sister's house in Malibu. The next morning, Gladen recalled, Kennedy called him at 6 a.m. to say he was in.

World Mercury Project had been struggling to stay afloat, but everything changed when Kennedy joined. He was "a machine," doing research, writing op-eds, delivering speeches and connecting with well-placed people, Gladen said. There was "almost no limit" to who they could reach.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 28 of 90

World Mercury Project, which reported just \$13,114 in revenue on its 2014 tax filings, brought in \$467,443 in revenue the following year, when Kennedy came on board.

Gladen stepped down for health reasons in August 2016, but continues to support its work.

Kennedy became board chairman and chief legal counsel. The group rebranded with the name Children's Health Defense in 2018, removing the word "mercury" from its name and announcing an expanded mission. A press release emphasized autism, ADHD and other "health epidemics" affecting children. It mentioned vaccines only once, almost as an afterthought.

Kennedy told Tucker Carlson in a July 2017 appearance that his vaccine work was "probably the worst career move that I've ever made." When the Fox News host asked him if he was "getting paid for this," Kennedy replied, "No, I'm not. In fact, I'm getting unpaid for this."

According to tax filings, Kennedy was paid \$131,250 by Children's Health Defense in 2017. In 2018, he was paid \$184,375. By 2019, the most recent year available, his compensation had risen to \$255,000.

Kennedy told the conspiracy site InfoWars this month that he had "the opposite of a profit motive."

"Probably I've lost 80 percent of my income because of what I'm doing, along with a lot of friendships and, you know, and damaged relationships even with people in my family," Kennedy said.

Still, CHD's fundraising success has only grown with Kennedy's involvement, and no year was more successful than 2020.

Filings the group made with charity regulators in California show that in 2018, CHD reported \$1.1 million in gross revenue. That grew to nearly \$3 million in 2019. By 2020, the most recent year available, revenue had more than doubled to \$6.8 million. It reported that it spent more than \$3.5 million on program expenses last year, the first year of the pandemic. That includes producing 49 "educational videos" and six eBooks, CHD reported to Guidestar.

Kennedy's group has also lobbied over vaccine legislation in the states, collected large sums of money from special interests such as chiropractors, and filed multiple lawsuits, including a \$5 million lawsuit last year against Facebook. Among its claims is that Facebook deactivated the "donate button" on its page, hurting CHD's efforts to raise money. In May 2019 alone, according to its lawsuit, Children's Health Defense said it received \$24,872 in user donations from its Facebook page. A federal judge dismissed the lawsuit in June, but CHD is appealing.

CAPITALIZING ON THE KENNEDY NAME

Children's Health Defense's new movie studio released a film earlier this year, called "Medical Racism." Doctors and public health advocates said it was aimed at spreading misinformation and fear of vaccines within the Black community, which has been disproportionately hit by coronavirus.

The movie brings up racist abuses in medicine, such as the Tuskegee experiment, when hundreds of Black men in Alabama with syphilis were left untreated, to question whether the vaccine can be trusted or is necessary. Examples of racist medical practices have contributed to distrust and hesitation about vaccines among some members of the Black community.

Williams, of the Minority Health Institute, pointed out that in the Tuskegee study, people were denied medication to treat a disease. In the case of the COVID-19 vaccine, medication is available – but anti-vaccine activists are trying to persuade people not to take it. He said the film is "totally slanted."

"It is not only harmful, but it is deadly," he said.

Kennedy has also made hay from the deaths of prominent people. Baseball legend Hank Aaron got his shot as a way to show other Black Americans that the vaccine was safe. A few weeks later, the 86-year-old died in his sleep. Kennedy posted on Facebook and Twitter calling it "part of a wave of suspicious deaths among elderly closely following administration of COVID vaccines," but provided no evidence of a connection. Kennedy's Jan. 22 posts are both still up and have been shared, commented on and liked thousands of times, although the Facebook post now carries a warning that it is missing context and "could mislead people."

In the movie, Kennedy and others also invoke the legacy of his family and its involvement in causes such as civil rights, Special Olympics and health care advocacy.

Dr. Oni Blackstock, who founded the racial and health equity consulting group Health Justice and who

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 29 of 90

is a former assistant commissioner in the New York City Health Department, said the Kennedy name adds "heft" to the anti-vaccine movement among people who have positive associations with the Kennedys' legacy as advocates for civil rights.

"It may make people more willing to listen and to consider what's being said," Blackstock said.

Kennedy also uses his family name and legacy to raise money. On multiple occasions, he has offered a trip to the Kennedy compound on Cape Cod as a lure to drum up donations for Children's Health Defense. As family photos and images of people including President Kennedy flashed on screen of one Facebook appeal, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., said the winner would meet Kennedy family members on the visit.

"There's always plenty of people and good conversation," he said in one video posted in 2020. "If my mom decides to come, adventure is guaranteed."

Kerry Kennedy said her brother had taken down some family-related content at her request. Still, she noted, he continues to reference President Kennedy's name to advance his anti-vaccine stance.

"Anyone who believes this does not know their history. Vaccinations were a major effort of John F. Kennedy, both as a senator and later as president," she said.

"I love Bobby, I think he's just completely wrong on this issue and very dangerous," she said. "Failure to take vaccines puts people's lives at risk. It not only impacts the person who refuses the jab but imperils the community at large."

But that hasn't deterred him. He often name-drops the top government officials and scientists that he has had access to, including Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health.

"Part of the benefit of being part of my family is that I could get these people on the phone almost instantaneously," Kennedy said at Centner Academy.

Collins told AP he was "very disappointed" in Kennedy.

"With his name recognition, with his remarkable heritage and a family that has done so much for America -- that he's using that to spread lies without somehow having some sense, looking in the mirror, that he's doing harms," Collins said, adding, "Shame on him."

In a speech to the Ron Paul Institute in October, Kennedy told a receptive crowd that his children have sometimes questioned him.

"They say, well this is going to kill people. And I say to them, there's a lot worse things than dying," he said, before evoking the "generation of Americans in 1776" who fought the Revolutionary War and then likening their cause to a "second American Revolution."

During his speech, he referenced Nazis multiple times, obliquely comparing public health measures put in place by multiple governments around the world to Nazi propaganda meant to scare people into abandoning critical thinking.

On Sunday, Kennedy again raised the specter of Nazis as he put out a video asking followers to take part in an international campaign to "wallpaper your community legally" with anti-vaccine stickers. The stickers popped up next to his face as he spoke, including one that showed a picture of Fauci with a Hitler mustache, and another that read "IF YOU'RE NOT AN ANTI-VAXXER YOU AREN'T PAYING ATTENTION."

INTERNATIONAL AMBITIONS

The pandemic has allowed Kennedy to take Children's Health Defense's anti-vaccine message global.

In August 2020, CHD launched a Europe branch, and Kennedy attended a huge rally in Berlin against coronavirus restrictions. Last month, Kennedy appeared before thousands of people at protests on successive days in Switzerland and Italy. He complained of conspiracies by government officials and Big Pharma operatives and claimed falsely that the Pfizer COVID-19 shot kills more people than it saves. Kennedy promised that he would "see you all on the barricades" and that "I and many others are ready to die with our boots on for liberty."

It has become something of a stump speech for Kennedy, one delivered not to win political office but to persuade as many people as possible not to get vaccinated.

Associated Press writers Luran Neergaard, Colleen Barry, Hillel Italie, Matt O'Brien and AP researcher

Rhonda Shafner contributed to this report.

Vaccination of under-12s starts in handful of EU countries

By DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

ATHENS, Greece (AP) — Greece and a handful of other European Union members began vaccinating children ages 5-11 against COVID-19 on Wednesday as governments braced for the holiday season and the spread of the omicron variant.

An Athens children's hospital administered its first shots to younger children hours after authorities announced Greece's highest daily death of the pandemic at 130. The children were given stickers and the day off school.

More than 30,000 vaccination appointments for under-12s have been booked by Greek parents, among them Education Minister Niki Kerameus.

"I won't hide the fact that on a personal level, after having talked with doctors and receiving scientific data, our family decided to vaccinate our son who is 5 1/2 years old," Kerameus said before taking her son, Loukas, to get his shot at an Athens hospital.

Italy, Spain and Hungary also expanded their vaccination programs to younger children. European Union regulators last month approved a reduced-dose vaccine made by Pfizer-BioNTech for use in the 5-11 age group.

A two-month surge in infections across Europe eased slightly in early December, but the appearance of the omicron variant has created uncertainty. Scientists think omicron is highly contagious, but they are not yet sure how dangerous it is.

The European Center for Disease Prevention and Control said Tuesday that it expects omicron to dominate infections in the EU within the next few months. It suggested that governments consider travel-related restrictions and press ahead with vaccination campaigns and booster shot delivery.

Vaccines for children are voluntary in all European Union countries and require parental approval.

Authorities in Spain have set ambitious targets for vaccinating younger children before Christmas and the customary family gatherings. Nearly 90% of the country's residents age 12 and older have received two vaccine doses.

Poland, Portugal, Croatia and Slovenia plan to lower their vaccine eligibility age later in the week.

Several hundred people protested Wednesday in front of the government headquarters in Croatia's capital, Zagreb, Wednesday. The protesters chanted "Don't kill our kids" and "We won't give you our children."

Other EU nations are taking a cautious approach to vaccinating younger children. Germany has started a region-based rollout, the Netherlands is waiting until after the holidays, and France is prioritizing children who suffer from heart and respiratory problems, obesity, and diabetes.

Britain was slower than many European countries to start vaccinating children ages 12-15, and it has not yet approved vaccines for younger children.

Wei Shen Lim, a member of the U.K.'s Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization, said the group expected to make a decision before Christmas but was awaiting a recommendation from British regulators.

a

Conservative lawmaker Jeremy Hunt, a former health minister, criticized the delay. "Our regulators, having been the nimblest in the world, are now taking too long," he said.

AP journalists from around Europe contributed to this report.

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

Biden visiting storm-ravaged Kentucky to offer aid, support

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 31 of 90

WASHINGTON (AP) — For the fifth time since taking office less than a year ago, President Joe Biden is taking on the grim task Wednesday of visiting an area ravaged by natural disaster to offer comfort and condolences.

Biden was headed to Kentucky to survey damage and offer federal support for the victims of devastating tornadoes that killed dozens and left thousands more in the region without heat, water or electricity.

More than 30 tornadoes tore through Kentucky and four other states over the weekend, killing at least 88 people and demolishing homes, downing power lines and cutting off residents from key utilities as temperatures dropped below freezing in Kentucky earlier this week.

Biden will visit Fort Campbell for a storm briefing and Mayfield and Dawson Springs to survey storm damage. While Biden is not expected to deliver an address, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said the president will meet with storm victims and local officials to provide federal support.

Biden “wants to hear directly from people, and he wants to offer his support directly to them,” Psaki said.

Jeff and Tara Wilson, a married couple from Mayfield, were at the Graves County Fairgrounds on Tuesday, where a distribution center has been set up to pass out food, water and clothing to storm victims. They were setting up a mobile site for storm victims to receive counseling and said their home was unscathed.

Asked about the president’s visit and the reception he’ll receive in this prominently Republican region, Tara Wilson replied: “Don’t know. I think that as long as everybody’s hearts are in the right place, we need to not focus on politics right now.” She said it was a “very positive thing” that Biden was visiting, and she and her husband expressed hope the president might help unite the community.

“This place is like a bomb has been dropped on it. And everyone needs to come together,” Wilson said. “So far that’s what’s happening. You’re seeing everyone pull together.”

Biden’s trip to Kentucky comes at the close of a year marked by a notable uptick in extreme weather occurrences driven primarily by climate change. Only a month after he was sworn into office, Biden went to Houston to survey the damage wrought by last winter’s historic storm there. He ultimately traveled to Idaho, Colorado and California to survey wildfire damage during the summer, as well as Louisiana, New Jersey and New York earlier this fall after Hurricane Ida tore through the region.

The disasters have offered Biden urgent and visceral evidence of what he says is the dire need for America to do more to combat climate change and prepare for future disasters — a case he made to help push for passage of his spending proposals.

The \$1 trillion infrastructure bill, signed into law last month, includes billions for climate resilience projects aimed to better defend people and property from future storms, wildfires and other natural disasters. His proposed \$2 trillion social spending package, still pending in Congress, includes billions more to help shift the nation away from oil, gas and coal and toward widespread clean energy and electric vehicle use.

The White House has spent much of the week engaging with lawmakers on the latter. Biden talked with West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, a key Democratic holdout, in hopes of smoothing over some of his issues in time to pass a package before year’s end.

But on Wednesday, Biden’s focus will be squarely on Kentucky. Five twisters hit the state, including one with an extraordinarily long path of about 200 miles (322 kilometers), authorities said.

In addition to the deaths in Kentucky, the tornadoes also killed at least six people in Illinois, where the Amazon distribution center in Edwardsville was hit; four in Tennessee; two in Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed and the governor said workers shielded residents with their own bodies; and two in Missouri.

The president signed two federal disaster declarations for Kentucky over the weekend, providing federal aid for search and rescue and cleanup operations, as well as aid for temporary housing and to help individuals and businesses recover.

Biden said earlier this week during a White House briefing on the tragedy with Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas and other top emergency response officials that the federal government is committed to providing whatever the affected states need in the aftermath of the storm.

“We’re going to get this done,” Biden said. “We’re going to be there as long as it takes to help.”

AP writer Bruce Schreiner in Mayfield, Kentucky, contributed to this report.

The AP Interview: Karzai 'invited' Taliban to stop chaos

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Taliban didn't take the Afghan capital — they were invited, says the man who issued the invitation.

In an Associated Press interview, former Afghan President Hamid Karzai offered some of the first insights into the secret and sudden departure of Afghan President Ashraf Ghani — and how he came to invite the Taliban into the city "to protect the population so that the country, the city doesn't fall into chaos and the unwanted elements who would probably loot the country, loot shops."

When Ghani left, his security officials also left. Defense minister Bismillah Khan even asked Karzai if he wanted to leave Kabul when Karzai contacted him to know what remnants of the government still remained. It turned out there were none. Not even the Kabul police chief had remained.

Karzai, who was the country's president for 13 years after the Taliban were first ousted in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, refused to leave.

In a wide-ranging interview at his tree-lined compound in the center of the city where he lives with his wife and young children, Karzai was adamant that Ghani's flight scuttled a last-minute push by himself, the government's chief negotiator Abdullah Abdullah and the Taliban leadership in Doha that would have seen the Taliban enter the capital as part of a negotiated agreement.

The countdown to a possible deal began Aug. 14, the day before the Taliban came to power.

Karzai and Abdullah met Ghani, and they agreed that they would leave for Doha the next day with a list of 15 others to negotiate a power-sharing agreement. The Taliban were already on the outskirts of Kabul, but Karzai said the leadership in Qatar promised the insurgent force would remain outside the city until the deal was struck.

Early on the morning of Aug. 15, Karzai said, he waited to draw up the list. The capital was fidgety, on edge. Rumors were swirling about a Taliban takeover. Karzai called Doha. He was told the Taliban would not enter the city.

At noon, the Taliban called to say that "the government should stay in its positions and should not move that they have no intention to (go) into the city," Karzai said. "I and others spoke to various officials and assurances were given to us that, yes, that was the case, that the Americans and the government forces were holding firm to the places (and) that Kabul would not fall."

By about 2:45 p.m., though, it became apparent Ghani had fled the city. Karzai called the defense minister, called the interior minister, searched for the Kabul police chief. Everyone was gone. "There was no official present at all in the capital, no police chief, no corps commander, no other units. They had all left."

Ghani's own protection unit's deputy chief called Karzai to come to the palace and take over the presidency. He declined, saying legally he had no right to the job. Instead the former president decided to make a public, televised message, with his children at his side "so that the Afghan people know that we are all here."

Karzai was adamant that there would have been an agreement for a peaceful transition had Ghani remained in Kabul.

"Absolutely. Absolutely. That is what we were preparing for, what we were hoping (along) with the chairman of the peace council to go to Doha that evening, or the next morning, and to finalize the agreement," he said. "And I believe the Taliban leaders were also waiting for us in Doha for the same ... objective, for the same purpose."

Today, Karzai meets regularly with the Taliban leadership and says the world must engage with them. Equally important, he said, is that Afghans have to come together. War has dominated Afghanistan for more than 40 years, and in the last 20 years "Afghans have suffered on all sides," he said. "Afghans have lost lives on all sides. . . . The Afghan army has suffered. Afghan police have suffered, the Taliban soldiers

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 33 of 90

have suffered.”

He added: “An end to that can only come when Afghans get together, find their own way out.”

The former president has a plan. In his talks with the Taliban, he is advocating the temporary resurrection of the constitution that governed when Afghanistan was a monarchy. The idea was also floated during earlier Doha talks.

At the same time, a traditional Loya Jirga — a grand council of all Afghans, including women — would be convened. It would decide the country’s future, including a representative government, a constitution, a national flag.

There’s no indication the Taliban will accept his formula, though he says they have not rejected it in discussions. A jirga is a centuries-old Afghan tradition for decision-making and is particularly popular among ethnic Pashtuns, which make up the backbone of the Taliban.

Karzai said a future Afghanistan has to have universal education rights for boys and girls and women “must find their place in the Afghan polity, in the administration, in economic activity and social activity, the political activity in all ways of life. ... That’s an issue on which there cannot be any compromise.”

But until it happens, Karzai says, the world has to engage with the Taliban. Afghanistan needs to operate. Government servants have to be paid. Health care facilities need to function.

“Right now, they need to cooperate with the government in any form they can,” said Karzai, who also bemoaned the unchallenged and sometimes wrong international perceptions of the Taliban. He cited claims that women and girls are not allowed outside their homes or require a male companion. “That’s not true. There are girls on the streets — women by themselves.” The situation on the ground in Kabul bears this out.

Asked to describe the Taliban, Karzai said: “I would describe them as Afghans, but Afghans who have gone through a very difficult period in their lives as all other Afghans have done for the past 40 years.”

We “have been through an extremely difficult period of our history in which we, the Afghans, have made mistakes on all sides, in which the international community and those who interacted with us have made tremendous mistakes,” Karzai said. “It’s time for all of us to realize that, and to look back at the mistakes that we have all made and to make it better.”

Kathy Gannon, Associated Press news director for Afghanistan and Pakistan, has been covering the region for more than 30 years.

EU official: Omicron to be dominant variant by mid-January

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The head of the European Union’s executive branch said Wednesday that omicron is expected to be the dominant coronavirus variant in the 27-nation bloc by mid-January, amid concerns that a dramatic rise in infections will leave Europe shrouded in gloom during the holiday season.

European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the EU is well prepared to fight omicron with 66.6% of the bloc’s population fully vaccinated. Von der Leyen expressed disappointment that the pandemic will again disrupt year-end celebrations but said she was confident the EU has the “strength” and “means” to overcome COVID-19.

“Like many of you, I’m sad that once again this Christmas will be overshadowed by the pandemic,” she said.

Continental Europe can look to Britain for a sense of what lies ahead as omicron spreads.

The head of the U.K. Health Security Agency, Dr. Jenny Harries, said omicron is displaying a staggering growth rate compared to previous variants.

“The difficulty is that the growth of this virus, it has a doubling time which is shortening, i.e. it’s doubling faster, growing faster,” Harries told a parliamentary committee on Wednesday. “In most regions in the U.K., it is now under two days. When it started, we were estimating about four or five.”

Harries said the variant poses “probably the most significant threat we’ve had since the start of the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 34 of 90

pandemic.”

Alarming rises in cases as winter approached and the delta variant remained at large prompted many European governments to implement public health measures as excess mortality increased during the fall.

With omicron now on the scene, more countries are adopting restrictions. Italy, for example, this week required negative tests from vaccinated visitors, raising concerns that similar moves elsewhere will limit the ability of EU citizens to travel to see friends and relatives over the holidays.

Portugal adopted a similar measure on December 1, requiring a mandatory negative test for all passengers on arriving flights, regardless of their vaccination status, point of origin or nationality.

Von der Leyen said the EU faces a double challenge, with a massive increase of cases in recent weeks due to the delta variant combined with the rise of omicron.

“We’re seeing an increasing number of people falling ill, a greater burden on hospitals and unfortunately, an increase in the number of deaths,” she told European Parliament lawmakers.

Von der Leyen insisted that the increase in infections remains due “almost exclusively” to the delta variant.

“And what I’m concerned about is that we now (are) seeing the new variant omicron on the horizon, which is apparently even more infectious,” she said.

According to an analysis Tuesday of data from South Africa, where the new variant is driving a surge in infections, omicron seems to be more easily spread from person to person and better at evading vaccines, but also milder.

Von der Leyen said that fighting vaccine skepticism is key, especially in EU member nations with lower vaccination rates.

“Because the price that we will pay if people are not vaccinated continues to increase,” she said. “It’s also a problem for our elderly citizens, who once again this Christmas can’t see their grandchildren. And it’s also a problem for those children who once again can’t go to school. What kind of a life is that?”

Echoing von der Leyen’s comments, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz vowed Wednesday that his new government would do everything for Germany to overcome the coronavirus pandemic and let people return to their normal lives.

“We have no time to waste,” said Scholz, who took office as Germany grapples with its biggest wave of infections during the pandemic to date.

Scholz also said that the government won’t tolerate a “tiny minority” of extremists trying to impose their will against coronavirus policies.

As governments brace for the holiday season, Greece and a handful of other European Union countries began vaccinating children ages 5-11 on Wednesday against COVID-19. Italy, Spain and Hungary were also among those countries expanding the vaccination program to younger children.

The leaders of the EU member nations have a summit scheduled for Thursday in Brussels.

Danica Kirka in London, Raf Casert in Brussels and Geir Moulson in Berlin contributed to this story.

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

Putin, Xi hail Russia-China ties during virtual summit

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese leader Xi Jinping held a video call on Wednesday to discuss bilateral relations and international affairs, a summit that comes amid heightened tensions between Moscow and the West over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine’s border.

In their opening remarks, Putin and Xi hailed relations between Russia and China, with the Russian leader declaring them “a proper example of interstate cooperation in the 21st century.”

“A new model of cooperation has been formed between our countries, based among other things on such principles as not interfering in internal affairs (of each other), respect for each other’s interests, determination to turn the shared border into a belt of eternal peace and good neighborliness,” Putin said.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 35 of 90

Xi said that the Russian president “strongly supported China’s efforts to protect key national interests and firmly opposed attempts to drive a wedge between our countries.”

“I appreciate it very much,” the Chinese leader said.

Putin also said that he plans to meet with Xi in person in Beijing in February and attend the 2022 Olympics. “As agreed, we will hold talks and then take part in the opening ceremony of the Winter Olympic Games,” Putin said.

In recent years, China and Russia have increasingly aligned their foreign policies to counter U.S. domination of the international economic and political order. Both have faced sanctions over their internal policies.

China has faced sanctions over abuses against minorities, especially Uyghur Muslims in Xinjiang, and for its crackdown on the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong. Meanwhile Russia has faced international sanctions for annexing Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula and over the poisoning and imprisonment of opposition leader Alexei Navalny.

Beijing and Washington also remain at odds over trade, technology and China’s military intimidation of Taiwan, which it claims as its own territory.

Russia’s relations with the U.S. have sunk to post-Cold War lows after it annexed Crimea in 2014 and threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in Ukraine’s east. Tensions have reignited in recent weeks after Moscow massed tens of thousands of troops near Ukraine’s border, a move Ukraine and the West feared may indicate plans of a new invasion.

Moscow has denied that it plans to attack Ukraine and in turn blamed Ukraine for its own military buildup in the war-torn east of the country.

Russian officials alleged that Kyiv might try to reclaim the areas controlled by the rebels by force, and Putin has pressed the West to provide legally binding guarantees that NATO will not expand to Ukraine or deploy its forces there.

Vaccine alliance chief: Omicron could trigger ‘Inequity 2.0’

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

CHAVANNES-DE-BOGUIS, Switzerland (AP) — The head of vaccine alliance Gavi, which is leading a U.N.-backed push to get COVID-19 vaccines to developing countries, said that he’s seen early signs that rich countries are beginning to withhold donations out of fears about the omicron coronavirus variant — warning any new hoarding could lead to “Inequity 2.0.”

Gavi chief executive Dr. Seth Berkley took stock of the nearly two-year fight against the pandemic as the alliance released the latest update to its supply forecast for COVID-19 vaccines that it has repeatedly downscaled, largely because of export bans and vaccine hoarding by some producer countries that critics say it should have foreseen.

“With the omicron variant, what we’ve seen is panic in many countries that has led acceleration of boosters both to the numbers of people getting them, but also the timeline for getting them,” Berkley told The Associated Press in an interview late Tuesday at his home outside Geneva.

He was referring to extra doses given in rich countries to a broad swath of people — not just those at highest risk of contracting severe COVID-19.

The Geneva-based public-private partnership has been the lead manager of the U.N.-backed COVAX program that initially sought to get coronavirus vaccines to all countries but was pivoted after wealthier countries, and even some poorer ones, started striking their own deals to get jabs.

That locked down much of tight supplies and prompted vast inequality in access to jabs. Of the roughly 10 billion doses that have been delivered worldwide, the vast majority have gone to rich countries. COVAX has delivered just over 700 million.

“We also are beginning to see donors not wanting to donate their doses as fast as they might have because of the uncertainty now of where we are,” Berkley said, declining to specify. “Of course, our long-term concern is, if it turns out that new variant vaccines are required, that there may be an ‘Inequity 2.0’ where we see wealthy countries hoard those vaccines once again, like we saw at the beginning of the pandemic.”

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 36 of 90

While omicron's transmissibility, severity and resistance to vaccines aren't yet fully clear, the new variant could require revisions to existing vaccines or even production of new ones. Berkley says a COVID-19 vaccine from Novavax, which relies on a common technology in flu vaccines and has shown efficacy against variants, could be set to win emergency-use approval within "days" from the World Health Organization.

In recent weeks, global production of COVID-19 vaccines has taken off and supply is less of a problem than it once was. Now, a challenge is making sure countries can take in vaccines that sometimes require storage in very cold temperatures or are delivered in batches that need to be used at the same time once opened.

Wastage is a risk. Berkley said some is inevitable and insisted less than 1% of COVAX vaccines have gone to waste.

While he said it's understandable, if potentially short-sighted, that politicians would want to serve their own people first with vaccines, one leading critic of Gavi's handling of COVAX says a lot of the trouble can be pinned on wealthy-country governments who didn't ensure steady sharing of vaccines. Now, an influx of vaccines in some developing countries could present problems.

"Since high-income country governments hoarded vaccine and didn't allow ... distribution ... to be paced, now we're at this end-of-year dump, basically, and lo and behold, surprise, surprise, fragile health systems -- some of them are having real difficulty accommodating it," said Kate Elder, senior vaccines policy adviser at Médecins Sans Frontières, or Doctors Without Borders, which provides medical care around the world.

Gavi manages COVAX along with the Center for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations and U.N. health agency WHO, while UNICEF handles distribution of shots into arms.

Berkley said Gavi expects to have delivered between 800 million and 1 billion doses by the end of this year to the poorest developing countries, which he says was in line with targets. Where the alliance faced slippage in deliveries was with wealthier "self-financing countries" that were originally expected to get jabs through COVAX but didn't use it as foreseen -- many opting for direct deals with manufacturers.

Gavi expects to have 1.4 billion doses available by the end of his year. It had originally set a goal to deliver 2 billion doses by the end of 2021.

Berkley said Gavi expects another 800 million doses in the first quarter of next year, but not all of those are confirmed. Questions remain about supplies from manufacturers, regulatory approvals, and dose donations that are "somewhat more unpredictable." Places like the United States and the European Union have been key donors.

As it has been forced to adapt and revise its strategies, donations from countries like "Team Europe" have grown increasingly important to COVAX -- which was never planned to be a donation mechanism.

"In fact, we didn't even have donations in the original framework and way of working," Berkley said. "That only occurred because of the vaccine hoarding that was occurring in wealthy countries and because of the fact that we had export bans."

Critics say Gavi misjudged national self-interest and wrongly bet on trying to supply the whole world through a vast new program whose long-term impact is questionable. They say focus should have been on strengthening existing vaccine distribution systems, like one through WHO's Americas regional body PAHO (Pan American Health Organization).

"Hindsight is 20/20 but there have been a tremendous number of shortcomings in the COVAX facility, probably many of them which could have been anticipated (by) understanding the environment and how countries with means were going to respond to this pandemic," said MSF's Elder.

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

Lack of jobs, crisis drive young Iraqi Kurds to migrate

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

RANYA, Iraq (AP) — The specter of unemployment haunts both students and teachers at universities in northern Iraq. Many speak of growing numbers of empty seats in classrooms across the semi-autonomous

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 37 of 90

Kurdish region — seats once occupied by students who have left for Europe.

Those who remain, like 21-year-old law student Zhewar Karzan, are making plans to leave.

He sees no future at home, in the town of Ranya, nestled among picturesque mountains, rivers and Lake Dukan, the Iraqi Kurdish region's largest lake. A college degree provides no guarantee of a job, and his parents struggle to pay the bills, he said.

Come spring, Karzan plans to try his luck and leave with other hopeful migrants. His brother Jiyar, who in 2016 paid a smuggler to take him to Italy from Turkey, eventually reached Britain and now supports the entire family back home while working in a pizza restaurant.

"I will join him," said Karzan.

Iraqi Kurdish youth face a tough choice: endure unemployment and corruption at home, or try to sneak into Europe at the risk of financial ruin, or even death during the perilous journey.

Though there are no firm statistics, a substantial number of young Iraqi Kurds are believed to have left, seeing no hope in their country. Meanwhile, students who stayed are struggling to get motivated because getting an education is no longer a sure path to a job.

Across the Middle East, struggling economies have failed to keep pace with growing populations. In the three Iraqi Kurdish provinces, between 43,000 to 54,000 jobs would need to be created every year to absorb new waves of young people joining the labor force, according to U.N. estimates.

The gap between tepid economic growth and a "youth bulge" has led to persistently high unemployment. Among Iraqi Kurds between the ages of 15 and 29, it's 24% for men and 69% for women, according to a U.N. survey. The government says these numbers have improved in the last three years but official statistics have not been released.

Iraqi Kurdish university campuses have become a hotbed of discontent. Recent protests in the cities of Irbil and Sulaymaniyah over student stipends, frozen since 2014, underscore growing public disenchantment with the government.

The Kurdish regional government halted the stipends at the time because of the costly war against the extremist Islamic State group and icy relations with Baghdad-based federal government of Iraq that further stalled budget allocations needed to pay public workers. A drop in oil prices dealt a further blow to the oil-exporting Iraqi Kurdish region.

The stipends, between \$40 and \$70 a month, covered transport, books, clothes and other basic needs.

With a recent rise in oil prices to above \$70 a barrel and the lifting of some austerity measures, students demanded a resumption of government aid. They recently staged protests at Raparin University in Sulaymaniyah and elsewhere to press for the stipends to resume.

The students were met with tear gas and batons. Classes at the main university in Ranya were canceled for a week. Karzan, the prospective migrant, said the protests were co-opted by political groups and turned violent.

Students also argued that the universities are incapable of producing graduates qualified for the job market. They alleged that the institutions are tainted by nepotism and directly or indirectly controlled by the political leadership through appointments and funding.

Inside university halls, framed posters of Kurdish leaders hang on the walls — a constant reminder of the reach of the political parties dominating the region.

Even the teachers are unable to escape the pull. One university professor in Sulaymaniyah said he often received calls from superiors, urging him to give passing grades to the offspring of powerful officials. Another said he was pointedly discouraged from being too critical of the ruling elite in his graduate level courses. Both teachers spoke on condition of anonymity, fearing they could lose their jobs.

Aram Hamza said he was sick of the prevailing political nepotism and just wants to leave.

"You need connections to survive here," said the 20-year-old student. "If I was the son of a powerful person, I would get a job, no problem."

The Iraqi Kurdish region is more prosperous and stable than the rest of Iraq, largely thanks to power-sharing between the two dominant Kurdish parties that have carved the region into zones of control. Each

party controls institutions within its turf and secures loyalties through appointments. The government remains the region's largest employer.

Iraqi Kurds who fall outside of these networks of patronage are unable to find jobs or, if they are employed, struggle for years with salary delays and cuts.

Serena Wso said she worries about the cost of her education burdening her parents. Her father, a government worker, gets \$412 a month.

"My father's salary is so little," she said. "And the government does nothing to help."

Math major Salah Sabir said he is thinking of dropping out, disappointed after his two older sisters who earned degrees in dentistry could not find work.

Ali Barez, a 20-year-old history student in Irbil, said he spends every day worrying about whether he will find work as a teacher after graduating. He said there have been no openings for years. Six friends recently left for Europe and he may follow them, if he can borrow enough money to pay smugglers.

Jiyar Othman, an English teacher, said students often ask him what's the point of studying if there are no jobs after graduation. Many college graduates have ended up working as manual laborers or in restaurants, making less than \$137 a month.

"It's hard to motivate them," he said. "They don't see the end of the tunnel."

Libya's election faces uncertainty amid towering challenges

By SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Libya's presidential election, meant to help unify the nation after a decade of civil war, is supposed to take place in just over a week, but calls are mounting for a delay.

Either scenario — holding the vote on time or postponing it — could turn into a destabilizing setback.

The vote, scheduled for Dec. 24, is to choose Libya's first president since the ouster and killing of long-time dictator Moammar Gadhafi more than a decade ago.

For nearly a year, the election has been the lynchpin of international efforts to bring peace to the oil-rich North African nation, and supporters fear a dangerous void if it is not held on schedule.

But critics warn that going ahead with the vote now could throw the country into new violence. They say Libya remains too bitterly divided among armed factions that are likely to reject any victory by rivals in the election. The presence of some of Libya's most polarizing figures in the race — including one of Gadhafi's sons — only makes it more explosive.

Nearly 100 people have announced their candidacies, but the election commission has still not announced a final list of candidates because of legal disputes. It should have announced the list earlier this month. The rules governing the election are also in dispute, with western Libya politicians accusing the east-based parliament of adopting them without consultations.

Libya plunged into chaos after Gadhafi's death during a 2011 uprising backed by a U.S.-led NATO military campaign. Control splintered among a myriad of armed militias. For years, the country was split between rival administrations in the east and the west, each backed by militias and foreign governments.

The current political process emerged last year after the latest round of brutal fighting.

In April 2019, the eastern-based military commander Khalifa Hifter launched an offensive aimed at capturing the capital, Tripoli, and bringing down the U.N.-recognized government based there. Hifter was backed by Russia, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey and Qatar responded by stepping up support for pro-Tripoli militias, supplying them with advanced weapons and providing troops and Syrian mercenaries.

After 14 months of fighting, Hifter's offensive collapsed. After a U.N.-brokered cease-fire in October 2020, a grouping of Libyan factions called the Political Forum drew up a road map that led to the creation of an interim government to run the country until the Dec. 24 election.

Those calling for a delay in the election say the mistrust between east and west remains too deep and volatile. The interim government has not been able to unify Libya's institutions, particularly the military, dismantle militias or ensure the exit of foreign mercenaries and fighters, said one U.N. official.

"These issues should have been settled before going to elections. They need more time and effort to be

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 39 of 90

resolved," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the press. Tarek Mitri, a former U.N. envoy for Libya, warned that "without unified military forces, the election poses a threat to peace."

"How can you win the argument in a democratic election when guns are loaded to the hilt on both sides?" he said.

In a last-minute effort to save the elections, U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres named American diplomat Stephanie Williams, who led the talks resulting in the October 2020 cease-fire deal, as his special adviser on Libya.

Williams met with Libyan officials in Tripoli on Sunday. She called for all sides to respect the "overwhelming demand of the Libyan people to elect their representatives through a free, fair and credible election." She did not mention the Dec. 24 dateline in her public comments.

The United States and some others in the international community want the vote to go ahead. As he stepped down on Dec. 8, outgoing U.N. envoy Jan Kubis said the election must take place on schedule, calling it "a critically important step that opens doors to future solutions."

The polarization around the election only grew hotter after both Hifter and Seif al-Islam Gadhafi, the son and one-time heir apparent of the longtime dictator, announced their candidacies.

Hifter, touted in the east as a hero, is hated by many in the west of the country.

"The entire western region will fight Hifter ... he will never rule Libya," Islamist Khalid al-Mishri, head of the Tripoli-based Supreme Council of State, said in televised comments last month.

Seif al-Islam's bid raised cries of an attempted return to the days of his father.

"Those who believe in the possibility of Libya's returning to the era of dictatorship after all these sacrifices are delusional," Abdel-Rahman el-Swahili, a lawmaker from Misrata, the western city that was one of the leading forces in the rebellion against the elder Gadhafi.

The prime minister of the interim government, Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, also caused an uproar when he announced his bid to enter the race. When he took his post, he had vowed not to run in the election.

Many Libyans are skeptical.

"All (the factions) say publicly they want elections, but in fact, all worked against it," said Ramadan al-Zawi, a 29-year-old teacher. "We are deceiving ourselves when we talk about elections while we are still in such an unchanged situation since 2011."

Congress sends Biden \$2.5T debt limit hike, avoiding default

By BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress averted a catastrophic debt default early Wednesday morning after Democratic majorities in both chambers voted to send a \$2.5 trillion increase in the nation's borrowing authority to President Joe Biden over lockstep Republican opposition.

Capping a marathon day, the House gave final approval to the legislation early Wednesday morning on a near-party-line 221-209 vote, defusing a volatile issue until after the 2022 midterm elections. The action came just hours shy of a deadline set by Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen, who warned last month that she was running out of maneuvering room to avoid the nation's first-ever default.

"The full faith and credit of the United States should never be questioned," Speaker Nancy Pelosi said from the House floor shortly before the vote.

Yet the bill — which drew only one Republican vote in the House, from Illinois Rep. Adam Kinzinger — also saddled vulnerable Democrats with a tough vote on the cusp of an election year when both chambers will be up for grabs.

Republicans, meanwhile, said they were perplexed by the Democrats' scramble to act.

"Democrats have known this day is coming for two years and did absolutely nothing," said Rep. Kevin Brady, R-Texas.

Despite a seemingly straightforward name, the nation's debt limit does little to curtail future debt. Established in 1917, it instead serves as a brake on spending decisions already endorsed by Republicans

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 40 of 90

and Democrats alike — in some cases decades ago — that if left unpaid could cripple markets, send the economy into a tailspin and shake global confidence in the U.S.

That hasn't stopped Republican saber-rattling. For months, they've used the debt limit to attack Democrats' big-spending social and environmental agenda while pledging to staunchly oppose the current effort to increase the threshold. As recently as October, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said he would not "be a party to any future effort to mitigate the consequences of Democratic mismanagement."

Yet McConnell softened his opposition, striking a deal with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer last week that created a workaround that allowed Senate Democrats to approve legislation with a simple majority while avoiding a Republican filibuster.

"This is about paying debt accumulated by both parties," Schumer, D-N.Y., said Tuesday while hailing the agreement.

McConnell's backtracking angered some in his party. But it also gave him much of what he wanted: Democrats taking a politically difficult vote without Republican support, while increasing the limit by a staggering dollar figure that is sure to appear in future attack ads.

"If they jam through another taxing and spending spree this massive debt increase will just be the beginning," the Kentucky Republican said Tuesday.

The decision didn't sit well with Donald Trump.

The former president has railed against the deal repeatedly, calling McConnell a "Broken Old Crow" who "didn't have the guts to play the Debt Ceiling card, which would have given the Republicans a complete victory on virtually everything."

"GET RID OF MITCH!" Trump said in a statement issued Sunday.

Republican Sen. Mike Lee of Utah also criticized the intricate process Schumer and McConnell agreed to, which he warned could be used in the future to "launder" potentially unpopular votes.

Under the agreement, an amendment was made to an unrelated Medicare bill that passed last week with Republican votes. It created a one-time, fast-track process for raising the debt limit that allowed Democrats to do so with a simple majority, bypassing the 60-vote threshold to avoid a GOP filibuster.

Lee said the process was intended to make the Republican votes last week "appear as something other than helping Democrats raise the debt ceiling," which he said Republican leadership "committed, in writing no less, not to do."

Yet Republican arguments against debt limit increases often ignore inconvenient facts.

The nation's current debt load of \$28.9 trillion has been racking up for decades. Major drivers include popular spending programs, like Social Security and Medicare, interest on the debt and recent COVID-19 relief packages. But taxation is also a major factor, and a series of tax cuts enacted by Republican presidents in recent decades has added to it, too.

That includes \$7.8 trillion heaped onto the pile during Trump's four-year presidency, an analysis of Treasury records shows. The GOP-championed 2017 tax cut is projected to add between \$1 trillion and \$2 trillion to the debt, according to the nonpartisan Tax Policy Center.

Colleges go back to drawing board — again — to fight virus

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

Facing rising infections and a new COVID-19 variant, colleges across the U.S. have once again been thwarted in seeking a move to normalcy and are starting to require booster shots, extend mask mandates, limit social gatherings and, in some cases, revert to online classes.

The threat of the omicron variant comes as a gut punch to schools that were hoping to relax safety measures this spring. Now, many are telling students to prepare for another term of masking, testing and, if cases get bad, limits around social life.

After a fall with few coronavirus cases, officials at Syracuse University were "feeling pretty good" about the spring term, said Kent Syverud, the upstate New York school's chancellor.

"But omicron has changed that," Syverud said. "It has made us go back and say, until we know more

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 41 of 90

about this variant for sure, we're going to have to reinstate some precautions."

Last week, Syracuse announced that all eligible students and employees must get COVID-19 booster shots before the spring term. Students will also face a round of virus tests when they return, and officials are weighing whether to extend an existing mask mandate.

Much is still unknown about the omicron variant and how big of a threat it poses. In the United States and many other nations, the delta variant is currently responsible for most COVID-19 cases.

But as colleges brace for the worst, many see boosters as their best hope. More than 20 colleges have issued booster shot requirements in recent weeks, and others say they're thinking about it. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is encouraging boosters for people ages 17 and older, and Pfizer last week announced that a booster of its COVID-19 vaccine might offer important protection against omicron even though the initial two doses appear less effective.

Hundreds of colleges already require COVID-19 vaccines, and some say boosters are an obvious next step.

Most booster mandates so far have come from small liberal arts colleges in the Northeast, but the list includes some as big as Boston University and as far away as the University of Notre Dame in Indiana and the University of New Mexico.

The University of Massachusetts in Amherst was among the first to require the booster for students, saying all students must get shots unless they have medical or religious exemptions.

"The boosters are our best protection," said Jeffrey Hescocock, co-director of the university's Public Health Promotion Center. "This demonstrates that we take public health seriously, and our students do too."

A recent online petition arguing against the booster mandate — citing 97% of students vaccinated and few on-campus cases — has attracted a few dozen signatures. But Emily O'Brien, a freshman at UMass, said the booster shot is a reasonable demand. She was already planning on getting a booster but said the mandate will probably increase uptake among students and prevent future lockdowns.

"If the past six months have shown anything, it's that lots of people won't bother to get vaccines — especially younger healthy people — if they don't have a requirement to," said O'Brien, 18, of Bedford, New Hampshire.

UMass will also require masks at the start of spring term, and it's sending students home with a rapid test to be taken near the end of winter break.

Many colleges planning for potential disruption next semester are already contending with campus outbreaks that have arisen in the weeks after Thanksgiving.

Cornell University shut down all campus activities on Tuesday and moved final exams online after more than 400 students tested positive over two days. In a campus message, President Martha Pollack said there was evidence of the omicron variant in a "significant" number of samples.

"It is obviously extremely dispiriting to have to take these steps," Pollack wrote. "However, since the start of the pandemic, our commitment has been to follow the science and do all we can to protect the health of our faculty, staff and students."

Middlebury College in Vermont switched to remote instruction last week amid a surge in cases and urged students to leave early for winter break. Rising cases at the University of Pennsylvania led to a ban on indoor social events last Thursday.

On Friday, Tulane University in New Orleans warned that a campus spike includes "probable" cases of the omicron variant, confirmed in at least one student last week. In response, school officials reinstated a mask mandate and expanded virus testing.

Other colleges that have extended mask requirements into next year include Wake Forest University, West Virginia University and Penn State.

Some other schools are already postponing the return to campus next month to avoid outbreaks. Southern New Hampshire University and DePaul University in Chicago recently said students will take classes remotely for two weeks before returning to campus after the holidays.

In a letter to students, DePaul's president, A. Gabriel Esteban, said the school will "cautiously start winter quarter so we can sustain a robust college experience the remainder of the academic year."

When students at Stanford University return to campus in January, they will be barred from holding parties or other big gatherings for two weeks. They'll also be tested once a week and continue to wear masks indoors as requirements to attend in-person classes. The measures aim to limit virus transmission without going too far in limiting the college experience, said Russell Furr, associate vice provost for environmental health and safety.

"This is something we've grappled with throughout the pandemic — how do we get a balanced approach?" Furr said. The goal is to avoid the strict lockdowns seen early in the pandemic, when student mental health "really suffered," he added.

At some colleges, there's still cautious hope for a normal semester. Leaders at the University of Central Florida told professors they can require in-person attendance in the spring, which had been discouraged this fall amid a surge in delta cases.

In a campus message, interim provost Michael D. Johnson warned that if the omicron variant takes off, "we may need to change direction yet again."

Another concern is omicron's timing — even without a new variant, there were worries of more outbreaks as colder weather drives people indoors, said Anita Barkin, co-chair of a COVID-19 task force for the American College Health Association.

The association recently recommended that colleges focus on increasing vaccination rates to avoid a new wave of cases.

"The message in all of it is, we need to remain vigilant," Barkin said. "There is certainly pandemic fatigue and people are tired of the pandemic — but it appears that the pandemic is not quite tired of us."

Myanmar public urges gas sanctions to stop military funding

By KRISTEN GELINEAU, VICTORIA MILKO and LORI HINNANT Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia (AP) — The young woman in Myanmar decided to speak out when she realized that money from the company she loved was now in the hands of the military leaders she hated.

She and her parents had long worked for Total Energies, the French company that operates a lucrative gas field off the coast of southern Myanmar with a state-owned enterprise. But in February, the military took over Myanmar's government and its bank accounts, including those that receive hundreds of millions of dollars each year from the Total gas field, known as Yadana.

As military abuses such as the murder and detention of thousands have grown, the young woman joined others across Myanmar in a groundswell of support for targeted sanctions on oil and gas funds, the country's single largest source of foreign currency revenue. But Western governments — most notably the United States and France — have refused to take that step amid lobbying from energy company officials and resistance from countries such as Thailand, which gets gas from Myanmar. On Friday, the U.S. announced a raft of sanctions against several Myanmar officials and entities, but again left out oil or gas revenues.

The young woman chanted slogans outside Total's offices, and later protested the military's takeover. She said she has since lost her job, and was thrown into prison for three weeks.

"We had a good relationship and good memories of Total," said the young woman, whose name, like those of other Myanmar gas workers in this story, is being withheld by The Associated Press for their safety. "Total has taken a lot from Myanmar....so they should at least help Myanmar with a little bit of effort during such a bloody period in our country."

In recent months, the Myanmar public's cries for sanctions on gas revenues have grown thunderous. In August, activists launched the "Blood Money Campaign" movement, risking their lives by marching in the streets and carrying signs that read: "Freeze payments to junta and save Myanmar." Others posted photos of themselves on social media holding signs that targeted the gas companies at the center of the debate: "Total, Chevron — Stop accessory to murder."

The United Nations' top expert on human rights in Myanmar says millions of people across the country are imposing personal sanctions by withholding taxes, refusing to pay power bills and boycotting products linked to the military. And on Nov. 30, hundreds of civil society organizations in Myanmar joined their international colleagues in signing a letter asking Total's CEO to stop payments to military-controlled accounts.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 43 of 90

The AP also obtained a copy of a letter from workers at Yadana to their managers earlier this year calling on Total's subsidiary, Total E&P Myanmar, to suspend export payments to the military, place the funds in a protected account and freeze income tax.

"We are specifically concerned that the profits gained from Yadana Project, which we are working for, will, one way or another, help fund the military junta's violent repression of Myanmar people," the letter said.

Total and Chevron say they condemn human rights abuses, but argue that sanctions could cause Myanmar's people further problems, such as cutting off electricity and making local gas workers vulnerable to military retaliation.

Meanwhile, tolerance on the ground for global inaction has worn thin. Local armed groups, referred to as People's Defense Forces, have targeted bill collectors for the national utility and sabotaged buildings and infrastructure, according to EarthRights International, which works on environmental and human rights issues in Myanmar.

Pro-sanctions activists don't want to shut down the gas field itself. Instead, they want to sanction the project's revenues and place them in a protected offshore bank account that the military can't touch.

The sanctions would target the state-owned Myanma Oil and Gas Enterprise (MOGE), which is a joint venture partner in all offshore gas projects in Myanmar, including Yadana with Total, Chevron, and Thailand's PTT Exploration & Production. Total has a majority stake in the venture and runs its daily operations, while MOGE collects revenues on behalf of the government. Gas from Yadana is piped to Myanmar and neighboring Thailand.

Several smaller offshore gas fields operate in Myanmar's waters, run by companies from Thailand, Japan, Malaysia, India and South Korea in partnership with MOGE. China is also an investor in the pipeline that delivers the gas to the country.

About 50 percent of Myanmar's foreign currency comes from natural gas revenues, with MOGE expected to earn \$1.5 billion from offshore and pipeline projects in 2021-2022, according to a Myanmar government forecast. The Yadana gas project and pipeline is particularly important, earning around \$400 million in revenues in 2017-2018.

Yet despite the growing calls for action, neither U.S. President Joe Biden nor French President Emmanuel Macron have publicly moved against Myanmar's oil and gas revenues. The current sanctions from the U.S. and European Union lean heavily on gemstones.

The U.S. State Department did not directly address AP's questions about why it has yet to impose sanctions on MOGE. Instead, the department pointed to a list of other people and entities the U.S. has already sanctioned, including several military officials and their family members, two army units believed responsible for a litany of atrocities, the military's two largest holding companies and a state-owned gems enterprise.

"We will not hesitate to take further action against those who perpetrate violence and suppress the will of the people," the department said in a statement.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday that the Biden administration is weighing tough new sanctions on Myanmar to pressure the country's military leaders to restore a democratic path.

An aide on the House Foreign Affairs Committee acknowledged that oil and gas make up "a huge chunk" of the military's ability to maintain control. Despite that, a measure introduced in the House in October that specifically calls out MOGE as a potential sanctions target has yet to advance.

The aide, who spoke on condition of anonymity to describe the thinking around the legislation, said objections from Singapore and Thailand have played a role in the Biden administration's hesitation to impose new sanctions, as has lobbying from Chevron. Activists have accused Singapore's banks of holding assets on the Myanmar military's behalf, although its central bank has said regular surveillance showed Myanmar companies and citizens did not have "significant funds" in the city state.

In the first half of 2021, Chevron reported spending \$3.7 million on federal lobbying in the U.S., with "Burma Energy Issues" and "Myanmar Energy and Investment Issues" listed as specific lobbying areas of focus.

"It certainly seems in the U.S. there is a major lobbying campaign going on from Chevron to try and protect its interests," said Chris Sidoti, a human rights lawyer and a member of the U.N. Fact Finding Mis-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 44 of 90

sion on Myanmar from 2017 to 2019.

In response to questions from the AP, a spokesman for Chevron pointed to an earlier statement from the company, which said Chevron would comply with any sanctions imposed by the U.S.

"Any actions should be carefully considered to ensure the people of Myanmar are not further disadvantaged by unintended and unpredictable consequences of well-intentioned decisions," Chevron wrote in its May statement.

The French government also said it wants to avoid adding to the burdens of Myanmar civilians through sanctions and aims to target individuals from the junta rather than a vital economic sector. France wants to avoid normalizing relations with the junta but also wants to "stay involved on the ground" for humanitarian reasons, which requires "operational contacts" with Myanmar's administration, according to a senior official in the French president's office. He described the French government's thinking on condition of anonymity.

He said Total's activities in Myanmar, including how it carries out payment for the gas, are the company's responsibility. Both the French government and Total want a return to a democratically elected government, "but at the same time you have to take into account the reality on the ground," he said.

French authorities have told activists that Europe is expecting to impose a fourth round of sanctions by Feb. 1, the anniversary of the military's takeover, and that both the energy and banking sectors are on the table.

Total said in a statement that it is trying to keep its local employees safe from reprisals such as forced labor, and also to avoid further harm to Myanmar's population. Total also argues that it has to pay taxes and respect its contract legally, and that it will donate the equivalent of the taxes to human rights associations in Myanmar. Total cancelled exploration for new deposits in Myanmar after the military takeover.

"The facts are that, in order to close off this source of revenue, the gas production should be brought to a stop," the statement said. "Any cut to such supply of gas and, consequently, any risk of disruption to the supply of electricity must be considered in light of the consequences it could have on everyday life of local citizens."

But several workers in Myanmar interviewed by AP dismissed concerns about their welfare, arguing the entire country is already oppressed. On Nov. 30, 789 civil society organizations — including 540 within Myanmar — sent a letter to CEO Patrick Pouyanne asking the company to "put an end to its complicity in crimes against humanity" by making payments to a holding account until democracy is restored. The letter argued that Total is now violating local laws against misappropriating public money and "has placed itself on the side of the junta."

MOGE can be targeted for sanctions without interrupting the flow of energy, said Tom Andrews, the United Nations special rapporteur on Myanmar.

"The people of Myanmar are not calling for anything that they, themselves, are unwilling to do," Andrews said in an e-mail to the AP. "But the fact remains that to be truly effective, the people of Myanmar need countries to join them and impose sanctions on MOGE."

Human rights activists say it's unconscionable for any company to help fund a military that has, in recent months, engaged in mass torture, launched attacks on medics, forcibly disappeared thousands of people, and returned mutilated corpses to victims' families as tools of terror. Since February, soldiers and police have killed at least 1,300 people and arrested more than 10,800, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which monitors deaths and arrests.

Last month, the National Unity Government, an underground opposition group and parallel administration, released a public statement that dubbed MOGE the military's most important financial lifeline and called for urgent sanctions.

"As a nation, we have these natural resources to build a school, to build a hospital, to build a road," said spokesman Dr. Sasa, who goes by one name. "So why are we still using this money to kill the people of Myanmar? To us, it is barbarity."

In response to questions, the military said state revenue is used for education, infrastructure, development projects and public service, and is also used "proportionately for the rule of law and for defense."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 45 of 90

The military has long denied allegations of human rights abuses.

"All state revenue is spent according to the needs of the country," the military said in a statement to the AP. "Putting restrictions on the current government is directly affecting the social and economic life of the citizens."

The Yadana project provides less than 1.5 percent of Chevron's worldwide natural gas output, and Total says Yadana represents less than 1 percent of its production. But while Yadana isn't a significant source of income, it also doesn't cost the companies much because major set-up fees were incurred decades ago, said Readul Islam, a Singapore-based research analyst at Rystad Energy. Chevron and Total would also struggle to sell the operation, given the remaining short life of the aging gas field and the grim political situation, he said.

"These operations are not company-makers by any sense, but they are profitable," Islam said.

Also, Chevron and Total's aversion to sanctions may be less about money than about precedent, said John Sifton, Asia advocacy director at Human Rights Watch.

"If you signal that every time a country has serious human rights abuses, Human Rights Watch and other groups can come in and say, 'You should sanction your revenue,' it's going to create business headaches for them all over the world," he said.

With public pressure mounting, Total and Chevron announced in May that they were suspending dividend payments by the Moattama Gas Transportation Company, which owns the Yadana pipeline. While welcoming the move as a first step, activists argue the dividend payments are a fraction of the military's gas revenues.

The energy analytics firm Wood Mackenzie in November downgraded its forecast of Myanmar gas exports to Thailand after Yadana's output fell faster than expected. Rights activists said Thai fears of a gas slowdown or cutoff at a time of surging prices across Asia have stiffened its resistance to new sanctions, which the U.S. and EU appeared reluctant to challenge. The Thai government did not respond with comment.

In Myanmar, some gas workers have dismissed the energy companies' concerns that they will face retaliation with sanctions. One 10-year employee of Total said the risk of losing his job due to sanctions was nothing compared to the risk of the generals remaining in power.

"Everyone needs a job," he said. "But I don't want to survive by working here while everyone is suffering from this crisis."

Given he and millions of others already have risked so much in the pursuit of democracy, he is frustrated with the international community's failure to act.

"I don't understand why they keep paying the junta," he said.

After the young woman whose family had long worked for Total protested outside its gates, the contractor company that hired her warned her not to participate again in the country's pro-democracy Civil Disobedience Movement, she said.

A few months later, she posted on social media about what she felt was Total's poor treatment of a colleague who died of COVID-19. Days later, she said, the contractor company fired her for allegedly defaming Total. In a statement, Total said that no Total E&P employees have been fired since the military's takeover, and none have been prevented from participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement.

In September, she was arrested and imprisoned for three weeks under Section 505(A) of the Penal Code, which, in part, criminalizes comments that "cause fear" or spread "false news."

"I feel very disappointed in Total because they are neglecting this country in which they invested," she said.

For another Total employee, the lack of action from those who claim to stand for human rights is baffling. Why, he asked, hasn't the international community told gas companies that if they do business with the military, they can no longer do business with the rest of the world?

For him, the solution to military abuse is simple.

"If they do not have revenue, they cannot buy weapons," he says. "If they cannot buy weapons, this

revolution will end quickly.”

Gelineau reported from Sydney and Hinnant reported from Paris. AP Business Writer Elaine Kurtenbach in Bangkok contributed to this report.

Volunteers raise oyster gardens to help restore reefs

By JANET McCONNAUGHEY Associated Press

BAY ST. LOUIS, Miss. (AP) — It's time to agitate the oysters at St. Stanislaus High School on Mississippi's Gulf coast.

Students on a platform below the school's long pier gently shake their oyster garden's wire cages as they pull them from the water, loosening mud and algae that might keep water and nutrients from baby oysters clinging to those shells.

These students in Bay St. Louis are part of a volunteer force along U.S. coasts that's raising oysters from translucent spat the width of a soda straw to hard-shelled bivalves that can help restore depleted reefs.

Oyster reefs are a keystone of coastal ecosystems. Each oyster filters 25 to 50 gallons (95 to 190 liters) of water a day. Spat glue themselves to larger oysters and grow. The reefs provide habitat for shrimp, crabs and fish and protect shorelines.

In Maryland, Virginia, Mississippi and Alabama alone, there are more than 1,000 oyster gardens, most in wire cages hanging from private docks or open-topped floats tied to them.

Dennis Hatfield of Gulf Shores, Alabama, said he is struck each summer by the number of crabs, fish, shrimp, sponges and other animals he clears from his cages on Little Lagoon.

"I feel very positive we are creating habitat in the lagoon," he said, adding that many of the 50,000 to 55,000 adult oysters grown there each year go to reefs in Mobile Bay.

In the 1950s, an average of 37,400 tons of oysters were taken annually from brackish waters nationwide. But overharvesting, pollution, parasites, smothering sediment and other problems saw U.S. oyster harvests fall 68% to about 11,900 tons a year in the 1990s, federal figures show.

Commercial farmers around the country grow oysters near the surface because they mature much faster where the water holds more of the plankton they eat and predators can be more easily removed.

Oyster gardening uses the same techniques on a smaller scale. But the oysters aren't being grown for the half-shell or deep fryer.

It's as much education as restoration, said Bob Stokes, director of the Galveston Bay Foundation in Texas. Volunteers become "engaged about caring about the bay they live on," he said.

When the Little Lagoon oysters were collected, more than 20 big plastic "shrimp baskets" held clumps of oysters.

Big enough to spawn next spring, they're now on reefs being restored for fishing or reserved to hold brood stock for future generations, with no harvest allowed.

In the Mississippi Sound, heavy rains through spring and summer were hard on baby oysters. Most shells in the cages set out in late June at St. Stanislaus held only silt in mid-November, and surviving juveniles were generally less than an inch long.

"When you find one with an oyster, put it aside so you don't count them twice," cautioned Rayne Palmer, an Auburn University graduate student who runs the Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant's gardening program in Mississippi.

Empty shells also go onto reefs, said Letha Boudreaux, head of the marine biology program at St. Stanislaus.

Oyster shells are the hard surface spat prefer, and entire artificial reefs are made from recycled shells. The Galveston Bay program puts mesh bags holding recycled shells into the water to attract spat and give them a head start.

Oyster gardening started in the late 1990s around the Chesapeake Bay, where harvests had plummeted 90% in two decades.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 47 of 90

The Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant's oyster gardening program, modeled on the Chesapeake's, started in Alabama in 2001 as master's thesis research.

"It makes me really happy to see that it took off and people are still doing it" in Alabama, said Kimberly Henderson Hedrick, who won a Gulf Guardian Award in 2004 as head of Alabama's Shellfish Restoration Project and now teaches in the Indiana farm town where she grew up.

The Chesapeake Bay oysters were beset by two highly lethal parasitic diseases, in addition to other problems. Declines in the second half of the 1900s followed an even more drastic crash in the 1920s from rampant overharvesting, said Chris Moore, senior ecosystem scientist for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation.

Gardeners in the foundation and its member groups have added at least 15 million oysters in Maryland and 1 million in Virginia, Moore said.

Virginia's Tidewater Oyster Gardeners Association members grow oysters to eat as well as to plant. Tidewater hasn't been able to collect data on reef contributions, but president emeritus Vic Spain thinks it's probably at least 500,000 a year.

An umbrella group called the Chesapeake Oyster Alliance has set a goal of 10 billion added oysters by 2025.

"Wish us luck, that's gonna be tough," Spain wrote in an email.

Dozens of schools and community groups around New York Harbor have similar projects as part of the Billion Oyster Project, spokeswoman Helene Hetrick said in an email. The project does not call them "oyster gardens" because the harbor's oysters are unsafe to eat and the goal is not food but restoration, she said.

Oyster gardens get pulled from the water every week to 10 days to clear out critters, keep oysters from growing through the cage mesh, and dry out and clean off algae and seaweed growing on the wire.

It can take oysters three to four years to reach adulthood in the Chesapeake, and a year to 18 months in raised cages.

In Mobile Bay and in Mississippi, it may take only four to five months to have oysters ready to transplant, said P.J. Waters, an Auburn University extension associate professor who oversees Alabama's oyster gardening at Mississippi-Alabama Sea Grant.

Colin Wood, one of two student interns who maintain the St. Stanislaus garden, collect data and supervise other students -- not for pay but for a credit on their transcripts -- said he was excited by the hands-on aspect.

"I didn't realize oysters had a big impact on the environment," he said.

Follow Janet McConnaughey on Twitter: @JanetMcCinNO.

On a single Kentucky street, the tornado killed 7 children

By CLAIRE GALOFARO and JOHN RABY Associated Press

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. (AP) — The little red wagon was strewn upside down on a heap of rubble — a pile of boards and bricks, a mangled blue bicycle, a baby doll.

Behind it, there was little more than a hole in the ground where a house had stood. Across the street, the tidy homes on this cul-de-sac were reduced to mounds of lumber. Clothes hung from the branches of snapped trees. The walls of one house were gone, and the only thing left standing inside was a white Christmas tree.

When a tornado touched down in Bowling Green, Kentucky, in the middle of the night, its violence was centered on this friendly subdivision, where everyone waved at one another and giggling children spent afternoons tooling around on bicycles on the sidewalks. Fourteen people died in a few blocks, 11 of them on a single street, Moss Creek Avenue. Entire families were lost, among them seven children, two of them infants. Neighbors who survived are so stricken with grief they struggle to speak of it. All around them, amid the ruins, is evidence of the kids they used to watch climb off the school bus.

Melinda Allen-Ray has barely slept since early Saturday, when tornado alerts started screaming and she carried her grandchildren into the bathroom as winds whipped her house apart. After just minutes of

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 48 of 90

destruction, there was silence. She went outside and heard her neighbors' screams.

"I heard them — it traumatized me. I think about that each night when I go to sleep, when I do sleep," she said. In her dreams she hears the screaming and wakes up. She wept all weekend.

"I just think about all those babies," she said.

Hers is a diverse community of families from around the world — Bosnia, Myanmar, Nigeria — many of whom fled from violence. For some, this fresh destruction triggers thoughts of the dark days they fled in their homelands, where they hid from bombs and lost whole families.

"We come from war; this reminds us, it touches the memory of that, where we've been and how we came here," said Ganimete Ademi, a 46-year-old grandmother who fled Kosovo in 1999 during the war, in which she lost her uncle and a nephew. Now she looks around her own neighborhood.

"I turn my memory back to 22 years ago," she said.

One of the families that lost many members was from Bosnia. Two brothers lived in homes next door to each other with their families, Ademi said. They were happy and gregarious, holding summertime parties in the yard. From the two brothers' households, one woman died, along with two children and two infants, police said. Their surviving relatives said it's too difficult to speak of it.

Another family here lost six members: three adults, a 16-year-old girl, a 4-year-old boy and another child.

Around the corner, a 77-year-old grandmother was killed. Two others from the neighborhood died of their injuries at the hospital.

"That's hard to think about — you go to bed, and your entire family is gone the next day," said Ronnie Ward, with the Bowling Green Police Department. They usually tell people to get in a bathtub and cover up with a mattress, he said, but that probably would've made little difference here: Some homes were destroyed so completely the tornado ripped all the way through the floor, exposing the earth below.

Now, they comb through what remains, turning over every strip of dry wall and each twisted car to make sure there aren't more victims underneath. It can be horrific work, Ward said, but they try to steady themselves enough because they know it must be done.

"So you go about that task of trying to get this work done, and then you come across a wagon," he said, standing near the Radio Flyer bent and broken on a pile. "And you think, that's associated with a child somewhere. And did that child live? Those thoughts, they overtake you, they overwhelm you."

What these children left consumes them. There's a Barbie doll missing a leg. A reindeer stuffed animal. A scooter, a toy horse, a hula hoop. There's a pink Disney princess backpack. A car from "Paw Patrol," and bedding printed with the faces of its goofy animal first responders.

The people who've had to see it are reckoning with how close they and their own children came. As the tornado tore through the subdivision, it decimated some houses and damaged others, yet left some just next door unscathed.

"It's almost hard to look at, because how did it miss that house but it got this house?" Ward said.

A tree shot through the neighborhood like a missile and landed in Ademi's backyard, about a dozen feet from where she'd cowered with her husband. Her four children and two grandchildren live nearby. "This tree could have come in my house, and we'd all be gone too," she said.

The tornado turned just as it got to Benedict Awm's house. Inside, he, his wife, their 2-year-old son and infant held one another under a blanket to protect their eyes and bodies from the broken glass shooting through shattered windows. His wife shook and asked if they would die. He said he didn't know.

"It's terrible, you can't imagine, I thought we were dead," he said. Had the tornado kept on its course, they would be, he thinks. But instead it turned slightly. Thunderous winds turned to silence, and their house still stood. A miracle, thinks Awm, who moved here from war-torn Burma.

Around the corner, someone spray-painted on their front door the words "By God's grace we survived," and hung an American flag from the wreckage of their rafters.

For days now, volunteers have arrived from all over with trucks and tools, and there's comfort in that.

"Sometimes it makes me want to cry, to see how people are willing to help me," Awm said.

Ben Cerimovic pulled his truck and trailer in every day over the weekend. He's an immigrant from Bosnia,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 49 of 90

and he knows the family that died here.

"The feelings I'm having right now I really can't explain," he said. There's a close-knit, thriving Bosnian community in Bowling Green, which has a robust refugee resettlement program to bring migrants to Western Kentucky. Most of them came here from war so their children would have a better life, he said. Now this subdivision looks like a war zone, scattered with things their children loved.

Cerimovic volunteered Saturday and Sunday, but he had to take Monday off to gather his emotions.

"Every time I see this, and I hear about those kids, I think about mine," he said. "What if they were my kids?"

Raby reported from Charleston, West Virginia. AP reporter Mike Catalini contributed from Morrisville, Pennsylvania.

Fox stars tried to get Trump to act on Jan. 6, texts show

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The revelation that Fox News Channel personalities sent text messages to the White House during the Jan. 6 insurrection is another example of how the network's stars sought to influence then-President Donald Trump instead of simply reporting or commenting on him.

Sean Hannity, Laura Ingraham and Brian Kilmeade all texted advice to Trump's chief of staff, Mark Meadows, as a mob of pro-Donald Trump loyalists stormed the Capitol on Jan. 6, according to Republican Rep. Liz Cheney of Wyoming, vice chair of the congressional committee probing the riot.

"Mark, the president needs to tell people in the Capitol to go home," texted Ingraham, host of "The Ingraham Angle." "This is hurting all of us. He is destroying his legacy."

"Please get him on TV," texted Kilmeade, a "Fox & Friends" host. "Destroying everything you have accomplished."

Hannity, like Ingraham a prime-time host, wondered whether Trump could give a statement and ask people to leave the Capitol.

Cheney's release of the text messages late Monday came a day after the most prominent hard-news journalist at Fox, Chris Wallace, announced he was leaving after 18 years for a new job at CNN. Wallace had grown privately frustrated by Fox's amplification of its conservative opinion hosts, particularly since the network's ratings took a brief dive following the election of President Joe Biden.

The network had no immediate comment Tuesday about the texts.

For journalists, the ethical lines are clear: Your job is to report the news, not try to influence the actions of newsmakers.

Fox has always tried to distinguish between "news" and "opinion" programming, even though those lines are often nonexistent and many viewers don't make the same distinctions. The network considers Hannity, Ingraham and Kilmeade hosts of opinion shows. Fox has argued in court that its prime-time hosts can't be held to the same factual standards as actual journalists.

It's not the first time Fox personalities acted as sort of a kitchen cabinet to Trump. Hannity frequently consulted with him during his presidency, and Tucker Carlson once asked for and received a meeting with Trump to talk about COVID-19 in the early days of the pandemic.

"I don't consider them in the traditional definition of a journalist," said Aly Colon, a professor of media ethics at Washington and Lee University. "But even so, they are representative of a news operation at Fox."

Their actions leave questions about whether their loyalty was to Trump or to viewers, who expect to learn about the news from them or at least get news analysis, Colon said.

While CNN and MSNBC provided live coverage of the Monday night hearing in which Cheney revealed the text messages, Fox did not. Hannity interviewed Meadows but did not ask about the advice he and his colleagues sent. At the outset of his show, he bashed the committee's work.

"We've been telling you that this is a waste of your time and money," Hannity said. "They have a pre-determined outcome."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 50 of 90

Not everyone thinks what the Fox hosts did was wrong, including a consultant who ran Fox's news operation for eight years during the 2000s.

"I do think it was helpful to have them, or anyone else who had influence or potential influence over the president, tell him what needed to be done," said Michael Clemente, a former executive vice president at Fox News.

At a point of national crisis, that's more important than the objectivity rules that most journalists are bound by, he argued.

"Texting the chief of staff to urge him to tell the president to call for an end to rioting is a good thing," said Tim Graham, director of media analysis at the conservative Media Research Center. "But, ideally, journalists shouldn't be texting political advice to the White House."

Graham said he didn't think the news will be a bombshell to Fox viewers. "It shows Fox being anti-riot, so they will be heartened by that," he said.

On the night of the riot, Ingraham told Fox viewers that the Capitol had been attacked "by people who can only be described as antithetical to the MAGA movement." She raised the idea that anti-fascist demonstrators may have been sprinkled through the crowd — which wasn't true.

She complained about the "continual video loop" of the Capitol breach. She said the demonstration was "99% peaceful," but "because of a small contingent of loons, these patriots have been unfairly maligned."

Hannity, on his show that night, condemned violence at the Capitol. He also spent considerable time talking about the "train wreck" presidential election and the failure of Democrats to condemn "violent far left riots" in American cities in the summer of 2020.

Some critics said they saw a disconnect between what the Fox personalities said publicly and texted privately.

"So you are telling me all these Fox News hosts knew the coup was terrible, begged Trump to stop it, and when he didn't they kept on promoting him?" tweeted Amanda Carpenter, a columnist for The Bulwark, a political website dominated by conservatives who oppose Trump.

On their shows Tuesday, both Hannity and Ingraham argued that there was no difference between what they said publicly on Jan. 6 and what they texted Meadows.

"Both publicly and privately, I said what I believe — that the breach of the Capitol was a terrible thing," Ingraham said.

Hannity complained about Cheney publicizing his text.

"Do we believe in privacy in this country?" he said. "Apparently not."

At Kim Potter trial, jurors get 2 views of former officer

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Jurors at the manslaughter trial of Kim Potter have been getting two versions of the white former suburban Minneapolis police officer, who says she made a tragic mistake when she fired her handgun instead of her Taser and killed Black motorist Daunte Wright.

Prosecutors have portrayed the longtime Brooklyn Center officer as an experienced police veteran who should have known better and who made the situation worse by failing to try to help Wright or even to quickly radio in what happened so others might help him.

The defense would like jurors to see the person who became interested in policing when she was in grade school and who raised two sons while balancing a career in which she took a special interest in helping domestic abuse victims and had never fired her gun or Taser in the line of duty before she shot Wright on April 11.

Soon, Potter herself will take the stand in an effort to reinforce the second image — a gamble that might be critical if she is to persuade the jury to acquit her of the two manslaughter charges she faces.

Susan Gaertner, a former chief prosecutor in neighboring Ramsey County who is now a defense lawyer, said it's important for any defendant to come across as genuine.

"If they can tell their story in their own voice, and their demeanor and approach is believable, that can

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 51 of 90

be extremely helpful," said Gaertner, who isn't connected to the case. "I think juries, perhaps just subconsciously, but they want to hear from the defendant directly. They want the defendant to sit in the witness stand under oath and look them in the eye and say, 'This is what happened.'"

The jury has already gotten a preview of what Potter's testimony is likely to cover. In his opening statement, defense attorney Paul Eng described her as a 49-year-old mother of two sons — a Marine and a college hockey player.

The bicycle safety talk she heard in grade school piqued an interest in policing that blossomed in high school, when she took part in a police explorer program, Eng said. After becoming an officer, she served in an honor guard for police killed in the line of duty and was president of the police union.

Potter was good at de-escalating conflicts and that's what she was trying to do when she warned Wright repeatedly that she was about to use her Taser on him, Eng said. She hoped that he would stop trying to get away from officers, he said.

"She was good at de-escalating everything," Eng said. "And here that's what she's trying to do. 'I'll tase you,' which is another way of saying, 'Please stop so I don't have to hurt you. Please stop.' So that's who she is."

The jury has repeatedly seen videos, including from Potter's own body camera, showing that she was inconsolable after realizing she had shot Wright. She wailed uncontrollably, "Oh my God. Oh my God!" before crumpling over on the curb.

Pool reports from inside the courtroom say that Potter has frequently cried as the videos of the shooting and the aftermath have been played.

Some clues to Potter's likely testimony might be gleaned from an interview she gave to the Minneapolis Star Tribune shortly before the trial. In it, she cried while describing how she struggles with the events of that day.

"I'm a good person, and I valued him in life," Potter said of Wright. "The aftermath of that day has destroyed me. I pray for him every day. I pray for the Wright family every day."

She also told the newspaper that she didn't like doing traffic stops, which sometimes led to criticism from her superiors.

"There's a lot of poverty," she said. "Giving someone a ticket and towing their car away doesn't help them get out of the situation they're in. I liked to educate people and talk to them."

Potter's testimony will expose her to cross-examination from prosecutors that could hurt her. They've already indicated a willingness to go at her hard, including when prosecutor Erin Eldridge used her opening statement to say Potter had "betrayed her badge and she failed Daunte Wright."

Eldridge hammered at the idea that Potter should have known better, saying she had been on the police force longer than Wright had been alive, and that she had gone through years of training and was actually training another officer when she shot Wright.

"What did she show him? She showed him how to kill someone," Eldridge said.

Eldridge's colleague, Matthew Frank, reacted with ridicule when Potter's attorneys were questioning a witness and noted that she had been marked as "exceeds expectations" in performance evaluations.

When Frank got the chance to question the witness again, he asked: "Does it exceed expectations to draw a gun and shoot somebody to death instead of their Taser?"

Eldridge said during her opening statement that Potter handled her firearm recklessly and disregarded the known risks — themes that prosecutors have honed in on throughout the trial. Eldridge said this case is about "an officer who knew she could kill someone if she got it wrong, but she failed to make sure she got it right."

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

Testimony: Potter extensively trained on proper Taser use

By AMY FORLITI and STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 52 of 90

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Prosecutors nearing the end of their case against a suburban Minneapolis police officer charged in Daunte Wright's death drew on testimony from her former colleagues to portray an officer whose intended use of a Taser would have violated department policy despite extensive training.

Kim Potter, who resigned two days after she shot Wright, was trained on policies as they evolved during her 26-year career and repeatedly signed documents acknowledging the policies, Brooklyn Center Police Commander Garrett Flesland testified Tuesday.

Potter, 49, is charged with manslaughter in Wright's death on April 11 after he was pulled over for having expired license plate tags and an air freshener dangling from his rear-view mirror. Video captured the moments when Wright pulled away from officers who were trying to arrest him on an outstanding warrant, with Potter shouting "I'll tase you!" and then shooting Wright with her handgun.

Potter is white and Wright was Black, and his death set off several nights of angry protests in Brooklyn Center. It happened while a white former officer, Derek Chauvin, was on trial in nearby Minneapolis in George Floyd's death.

The defense has called the shooting a horrific mistake, but has also asserted that Potter would have been within her rights to use deadly force on Wright because he might have dragged another officer, then-Sgt. Mychal Johnson, with his car.

Testimony was scheduled to resume Wednesday.

Prosecutors introduced several documents Tuesday that Flesland testified showed Potter's repeated certifications on Taser training, and her awareness of the warnings for their use — including a certification the month before Wright was shot.

On cross-examination, Potter attorney Earl Gray hammered away at her right to use force. He repeatedly described the situation as one in which Potter was trying to stop a wanted person who was trying to flee from the police and who could have put a fellow officer at risk of being dragged by a car.

"You've got to save that officer that's laying over the seat, correct?" Gray asked.

"Yes," Flesland said.

Later, when Gray asked Flesland what he thought of Potter, he said: "She's a good cop. She's a good person. She's a friend. I have no concerns going to calls with her." Prosecutors objected.

Flesland also testified that he and the police chief at the time had gone to Potter's house the day of Wright's shooting because "we had been told she had hurt herself." That line of questioning was cut off after prosecutors objected.

Sgt. Mike Peterson, a use-of-force instructor with the department and certified Taser instructor, showed the jury how officers are supposed to run a "spark test" at the beginning of every shift to check whether their Tasers are working. He did so with his own device, which generated a loud buzz for five seconds as electricity arced across the electrodes.

Sam McGinnis, a senior special agent with the state's Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, testified Monday that Potter failed to run the test on her Taser on the day she shot Wright.

Peterson also walked the jury through the Brooklyn Center department's training procedures for using Tasers as prosecutor Matthew Frank showed them pages from the manufacturer's and the department's training materials that warn against the dangers of mixing up a Taser and a handgun. Frank also highlighted portions that say a Taser should not be used simply to stop fleeing suspects or on suspects who are operating vehicles.

Earlier Tuesday, Judge Regina Chu denied two motions filed by prosecutors. One was designed to limit the opinion of witnesses who are not testifying as experts. That came after Johnson, who is now a major in a sheriff's office near Minneapolis, testified last week that Potter's actions were authorized under state law. Johnson was not testifying as an expert on the police use of force.

"I'm not going to preclude any of the officers from testifying that, based upon their training and experience, that deadly force or use of Taser was appropriate under the circumstances," Chu said.

She also denied prosecutors' request to question police officers about union membership. They argued that Potter had roles in the union, including as president, that gave her an elevated level of respect among her coworkers. They wanted to ask officers about it so that jurors could evaluate any potential bias toward

Potter.

Chu said she rejected the motion because Potter is no longer connected to the police union in any way and testifying witnesses "couldn't possibly be biased to testify in her favor because of her position."

Chu also ruled Tuesday that if Potter is convicted of one or both of the counts against her, she would preside over a separate trial to determine if there were aggravating factors that would allow Chu to give Potter a sentence above what the state's guidelines suggest.

Without the jury present, prosecutors told the judge they had been operating under the impression that these issues would be presented during this trial, but Gray said Potter had never agreed to that.

In order for Potter to be sentenced above what the guidelines suggest, prosecutors would have to prove there were aggravating factors; prosecutors allege that Potter's conduct caused a danger to others and that she abused her position of authority.

Prosecutors presented evidence of these aggravating factors when they brought in testimony about injuries to Wright's passenger and an occupant of the car that collided with Wright's right after Potter shot him. Chu said Tuesday that this testimony was not prejudicial and could remain part of this case because evidence about the crash also relates to whether Potter's use of force was reasonable.

The case is being heard by a mostly white jury.

State sentencing guidelines call for just over seven years in prison upon conviction of first-degree manslaughter and four years for second-degree, though prosecutors have said they plan to push for longer sentences.

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

Worker says she risked discipline if she left job amid storm

By BRUCE SCHREINER Associated Press

MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — An employee of the Kentucky candle factory where eight workers were killed by a tornado said Tuesday that a supervisor threatened her with written disciplinary action if she went home early because storms were approaching.

Haley Conder, who worked at the Mayfield Consumer Products factory on and off for 10 years, also questioned why the company did not encourage workers to go home — or at least give them a better understanding of the danger — between a first tornado siren around 6 p.m. Friday and another one around 9 p.m., shortly before the tornado hit.

"They (the company) had from 6 o'clock to 9 o'clock to allow us to go home, to tell us really what was going on and that we needed to prepare ourselves for the worst," Conder told The Associated Press in a phone interview. "It was nothing like that. Not one supervisor told us what was really going on."

A spokesman for the company insisted that employees were free to leave anytime.

Conder's comments came on the same day that the state's governor said Kentucky's workplace safety agency would look into the eight deaths, which happened as violent weather spawned tornadoes in five states.

Gov. Andy Beshear told reporters that the Kentucky Division of Occupational Safety and Health Compliance would conduct a review. That kind of investigation is routine whenever workers are killed on the job.

"So it shouldn't suggest that there was any wrongdoing. But what it should give people confidence in, is that we'll get to the bottom of what happened," he said.

Conder, 29, said her supervisor threatened to write her up if she left early, and that accumulated write-ups can lead to firing.

More than 100 people were working on holiday candle orders when the twister leveled the facility. The scale of the damage initially stoked fears that scores of workers could be found dead in the rubble.

The company later said many employees who survived left the site and went to homes with no phone service, adding to the confusion over who was missing.

Since then, all workers have been accounted for, according to state and local officials who have spoken

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 54 of 90

to the company. Louisville Emergency Management Director E.J. Meiman said late Monday that authorities now "have a high level of confidence that nobody is left in this building."

The factory supplies candles to retailers, including Bath & Body Works. It is the county's third-largest employer.

Mayfield Consumer Products spokesman Bob Ferguson, who works for an outside communications firm, said the company welcomes a review by the state and will cooperate.

Ferguson denied that employees were stuck at the plant or would face retribution if they left.

"Not true. That is absolutely not true. We followed our protocols exactly. Employees, if they decide they want to leave, they're free to leave," he said.

Due to a tight labor market, the company had relaxed some of its procedures so that employees were not required to give a reason if they had to leave work during a shift, Ferguson said.

NBC News first reported that employees said they were threatened with discipline if they left early.

Mayfield, home to 10,000 residents and the candle factory, suffered some of the worst damage in the country. The tornado outbreak that killed at least 88 people — 74 of them in Kentucky — cut a path of devastation from Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed, to Illinois, where an Amazon distribution center was heavily damaged.

Six people died in the Illinois warehouse collapse, and the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration has opened an investigation into what happened there. The tornadoes also killed four in Tennessee, two in Arkansas and two in Missouri.

Hundreds of people gathered for a candlelight vigil Tuesday evening on the outskirts of Mayfield.

Prayers went up that the brokenhearted will be "wrapped up in God's love" and that people "hold on to one another" as the storm-stricken city begins its recovery.

Scarlett Sears, an employee at the factory, said at the vigil she had not seen her co-workers since Friday.

"It's great for the ones that made it but heartbreaking for everything else, Mayfield, MCP, all of it, heartbreaking," she said.

J.R. Ramsey, who has worked at the plant for 18 years, said he was still in shock.

"It's good to see the people that made it," he said.

Conder said employees sheltered inside the building after the first siren, but were then told to go back to work about a half-hour later "like it was a regular day."

"Some of us were just clueless," she added. "Unless family called us and let us know ... we had no idea it was coming for us at all."

Employees sheltered again after the 9 p.m. tornado siren. Conder was in a bathroom when the storm hit.

"I look up and the ceiling is just giving way, like it's the ocean just coming toward me," she said, adding she was trapped in rubble for about an hour.

Mark Saxton was working as a forklift operator. After the first storm siren, he said employees were told to go back to work.

"I feel like production was a priority over letting everybody go home," Saxton said Tuesday in a phone interview. He said he wasn't threatened with any disciplinary action.

When the second storm siren sounded, he said he took refuge along with the other workers. It wasn't long before he heard a big boom and "everything shook."

He said he dropped to the ground, got in a fetal position and "that's when everything started falling — the walls and everything." He was trapped by a slab of a concrete wall but was able to extricate himself.

Associated Press writers Dylan Lovan and Rebecca Reynolds in Louisville, Kentucky, and photographer Gerald Herbert in Mayfield contributed to this report.

Chauvin expected to admit to violating Floyd's civil rights

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Former Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin is set to appear in federal

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 55 of 90

court in person Wednesday morning for a change of plea hearing during which he is expected to admit to violating George Floyd's civil rights.

Although the scheduling of the change of plea hearing suggests a guilty plea is imminent, details have not been made public and nothing will be official until Chauvin enters his plea in court and the agreement is accepted by a judge.

Chauvin is charged with two counts of depriving Floyd of his rights for pinning his knee against Floyd's neck as the Black man said he couldn't breathe and for failing to provide medical care to Floyd during a May 25, 2020, arrest that resulted in Floyd's death. Chauvin has already been convicted of state murder and manslaughter charges and is serving a sentence of 22 1/2 years.

He faces two more counts in a separate case involving the restraint of a Black teenager in 2017. It was not immediately clear if there would be any change of plea in that case as it was not part of the scheduling notice sent out by the court.

Floyd's arrest and death, which a bystander captured on cellphone video, sparked mass protests nationwide that called for an end to racial inequality and police mistreatment of Black people.

Chauvin and three other former officers — Thomas Lane, J. Kueng and Tou Thao — were indicted earlier this year on federal charges alleging they willfully violated Floyd's rights. A federal trial for the other three men still appears to be scheduled for January.

To bring federal charges in deaths involving police, prosecutors must believe an officer acted under the "color of law," or government authority, and willfully deprived someone of their constitutional rights. That's a high legal standard. An accident, bad judgment or simple negligence on the officer's part isn't enough to support federal charges. Prosecutors have to prove the officer knew what he was doing was wrong in that moment but did it anyway.

According to evidence in the state case against Chauvin, Kueng and Lane helped restrain the 46-year-old Floyd as he was on the ground — Kueng knelt on Floyd's back and Lane held down Floyd's legs. Thao held back bystanders and kept them from intervening during the 9 1/2-minute restraint.

All four former officers were charged broadly in federal court with depriving Floyd of his rights while acting under government authority, but the federal indictment broke down the counts even further. The first count against Chauvin alleges he violated Floyd's right to be free from unreasonable seizure and unreasonable force by a police officer when he kept his knee on Floyd's neck, even after Floyd was unresponsive.

The second count alleges Chauvin willfully deprived Floyd of liberty without due process, including the right to be free from "deliberate indifference to his serious medical needs."

In the 2017 case involving the then-14-year-old boy, Chauvin is charged with depriving the boy, who was handcuffed and not resisting, of his right to be free of unreasonable force when he held him by the throat, hit him in the head with a flashlight and held his knee on the boy's neck and upper back while he was in a prone position.

According to a police report from that 2017 encounter, Chauvin wrote that the teen resisted arrest and after the teen, whom he described as 6-foot-2 and about 240 pounds, was handcuffed, Chauvin "used body weight to pin" him to the floor. The boy was bleeding from the ear and needed two stitches.

That encounter was one of several mentioned in state court filings that prosecutors said showed Chauvin had used neck or head and upper body restraints seven times before dating back to 2014, including four times state prosecutors said he went too far and held the restraints "beyond the point when such force was needed under the circumstances."

The other three former officers are still expected to go to trial on federal charges in January, and they face state trial on aiding and abetting counts in March.

Find AP's full coverage of the death of George Floyd at: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-george-floyd>

House votes to hold Mark Meadows in contempt in Jan. 6 probe

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House voted Tuesday to hold former White House chief of staff Mark Mead-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 56 of 90

ows in contempt of Congress after he ceased to cooperate with the Jan. 6 Committee investigating the Capitol insurrection — making it the first time the chamber has voted to hold a former member in contempt since the 1830s.

The near-party-line 222-208 vote is the second time the special committee has sought to punish a witness for defying a subpoena. The vote is the latest show of force by the Jan. 6 panel, which is leaving no angle unexplored — and no subpoena unanswered — as it investigates the worst attack on the Capitol in more than 200 years. Lawmakers on the panel are determined to get answers quickly, and in doing so reassert the congressional authority that eroded while former President Donald Trump was in office.

“History will be written about these times, about the work this committee has undertaken,” said Rep. Bennie Thompson, R-Miss., the chairman. “And history will not look upon any of you as a martyr. History will not look upon you as a victim.”

The two GOP votes — Reps. Liz Cheney of Wyoming and Adam Kinzinger of Illinois, who serve on the committee — in favor of the resolution came after nine Republicans voted to hold former Trump ally Steve Bannon in contempt in October. While Bannon’s case was more clear-cut -- he never engaged with the committee at all -- Meadows had turned over documents and negotiated for two months with the panel about an interview. Meadows also has closer relationships within the Republican caucus, having just left Congress last year.

Meadows was also Trump’s top aide in the White House, giving him more plausible grounds to claim executive privilege. Bannon had not worked in the White House since 2017.

The Justice Department will also be weighing those factors as prosecutors decide whether to move forward with the case. If convicted, Bannon and Meadows could each face up to one year behind bars on each charge.

Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., another member of the panel, began Tuesday’s debate on the resolution by reading frantic texts from the day of the attack revealing members of Congress, Fox News anchors and even Trump’s son urging Meadows to persuade the outgoing president to act quickly to stop the three-hour assault by his supporters.

Republicans on Tuesday called the action against Meadows a distraction from the House’s work, with one member calling it “evil” and “un-American.”

Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio praised Meadows: “Make no mistake, when Democrats vote in favor of this resolution, it is a vote to put a good man in prison.”

Trump also defended Meadows in an interview, saying: “I think Mark should do what’s right. He’s an honorable man. He shouldn’t be put through this.”

And Meadows’ attorney George Terwilliger defended his client in a statement before the vote, noting that he had provided documents to the panel and maintaining that he should not be compelled to appear for an interview.

Terwilliger said, “The Select Committee’s true intentions in dealing with Mr. Meadows have been revealed when it accuses him of contempt citing the very documents his cooperation has produced.”

Meadows himself has sued the panel, asking a court to invalidate two subpoenas that he says are “overly broad and unduly burdensome.”

Meanwhile, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell told reporters: “I do think we’re all watching, as you are, what is unfolding on the House side. And it will be interesting to reveal all the participants who were involved.”

He added that he was not in contact with Meadows on the day of the attack.

Democrats quoted at length from Jan. 6 text messages provided by Meadows while he was cooperating with the committee.

“We need an Oval Office address,” Donald Trump Jr. texted, the committee said, as his father’s supporters were breaking into the Capitol, sending lawmakers running for their lives and interrupting the certification of Joe Biden’s presidential victory. “He has to lead now. It has gone too far and gotten out of hand.”

Trump Jr. added, “He’s got to condemn this s— ASAP.” In response to one of Trump Jr.’s texts, Meadows

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 57 of 90

said: "I'm pushing it hard. I agree."

Members of the committee said the texts raise fresh questions about what was happening at the White House — and what Trump himself was doing — as the attack was underway. The committee had planned to question Meadows about the communications, including 6,600 pages of records taken from personal email accounts and about 2,000 text messages. The panel has not released any of the communications in full.

Cheney, the panel's vice chairwoman, said at the committee's Monday evening meeting that an important issue raised by the texts is whether Trump sought to obstruct the congressional certification by refusing to send a strong message to the rioters to stop.

"These texts leave no doubt," she said. "The White House knew exactly what was happening at the Capitol."

The investigating panel has already interviewed more than 300 witnesses, and subpoenaed more than 40 people, as it seeks to create the most comprehensive record yet of the lead-up to the insurrection and of the violent siege itself.

If Meadows had appeared for his deposition, lawmakers had planned to ask him about Trump's efforts to overturn the election in the weeks before the insurrection, including his outreach to states and his communications with members of Congress.

The panel says it wanted to know more about whether Trump was engaged in discussions regarding the response of the National Guard, which was delayed for hours as the violence escalated and the rioters beat police guarding the Capitol building.

The documents provided by Meadows include an email he sent to an unidentified person saying that the Guard would be present to "protect pro Trump people," the panel said, and that more would be available on standby. The committee did not release any additional details about that email.

Committee staff said they would have interviewed Meadows about emails "to leadership at the Department of Justice on December 29th and 30th, 2020, and January 1st, 2021, encouraging investigations of suspected voter fraud," even though election officials and courts across the country had rejected those claims.

Associated Press writers Eric Tucker and Darlene Superville contributed to this report.

US COVID death toll hits 800,000, a year into vaccine drive

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

The U.S. death toll from COVID-19 topped 800,000 on Tuesday, a once-unimaginable figure seen as doubly tragic, given that more than 200,000 of those lives were lost after the vaccine became available practically for the asking last spring.

The number of deaths, as compiled by Johns Hopkins University, is about equal to the population of Atlanta and St. Louis combined, or Minneapolis and Cleveland put together. It is roughly equivalent to how many Americans die each year from heart disease or stroke.

The United States has the highest reported toll of any country. The U.S. accounts for approximately 4% of the world's population but about 15% of the 5.3 million known deaths from the coronavirus since the outbreak began in China two years ago.

The true death toll in the U.S. and around the world is believed to significantly higher because of cases that were overlooked or concealed.

A closely watched forecasting model from the University of Washington projects a total of over 880,000 reported deaths in the U.S. by March 1.

President Joe Biden on Tuesday noted what he called a "tragic milestone." He again called on unvaccinated Americans to get shots for themselves and their children, and urged the vaccinated to get booster shots.

"I urge all Americans: do your patriotic duty to keep our country safe, to protect yourself and those around you, and to honor the memory of all those we have lost," Biden said. "Now is the time."

Health experts lament that many of the deaths in the United States were especially heartbreaking be-

cause they were preventable by way of the vaccine, which became available in mid-December a year ago and was thrown open to all adults by mid-April of this year.

About 200 million Americans are fully vaccinated, or just over 60% of the population. That is well short of what scientists say is needed to keep the virus in check.

"Almost all the people dying are now dying preventable deaths," said Dr. Chris Beyrer, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "And that's because they're not immunized. And you know that, God, it's a terrible tragedy."

When the vaccine was first rolled out, the country's death toll stood at about 300,000. It hit 600,000 in mid-June and 700,000 on Oct. 1.

The U.S. crossed the latest threshold with cases and hospitalizations on the rise again in a spike driven by the highly contagious delta variant, which arrived in the first half of 2021 and now accounts for practically all infections. Now the omicron variant is gaining a foothold in the country, though scientists are not sure how dangerous it is.

Beyrer recalled that in March or April 2020, one of the worst-case scenarios projected upwards of 240,000 American deaths.

"And I saw that number, and I thought that is incredible — 240,000 American deaths?" he said. "And we're now past three times that number." He added: "And I think it's fair to say that we're still not out of the woods."

EXPLAINER: The security flaw that's freaked out the internet

By FRANK BAJAK AP Technology Writer

BOSTON (AP) — Security pros say it's one of the worst computer vulnerabilities they've ever seen. They say state-backed Chinese and Iranian hackers and rogue cryptocurrency miners have already seized on it.

The Department of Homeland Security is sounding a dire alarm, ordering federal agencies to urgently eliminate the bug because it's so easily exploitable — and telling those with public-facing networks to put up firewalls if they can't be sure. The affected software is small and often undocumented.

Detected in an extensively used utility called Log4j, the flaw lets internet-based attackers easily seize control of everything from industrial control systems to web servers and consumer electronics. Simply identifying which systems use the utility is a prodigious challenge; it is often hidden under layers of other software.

The top U.S. cybersecurity defense official, Jen Easterly, deemed the flaw "one of the most serious I've seen in my entire career, if not the most serious" in a call Monday with state and local officials and partners in the private sector. Publicly disclosed last Thursday, it's catnip for cybercriminals and digital spies because it allows easy, password-free entry.

The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, or CISA, which Easterly runs, stood up a resource page Tuesday to help erase a flaw it says is present in hundreds of millions of devices. Other heavily computerized countries were taking it just as seriously, with Germany activating its national IT crisis center.

A wide swath of critical industries, including electric power, water, food and beverage, manufacturing and transportation, were exposed, said Dragos, a leading industrial control cybersecurity firm. "I think we won't see a single major software vendor in the world -- at least on the industrial side -- not have a problem with this," said Sergio Caltagirone, the company's vice president of threat intelligence.

Eric Goldstein, who heads CISA's cybersecurity division, said Washington was leading a global response. He said no federal agencies were known to have been compromised. But these are early days.

"What we have here is a extremely widespread, easy to exploit and potentially highly damaging vulnerability that certainly could be utilized by adversaries to cause real harm," he said.

A SMALL PIECE OF CODE, A WORLD OF TROUBLE

The affected software, written in the Java programming language, logs user activity on computers. Developed and maintained by a handful of volunteers under the auspices of the open-source Apache Software Foundation, it is extremely popular with commercial software developers. It runs across many

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 59 of 90

platforms — Windows, Linux, Apple's macOS — powering everything from web cams to car navigation systems and medical devices, according to the security firm Bitdefender.

Goldstein told reporters in a conference call Tuesday evening that CISA would be updating an inventory of patched software as fixes become available. Log4j is often embedded in third-party programs that need to be updated by their owners. "We expect remediation will take some time," he said.

Apache Software Foundation said the Chinese tech giant Alibaba notified it of the flaw on Nov. 24. It took two weeks to develop and release a fix.

Beyond patching to fix the flaw, computer security pros have an even more daunting challenge: trying to detect whether the vulnerability was exploited — whether a network or device was hacked. That will mean weeks of active monitoring. A frantic weekend of trying to identify — and slam shut — open doors before hackers exploited them now shifts to a marathon.

LULL BEFORE THE STORM

"A lot of people are already pretty stressed out and pretty tired from working through the weekend — when we are really going to be dealing with this for the foreseeable future, pretty well into 2022," said Joe Slowik, threat intelligence lead at the network security firm Gigamon.

The cybersecurity firm Check Point said Tuesday it detected more than half a million attempts by known malicious actors to identify the flaw on corporate networks across the globe. It said the flaw was exploited to plant cryptocurrency mining malware — which uses computer cycles to mine digital money surreptitiously — in five countries.

As yet, no successful ransomware infections leveraging the flaw have been detected. But experts say that's probably just a matter of time.

"I think what's going to happen is it's going to take two weeks before the effect of this is seen because hackers got into organizations and will be figuring out what to do to next." John Graham-Cumming, chief technical officer of Cloudflare, whose online infrastructure protects websites from online threats.

We're in a lull before the storm, said senior researcher Sean Gallagher of the cybersecurity firm Sophos.

"We expect adversaries are likely grabbing as much access to whatever they can get right now with the view to monetize and/or capitalize on it later on." That would include extracting usernames and passwords.

State-backed Chinese and Iranian hackers have already exploited the flaw, presumably for cyberespionage, and other state actors were expected to do so as well, said John Hultquist, a top threat analyst at the cybersecurity firm Mandiant. He wouldn't name the target of the Chinese hackers or its geographical location. He said the Iranian actors are "particularly aggressive" and had taken part in ransomware attacks primarily for disruptive ends.

SOFTWARE: INSECURE BY DESIGN?

The Log4j episode exposes a poorly addressed issue in software design, experts say. Too many programs used in critical functions have not been developed with enough thought to security.

Open-source developers like the volunteers responsible for Log4j should not be blamed so much as an entire industry of programmers who often blindly include snippets of such code without doing due diligence, said Slowik of Gigamon.

Popular and custom-made applications often lack a "Software Bill of Materials" that lets users know what's under the hood — a crucial need at times like this.

"This is becoming obviously more and more of a problem as software vendors overall are utilizing openly available software," said Caltagirone of Dragos.

In industrial systems particularly, he added, formerly analog systems in everything from water utilities to food production have in the past few decades been upgraded digitally for automated and remote management. "And one of the ways they did that, obviously, was through software and through the use of programs which utilized Log4j," Caltagirone said.

Tornado victims include former Kentucky school administrator

By DYLAN LOVAN and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 60 of 90

A Kentucky woman who worked her way up from school bus driver to become an administrator and school board member. A grandfather who "stole the show" when he was around his grandchildren. A 2-month-old whose family tried to protect her by putting her in a car seat. A 94-year-old Korean War veteran from Arkansas.

These were among at least 88 people killed during tornadoes Friday night that ripped through five states in the Midwest and South. The tornado outbreak cut a path of devastation that stretched from Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed, to Illinois, where an Amazon distribution center was heavily damaged. In Kentucky, 74 people died, and Gov. Andy Beshear said the death toll could grow.

Here are some of the people who perished during the tornadoes.

By the time she won election to a vacant school board seat last year, Jenny Bruce had played a role at virtually every level in the small school district in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, where she had graduated from high school decades earlier.

"Jenny started out driving a bus and she was a teacher's aide, and she gradually worked her way up to finance director," Dawson Springs School Superintendent Leonard Whalen recalled. "She was some kind of lady."

During the deadly tornado outbreak late Friday and early Saturday, 65-year-old Bruce was sheltering inside when a tornado obliterated her home, Whalen said. He said neighbors found her amid the wreckage. A county coroner later confirmed her death.

Bruce had worked for the school system for roughly four decades before retiring about two years ago. Whalen helped persuade her to campaign for an empty seat on the five-member school board in 2020, and she ended up running unopposed.

In her years working in the school district's administrative office, Whalen said, Bruce was universally liked — never saying an unkind word about anyone and often bringing cookies and other treats for co-workers to share.

"She was a Dawson Springs graduate and she loved our schools," Whalen said. "She loved kids."

Kevin Dickey loved spending time with his family and "stole the show and the hearts of his grandchildren anytime he was around," his family said in a statement. He also had a tight bond with his co-workers at Amazon, they said.

Dickey, 62, was among six people killed when an Amazon warehouse in Edwardsville, Illinois, was struck. Authorities say both sides of the warehouse used to prepare orders for delivery collapsed inward and the roof caved. Rescuers had to pull survivors from the rubble.

Dickey's daughter, Kristen Anastasi, told the Marion Republican that a co-worker said Dickey was trying to get people to safety and making sure his drivers were OK. She called his work ethic "unmatched" and said that's what the family would expect of him.

"Dad talked often about his co-workers and their daily stories. He had a great bond with many," the family said.

Douglas Koon, his wife, Jackie, and their three children huddled in his mother-in-law's bathroom in Dawson Springs, Kentucky, as the storms approached. The tornado hit the house directly, flinging the family around and tossing in the air a bathtub that was shielding two of his sons. The couple put their infant daughter, Oaklynn, in a car seat to protect her, and she appeared to be OK on Saturday.

But by Sunday, the baby was having seizures, and doctors noticed a brain bleed after she was taken to the hospital. They believed she had a stroke, Koon said in a Facebook post.

"It's not looking good at this point," he wrote. "The machines are keeping her alive."

Early Monday morning, the family posted that the infant had died.

In a text message to The Associated Press on Monday, Koon said he was struggling "to process everything that I'm going through."

A family member has set up a GoFundMe account for Koon's family and his mother-in-law, Sheila Rose,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 61 of 90

who lost her home.

Lisa Taylor had worked 14 years as a florist at the same family-owned shop in Memphis, Tennessee, when she left in October to start a new career at the airport with the Transportation Security Administration. Co-workers at Rachel's Flowers congratulated her with balloons on a sign that read, "Good Luck, Lisa."

Taylor, 54, stayed in touch with her friends at the flower shop, making plans to return part time over the holidays to make some extra money. Then the phone rang Saturday, just as the power came back on at the shop after violent storms passed through overnight. Taylor's longtime boyfriend was calling with tragic news. A large tree had fallen through her roof overnight, killing Taylor as she slept in bed.

"She had just gotten started on her new adventure and she's just been taken," said Angie Morton, who worked as a florist alongside Taylor for several years.

A single mother of two children now in their 20s, Taylor took her new government job for higher wages and the extra stability that came with health insurance and other benefits, friends said.

But she had a creative spark that made her a natural when it came to working with flowers, Morton said, whether she was helping grieving families design funeral arrangements or using bits and pieces of broken, castoff jewelry to add some custom sparkle to high school girls' prom corsages.

"She really liked to bling everything up," Morton said. "She would take stuff other people would throw in the trash and make beautiful things out of it. If she found an earring in a store that didn't have a matching pair, she would think, 'I know there's somebody who that would be perfect for her corsage.'"

Charles Newell, deputy emergency management administrator for Shelby County, Tennessee, said she was the only known storm death in the county that includes Memphis.

Rachel Greer, the flower shop's owner, was helping plan floral arrangements for Taylor's funeral. She said Taylor's daughter had requested "a sea of purple flowers" such as lavender roses and chrysanthemums to match her mother's favorite color.

Meanwhile customers were dropping by the shop to offer condolences and leaving notes. One of them read: "Lisa was a light in a dark world."

Annistyn Rackley was an outgoing and energetic 9-year-old who loved swimming, dancing and cheer-leading, according to her great-aunt Sandra Hooker.

The two had become close over the past four years: Hooker offered the girl support during doctor's visits and blood draws required by a rare liver condition that still didn't keep the southeastern Missouri girl from participating in activities.

Annistyn, her parents and her two younger sisters took shelter Friday night in a windowless bathroom in their new home west of Caruthersville, Missouri. To prove they'd gotten to the family's "safe space," the girls' mom texted Hooker a photo of the three in and next to the bathtub — all of them smiling, 9-year-old Annistyn holding her favorite doll.

Fifteen minutes later, Sandra Hooker said, a tornado splintered the home, carrying the family members dozens of yards through the air into a field where first responders found them in mud. Annistyn died, and the others were injured. The mother, Meghan Rackley, and their middle daughter, 7-year-old Avalinn, remained hospitalized Monday.

Hooker called Annistyn a "special angel" and said the girl delighted in donning outfits and makeup for cheer competitions and learning new dances from TikTok. She did cartwheels and splits in front of Hooker.

"I would just gasp because she could do the splits all the time, and she would just laugh," Hooker said. "She loved dancing."

Hooker teaches gifted students at the same elementary school where Meghan Rackley teaches kindergarten in Caruthersville, which is nestled next to the Mississippi River in what's known as Missouri's Bootheel region.

Hooker said Annistyn's parents learned when she was 2 months old that she had a rare liver disorder in which bile ducts don't develop properly, sometimes making it hard to fight off illness.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 62 of 90

Golden Wes Hembrey, 94, died when a tornado destroyed the nursing home where he lived in Monette, Arkansas.

His nephew Mike Hembrey said the Korean War veteran and retired farmer had been in the nursing home since 2016 because of Alzheimer's disease. But he remembered his uncle as engaged with his extended family throughout their younger years.

"He was outgoing," his nephew said. "He'd be out in the yard playing with us. But don't make him mad. When he was mad, he was mad."

"He liked cutting up, telling jokes," said niece Kristie Carmichael.

The Hembreys said Jimmie Hembrey had visited his brother the day before the tornado and found him to be in good health.

Graves County Deputy Jailer Robert Daniel was supervising inmate workers at a candle factory in Mayfield, Kentucky, when the tornado struck. His boss said Monday that Daniel had been focused on the prisoners in his care when he was killed as the twister wrecked the plant.

Daniel, 47, had worked at the county jail for a few years previously and was rehired a few months ago, said Graves County Jailer George Workman. The seven inmates whom Daniel was overseeing at the factory Friday night were part of a brand-new work program and had just begun their jobs three days earlier.

After the storm hit, the inmates told Workman's deputies that it was Daniel who literally had pushed them all to safety, guiding them through a doorway and against a wall in an interior part of the plant. Workman said the last inmate through the door told deputies that Daniel was behind him one moment, and suddenly he was gone.

"He was physically still in the act of trying to get them to safety. And that's when it hit," Workman said. "It takes a tremendous person to be able to lay their own life down for somebody else. But he did and he was doing it for the right reasons."

All seven of the inmates in Daniel's care survived, Workman said, with two of them suffering broken legs.

A cousin, Mark Saxton Sr., said Daniel was a native of the Mayfield area, which was devastated by the storm.

"He loved his community," Saxton said. "He was a great family man. Everybody who met him just loved him. He's the type of person you want to be associated with."

Brian Crick, a judge for two western Kentucky counties, was known for his sound judgment when it came to solving problems, a fellow judge said.

Crick, 43, was a district judge for Muhlenberg and McLean counties who handled criminal misdemeanor cases, traffic court and juvenile cases, said Circuit Judge Brian W. Wiggins. Wiggins said he had known his fellow judge since 2005, when Crick was a public defender. He later was in private practice before taking the bench in 2011.

Many of the defendants who came before him weren't represented by attorneys, and Crick "was very good about seeing to it that their rights were protected," Wiggins said. "He had a very common-sense approach. He was very level-headed about how to handle cases and how to talk to people."

Wiggins was killed when the storm hit his family's home in Muhlenberg County. He is survived by a wife and three children, all of whom made it through the storm without major injuries, Wiggins said. "He was just a consummate family man ... very engaged with his children and his wife. They were No. 1 to him."

"We are especially heartbroken to get the news," Kentucky Supreme Court Chief Justice John Minton said in a statement. "This is a shocking loss to his family, his community and the court system and his family is in our prayers."

Two of June Pennington's children said the Manila, Arkansas, resident was devoted to her four children and nine grandchildren and had a particular soft spot for animals.

Pennington, 52, was working as an assistant manager at a Dollar General store in nearby Leachville, Arkansas, when it was hit.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 63 of 90

"She didn't love anything as much in life as her kids and grandkids," said Christie Pennington. "She was truly selfless and loved wholeheartedly."

David Benefield, the oldest of June Pennington's four children, said he was born when his mother was only 14.

"She was a kid raising a kid. We were just like best friends," he said. "It's crazy how close you become."

Her children remember her as someone who "would do anything that we asked her to do," Benefield said. Even after her children were grown, they said June Pennington wanted to spend as much time with them as possible.

Christie Pennington said her mother adopted dogs, cats, rabbits, birds, turtles and even a ferret.

"If there was ever an animal in need of a home, we took it in," she said.

Clayton Lynn Cope, 29, had been working at Amazon for more than a year before the storm killed him at a company facility in southwestern Illinois.

Five other workers also died at the facility located outside St. Louis.

Cope, who lived in nearby Alton, Illinois, had joined the Navy after graduating from high school and was an avid outdoorsman who also liked to ride motorcycles and play video games. He had a special place in his heart for his dog, Draco, said his younger sister, Rachel Cope.

"He would go out of his way for anyone," Cope said in a written message.

Ollie Borgmann, 84, was a sweet and "typical grandmother" who had lived in her home in Defiance, Missouri, for decades.

A tornado blew through the home she shared with her 84-year-old husband, Vernon, on Friday night, blowing the house off its foundation, as well as that of a neighbor's house in the town located about 40 miles (64 kilometers) west of St. Louis.

Her son Mark Borgmann told the St. Louis Post-Dispatch that his brother, Keith, was on the phone with their father during the powerful storm when the line went dead. The next thing Vernon Borgmann remembers is waking up in a nearby field surrounded by debris. He suffered scratches and bruises but will be OK, said Mark Borgmann.

When Ollie Borgmann was found by rescuers, she was awake. She died later at a hospital.

Lovan reported from Louisville, Kentucky. Bynum reported from Savannah, Georgia. Associated Press writers Sudhin Thanawala in Atlanta; Travis Loller in Nashville, Tennessee; John Hanna in Topeka, Kansas; Terry Wallace in Dallas; Sophie Tareen in Chicago; Josh Funk in Omaha, Nebraska; Mike Schneider in Orlando, Florida; and Jeff Amy in Atlanta contributed to this report.

Review: A Spidey sense overdose in 'No Way Home'

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

Spider-Man movies have come in such flurries over the last two decades that you could almost tell time by them. Who needs the long centuries of the Triassic, Jurassic and the Cretaceous, when, in the span of just one generation you can have the Tobey epoch, the Garfield era and the Tomozoic?

The franchise's constant (and contractual) regenerative velocity has by now become a familiar punchline. But in "Spider-Man: No Way Home," the distinct, if cluttered, time zones of Marvel's webslinger overlap and collide in ways that are often entertaining and likely to be satisfying to fans, even if they still lack quite the Spidey sense tingle they're designed to provide an overdose of. This movie is like two Spider-Man jabs and a booster all in one. In its retrospective sweep and supergroup construction, "No Way Home" is Spidey's own "Endgame."

That also means it comes with plenty of twists that, if you don't want spoiled, you really ought to see the movie before reading reviews like this one. The clever reveals and appearances of "No Way Home" are so much a part of its fabric that it's difficult to consider the movie without referencing some of them. In a message before the film, Jamie Foxx (who played the villain Electro in "The Amazing Spider-Man 2")

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 64 of 90

warns of revealing spoilers before it's pointed out that he, himself, is a spoiler.

Jon Watts' "No Way Home" begins as its two previous installments, also directed by Watts, did: with the breezy high-school vibe that has characterized Tom Holland's reign as Spider-Man. It's been a chapter defined by Holland's wholesome charm. He's a pleasant, if somewhat vanilla Spider-Man, who has sometimes seemed most suited to the role offscreen, as student to Robert Downey Jr. and in his genial, goofy media appearances. But Holland's earnest, easy manner has also lightened the sometimes heavy load of Marvel movies, and his mostly winning albeit easily forgotten Spider-Man films have been refreshingly unencumbered by the larger franchise's exposition-leaden, interconnected apparatus.

"No Way Home" picks up precisely where 2019's "Far From Home" left off: Outside New York's Penn Station, where Jake Gyllenhaal's Mysterio revealed Peter Parker's identity just before perishing. The new notoriety brings news helicopters hovering over Peter's apartment and disrupts his previously clandestine relationship with girlfriend MJ (Zendaya) and best pal Ned (Jacob Batalon). They are on the cusp of getting into MIT (Paula Newsome is especially good as a college admissions officer), but Mysterio has made Peter a divisive figure. Our stay in Midtown High School, where Peter is mobbed, is brief — too brief, considering the teaching staff includes JB Smoove, Hannibal Buress and Martin Starr.

Wanting his old anonymity back, Peter turns to Benedict Cumberbatch's Doctor Strange, who summons an amnesia spell that goes awry. Instead of wiping the memory of those who know Spider-Man's secret, it conjures villains from Spider-man's past, opening portals between parallel universes — which in this case means between movies. Electro, Green Goblin (Willem Dafoe), Doctor Octopus (Alfred Molina), Sandman (Thomas Haden Church) and Lizard (Rhys Ifans) tumble forth like dazed travelers who took a wrong turn at Albuquerque.

By opening pathways of connection between the Spider-Man films, "No Way Home" binds together a much-remade fictional universe with a new spirit of cohesion and a warm bath of fan service. If we are stepping between movies, it's tempting to want some of the portals to lead into other films — to Cumberbatch's character in "The Power of the Dog" or Andrew Garfield in "Tick, Tick ... Boom!" Or better yet, Dafoe's mad wickie in "The Lighthouse." Now that would be meta.

Really, it was the Chris Miller and Phil Lord-produced "Into the Spider-verse" that opened this gateway by riffing metaphysically with the webslinger. "No Way Home" adopts some of that comic energy but doesn't have the same whip-smart, freewheeling uninhibitedness. If "Spider-verse" was about how anyone can be Spider-Man, "No Way Home" is a more authorized Spider-Man compendium; its tone leans more operatic than antic. Still, Watts has a human touch that can be lacking in superhero films, and nearly all of the actors who appear in "No Way Home" come across as individuals despite the high-concept narrative.

It also offers a more direct compare and contrast between our three Spider-Men, each a variant of the same theme. The Sam Raimi films, with Tobey Maguire — or at least the first two — are still top of the class. But while Garfield's pair of movies are probably the easiest to dismiss, it's his appearance here that's the most potent. Not because he's at home as Spider-Man but because he isn't. Now seven years older and doing some of the best work of his life, a more mature Garfield exudes something that doesn't enter into this ever-recycling, short-term-memory franchise — that there is life after Spider-Man.

"Spider-Man: No Way Home," a Columbia Pictures release, is rated PG-13 by the Motion Picture Association of America for sequences of action/violence, some language and brief suggestive comments. Running time: 150 minutes. Two and a half stars out of four.

Follow AP Film Writer Jake Coyle on Twitter at: <http://twitter.com/jakecoyleAP>

The AP Interview: UN nuke chief says view of Iran blurred

By JON GAMBRELL and ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — The head of the United Nations nuclear watchdog warned Tuesday that the restrictions faced by his inspectors in Iran threaten to give the world only a "very blurred image" of Tehran's program as it enriches uranium closer than ever to weapons-grade levels.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 65 of 90

Speaking in a wide-ranging interview to The Associated Press, Rafael Mariano Grossi said he wanted to tell Iran that there was “no way around” his inspectors at the International Atomic Energy Agency if the Islamic Republic wanted to be “a respected country in the community of nations.”

“We have to work together,” Grossi said from a luxury hotel in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, after he visited that country’s first nuclear power plant. “They must work together. I will make sure they understand that in us they will have a partner.”

Grossi’s insistence that the Vienna-based IAEA remained “an auditor” for the world came as negotiations falter in Vienna to revive Tehran’s tattered nuclear deal. Hours earlier, the chief of Iran’s civilian nuclear program insisted his country would refuse the agency access to a sensitive centrifuge assembly plant.

That plant in Karaj came under what Iran describes as a sabotage attack in June. Tehran blamed the assault on Israel amid a widening regional shadow war since former President Donald Trump unilaterally withdrew America from Iran’s landmark nuclear accord with world powers. Iran since has refused the IAEA access to replace cameras damaged in the incident.

“If the international community through us, through the IAEA, is not seeing clearly how many centrifuges or what is the capacity that they may have ... what you have is a very blurred image,” Grossi said. “It will give you the illusion of the real image. But not the real image. This is why this is so important.”

Grossi dismissed as “simply absurd” an Iranian allegation that saboteurs used the IAEA’s cameras in the attack on the Karaj centrifuge site. Tehran has offered no evidence to support the claim, though it’s another sign of the friction between inspectors and Iran.

Since the nuclear deal’s collapse, Tehran has started enriching uranium up to 60% purity — a short technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%. The deal limited enrichment to 3.67%, enough to be used in a power plant. The nation’s stockpile of enriched uranium grows every day far beyond the scope of the 2015 accord, which saw Tehran agree to limit its nuclear program in the exchange for the lifting of economic sanctions. It also spins ever-more advanced centrifuges also barred by the deal.

While stressing he wasn’t involved in the political negotiations ongoing in Vienna, Grossi acknowledged the advances made by Iran since the deal’s collapse meant there would have to be changes to the original agreement.

“The reality is that we are dealing with a very different Iran,” he said. “2022 is so different from 2015 that there will have to be adjustments that take into consideration these new realities so our inspectors can inspect whatever the countries agree at the political table.”

And while Iran insists its program is peaceful, U.S. intelligence agencies and the IAEA have said Iran ran an organized nuclear weapons program until 2003.

“There’s no other country other than those making nuclear weapons reaching those high levels” of uranium enrichment, Grossi said of Iran. “I’ve said many times that this doesn’t mean that Iran has a nuclear weapon. But it does mean that this level of enrichment is one that requires an intense verification effort.”

Iran’s mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Grossi’s remarks.

In Vienna, however, anxiety is growing among European nations at the negotiating table. The U.S. has remained outside of direct talks since abandoning the accord.

“Without swift progress, in light of Iran’s fast-forwarding of its nuclear program, the (deal) will very soon become an empty shell,” they warned in an overnight statement.

Apparently responding to the criticism, Iranian negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani wrote on Twitter: “Some actors persist in their blame game habit, instead of real diplomacy.”

But the Iranian negotiators who have entered the talks for the first time in months under newly elected hard-line President Ebrahim Raisi have taken maximalist positions. Bagheri Kani himself described six previous rounds of negotiations with a team under former President Hassan Rouhani as a mere “draft.”

Asked about the difference between the two administrations, Grossi said that “the change is palpable.”

“The president himself and people around him have been saying very clearly they have views about the program,” he said. “They have strong views about the interactions that Iran has been having” with both the IAEA and parties to the nuclear deal.

He also described cooperation with the Raisi administration as “slower than expected.”

“We have been able to start this relationship quite late I would say,” Grossi said.

Meanwhile, satellite photos obtained by the AP show ongoing construction in the mountain south of Iran’s Natanz nuclear facility, twice the target of suspected Israeli attacks. Another above-ground facility is being built at Iran’s underground Fordo facility, which also has begun uranium enrichment amid the Vienna talks in defiance of the nuclear deal.

Grossi said Iran has informed the IAEA about the ongoing construction and his inspectors “are following” progress at the sites.

Regionally, Saudi Arabia has begun exploring nuclear power. Unlike the UAE — which has a strict agreement with the U.S. that ensures it doesn’t enrich its own uranium — Saudi Arabia says it wants a centrifuge program. That opens the risk of nuclear proliferation as the kingdom has threatened to rush for a nuclear weapon if Iran obtains one. Grossi described discussions between Riyadh and the IAEA as “very positive.”

And in Israel, long believed to be a nuclear-armed state, a massive construction project continues at its secretive nuclear reactor near Dimona, which isn’t subject to the IAEA’s watch. Iran often points to Israel’s weapons program as an international double-standard given the scrutiny of Tehran’s civilian program.

When asked about Israel, Grossi said: “I think the international community would like every country to sign up to the treaty on the non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and to put all the facilities under safeguards from the IAEA.”

He stressed the importance of ensuring that IAEA inspectors have unfettered ability to monitor and access Iran’s fast-accelerating nuclear program.

“The problem is that the more time passes and you lose the ability to record what is going on, then the moment this capability is restored, inspectors come back and start to put the jigsaw puzzle together again,” he said. “There might be gaps. And these gaps are not a good thing to have.”

Follow Jon Gambrell and Isabel DeBre on Twitter at www.twitter.com/jongambrellAP and www.twitter.com/isabeldebre.

Data indicate omicron is milder, better at evading vaccines

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

JOHANNESBURG (AP) — The omicron variant is offering more hints about what it may have in store as it spreads around the globe: A highly transmissible virus that may cause less severe disease, and one that can be slowed — but not stopped — by today’s vaccines.

An analysis Tuesday of data from South Africa, where the new variant is driving a surge in infections, suggests the Pfizer vaccine offers less defense against infection from omicron and reduced, but still good, protection from hospitalization.

The findings are preliminary and have not been peer-reviewed — the gold standard in scientific research — but they line up with other early data about omicron’s behavior, including that it seems to be more easily spread from person to person.

The spread can be seen in Britain, the United States and Denmark, where confirmed omicron cases are increasing at a worrisome pace, said Dr. Jacob Lemieux, who monitors variants for a research collaboration led by Harvard Medical School.

“Omicron is moving extraordinarily fast, faster even than the most pessimistic among us thought it was going to move,” Lemieux said.

During past waves of the pandemic, the U.S. could look to Europe and Britain for an early signal of what was coming, Lemieux said. “With omicron, it seems to be happening everywhere all at once with extremely rapid kinetics.”

It’s unclear whether omicron’s rapid spread will overwhelm hospitals. In South Africa, although case numbers are rising, hospital admissions for adults diagnosed with COVID-19 are 29% lower compared to the wave the country experienced in mid-2020, after adjusting for vaccination status, according to the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 67 of 90

new analysis.

Still, some experts cautioned that it's too soon to draw conclusions since the variant is quite new and hospitalizations can lag weeks behind infections.

When omicron reaches broader populations more useful information will emerge, said Dr. David Dowdy, an infectious disease epidemiologist at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

"To date, omicron has disproportionately infected young adults — people who probably have more social contacts and are more likely to attend large gatherings," Dowdy said. Young adults may be more likely to be sick without knowing it, have more intense exposures and experience milder disease, he said.

"Our society needs to learn how to wait, rather than either panicking or dismissing early findings," Dowdy said.

U.S. health officials estimate that a small, but growing proportion of new COVID-19 infections are due to omicron, and that the rise is particularly dramatic in some places.

Two weeks ago, omicron accounted for less than 0.5% of the coronaviruses that were genetically sequenced in the U.S. That rose to about 3% last week, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Tuesday.

But it varies from place to place, and is as high as 13% in the New York/New Jersey area, according to the agency.

The CDC is tracking how fast the percentage doubles, and as more cases come in, it may be better able to predict whether — or when — the omicron variant becomes the dominant version of the coronavirus in the U.S, health officials say.

In Britain, omicron cases are doubling every two to three days. Health officials say the variant will replace delta as the dominant coronavirus strain within days.

In the new South Africa findings, people who received two doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine appeared to have just 33% protection against infection, compared to those who were unvaccinated, during the country's current omicron-fueled surge, but 70% protection against hospitalization. The analysis was conducted by Discovery Health, South Africa's largest private health insurer, and the South African Medical Research Council.

The study did not look at booster shots, which are not yet prevalent in South Africa but which data from elsewhere has indicated improves protection.

The Pfizer vaccine's 70% protection against hospital admission during the omicron surge compares to a 93% protection level seen in South Africa's delta-driven wave, according to the new analysis.

That's a big drop in vaccine protection from severe illness requiring hospitalization, said Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute.

"What we don't know yet is whether the booster will restore that back to greater than 90% and for how long," Topol said.

The analysis in South Africa was based on examining more than 211,000 COVID-19 test results that date from Sept. 1 to Dec. 7 — 41% of which were for adults who had received two doses of the Pfizer vaccine, which is the most commonly used one in South Africa.

Experts now say that omicron accounts for more than 90% of all new infections in South Africa, according to Discovery Health chief executive Dr. Ryan Noach.

Researchers around the world are rushing to figure out what the variant will mean for the coronavirus pandemic, now well into its second year. More information came Tuesday from Pfizer, which announced that its experimental pill to treat COVID-19 — separate from its vaccine — appears effective against omicron.

In the weeks since the variant was detected, South Africa has experienced rapid spread of the virus. The seven-day rolling average of daily new cases in the country rose over the past two weeks from 8.07 new cases per 100,000 people on Nov. 29 to 34.37 new cases per 100,000 people on Dec. 13, according to Johns Hopkins University. The death rate hasn't increased during that same period.

Some say there's still not enough data to draw broad conclusions about hospitalizations and the severity of disease caused by omicron.

"Is omicron milder, or more severe than delta?" said Dr. Michael Head, Senior Research Fellow in Global

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 68 of 90

Health, University of Southampton, wrote of the study. "Time will tell. The world's finest scientists, including many in the global south such as in South Africa, will find out. For now, national-level decision-makers have to consider that discretion is the better part of valor."

This story has been updated to correct the time period that the samples were from. They dated from Sept. 1 to Dec. 7, not Nov. 15 to Dec. 7. It also corrects that not all of the samples were positive, as a news release from Discovery initially said.

Associated Press writers Mike Corder, Mike Stobbe and Carla K. Johnson contributed.

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

Far too little vote fraud to tip election to Trump, AP finds

By CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — An Associated Press review of every potential case of voter fraud in the six battleground states disputed by former President Donald Trump has found fewer than 475 — a number that would have made no difference in the 2020 presidential election.

Democrat Joe Biden won Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin and their 79 Electoral College votes by a combined 311,257 votes out of 25.5 million ballots cast for president. The disputed ballots represent just 0.15% of his victory margin in those states.

The cases could not throw the outcome into question even if all the potentially fraudulent votes were for Biden, which they were not, and even if those ballots were actually counted, which in most cases they were not.

The review also showed no collusion intended to rig the voting. Virtually every case was based on an individual acting alone to cast additional ballots.

The findings build on a mountain of other evidence that the election wasn't rigged, including verification of the results by Republican governors.

The AP review, a process that took months and encompassed more than 300 local election offices, is one the most comprehensive examinations of suspected voter fraud in last year's presidential election. It relies on information collected at the local level, where officials must reconcile their ballots and account for discrepancies, and includes a handful of separate cases cited by secretaries of state and state attorneys general.

Contacted for comment, Trump repeated a litany of unfounded claims of fraud he had made previously, but offered no new evidence that specifically contradicted the AP's reporting. He said a soon-to-come report from a source he would not disclose would support his case, and insisted increased mail voting alone had opened the door to cheating that involved "hundreds of thousands of votes."

"I just don't think you should make a fool out of yourself by saying 400 votes," he said.

These are some of the culprits in the "massive election fraud" Trump falsely says deprived him of a second term:

A Wisconsin man who mistakenly thought he could vote while on parole.

A woman in Arizona suspected of sending in a ballot for her dead mother.

A Pennsylvania man who went twice to the polls, voting once on his own behalf and once for his son.

The cases were isolated. There was no widespread, coordinated deceit.

The cases also underscore that suspected fraud is both generally detected and exceptionally rare.

"Voter fraud is virtually non-existent," said George Christenson, election clerk for Milwaukee County in Wisconsin, where five people statewide have been charged with fraud out of nearly 3.3 million ballots cast for president. "I would have to venture a guess that's about the same odds as getting hit by lightning."

Even in the state with the highest number of potential fraud cases — Arizona, with 198 — they comprised less than 2% of the margin by which Biden won.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 69 of 90

Trump has continued to insist that the election was fraudulent by citing a wide range of complaints, many of them involving the expansion of mail voting because of the pandemic. As the Republican weighs another run for president in 2024, he has waded into some GOP primary contests, bestowing endorsements on those who mimic his "Stop the steal" rhetoric and seeking to exact revenge on some who have opposed his efforts to overturn the results.

Trump's false claims of a stolen election fueled the deadly Jan. 6 attempted insurrection at the Capitol, have led to death threats against election officials and have become deeply ingrained within the GOP, with two-thirds of Republicans believing Biden's election is illegitimate. Republican lawmakers in several states have used the false claims as justification to conduct costly and time-consuming partisan election reviews, done at Trump's urging, and add new restrictions for voting.

The number of cases identified so far by local elections officials and forwarded to prosecutors, local law enforcement or secretaries of state for further review undercuts Trump's claim. Election officials also say that in most cases, the additional ballots were never counted because workers did their jobs and pulled them for inspection before they were added to the tally.

"There is a very specific reason why we don't see many instances of fraud, and that is because the system is designed to catch it, to flag it and then hold those people accountable," said Amber McReynolds, a former director of elections in Denver and the founding CEO of the National Vote at Home Institute, which promotes mail voting.

The AP's review of cases in the six battleground states found no evidence to support Trump's various claims, which have included unsupported allegations that more votes were tallied than there are registered voters and that thousands of mail-in ballots were cast by people who are not on voter rolls. Dozens of state and federal courts have rejected the claims.

White House spokesman Andrew Bates said the AP's reporting offered further proof that the election was fairly conducted and decided, contrary to Trump's claims.

"Each time this dangerous but weak and fear-ridden conspiracy theory has been put forward, it has only cemented the truth more by being completely debunked — including at the hands of elections authorities from both parties across the nation, nonpartisan experts, and over 80 federal judges," he said.

Experts say to pull off stealing a presidential election would require large numbers of people willing to risk prosecution, prison time and fines working in concert with election officials from both parties who are willing to look the other way. And everyone somehow would keep quiet about the whole affair.

"It would be the most extensive conspiracy in the history of planet Earth," said David Becker, a senior trial attorney in the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division during the presidencies of Bill Clinton and George W. Bush who now directs the nonprofit Center for Election Innovation & Research.

Separate from the fraud allegations are claims by Trump and his allies that voting systems or ballot tallies were somehow manipulated to steal the election. Judges across the country, of both parties, dismissed those claims. That includes a federal judge in Michigan who ordered sanctions against attorneys allied with Trump for intending to create "confusion, commotion and chaos" in filing a lawsuit about the vote-counting process without checking for evidence to support the claims.

Even Trump's former attorney general, William Barr, said a month after the election that there was no indication of widespread fraud that could change the result.

For its review, AP reporters in five states contacted roughly 340 election offices for details about every instance of potential voter fraud that was identified as part of their post-election review and certification process.

After an election is over, officials research voter records, request and review additional information if needed from the state or other counties, and eventually decide whether to refer potential fraud cases for further investigation — a process that can take months.

For Wisconsin, the AP relied on a report about fraud investigations compiled by the state and filed public records requests to get the details of each case, in addition to prosecutions that were not initially reported to the state elections commission. Wisconsin is the only one of the six states with a centralized accounting

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 70 of 90

of all potential voter fraud cases.

A state-by-state accounting:

—ARIZONA: Authorities have been investigating 198 possible fraud cases out of nearly 3.4 million votes cast, representing 1.9% of Biden's margin of victory in the state. Virtually all the cases were in Pima County, home to Tucson, and involved allegations of double voting. The county has a practice of referring every effort to cast a second ballot to prosecutors, something other offices don't do. In the Pima cases, only one ballot for each voter was counted. So far, nine people have been charged in the state with voting fraud crimes following the 2020 election. Six of those were filed by the state attorney general's office, which has an election integrity unit that is reviewing an undisclosed number of additional cases.

—GEORGIA: Election officials in 124 of the state's 159 counties reported no suspicious activity after conducting their post-election checks. Officials in 24 counties identified 64 potential voter fraud cases, representing 0.54% of Biden's margin of victory in Georgia. Of those, 31 were determined to be the result of an administrative error or some other mistake. Eleven counties, most of them rural, either declined to say or did not respond. The state attorney general's office is reviewing about 20 cases referred so far by the state election board related to all elections in 2020, including the primary, but it was not known if any of those overlapped with cases already identified by local election officials.

—MICHIGAN: Officials have identified 56 potential instances of voter fraud in five counties, representing 0.04% of Biden's margin of victory in the state. Most of the cases involved two people suspected of submitting about 50 fraudulent requests for absentee ballots in Macomb, Wayne and Oakland counties. All the suspicious applications were flagged by election officials and no ballots were cast improperly.

—NEVADA: Local officials identified between 93 and 98 potential fraud cases out of 1.4 million ballots cast, representing less than one-third of 1% of Biden's margin of victory. More than half the total — 58 — were in Washoe County, which includes Reno, and the vast majority involved allegations of possible double voting. The statewide total does not include thousands of fraud allegations submitted to the state by local Republicans. Republican Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske has said many of those were based "largely upon an incomplete assessment of voter registration records and lack of information concerning the processes by which these records are compiled and maintained." It's not known how many remain under investigation.

—PENNSYLVANIA: Election officials in 11 of the state's 67 counties identified 26 possible cases of voter fraud, representing 0.03% of Biden's margin of victory. The elections office in Philadelphia refused to discuss potential cases with the AP, but the prosecutor's office in Philadelphia said it has not received any fraud-related referrals.

—WISCONSIN: Election officials have referred 31 cases of potential fraud to prosecutors in 12 of the state's 72 counties, representing about 0.15% of Biden's margin of victory. After reviewing them, prosecutors declined to bring charges in 26 of those cases. Meagan Wolfe, administrator of the Wisconsin Elections Commission, said the number of cases in 2020 was "fairly run of the mill."

AP's review found the potential cases of fraud ran the gamut: Some were attributed to administrative error or voter confusion while others were being examined as intentional attempts to commit fraud. In those cases, many involved people who sought to vote twice — by casting both an absentee and an in-person ballots — or those who cast a ballot for a dead relative such as the woman in Maricopa County, Arizona. Authorities there say she signed her mother's name on a ballot envelope. The woman's mother had died a month before the election.

The cases are bipartisan. Some of those charged with fraud are registered Republicans or told investigators they were supporters of Trump.

Donald Holz is among the five people in Wisconsin who face voter fraud charges. He said all he wanted to do was vote for Trump. But because he was still on parole after being convicted of felony drunken driving, the 63-year-old retiree was not eligible to do so. Wisconsin is not among the states that have loosened felon voting laws in recent years.

Holz said he had no intention to break the law and only did so after he asked poll workers if it was OK.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 71 of 90

"The only thing that helps me out is that I know what I did and I did it with good intentions," Holz said after an initial court appearance in Fond du Lac. "The guy upstairs knows what I did. I didn't have any intention to commit election fraud."

In southeast Pennsylvania, 72-year-old Ralph Thurman, a registered Republican, was sentenced to three years' probation after pleading guilty to one count of repeat voting. Authorities said Thurman, after voting at his polling place, returned about an hour later wearing sunglasses and cast a ballot in his son's name.

After being recognized and confronted, Thurman fled the building, officials said. Thurman's attorney told the AP the incident was the result of miscommunication at the polling place.

Las Vegas businessman Donald "Kirk" Hartle was among those in Nevada who raised the cry against election fraud. Early on, Hartle insisted someone had unlawfully cast a ballot in the name of his dead wife, and state Republicans seized on his story to support their claims of widespread fraud in the state. It turned out that someone had cast the ballot illegally — Hartle, himself. He agreed to plead guilty to a reduced charge of voting more than once in the same election.

Hartle's attorney said the businessman, who is an executive at a company that hosted a Trump rally before the election, had accepted responsibility for his actions.

Additional fraud cases could still surface in the weeks and months ahead. One avenue for those is the Electronic Registration Information Center, a data-sharing effort among 31 states aimed at improving state voter rolls. The effort also provides states with reports after each general election with information about voters who might have cast ballots in more than one state.

In the past, those lists have generated small numbers of fraud cases. In 2018, for example, Wisconsin used the report to identify 43 additional instances of potential fraud out of 2.6 million ballots cast.

Official post-election audits and other research have shown voter fraud to be exceptionally rare. A nonpartisan audit of Wisconsin's 2020 presidential election found no evidence of widespread fraud and a Republican lawmaker concluded it showed that elections in the state were "safe and secure," while also recommending dozens of changes to how elections are run. In Michigan, Republican state senators issued a report earlier this year saying they had found "no evidence of widespread or systematic fraud" in the 2020 election.

Not only do election officials look for fraud, they have procedures to detect and prevent it.

For mail voting, which expanded greatly last year because of the pandemic, election officials log every mail ballot so voters cannot request more than one. Those ballots also are logged when they are returned, checked against registration and, in many cases, voter signatures on file to ensure the voter assigned to the ballot is the one who cast it.

If everything doesn't match, the ballot isn't counted.

"Often, we don't get to fraud," said Jennifer Morrell, a former local election official in Utah and Colorado who advises election officials on security and other issues. "Say we have evidence that something might not be correct, we ask the voter to provide additional documentation. If the person doesn't respond, the ballot isn't accepted. The fraud never happened."

If a person who requested a mail ballot shows up at a polling place, this will become apparent when they check in. Typically, poll workers either cancel the ballot that was previously issued, ensuring it's never counted, or ask the voter to complete a provisional ballot that will only be counted if the mail ballot is not.

In Union County, Georgia, someone voted in person and then election officials found their ballot in a drop box. Since the person had already voted, the ballot in the drop box was not counted and the case was referred to the state for investigation, Deputy Registrar Diana Nichols said.

"We can tell pretty quick whenever we pull up that record -- wait a minute, this person has already voted," Nichols said. "I'm not saying it's foolproof. We are all human, and we all make mistakes. But as far as the system is set up, if you follow the rules and the guidelines set up by the state, I think it's a very good system."

The final step is the canvassing process in which election officials must reconcile all their counts, ensuring the number of ballots cast equals the number of voters who voted. Any discrepancies are researched,

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 72 of 90

and election officials provide detailed explanations before the election can be certified.

Often, an administrative error can raise questions that suggest the potential for fraud.

In Forsyth County, Georgia, election officials were asked by Arizona investigators for records confirming that a voter had also cast a ballot in Georgia last November. It turns out that voter didn't cast a ballot but was listed as having done so because their registration number was mistakenly associated with another voter's record in the county's system, according to a letter sent by county election officials.

In other cases, it could be as simple as a voter signing on the wrong line next to another person's name in a paper pollbook at their polling place. Once researched, it quickly becomes clear no fraud occurred.

Republican lawmakers have argued there are security gaps in the process, using concerns of fraud to justify restrictions on voting laws. This has happened even in places where Republican lawmakers have pushed back against Trump's false claims and said the 2020 election was valid.

The review by Republican lawmakers in Michigan that found no systemic fraud cited various claims they had investigated. For example, senators were provided with a list of over 200 voters in Wayne County who were believed to be dead. Of these, the report noted, only two instances involved actual dead voters. The first was due to a clerical error in which a son had been confused with his dead father and the second involved a 92-year-old woman who had died four days before the election.

And yet, Republicans in the state are collecting signatures for a citizen initiative that would allow the GOP-controlled legislature to approve voting restrictions and bypass a veto by the Democratic governor. Republicans say mail voting needs to be more secure as more people embrace it.

"These bills will restore confidence in our elections," said GOP Rep. Ann Bollin, chairwoman of the Michigan House Elections and Ethics Committee and a former township clerk. "Voters want to know their vote will count and that they, and only they, are casting their own ballot."

Overall, 80% of counties in the six states reviewed by the AP reported no suspicious activity after completing their post-election reviews. This was true of both small and large counties, something experts said was to be expected given how rare voter fraud has been.

Limited instances of fraud do occur, as the AP review illustrates, but safeguards ensure they are few and that they are caught, said Ben Hovland, a Democrat appointed by Trump to serve on the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, which supports the state and local officials who administer elections.

"Every credible examination has shown there was no widespread fraud" in the 2020 presidential election, Hovland said. "Time and again when we have heard these claims and heard these allegations, and when you do a real investigation, you see that it is the exception and not the rule."

Contributing to this report were Associated Press data journalist Camille Fassett in Oakland, California; reporter Colleen Long in Washington; AP state government reporters Scott Bauer in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin; Bob Christie in Phoenix; David Eggert in Lansing, Michigan; Anthony Izaguirre in Tallahassee, Florida; and Michelle L. Price in New York City; and other AP reporters in Michigan and Pennsylvania.

Kentucky governor's family ties run deep in storm-hit area

By BRUCE SCHREINER Associated Press

DAWSON SPRINGS, Ky. (AP) — In the desperate hours after the massive storm struck, Andy Beshear took time out from his duties as governor of the hardest-hit state early Saturday to do what a lot of his fellow Kentuckians were doing.

Again and again, he made calls to track down his cousin Jenny in Dawson Springs.

"There's a good ending to the story," Beshear, the state's Democratic governor, said at a news conference Monday. "It took me eight hours to get in touch with her, just calling over and over."

But his extended family also was among the Kentuckians grieving the loss of life from the storms. The governor said he has an uncle by marriage who lost two cousins who died in Muhlenberg County.

All of that may explain why Beshear, the face of his state's response to the historic outbreak of tornadoes, has veered at times between assertions of steadfast determination — declaring that Kentuckians

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 73 of 90

are "strong enough to rebuild" — and raw emotion. He has mourned with every stricken town, but no subject has touched him more personally than the devastation in Dawson Springs, his father's hometown and a place he has visited his entire life.

"This is a place where I'd go and I'd sit on my grandparents' front porch," he said.

Beshear, who since the early days of his term has led his state's battle against the COVID-19 pandemic, came under heavy scrutiny amid early uncertainties on the storm-related death toll, especially at a candle factory that was leveled in Mayfield. The governor, a Democrat elected in a state largely controlled by Republicans, is known for his frequent vows that "we'll get through this together," first in fighting the coronavirus and now in responding to the storms. He has made multiple visits to the stricken region and held numerous news conferences, putting him in the national spotlight.

Dawson Springs is connected to a mini-political dynasty in the Bluegrass State. Beshear's father, former two-term Democratic Gov. Steve Beshear, grew up in the tightknit western Kentucky community, where a local leader estimates at least 60% of the town of nearly 3,000 is "beyond repair."

"It's a personal tragedy," Steve Beshear said in a phone interview. "It's a delightful small-town community. It was one of those places that was so easy to grow up in, because everybody knew everybody, and everybody watched out for everybody. If you ever did anything wrong, they (parents) knew it before you got home."

The storms killed dozens of people in the state and crippled towns across a long swath of western Kentucky. In Dawson Springs, homes and businesses were in ruins as the realization sunk in that the recovery will take years.

"For the most part, you can go three city blocks and it all looks like toothpicks," said Darryl Kelley, who was delivering food and water around town. "A lot of people are just thankful they're alive."

Some deliveries took him to homes reduced to rubble. Residents searched the wreckage in hopes of finding possessions they could salvage.

"It's heartbreaking," he said. "I cry with them."

One family suffered an unspeakable tragedy — the death of a baby girl.

Douglas Koon, his wife, Jackie, and their three children huddled in his mother-in-law's bathroom in Dawson Springs as the storm approached. The tornado hit the house, flinging the family around and tossing a bathtub in the air that was shielding two of his sons. The couple put their 2-month-old, daughter, Oaklynn, in a car seat to protect her, and she appeared to be OK Saturday.

By Sunday, the baby was having seizures and doctors noticed a brain bleed. They believed she had a stroke, Koon said in a Facebook posting.

Early Monday, the family posted that Oaklynn had died. In a text message to The Associated Press on Monday, Koon said he was struggling "to process everything that I'm going through."

The destruction in the town was widespread. The top county official, Judge-Executive Jack Whitfield Jr., said "hundreds" of homes in Dawson Springs were destroyed. He estimated that 60% to 75% of the Hopkins County town was "beyond repair."

"It looks like a bomb went off," he said. "It's just completely destroyed in areas."

Andy Beshear described the grim view from the front porch that he had visited with his grandparents as a kid. The house his dad grew up in was intact, but the devastation was in clear sight.

"One block up and left or right is just gone, just flattened," the governor said.

Steve Beshear moved away from Dawson Springs decades ago, attending the University of Kentucky and then building successful careers in law and politics, culminating in his election as governor in 2007 and reelection four years later. But his memories of the town endure. He rattled off the names of streets that took direct hits from the storm.

And he recalled the visits back home and the generational bonding — including the rides his children got on his father's small tractor.

"I think one of Andy's memories is riding down the street on that tractor in granddad's lap," Beshear said. "We had some great times when the kids were growing up."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 74 of 90

The Beshear name remains prominent in Dawson Springs because it's also the name of the funeral home that's been in the family for generations. It started as a combination funeral home and furniture store in 1909, according to Steve Beshear, started by the former governor's great uncle. The cousin the governor tried to reach after the storm hit, Jenny Beshear Sewell, is now the funeral home's owner and president.

As Andy Beshear monitored the horrifying damage reports in the hours after the storms struck, he realized Dawson Springs was hit hard. While leading the response, he took time to make the calls that would last for hours in his frantic search for his cousin.

"Got to see her later that day because the moment it was safe to fly, we went first to Mayfield and then to Dawson," he said. "Got to give her a hug."

Associated Press Writers Piper Hudspeth Blackburn in Frankfort, Kentucky, and Dylan Lovan in Louisville, Kentucky, contributed to this report.

NASA craft 'touches' sun for 1st time, dives into atmosphere

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A NASA spacecraft has officially "touched" the sun, plunging through the unexplored solar atmosphere known as the corona.

Scientists announced the news Tuesday during a meeting of the American Geophysical Union.

The Parker Solar Probe actually flew through the corona in April during the spacecraft's eighth close approach to the sun. Scientists said it took a few months to get the data back and then several more months to confirm.

"Fascinatingly exciting," said project scientist Nour Raouafi of Johns Hopkins University.

Launched in 2018, Parker was 8 million miles (13 million kilometers) from the center of the sun when it first crossed the jagged, uneven boundary between the solar atmosphere and outgoing solar wind. The spacecraft dipped in and out of the corona at least three times, each a smooth transition, according to scientists.

"The first and most dramatic time we were below for about five hours ... Now you might think five hours, that doesn't sound big," the University of Michigan's Justin Kasper told reporters. But he noted that Parker was moving so fast it covered a vast distance during that time, tearing along at more than 62 miles (100 kilometers) per second.

The corona appeared dustier than expected, according to Raouafi. Future coronal excursions will help scientist better understand the origin of the solar wind, he said, and how it is heated and accelerated out into space. Because the sun lacks a solid surface, the corona is where the action is; exploring this magnetically intense region up close can help scientists better understand solar outbursts that can interfere with life here on Earth.

Preliminary data suggest Parker also dipped into the corona during its ninth close approach in August, but scientists said more analyses are needed. It made its 10th close approach last month.

Parker will keep drawing ever closer to the sun and diving deeper into the corona until its grand finale orbit in 2025.

The latest findings were also published by the American Physical Society.

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

Cities wracked by opioids close to getting \$26B settlement

By ANDREW SELSKY Associated Press

McMINNVILLE, Ore. (AP) — The opioid epidemic blew into this picturesque Oregon town like a toxic wind, leaving overdoses, addiction, homelessness and wrecked families in its wake.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 75 of 90

In a humble, single-story brick building, three blocks from downtown McMinnville's wine-tasting rooms and cafes, staffers and volunteers of a recovery center called Provoking Hope help the casualties. The workers, who themselves are recovering from drug addiction, offer counseling, coffee and, for some, clean syringes.

McMinnville and thousands of other towns across the United States are on the precipice of receiving billions of dollars in the second-biggest legal settlement in U.S. history. The \$26 billion from three drug distributors and a pharmaceutical manufacturer would address damage wrought by opioids, which the federal government declared in 2017 was a public health emergency.

States, counties and cities face a deadline in three weeks to sign onto the deal, and most states have agreed to do so. But a few holdouts remain, including Oregon, where disagreements have emerged between state and local government officials.

The money is needed. In Yamhill County, where McMinnville is the county seat, it would expand counseling and treatment, including in jails, expand residential treatment and recovery facilities and fund other programs, said County Commissioner Casey Kulla.

As Provoking Hope's office manager, Anne Muilenburg has seen the devastating effects of drug addiction and also experienced it first-hand. She says her addiction started as many in America did, after her physician prescribed opioids. They were for a painful spinal bone spur. Ten years later, using her prescription and buying two other people's prescriptions, she was taking 35 pills per day, far exceeding the maximum dosage.

"It wasn't even enough to make me feel high. It was just enough to not make me sick," Muilenburg said. She described opiate withdrawal — experienced when she would run out of pills — as "the worst feeling ever."

"It makes you feel like somebody's peeling your skin off," she recalled in her small office, decorated with posters with sayings like "be kind" and "stay humble."

Muilenburg finally got treatment but then "drug jumped" to alcohol and methamphetamine. She wound up losing her job at a car dealership and splitting with her husband, though they have since reunited. She was in and out of jail and found herself living on the street.

"My being homeless was one of the things that led me to wanting to change my life," Muilenburg said.

She has been free of drugs for 4 1/2 years. Muilenburg said funds from the settlement are needed to address the community's drug dependency.

"We need more treatment centers. Every place needs more treatment centers," she said. "It's ridiculous that somebody wants to go to treatment and they have to wait eight to 10 weeks for a bed."

In the U.S., more than 500,000 deaths over the last two decades have been linked to opioids, both prescription drugs and illegal ones.

The clock is ticking on the settlement, with a payout second only to the \$200 billion-plus tobacco settlement, in 1998, with the nation's four largest tobacco companies.

The three drug distributors — AmerisourceBergen, Cardinal Health and McKesson — and drugmaker Johnson & Johnson agreed in July to pay the combined \$26 billion to resolve thousands of state and local government lawsuits. But if the defendants feel there's a lack of participation by states and local jurisdictions, it could cause them to back away from the landmark agreement or eventually reduce the settlement amount.

"The defendants have the last bite at the apple to say, 'Do we have a critical mass to justify going forward?'" said Joe Rice, an attorney for the plaintiffs.

In exchange for the payout, participating states, counties and cities would have to drop any lawsuits against the defendants and agree not to sue them in the future for the opioid epidemic.

"There are complex tradeoffs at stake here," said Caleb Alexander, a drug safety expert at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health. "On the one hand, the settlement would offer sorely needed funding to scale up treatment and otherwise address the opioid epidemic. On the other, many parties believe the settlement is not enough."

At least 45 states have signed on or signaled their intent to do so, and at least 4,012 counties and cities

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 76 of 90

have also confirmed participation, plaintiffs' attorneys said Friday.

Washington state has already ruled out participating, with Attorney General Bob Ferguson calling the settlement "woefully insufficient." He's suing the nation's three biggest drug distributors — the same ones in the national settlement — for \$38 billion in a trial that began in November.

In Pennsylvania, the district attorneys for Philadelphia and Allegheny County, which includes Pittsburgh, have sued the state attorney general to ensure their lawsuits against the drug industry could continue, saying their communities' shares from the settlement would cover only a fraction of the epidemic's financial toll.

"We are not going to accept a settlement that is a sellout," Philadelphia District Attorney Larry Krasner said.

Pennsylvania Attorney General Josh Shapiro says receiving payouts from the settlement is a sure thing, unlike continuing to pursue lawsuits against the companies. Local governments can opt out and keep suing, he said, but the more that do, the less the state would receive.

New Mexico is still working out details, "and we're anticipating that counties and local governments will be responding soon," said Jerri Mares of the state attorney general's office.

In Oregon, lawyers for local governments and the state recently resolved an impasse over how the settlement would be disbursed, according to The Lund Report, a health care news site.

The state of Oregon had wanted local governments to apply to it for grants. The local governments instead wanted a larger share of the funds in direct payments. There's now disagreement on how much of the settlement should go to attorneys who sued on behalf of several Oregon counties.

Kulla, the Yamhill County commissioner, supports the opioid settlement but doesn't want the state taking excessive control of it.

"We at the counties are the ones working with those addicted and their families, and we incur the societal costs of those addictions," he said.

Under the settlement, the payments would be made over 18 years. The tobacco settlement was controlled by state governments, and most of the money has not gone to pay for the toll of tobacco. By contrast, the opioid settlements are structured so most of the money is intended to fight the crisis.

Kulla recognizes there won't be a quick fix.

"It's going to be long-term," Kulla said. "It's going to take generations, really, to dig ourselves out of this."

Associated Press writers Geoff Mulvihill in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, and Cedar Attanasio in Santa Fe, New Mexico, contributed to this report.

Follow Andrew Selsky on Twitter at <https://twitter.com/andrewselsky>

Omicron spreading so fast it threatens Britain's hospitals

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — The omicron variant is spreading so rapidly it has the potential to overwhelm Britain's hospitals, highlighting the need to strengthen coronavirus restrictions and speed up the delivery of booster vaccine shots, the country's health minister said Tuesday.

Omicron is so transmissible that even if it proves to be less severe than other variants, there is still likely to be a surge in hospital admissions if it goes unchecked, U.K. Health Secretary Sajid Javid told lawmakers.

His comments came as the government rushed to accelerate the national vaccination program, with a goal of offering a booster dose to every adult by the end of December. Lawmakers also voted Tuesday to approve tougher rules on mask-wearing in most indoor public places and mandatory COVID passes for nightclubs to slow the variant until more vaccinations can be delivered.

"This is a new national mission," Javid said. "A race between the virus and the vaccine to get as many people protected as possible."

In another effort to speed up the booster program, U.K. health officials temporarily suspended the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 77 of 90

15-minute observation period normally required for anyone receiving a Pfizer or Moderna shot. Doctors had complained that the waiting period — designed to spot allergic reactions before patients left clinics — usually wasn't necessary and resulted in healthy patients taking up valuable space at crowded vaccination centers.

Long lines formed outside vaccination centers across England for a second consecutive day on Tuesday as the National Health Service raced to meet the government's target of delivering up to 1 million shots a day, more than double the recent average.

Deputy Prime Minister Dominic Raab said logistical issues in expanding the vaccination program would diminish over the next week.

"It does take a few days just to make sure we get to a steady state," he told the BBC. "We'll keep straining every sinew to make sure we can reach that target."

Vaccination centers throughout the U.K. put 562,800 shots in arms on Monday, including 513,722 boosters.

Monday was the second-highest day for COVID-19 booster bookings in England, with more than 650,000 appointments scheduled, the NHS said.

In an address to the nation on Sunday, Prime Minister Boris Johnson encouraged everyone eligible to get a booster shot to "reinforce our wall of vaccine protection" against an anticipated "tidal wave of omicron." Everyone 18 and up will be offered a third dose by Dec. 31 — a month earlier than the previous target, Johnson said.

Johnson late Monday called for thousands of volunteers to staff new vaccination centers in shopping areas, stadiums and racecourses. The push mirrored last year's vaccination drive, with primary care doctors, hospitals, the military and average citizens mobilized to deliver inoculations.

"We need tens of thousands of people to help out — everyone from trained vaccinators to stewards," Johnson said. "Many thousands have already given their time — but we need you to come forward again, to work alongside our brilliant GPs, doctors, nurses and pharmacists, to deliver jabs and save lives."

U.K. authorities have said the number of omicron infections is doubling every two to three days and the variant is likely to become the dominant form of COVID-19 throughout the country in days.

Javid said the rapid spread of omicron in Britain meant it no longer made sense to try to stop the importation of cases from abroad. As a result, the government lifted a ban on visitors from 11 African countries and a requirement that U.K. residents returning from those countries quarantine in a hotel at their own expense.

Javid said all the countries on the "red list" would be removed at 0400 GMT on Wednesday.

U.K. health authorities reported 59,610 confirmed cases of COVID-19 on Tuesday, the highest number since Jan. 9. However, widespread vaccinations means that the large number of infections is translating into fewer hospitalizations and deaths. Britain recorded 150 more coronavirus-related deaths on Tuesday, compared with 1,035 on Jan. 9.

Scientists in South Africa, where the omicron outbreak is more advanced, say the variant may cause less severe disease than the delta variant, although they caution that it's too soon to be certain. Health authorities around the world are watching Britain closely to see what an omicron surge looks like in a country with an older, more highly vaccinated population than South Africa.

Throughout the pandemic, the British government's primary goal has been to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed by COVID-19 patients. This is particularly important during the winter, when U.K. hospitals are often stretched by a surge in flu cases and other illnesses related to cold weather.

Professor Chris Whitty, England's chief medical officer, told government ministers it was too soon to know the severity of illness that omicron will produce but that "we can expect a significant increase in hospitalizations," according to a summary of his comments released by the government.

Over the past week, an average of 811 people a day were hospitalized with COVID-19. There are currently about 7,400 coronavirus patients in U.K. hospitals, down from a peak of more than 39,000 in mid-January. Only 10 of those have tested positive for the omicron variant.

"The lag between infections and hospitalizations is around two weeks," Javid said. "With infections rising

so quickly, we're likely to see a substantial rise in hospitalizations before any measures start to have an impact. So there really is no time to lose."

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

AP Breakthrough Entertainer: Rachel Zegler's baptism by fire

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

In another timeline, Rachel Zegler would have had her breakthrough moment last December.

That was when Steven Spielberg's rendition of "West Side Story" was supposed to open and introduce the world to the New Jersey high school student who responded to an open call on Twitter and beat out thousands for the part of Maria. But the pandemic had other plans.

Yet 2021 wasn't exactly spent waiting in the wings. In fact, her dance card filled up rather quickly: She was cast in and filmed the sequel to "Shazam" and snagged the role of Snow White in the live-action reimagining with "Wonder Woman" Gal Gadot playing the evil queen.

"It's been a year of transition," Zegler, 20, said in a recent Zoom interview from her family's home in Clifton, New Jersey. "I stepped out of my comfort zone."

And as soon as she got back from filming "Shazam 2" in Atlanta, it was time to dive into the "West Side Story" promotional circus. That meant interviews, photo shoots and many, many public appearances and red carpets, which she had never done before.

"My first red carpet was the Met Gala, which just feels like a baptism by fire," Zegler said. "I said yes and then it was like, 'Oh, now I have to go and I have to like, walk on the carpet and trip up the stairs, which I didn't do and I'm really proud of myself (for)!' But yeah, that was that was crazy."

For her pivoting skills, Zegler has been named among The Associated Press' breakthrough entertainers of the year alongside Damson Idris, Simu Liu, Saweetie, Adrienne Warren, Ruaw Alejandro and more.

It was at the Met Gala that she got to meet the pop star Lorde and tell her how much her music meant to her. Much to her surprise Lorde — whose first name is Ella — knew exactly who she was, too.

"She said, 'I'm Ella. It's nice to meet you.' And I was like, 'I'm Rachel.' And she's like, 'Oh, no, I know who you are. You sing, you dance, you're a triple threat. I can't wait to see your film,'" Zegler said. "I'm taking that to the grave."

Something similar happened recently with Kid Cudi at the CDFA Fashion Awards, too, and though Zegler isn't someone who gets star-struck easily, it is at least a bit surreal to suddenly be recognized.

"You don't realize how far the reach is until you're in it," Zegler said. "And then all of these people are coming up to you — complete strangers are coming up to you — and a lot of it, I think, has to do with Steven's impact on the industry and the world."

To be fair, her life had already changed course significantly the moment Spielberg told her that she had gotten the role three years ago. Not only would Zegler be starring in an iconic property with a legendary director at the helm, she'd also be the first Latina (she's Colombian-American) to play the part in a major motion picture. It was history in the making.

"I really thought no one would see the video that I sent in," Zegler said.

Her family, she said, is a little overwhelmed. She is the baby, after all. But she tries to remind them as often as she can that she would not be "an emotionally stable, well-spoken person" without her parents and sister.

"They're very proud, but I do think that they get scared for me sometimes," she said. "It's a scary moment. I get scared sometimes."

Zegler is actually grateful that she had this gap year to get ready for her new life in the spotlight.

"I don't know how I would have reacted to everything that's going on in my life right now should I have not had a year to prepare," she said. "I was obviously devastated when we had to postpone a year. I don't know who wouldn't be. But looking back on it, the girl that I was before COVID moved our movie a whole 365 days is not the same girl who's talking to you today."

Follow AP Film Writer Lindsey Bahr on Twitter: www.twitter.com/ldbahr

For more on AP's 2021 class of Breakthrough Entertainers, please visit: <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-breakthrough-entertainers>

What's your religion? In US, a common reply now is "None"

By LUIS ANDRES HENAO, KWASI GYAMFI ASIYEDU and DAVID CRARY Associated Press

Nathalie Charles, even in her mid-teens, felt unwelcome in her Baptist congregation, with its conservative views on immigration, gender and sexuality. So she left.

"I just don't feel like that gelled with my view of what God is and what God can be," said Charles, an 18-year-old of Haitian descent who identifies as queer and is now a freshman at Princeton University.

"It wasn't a very loving or nurturing environment for someone's faith."

After leaving her New Jersey church three years ago, she identified as atheist, then agnostic, before embracing a spiritual but not religious life. In her dorm, she blends rituals at an altar, chanting Buddhist, Taoist and Hindu mantras and paying homage to her ancestors as she meditates and prays.

The path taken by Charles places her among the religiously unaffiliated -- the fastest-growing group in surveys asking Americans about their religious identity. They describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or "nothing in particular."

According to a survey released Tuesday by the Pew Research Center, this group — commonly known as the "nones" — now constitutes 29% of American adults. That's up from 23% in 2016 and 19% in 2011.

"If the unaffiliated were a religion, they'd be the largest religious group in the United States," said Elizabeth Drescher, an adjunct professor at Santa Clara University who wrote a book about the spiritual lives of the nones.

The religiously unaffiliated were once concentrated in urban, coastal areas, but now live across the U.S., representing a diversity of ages, ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds, Drescher said.

Even in their personal philosophies, America's nones vary widely, according to a recent poll by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. For example, 30% say they feel some connection to God or a higher power, and 19% say religion has some importance to them even though they have no religious affiliation.

About 12% describe themselves as religious and spiritual and 28% as spiritual but not religious. More than half describe themselves as neither.

Nearly 60% of the nones say religion was at least somewhat important to their families when they were growing up, according to the AP-NORC poll. It found that 30% of nones meditate and 26% pray privately at least a few times a month, while smaller numbers consult periodically with a religious or spiritual leader.

"There are people who do actually practice, either in a particular faith tradition that we would recognize, or in multiple faith traditions," Drescher said. "They're not interested in either membership in those communities formally or in identifying as someone from that religion."

Over recent years, the prevalence of the nones in the U.S. has been roughly comparable to Western Europe -- but overall, Americans remain more religious, with higher rates of daily prayer and belief in God as described in the Bible. According to a 2018 Pew survey, about two-thirds of U.S. Christians prayed daily, compared to 6% in Britain and 9% in Germany.

The growth of the nones in the U.S. has come largely at the expense of the Protestant population in the U.S., according to the new Pew survey. It said 40% of U.S. adults are Protestants now, down from 50% a decade ago.

Among the former Protestants is Shianda Simmons, 36, of Lakeland, Florida, who began identifying as an atheist in 2013.

She grew up as a Baptist and attended church regularly; she says she left mainly because of the church's unequal treatment of women.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 80 of 90

Not everyone in her family knows she has forsaken religion, and some who do know struggle to accept it, Simmons said.

"There are certain people I can't tell that I am atheist," she said. "It has made me draw away from my family."

Similarly, at the beauty store she owns, she feels she must keep her atheism "under wraps" from clients, for fear they'd go elsewhere.

Like Simmons, Mandisa Thomas is a Black atheist — an identity that can be challenging in the many African American communities where churches are a powerful force. Thomas sang in a church choir in her childhood, but was not raised Christian.

"Within the Black community, we face ostracism," said Thomas, who lives near Atlanta and founded Black Nonbelievers, a support group, in 2011. "There is this idea that somehow you are rejecting your blackness when you reject religion, that atheism is something that white people do."

Another advocate for the nones is Kevin Bolling, who grew up in a military family and served as a Roman Catholic altar boy. In college, he began to question the church's role, and grew dismayed about its position on sexuality after he came out as gay.

He's now executive director of the Secular Student Alliance, which has more than 200 branches in colleges and schools nationwide. The chapters, he said, serve as havens for secular students or those questioning their faith.

"I think this generation can be the first generation to be majority non-religious versus majority religious," he said.

Being Catholic also was a big part of Ashley Taylor's upbringing -- she became an altar server at 9. Now 30, she identifies as religiously unaffiliated.

"It just means finding meaning and maybe even spirituality without practicing a religion pulling from whatever makes sense to me or whatever fits with my values," she said.

Her faith gave her strength when she had cancer at 11, she said, but she also feels that growing up Catholic negatively affected her emotional and sexual development and delayed her coming out as queer.

Eventually, Taylor discovered Sunday Assembly, which provided her with a congregation-like community but in a secular way, offering activities such as singing, book clubs and trivia nights. She's now board president at Sunday Assembly Pittsburgh.

"They're not trying to tell you what's true," said Taylor. "There's always a spirit of curiosity and questioning and openness."

For some nones, such as 70-year-old Zayne Marston of Shelburne, Massachusetts, their spiritual journey keeps evolving over decades.

Growing up near Boston, Marston attended a Congregational church with his family – he remembers Bible study, church-sponsored dances, the itchiness of his flannel trousers while attending Sunday services.

Through high school and college, he "drifted away" from Christian beliefs and in his 30s began a serious, long-lasting journey into spirituality while in rehab to curb his alcoholism.

"Spirituality is a soul-based journey into the heart, surrendering one's ego will to a higher will," he said. "We're looking for our own answers, beyond the programming we received growing up."

His path has been rough at times – the death of his wife from a fast-moving cancer, financial troubles leading to the loss of his house – but he says his spiritual practice has replaced his anxieties with a "gentle joy" and a desire to help others.

He previously worked as a landscape designer and real estate appraiser, and now runs a school teaching qigong, a practice that evolved from China combining slow, relaxed movement with breathing exercises and meditation.

"As a kid, I used to think of God up on a throne, with a white beard, passing judgment, but that has totally changed," Marston said. "My higher power is the universe... It's always there for me, if I can get out of my ego's way."

—

The AP-NORC poll of 1,083 adults was conducted Oct. 21-25 using a sample drawn designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

The Pew survey was conducted among 3,937 respondents from May 29 to Aug. 25. It's margin of error for the full sample of respondents is plus or minus 2.1 percentage points.

Associated Press Writer Mariam Fam contributed to this report.

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

AP Breakthrough Entertainer: 'Snowfall' star Damson Idris

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Damson Idris transformed from his real life British-speaking Nigerian persona into a canny drug kingpin character with a West Coast accent on FX's popular crime drama "Snowfall."

Idris made his presence felt as Franklin Saint, a young street-minded entrepreneur who was educated in an upper-class neighborhood, but determined to get into the drug game to take care of the people around him. Through the critically acclaimed show, his popularity has grown exponentially over the past four seasons.

Along with serving as a co-producer of season five due next year, Idris' breakthrough role landed him other opportunities on other projects such as television shows "The Twilight Zone" and "Black Mirror" along with films including "Farming" and Netflix's "Outside the Wire," starring him with Anthony Mackie.

"It's the foundation of my career," Idris said of "Snowfall," which was co-created by John Singleton, who died in 2019. The series focuses on the genesis of how crack cocaine became a rampant epidemic in Los Angeles' inner city neighborhoods in the 1980s.

"Sometimes, I talk as if I'm already 90 years old and I've seen my career," he said. "It's so weird. I think in 40, 50, 60 years, people will talk about and refer to (the series) and be like 'Oh man, I remember when he did that and look what he's doing now.' I think that's a remarkable thing. I love the show for that."

For his career-defining work, Idris has been named among The Associated Press' breakthrough entertainers of the year alongside Rachel Zegler, Simu Liu, Adrienne Warren, Ruaw Alejandro and more.

The Nigerian actor grew up in Peckham, south London, but he didn't know anything about the drug epidemic in the United States until he visited Los Angeles for the first time and saw Skid Row — an impoverished area inhabited by the homeless. He auditioned so well for the role that he said Singleton didn't know he was from London until "way later in the process."

Before Idris' rise, he said Singleton gave him advice about humility — a lesson that still sticks with him.

"Everyone you meet on the way up, you're going to meet on the way down," he said. "So just be nice to everyone. That's something I'm learning and mastering today. I'm fortunate not only to be the lead of the show, but also be a young producer. That could come with a lot of ego and a big head. But if anything, I'm even nicer now to everyone. That's something John taught me. He empowered people. That's something I strive to do. I'm learning so much every day."

In preparing for "Snowfall," Idris said his upbringing in Peckham helped him relate to the plight of Black people's struggle in South Central Los Angeles.

"There are so many categories that correlate: From single fathers (and mothers), to poverty, to drugs to crime to police brutality to racism," he said. "I definitely feel in the U.K. that there are similarities between Black British culture to African American culture. I feel like my upbringing assisted with me understanding and having empathy towards people of that lifestyle in South Central."

For Idris, doing impersonations has been his calling card since he was a kid. His acting career unknowingly started when his family made him perform in front of them.

"You remember at the beginning of Eddie Murphy's 'Raw' and Samuel Jackson says 'That boy got talent'?"

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 82 of 90

That was literally my upbringing," he recalled. "I didn't know what acting was, but I was impersonating these people from Martin (Lawrence) in 'Bad Boys' to whatever since I was 5 years old."

Idris, 30, is a part of a long line of British Black actors who have found success on American soil including Idris Elba, Daniel Kaluuya, David Oyelowo and John Boyega. He said acting is embedded at an early age for their culture by them going to the theater when "we're babies."

"I think when we see you guys on the screen, we are instantly locked in because we feel a connection," he said. "It's unfortunate that you guys don't get the opportunity to see our stuff, too. Most of the time when we come here, Americans think 'Oh, he's all tea and crumpets.' They think I live next door to the Queen. I don't. But that's changing."

In the future, Idris said he would love to someday portray Eddie Murphy or Sidney Poitier on screen and maybe a musician. He said next year will be a pivotal moment for his career.

"My career could either skyrocket or I'm going back to Peckham," he jokingly said. "In 2022, I'm really excited about playing a lot of real people from the past and producing."

For more on AP's 2021 class of Breakthrough Entertainers, please visit: <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-breakthrough-entertainers>

The AP names its Breakthrough Entertainers of 2021

By The Associated Press undefined

If 2020 was a pandemic-induced pause, 2021 was when things started up again, albeit slowly and timidly. But that doesn't describe this year's eight Associated Press' Breakthrough Entertainers of the Year: They seized their masks — and the moment.

They are Damson Idris, Simu Liu, Rachel Zegler, Rauw Alejandro, Adrienne Warren, Saweetie, Anupam Tripathi and Sydney Sweeney. Each found ways to share their art despite virus fears and variants.

The year went quickly for Zegler, who had beat out thousands for the part of Maria in Steven Spielberg's "West Side Story." The pandemic pushed the film's release a year but she didn't stop.

Zegler was cast in and filmed the sequel to "Shazam" and snagged the role of Snow White in the live-action reimagining with Gal Gadot playing the evil queen. Then there was all the press for "West Side Story" and even a Met Gala invite. "I stepped out of my comfort zone," she says.

Liu smashed through the Marvel Cinematic Universe's comfort zone as its first Asian-led superhero stand-alone in "Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings." His was a career-making turn as Shang-Chi, who combines Spider-Man's aw-shucks sweetness with lethal fists.

The path Tripathi took was far slower. For more than a decade, the Indian actor who relocated to South Korea more than a decade ago, spent countless hours singing in humble theaters and taking on minor film gigs. Then came "Squid Game" and sudden, massive popularity.

The pandemic stopped live theater in its tracks, so Adrienne Warren pivoted. While waiting for Broadway to restart, she turned to a project she never would have been able had she still been starring in the title role in "Tina — The Tina Turner Musical."

Warren lost and gained 30 pounds to play civil rights catalyst Mamie Till-Mobley — whose son Emmett Till was brutally murdered in the Jim Crow South — in the upcoming ABC series "Women of the Movement." She co-founded the Broadway Advocacy Coalition, which uses storytelling to dismantle the systems that perpetuate racism. And when Broadway resumed, she came back to earn her first Tony Award.

Idris' popularity has grown exponentially over the past four seasons of the critically-acclaimed series "Snowfall." His breakthrough role landed him other opportunities including "The Twilight Zone," "Black Mirror," "Farming" and Netflix's "Outside the Wire."

Sweeney sealed her stardom in 2021 with major roles in the hit HBO miniseries, "The White Lotus," and Amazon's sexy psychological thriller, "The Voyeurs." She also filmed the hotly anticipated second season of "Euphoria," which drops in January. On top of all that, Sweeney also started her own production company.

Bay Area-rapper Saweetie had landed three Top 40 hits in the last three years but in 2021 she earned

two Grammy nods, made her debut on "SNL" and hosted the MTV Europe Music Awards in Hungary.

Like her, Alejandro has been on the rise for the past few years, but 2021 catapulted him into another level of success — five songs in the top 50, sold out shows and Grammy recognition. "This year has been my best, and I hope the next one surpasses this one," he says, something his other nominees might agree with.

For more on AP's 2021 class of Breakthrough Entertainers, please visit: <https://apnews.com/hub/ap-breakthrough-entertainers>

Afghan victims saddened US drone strike to go unpunished

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — The Afghan survivors of an errant U.S. drone strike that killed 10 members of their family in August said Tuesday they are frustrated and saddened that U.S. troops involved in the attack will not face disciplinary action.

A hellfire missile had slammed into a car belonging to Zemerai Ahmadi, killing him and nine relatives, including seven children, in the chaotic final days of the U.S. troop withdrawal from Afghanistan.

On Tuesday, three of Ahmadi's brothers spoke of their loss, sitting just a few feet from where the missile struck Aug. 29. They said that to this day, they have heard nothing from Washington about financial compensation or when they would be evacuated from Afghanistan.

Ahmadi, 37, was a longtime employee of an American humanitarian organization. The strike that killed him and his family members came following the Taliban takeover of the country in mid-August.

It also came just days after an Islamic State group suicide bomber killed 13 U.S. troops and 169 Afghans at a Kabul airport gate. U.S. forces believed that the car they were following was an imminent threat and decided to strike.

Since the strike, the Ahmadis had demanded that those responsible be punished and that they be relocated to the United States or a third country deemed safe for them.

On Monday, the Pentagon said that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had approved recommendations for improvements in strike operations from the generals who lead U.S. Central Command and Special Operations Command, based on the findings of an independent Pentagon review released last month.

But there were no recommendations for discipline made by the generals, according to John Kirby, chief Pentagon spokesman.

Kirby said the U.S. was still ready to pay financial compensation to the Ahmadis and potentially get them out of Afghanistan. Asked why it was taking so long, Kirby said the U.S. wanted it done as safely as possible.

For the Ahmadis, every day they remain in Kabul puts them at risk. Rumor on the street has it that the U.S. has already paid them and criminals are eager to get their hands on the money, said Emal Ahmadi. His 3-year-old daughter Malika was killed in the strike.

They are also getting phone threats, added Emal, the youngest of the brothers. The callers threaten to kill them if they don't give them money.

"People are always asking us how much money we got," Emal added. As for the U.S. promises to evacuate the family, "we are waiting. We have heard nothing. ... The longer it takes, the more dangerous it is for us."

For Romal Ahmadi, whose three children aged 2-7 years were killed in the strike, the days are a blur of depression and pain. "I feel only pain," he said. He wants the U.S. troops behind the strike punished.

"But America is a superpower," Romal said. "We are powerless to do anything so we leave it to God to punish them."

At the time of the strike, the U.S. was working to evacuate thousands of Americans, Afghans and other allies in the wake of the Afghan government's collapse.

For weeks after and despite mounting evidence that the U.S. had wrongly killed the 10 Ahmadis, the Pentagon maintained it had taken out a potential Islamic State operative. It wasn't until mid-September that U.S. Marine Gen. Frank McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, called the strike a "tragic mistake" and said that innocent civilians were indeed killed in the attack.

The Pentagon review subsequently found there were breakdowns in communication in the process of identifying and confirming the target of the bombing.

"My children are all gone. No one can bring them back," Romal said.

Women say they do most chores, child care: AP-NORC poll

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Business Writer

When it comes to household duties such as changing diapers, handling chores and meals and managing family schedules and activities, many couples who don't have children expect that they will more or less share the work equally should they have kids one day.

The reality is not quite so rosy — at least for mothers.

A new poll from the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that although women generally expect to do more in their household, Americans without children are still more optimistic that they would share responsibilities equally with a partner compared with what parents report actually happens. That's true even when factors such as the age of respondents are taken into account.

The poll asked about eight specified household responsibilities and found that 35% of mothers report doing more than their partner for all eight, compared with just 3% of fathers who report the same. For instance, about half of mothers said they are completely or mostly responsible for providing transportation to their kids, while only about a quarter of fathers said they are responsible for all or most of it.

By contrast, majorities of both men and women who are not parents said that if they did have kids they'd share equally in things like providing transportation, changing diapers and attending to children waking up at night.

Mothers and fathers had different ideas about who does the bulk of household chores. For instance, 21% of mothers said they and their partner both equally attend to children if they wake up at night, while 49% of fathers said the same thing. So who is right?

"When you look at time use data, women are more correct than men," said Yana Gallen, assistant professor at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, who worked on the poll.

Life can also complicate the best-laid plans. Liana Price, 35, who has a 4-month-old baby who came as a "very much wanted surprise" during the height of the coronavirus pandemic when Price was undergoing chemotherapy treatments on her hands and had a pregnancy complication, said she stopped working in January as a result of everything going on.

"Things just kind of changed very drastically. And suddenly for us, we didn't really have like a plan," Price said. While Price and her husband had planned to both work full time, with her taking maternity leave offered by her job as a registered nurse, instead she quit her job and they began to run through savings.

Still, she says she and her husband divide child care equally — including attending to night wakings.

"When I was breastfeeding, there was no point in him getting up in the middle of the night. But now that I'm formula feeding, we alternate nights," she said. "However, during the day my husband does work from home. He travels, too. So when he travels, obviously everything is on me."

Experts say one reason women report doing more house and child care work is not only because they actually do more — which is often true — but also because men are not always aware of all the work involved. That includes planning family activities and organizing appointments and even things like providing children with emotional support.

The poll found that 57% of mothers said they provide "all or most" emotional support to their children. Only 1% of mothers said that their partner does. In contrast, 10% of fathers said they are the primary provider of emotional support to their kids, while 24% said it's their partner.

Much has been said about the effects of the pandemic on women, including many women who left or stepped back from the labor force to take care of their children or aging parents. The U.S. lost tens of millions of jobs when states began shuttering huge swaths of the economy after COVID-19 erupted. But as the economy has quickly rebounded and employers have posted record-high job openings, many women

have delayed a return to the workplace, willingly or otherwise.

In the spring of 2020, roughly 3.5 million mothers with school-age children either lost jobs, took leaves of absence or left the labor market altogether, according to an analysis by the Census Bureau. Many have not returned. A recent report by the consulting firm McKinsey & Co. found that one in three women over the past year had thought about leaving their jobs or “downshifting” their careers. Early in the pandemic, by contrast, the study’s authors said, just one in four women had considered leaving.

“But another thing that happened during the pandemic is a lot more jobs became remote and working from home became OK with a lot of jobs,” Gallen said. “So I think that actually really helps women in the workplace because a potentially big problem has been that, women don’t feel like they can take some of the higher-paying jobs available” that involve travel or long hours away from home.

“So this pandemic kind of moved forward a shift to more female friendly conditions and many jobs,” she said.

This includes schedule flexibility and, for jobs in which that’s possible, remote work. Women are more likely than men to say flexibility at work is important when thinking about whether or not to have a child, 74% versus 66%, according to the poll.

It’s not just the division of household responsibilities that having kids can throw into a loop. It’s been well documented that having children can hinder women’s careers, both when it comes to pay when compared with men (including men with children) and advancing to better jobs.

According to the poll, 47% of women say having a child is an obstacle for job security at their current or most recent job, compared with 36% of men. Americans under 30 were especially likely to say that, compared with older adults.

Amy Hill, who is 31 and lives in West Virginia, said she’s happy with her home division of labor, even though she does more than her husband. That’s because he works in the coal mines, doing 16-hour shifts away from home. Her work, while steady, is not full time — she does makeup for proms, weddings and other events.

“I think it helps not being around each other a whole lot because I miss him when he’s gone, you know?” she said. “As long as we’ve been together, he’s been working underground. And also, he doesn’t really fold the towels the way I want them to be folded.”

The AP-NORC poll of 1,054 adults was conducted Oct. 7-11 using a sample drawn from NORC’s probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

Women say they do most chores, child care: AP-NORC poll

By BARBARA ORTUTAY AP Business Writer

When it comes to household duties such as changing diapers, handling chores and meals and managing family schedules and activities, many couples who don’t have children expect that they will more or less share the work equally should they have kids one day.

The reality is not quite so rosy — at least for mothers.

A new poll from the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that although women generally expect to do more in their household, Americans without children are still more optimistic that they would share responsibilities equally with a partner compared with what parents report actually happens. That’s true even when factors such as the age of respondents are taken into account.

The poll asked about eight specified household responsibilities and found that 35% of mothers report doing more than their partner for all eight, compared with just 3% of fathers who report the same. For instance, about half of mothers said they are completely or mostly responsible for providing transportation to their kids, while only about a quarter of fathers said they are responsible for all or most of it.

By contrast, majorities of both men and women who are not parents said that if they did have kids

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 86 of 90

they'd share equally in things like providing transportation, changing diapers and attending to children waking up at night.

Mothers and fathers had different ideas about who does the bulk of household chores. For instance, 21% of mothers said they and their partner both equally attend to children if they wake up at night, while 49% of fathers said the same thing. So who is right?

"When you look at time use data, women are more correct than men," said Yana Gallen, assistant professor at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, who worked on the poll.

Life can also complicate the best-laid plans. Liana Price, 35, who has a 4-month-old baby who came as a "very much wanted surprise" during the height of the coronavirus pandemic when Price was undergoing chemotherapy treatments on her hands and had a pregnancy complication, said she stopped working in January as a result of everything going on.

"Things just kind of changed very drastically. And suddenly for us, we didn't really have like a plan," Price said. While Price and her husband had planned to both work full time, with her taking maternity leave offered by her job as a registered nurse, instead she quit her job and they began to run through savings.

Still, she says she and her husband divide child care equally — including attending to night wakings.

"When I was breastfeeding, there was no point in him getting up in the middle of the night. But now that I'm formula feeding, we alternate nights," she said. "However, during the day my husband does work from home. He travels, too. So when he travels, obviously everything is on me."

Experts say one reason women report doing more house and child care work is not only because they actually do more — which is often true — but also because men are not always aware of all the work involved. That includes planning family activities and organizing appointments and even things like providing children with emotional support.

The poll found that 57% of mothers said they provide "all or most" emotional support to their children. Only 1% of mothers said that their partner does. In contrast, 10% of fathers said they are the primary provider of emotional support to their kids, while 24% said it's their partner.

Much has been said about the effects of the pandemic on women, including many women who left or stepped back from the labor force to take care of their children or aging parents. The U.S. lost tens of millions of jobs when states began shuttering huge swaths of the economy after COVID-19 erupted. But as the economy has quickly rebounded and employers have posted record-high job openings, many women have delayed a return to the workplace, willingly or otherwise.

In the spring of 2020, roughly 3.5 million mothers with school-age children either lost jobs, took leaves of absence or left the labor market altogether, according to an analysis by the Census Bureau. Many have not returned. A recent report by the consulting firm McKinsey & Co. found that one in three women over the past year had thought about leaving their jobs or "downshifting" their careers. Early in the pandemic, by contrast, the study's authors said, just one in four women had considered leaving.

"But another thing that happened during the pandemic is a lot more jobs became remote and working from home became OK with a lot of jobs," Gallen said. "So I think that actually really helps women in the workplace because a potentially big problem has been that, women don't feel like they can take some of the higher-paying jobs available" that involve travel or long hours away from home.

"So this pandemic kind of moved forward a shift to more female friendly conditions and many jobs," she said.

This includes schedule flexibility and, for jobs in which that's possible, remote work. Women are more likely than men to say flexibility at work is important when thinking about whether or not to have a child, 74% versus 66%, according to the poll.

It's not just the division of household responsibilities that having kids can throw into a loop. It's been well documented that having children can hinder women's careers, both when it comes to pay when compared with men (including men with children) and advancing to better jobs.

According to the poll, 47% of women say having a child is an obstacle for job security at their current or most recent job, compared with 36% of men. Americans under 30 were especially likely to say that,

compared with older adults.

Amy Hill, who is 31 and lives in West Virginia, said she's happy with her home division of labor, even though she does more than her husband. That's because he works in the coal mines, doing 16-hour shifts away from home. Her work, while steady, is not full time — she does makeup for proms, weddings and other events.

"I think it helps not being around each other a whole lot because I miss him when he's gone, you know?" she said. "As long as we've been together, he's been working underground. And also, he doesn't really fold the towels the way I want them to be folded."

The AP-NORC poll of 1,054 adults was conducted Oct. 7-11 using a sample drawn from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 4 percentage points.

In the ruins of Mayfield, a search for hope in what's saved

By CLAIRE GALOFARO AP National Writer

WINGO, Ky. (AP) — She arrived at the shelter sobbing. Her house was gone, along with everything in it. On the phone, Victoria Byerly-Zuck begged her neighbors to search the wreckage for the one thing she could not bear to lose.

It was a plexiglass box, about the size of a medicine cabinet, and inside was all she has left of her infant son who died four years ago: his cremated ashes, his photos, the first and only outfit he ever wore.

The 35-year-old was surrounded at this makeshift shelter by others who lost everything when a deadly tornado tore apart their small town of Mayfield. Their downtown was demolished. Hundreds of houses were reduced to rubble. They lost cars, wallets, clothes, Christmas presents, all their furniture, photos and priceless family heirlooms.

More than 100 survivors are here, at a church in the nearby town of Wingo, population 600, that opened its doors in the hours after the tornado touched down and now no one knows how long it will have to remain open. One 82-year-old widow with no home to go to asked volunteers how long she could stay, and they told her as long as she needed to.

Byerly-Zuck's 3-year-old son spent a day trying to climb into any car that came and went from this shelter. "He wants to go home," she said. He has autism and is nonverbal. She doesn't know how to make him understand they don't have one anymore.

They'd been alone at their rented house in downtown Mayfield when the storm roared in. She piled pillows in the bathtub and laid him on top of them. As the windows burst, she grabbed the essentials for her son: a bag of diapers, some wipes, a few changes of clothes, a gallon of milk. It did not occur to her that those hastily selected items would be all they'd have left.

She got back to the bathroom and closed the door just as a tree uprooted and fell into the house, feet from where they cowered. She climbed onto the edge of the tub, trying to balance her body to shield her son without crushing him beneath her.

She prayed to God to save him: "Please let us make it through this. I don't care about anything else. Everything else is replaceable, but he is not replaceable."

She'd buried a baby before, and all she could think was that she could not do it again. In 2017, she was pregnant, learned she was carrying a boy and picked a name. The very next day, her water broke and the doctors couldn't save him. He was born premature at 22 weeks, and his lungs weren't developed. He gasped for breath once and died moments later. She lives in that moment every day in her mind.

"I can't live through it again. I really can't. I just got my one son now," she said.

As he lay in the bathtub while the storm passed, she realized they were trapped. The fallen tree and debris had blocked the bathroom door. Crying and choking, she couldn't scream for help. She smashed a hole through the drywall, and turned the flashlight on and off to signal that someone was inside. The National Guard came and dug them out.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 88 of 90

That very morning, she'd wrapped her son's last Christmas present — \$300 worth of gifts she'd bought for him. As they fled their ruined home, the only things standing were the bathroom where they'd been and one other room — all those presents were under the rubble.

A neighbor called her later that night to tell her the rest of the house crumbled, and she begged them to search for the box with her baby's ashes.

Now they're surrounded by rows of cots and people who had been strangers. They play together on the pool table in the corner that the church set up for now-homeless kids. There are people here in their 80s and 90s, babies, dogs, including a little one named Jingles.

On Monday afternoon, volunteers scrambled to set up more cots because they expected to absorb 40 more people from other shelters that sprung up in the hours after the storm, never intending or equipped for people to stay but unwilling to turn anyone away.

A health care company pulled a trailer into the lot. They are trying to find an outdoor shower facility and a laundry truck, because they're fearful this might be the only long-term solution for many of the displaced. Volunteers scramble around. "I've got two that need undergarments," one said. "Do we have socks?"

Byerly-Zuck's son is used to having a routine: bed at 8 p.m., a nap in the afternoon. But he's having trouble sleeping. She can't get him to go down for a nap, and she couldn't get him to sleep on the cot they share until after midnight Sunday. She is worried about what all this uncertainty is doing to him.

He's close to his grandfather, who is at a Nashville hospital recovering after his home collapsed onto him. Their neighbor died. Other people they know in nearby apartments are missing.

"I will need therapy after this; we will all need therapy," she said, because here they exchange stories of the horrors they survived, and the people they know who didn't.

She answers many questions about their future the same way: "I don't know." She's desperate and sad — she doesn't even have a driver's license anymore — but she tries to pretend she isn't scared so her son won't get scared, too.

"He's all I've got," she said. "We lost everything."

She guesses they'll spend Christmas in the shelter.

All she can think to do is pray.

There was one blessing, she said: On Sunday night, a neighbor called and said they'd found the box with her baby's ashes, unbroken, amid the rubble.

McConnell, Spears, Osaka: A look at 2021's notable quotes

NEW HAVEN, Conn. (AP) — A line from a speech given from the U.S. Senate floor before rioters broke into the Capitol on Jan. 6 tops a Yale Law School librarian's list of the most notable quotes of 2021.

Sen. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell was urging fellow Republicans to abandon their effort to overrule the election victory of President Joe Biden when he said: "The voters, the courts, and the states have all spoken."

Moments later, the insurrection began, forcing the Capitol's evacuation.

Fred Shapiro, an associate director at the library, assembles a list of noteworthy quotes each year. He said he picks quotes that are important or revealing of the spirit of the times, not because they are necessarily eloquent or admirable.

The list is a supplement to The New Yale Book of Quotations, which was edited by Shapiro and published by Yale University Press.

THE LIST

1. "The voters, the courts, and the states have all spoken." — U.S. Sen. Mitch McConnell, remarks on Senate floor, Jan. 6.

2. "The likelihood there's going to be the Taliban overrunning everything and owning the whole country is highly unlikely." — President Joe Biden, televised address, July 8.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 89 of 90

3. "We say no more 'blah blah blah,' no more exploitation of people and nature and the planet." — activist Greta Thunberg, remarks to climate protesters, Edinburgh, Scotland, Nov. 1.
4. "When day comes we ask ourselves, where can we find light in this never-ending shade?" — poet Amanda Gorman, "The Hill We Climb" inauguration poem, Jan. 20.
5. "This conservatorship is abusive." — Britney Spears, statement to court, Los Angeles, June 23.
6. "I communicated that I wanted to skip press conferences at Roland Garros to exercise self-care and preservation of my mental health." — tennis player Naomi Osaka, Time Magazine, July 19/26 issue.
7. "In those months when I was pregnant, all around the same time, so we have in tandem the conversation of, he won't be given security, he's not going to be given a title, and also concerns and conversations about how dark his skin might be when he's born." — Duchess Megan Markle, remarks about her son Archie, "Oprah with Megan and Harry" CBS interview, March 7.
8. "My name is Cleo." — Cleo Smith, 4, in response to a policeman upon her rescue from kidnapping, Carnarvon, Australia, Nov. 3.
9. "Presidents are not kings." — Judge Tanya Chutkan, opinion in case of Trump v. Thompson, Nov. 9.
10. "I am here today because I believe Facebook's products harm children, stoke division, and weaken our democracy." — whistleblower Frances Haugen, testimony before the Senate Commerce Committee Sub-Committee on Consumer Protection, Product Safety, and Data Security, Oct. 5.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined
Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Dec. 15, the 349th day of 2021. There are 16 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 15, 1978, President Jimmy Carter announced he would grant diplomatic recognition to Communist China on New Year's Day and sever official relations with Taiwan.

On this date:

In 1791, the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the U.S. Constitution, went into effect following ratification by Virginia.

In 1890, Sioux Indian Chief Sitting Bull and 11 other tribe members were killed in Grand River, South Dakota, during a confrontation with Indian police.

In 1939, the Civil War motion picture epic "Gone with the Wind," starring Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, had its world premiere in Atlanta.

In 1967, the Silver Bridge between Gallipolis (gal-ih-puh-LEES'), Ohio, and Point Pleasant, West Virginia, collapsed into the Ohio River, killing 46 people.

In 1971, the Secret Service appointed its first five female special agents.

In 1974, the horror spoof "Young Frankenstein," starring Gene Wilder and directed by Mel Brooks, was released by 20th Century Fox.

In 1989, a popular uprising began in Romania that resulted in the downfall of dictator Nicolae Ceausescu (chow-SHEHS'-koo).

In 2000, the long-troubled Chernobyl nuclear power plant in Ukraine was closed for good.

In 2001, with a crash and a large dust cloud, a 50-foot tall section of steel — the last standing piece of the World Trade Center's facade — was brought down in New York.

In 2010, the U.N. Security Council gave a unanimous vote of confidence to the government of Iraq by lifting 19-year-old sanctions on weapons and civilian nuclear power.

In 2012, a day after the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, President Barack Obama declared that "every parent in America has a heart heavy with hurt" and said it was time to "take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this."

In 2013, Nelson Mandela was laid to rest in his childhood hometown, ending a 10-day mourning period for South Africa's first Black president.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021 ~ Vol. 30 - No. 161 ~ 90 of 90

Ten years ago: The flag used by U.S. forces in Iraq was lowered in a low-key Baghdad airport ceremony marking the end of a war that had left 4,500 Americans and 110,000 Iraqis dead and cost more than \$800 billion.

Five years ago: A federal jury in Charleston, South Carolina, convicted Dylann Roof of slaughtering nine Black church members who had welcomed him to their Bible study.

One year ago: Hundreds more hospitals around the country began dispensing COVID-19 shots to their workers in a rapid expansion of the U.S. vaccination drive. The Food and Drug Administration cleared the first kit that consumers could buy without a prescription to test themselves for COVID-19 entirely at home. After weeks of holding out, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Joe Biden on winning the presidential election. Biden nominated his former rival Pete Buttigieg (BOO'-tuh-juhj) as secretary of transportation. Two-time reigning NBA MVP Gannis Antetokounmpo (YAH'-nihs an-teh-toh-KOON'-poh) said he'd signed an extension keeping him with the Milwaukee Bucks for at least five more seasons.

Today's Birthdays: Singer Cindy Birdsong (The Supremes) is 82. Rock musician Dave Clark (The Dave Clark Five) is 79. Rock musician Carmine Appice (Vanilla Fudge) is 75. Actor Don Johnson is 72. Actor Melanie Chartoff is 71. Movie director Julie Taymor is 69. Movie director Alex Cox is 67. Rock musician Paul Simonon (The Clash) is 66. Movie director John Lee Hancock is 65. Democratic Party activist Donna Brazile is 62. Country singer Doug Phelps (Brother Phelps; Kentucky Headhunters) is 61. Movie producer-director Reginald Hudlin is 60. Actor Helen Slater is 58. Actor Paul Kaye (TV: "Game of Thrones") is 57. Actor Molly Price is 56. Actor Garrett Wang (wahng) is 53. Actor Michael Shanks is 51. Actor Stuart Townsend is 49. Figure skater Surya Bonaly is 48. Actor Geoff Stults is 45. Actor Adam Brody is 42. Actor Michelle Dockery is 40. Actor George O. Gore II is 39. Actor Camilla Luddington is 38. Rock musician and actor Alana Haim (HYM) is 30. Actor Maude Apatow (AP'-ih-tow) is 24. Actor Stefania Owen is 24.