

# Groton Daily Independent

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## UpComing Events

### 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 1 p.m. with varsity to follow.

## South Dakota Reports First Flu Death of Season

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the South Dakota Department of Health reported the first influenza death of the 2021-2022 season.

“Our sympathy is with the family. Their loss serves as a reminder to us all that influenza can be a very serious illness,” said Dr. Joshua Clayton, state epidemiologist for the department. “It is not too late to get vaccinated for this flu season, and if you haven’t yet received your annual flu vaccination, the time to do so is now.”

Clayton noted that flu activity in communities across South Dakota is classified as local. In addition to one death, the state has reported 89 lab-confirmed cases of flu and 4 flu-related hospitalizations in the past week.

Each year, an average of 39 South Dakotan deaths are reported to the Department of Health following influenza infections. To protect against flu complications, annual flu vaccination is recommended for everyone age 6 months and older. Groups like pregnant women, children younger than 5 years, people over 65 years, and people with chronic medical conditions are at higher risk for flu-related complications, such as pneumonia, hospitalization, and death. Healthcare workers and household contacts of high-risk populations, such as those with young infants, should also be vaccinated.

Influenza, much like COVID-19, is a viral infection spread by respiratory droplets released when an infected person talks, coughs or sneezes. Common signs and symptoms of the flu include fever of 100 degrees or greater, cough, sore throat, headache, fatigue, body or muscle aches, and runny or stuffy nose.

In addition to vaccination, to prevent the spread of the flu:

Wash your hands often with soap and water or alcohol-based hand gel;

Cover your mouth and nose when you cough or sneeze;

Avoid touching your eyes, nose, or mouth; and

Stay home if you are sick.

To find participating locations offering flu vaccines in your community, click [here](#). For more information and the latest resources visit [flu.sd.gov](http://flu.sd.gov).



## **OPEN:** Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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## Five wrestlers place at Northeast Conference

Five Groton Area wrestlers placed in the top four at the Northeast Conference Wrestling Tournament held Thursday in Sisseton.

Liza Krueger was the only girl wrestler at 106 pounds so she claimed the first place spot. Lane Krueger placed second at 285 pounds, Cole Bisbee placed third at 160 pounds, and Brevin Fliehs at 138 pounds and Pierce Kettering at 132 pounds both placed fourth.

Redfield won the team title with 198.5 points followed by Milbank with 152.5, Sisseton 120.5, Hamlin 115.5, Clark/Willow Lake 100, Groton Area 57, Britton-Hecla 49, Deuel 42, Webster Area 22 and Tiospa Zina 4.

### **G106: Liza Krueger (0-0) placed 1st.**

Round 1 - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 0-0 received a bye () (Bye)

Round 2 - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 0-0 received a bye () (Bye)

### **106: Walker Zoellner (5-5) scored 6.0 team points.**

Prelim - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 5-5 won by fall over Brenden Cook (Tiospa Zina) 2-6 (Fall 2:40)

Quarterfinal - Brady Risetter (Redfield Area) 5-0 won by fall over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 5-5 (Fall 0:00)

Cons. Round 1 - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 5-5 won by fall over Tyson Hagberg (Deuel) 4-5 (Fall 4:35)

Cons. Semi - Brody Randall (Hamlin) 11-5 won by tech fall over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 5-5 (TF-1.5 3:59 (15-0))

**113: Porter Johnson (2-5)** Quarterfinal - Taylor Merkel (Clark/Willow Lake) 5-6 won by decision over Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 2-5 (Dec 7-0)

Cons. Round 1 - Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 2-5 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Semi - Conner Zens (Redfield Area) 4-1 won by fall over Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 2-5 (Fall 2:22)

### **126: Isiah Sepaniak (2-6) scored 3.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Jacob Johnson (Milbank) 6-6 won by fall over Isiah Sepaniak (Groton Area) 2-6 (Fall 0:15)

Cons. Round 1 - Isiah Sepaniak (Groton Area) 2-6 won by fall over Thomas Anderson (Tiospa Zina) 0-4 (Fall 1:23)

Cons. Semi - Trace Shoemaker (Webster Area) 8-6 won by fall over Isiah Sepaniak (Groton Area) 2-6 (Fall 1:56)

### **132: Pierce Kettering (6-4) placed 4th and scored 10.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 6-4 won by fall over Ernesto Garcia (Clark/Willow Lake) 4-5 (Fall 3:11)

Semifinal - Kaden Krause (Milbank) 4-4 won by major decision over Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 6-4 (MD 14-5)

Cons. Semi - Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 6-4 won by major decision over Tate Everson (Hamlin) 4-9 (MD 12-2)

3rd Place Match - Jaxon Quail (Deuel) 10-2 won by decision over Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 6-4 (Dec 8-5)

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**138: Brevin Flihs (6-4) placed 4th and scored 11.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Brevin Flihs (Groton Area) 6-4 won by fall over Dustin Stabnow (Britton/Hecla) 2-9 (Fall 1:01)

Semifinal - Ethan Mcelhone (Clark/Willow Lake) 6-4 won by decision over Brevin Flihs (Groton Area) 6-4 (Dec 3-2)

Cons. Semi - Brevin Flihs (Groton Area) 6-4 won by fall over Blaise McGregor (Webster Area) 2-5 (Fall 2:15)

3rd Place Match - Brock Gisselbeck (Hamlin) 6-4 won by decision over Brevin Flihs (Groton Area) 6-4 (Dec 4-3)

**152: Korbin Kucker (3-6) scored 1.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Troy Randall Jr. (Hamlin) 12-4 won by fall over Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 3-6 (Fall 1:51)

Cons. Round 1 - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 3-6 won by decision over Collin Beaner (Britton/Hecla) 4-7 (Dec 5-2)

Cons. Semi - Tate Schlueter (Milbank) 9-3 won by fall over Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 3-6 (Fall 1:42)

**160: Cole Bisbee (7-3) placed 3rd and scored 12.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 7-3 received a bye () (Bye)

Semifinal - Barrett Schneck (Milbank) 12-3 won by fall over Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 7-3 (Fall 2:10)

Cons. Semi - Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 7-3 won by fall over Braeden Johnson (Clark/Willow Lake) 2-7 (Fall 2:49)

3rd Place Match - Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 7-3 won by fall over Conner Glines (Britton/Hecla) 4-6 (Fall 1:29)

**285: Lane Krueger (5-2) placed 2nd and scored 14.0 team points.**

Quarterfinal - Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 5-2 received a bye () (Bye)

Semifinal - Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 5-2 won by decision over Landon Novy (Milbank) 10-4 (Dec 5-0)

1st Place Match - Grady Fey (Redfield Area) 2-0 won by fall over Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 5-2 (Fall 2:17)



DACOTAH BANK

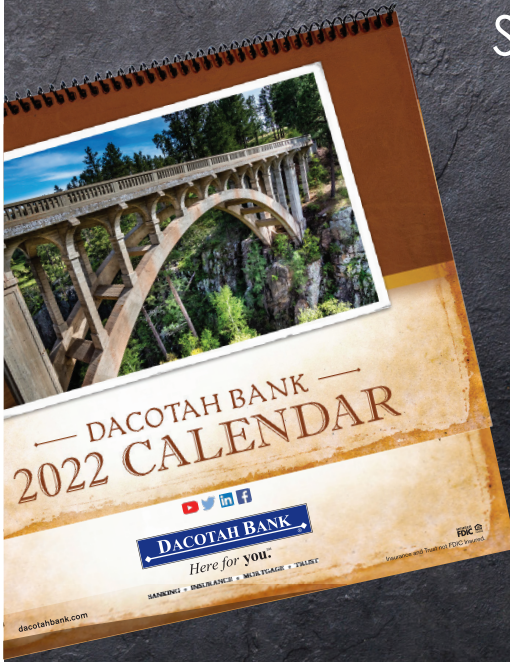
## *Cookies & Calendar* OPEN HOUSE

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



## Groton Area Boys have come-from-behind win over Hamlin

Two evenly matched teams battled it out on the court Thursday night as Groton Area came from behind to edge out Hamlin in boys basketball action in Groton, 56-52.

Both teams came out with guns blazing in the first quarter. After a tie at two, the lead changed hands eight times before Groton Area held a 17-16 lead at the end of the first quarter. The lead changed hands three more times and the game was tied twice more in the second quarter as Hamlin led at half time, 32-28. Groton Area came out flat in the third quarter and the Chargers opened up an eight-point lead, 43-34, with 2:03 left in the third quarter. Hamlin held the lead, 43-38, at the break.

Groton Area closed to within two to start the fourth quarter, but Hamlin held a six-point lead, 49-43, with 4:34 left. Groton Area then scored 11 unanswered points to take a 53-49 lead with 24 seconds left and went on for the 56-52 win.

Three players hit double figures with Kaden Kurtz scoring eight of his 13 points in the fourth quarter. He also had two rebounds. Jayden Zak had 12 points, five rebounds, two assists, five steals and one block. Tate Larson had 12 points, six rebounds and one steal. Jacob Zak had seven points and three rebounds. Wyatt Hearnen had seven points, five rebounds and one steal. Cole Simon had three points and two rebounds. Lane Tietz had two points, one rebound, four assists and two steals.

Groton Area made 16 of 30 field goals for 53 percent, four of 15 three-pointers for 27 percent, made 13 of 23 free throws for 52 percent off of Hamlin's 19 team fouls, had 24 rebounds, 12 turnovers, six assists, nine steals, 17 team fouls and one block shot.

Hamlin was led by Tyson Stevenson with 19 points followed by Easton Neudendorf and Brennan Kesler with eight apiece, Dawson Noem had six, Evan Stormo five, Luke Fraser four and Rylan Bawdon two. The Chargers made 20 of 45 field goals for 44 percent, nine of 11 free throws for 82 percent off of Groton Area's 17 team fouls, and had 11 turnovers.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 40-33. Cole Simon had 16 points while Teyton Diegel had 10, Logan Ringgenberg eight, and Braxton Imrie, Dillon Abeln and Colby Dunker each had two points. Matt Donahoe and Jameson Nebel each had nine points for Hamlin.

## Hamlin runs away in girls game

Hamlin led at the quarterstops at 15-5, 33-8 and 46-16 en route to a 52-22 win the girls varsity game.

Gracie Traphagen led the Lady Tigers with seven points and two rebounds. Brooke Gengerke had five points and two rebounds. Jerrica Locke had five points, four rebounds and one steal. Allyssa Locke had one rebound and three assists. Sydney Leicht had four rebounds and one steal. Aspen Johnson had one rebound and one steal. Jaedyn Penning had three rebounds. Laila Roberts had one rebound.

Groton Area made six of 25 field goals for 24 percent, three of 16 three-pointers for 19 percent, was one of two from the line, had 20 rebounds, 10 turnovers, five assists, three steals and 11 team fouls.

Hamlin was led by Kami Wadsworth with 21 points followed by Addison Neudendorf and Brooklyn Brandriet with nine each, Ally Abraham and eight points, Grace Opdahl and Zoie Fraser each had two points and Alyssa West had one free throw.

The Chargers made 19 of 39 field goals for 48 percent, was six of nine from the line, had nine team fouls and four turnovers.

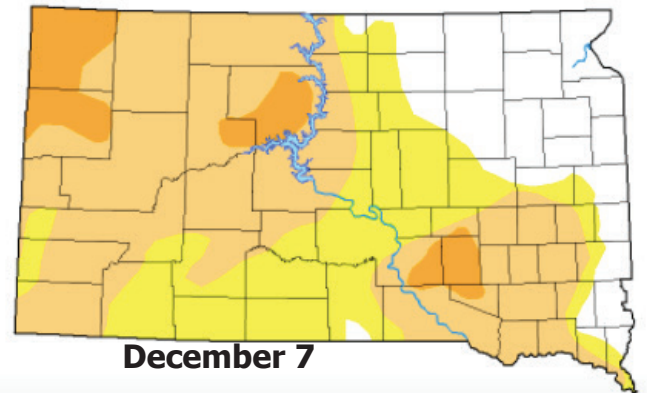
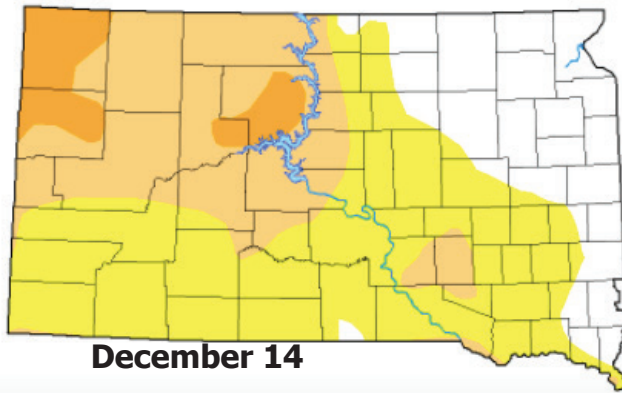
Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 32-17. Laila Roberts had 11 points, Jaedyn Penning had seven, Brooklyn Hansen five, Faith Traphagen four, Jerrica Locke and Elizabeth Flihs each had two points and Kennedy Hansen had one. Emily Everson led the Chargers with 10 points.

Both varsity games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Groton Ford, Allied Climate Professionals with KevinNehls, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, the John Sieh Agency and Dacotah Bank.

## Drought Classification



## Drought Monitor



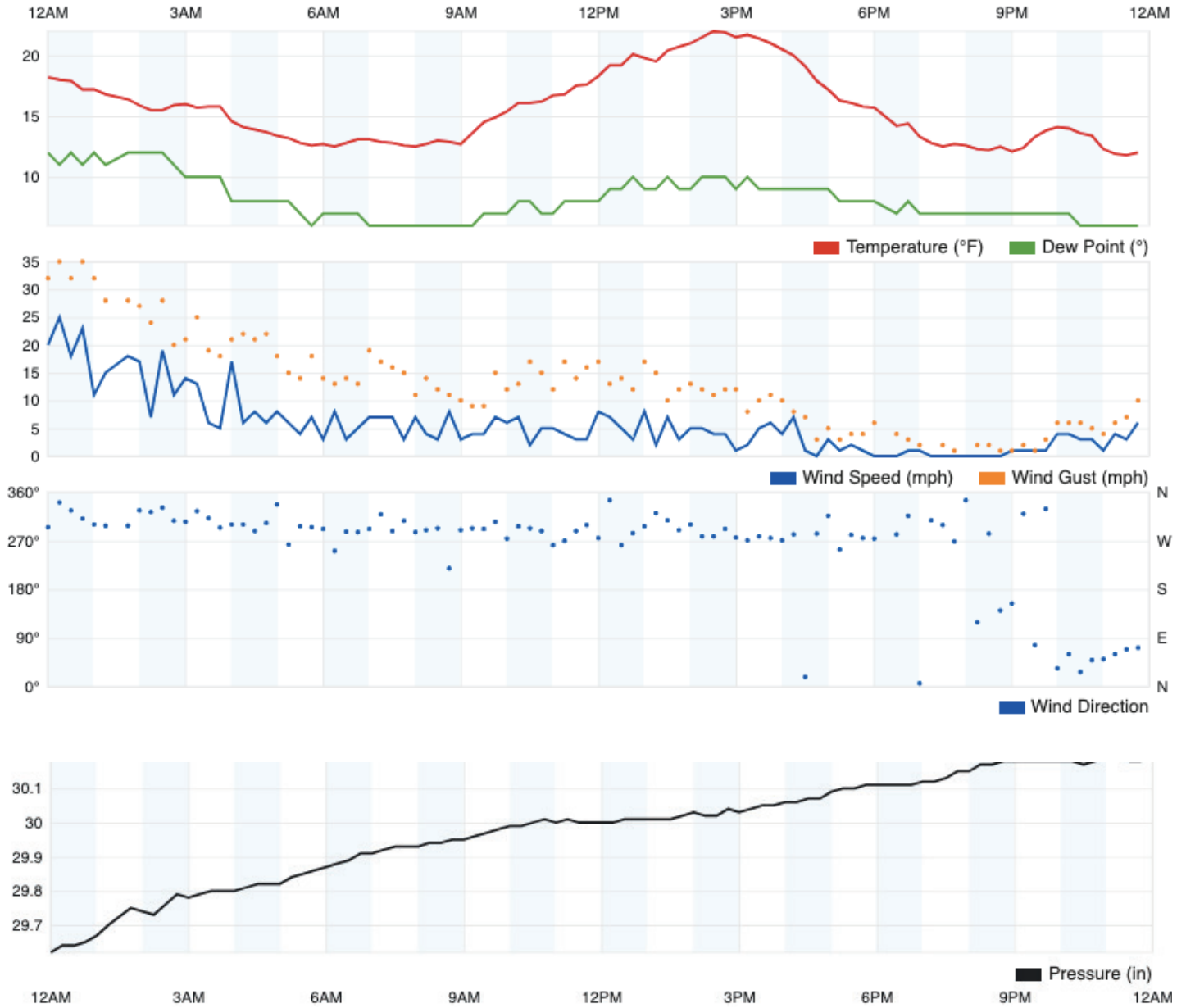
### High Plains

On this week's map, eastern Wyoming, eastern Montana, central North Dakota, southern South Dakota, and northwestern Nebraska saw improvements based on short-term precipitation (30 to 90-day period). This included beneficial snowfall in southern portions of South Dakota where observed totals ranged from 6 to 18 inches with the highest totals in southwestern South Dakota. In these areas, soils have yet to freeze throughout the soil column and melting snows are infiltrating and helping to improve soil moisture levels. According to NOAA NOHRSC, snow coverage in the Upper Midwest Region (includes portions of Wisconsin, Minnesota, the Dakotas, eastern Montana, and northwestern Wyoming) is currently at 52.5% with an average depth of 1.5 inches and a maximum depth of 28.8 inches. Despite some improvements on the map, it is noteworthy that average temperatures across the High Plains region have been well above normal since September. This includes numerous high-temperature records that were recently broken across the region during the first week of December when high temperatures soared into the 70's.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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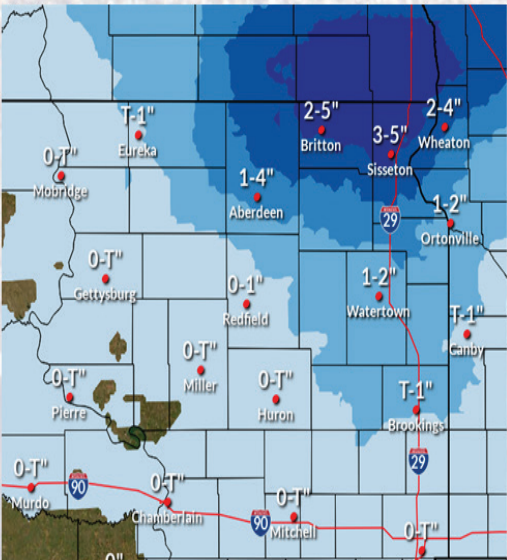
**Winter Weather Advisory**

Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
70%	60% → 20%			
Snow Likely	Snow Likely then Slight Chance Snow	Cold	Partly Cloudy	Partly Sunny
High: 19 °F	Low: 1 °F	High: 10 °F	Low: -1 °F	High: 31 °F

## Accumulating Snowfall Today

- Light to moderate snowfall develops this morning, and persists through the afternoon and into the evening across portions of northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota
- **Travel, especially the evening commute, may be impacted as snow makes roadways slippery**
- Colder air moves in tonight with lows around zero and wind chills of -10 F or colder. Sat highs of 10 to 18 F.

### Snow Totals 6am Today – 6am Sat



### Hourly Snow Probability/Timing

	12/17 Fri														12/18 Sat						
	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm	6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm	12am	1am	2am
<b>Aberdeen</b>	15	24	29	35	45	46	42	32	34	44	60	63	53	37	31	32	20	17	8	7	10
<b>Britton</b>	23	44	50	70	76	78	81	82	72	71	70	74	63	63	60	57	58	40	25	11	12
<b>Clark</b>	33	39	35	42	36	29	16	17	8	9	23	35	50	62	62	64	52	38	17	11	11
<b>Clear Lake</b>	22	41	59	62	47	23	9	9	11	12	12	16	28	42	55	69	71	67	55	36	22
<b>Frederick</b>	17	19	30	47	52	61	62	58	60	63	68	62	54	42	29	22	22	18	19	11	14
<b>Milbank</b>	13	27	42	74	80	72	51	30	24	18	23	26	44	60	77	82	85	78	63	41	21
<b>Redfield</b>	18	19	14	8	5	4	3	5	8	12	17	34	45	41	39	40	27	15	7	4	3
<b>Sisseton</b>	15	35	49	62	80	82	79	74	66	59	54	62	70	71	72	73	68	54	36	14	10
<b>Watertown</b>	23	46	70	71	54	30	13	19	13	15	16	22	45	59	67	74	67	51	37	19	15
<b>Webster</b>	25	47	68	76	73	65	50	42	25	35	34	56	72	67	66	56	52	45	23	12	8
<b>Wheaton</b>	9	16	23	37	48	62	67	71	71	65	63	59	62	68	68	66	66	55	42	23	20

\*Table values in %  
 \*\*Created: 2 am CST Fri 12/17/2021  
 \*\*\*Values are maximums over the period beginning at the time shown.

Visit [www.weather.gov/abr](http://www.weather.gov/abr) for a detailed local forecast

Updated: 12/17/2021 5:13 AM CT

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE  
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Snow showers may add up to several inches of accumulation by tonight across portions of northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota. Northwest wind gusts of 10-20 mph may cause some drifting of snow as well. Much below average temperatures then move in tonight through Saturday night, but this will be short-lived with highs a good 20 degrees warmer on Sunday compared to Saturday (in the upper 20s to low 40s).



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## Today in Weather History

December 17, 1993: A prolonged period of snow occurred from December 15th through the 19th over the western half of South Dakota. Several accidents leading to injuries occurred due to ice on the 15th, and many vehicles slid into ditches. Snowfall amounts were 4 to 10 inches. McIntosh received three inches of snow; Timber Lake, Murdo, and Selby received five inches of snow; and six inches accumulated at McLaughlin. Eagle Butte recorded seven inches of new snow.

December 17, 1903: Wilbur and Orville Wright made four brief flights at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina with their first powered aircraft on this day. After having success with their 5-foot biplane kite, the brothers realized the weather conditions in Dayton were not ideal for their flying experiments. They wrote the Weather Bureau in Washington, D.C. requesting a list of suitable places on the east coast where winds were constant. Below is the response the Wright Brothers received from Joseph Doshier, who staffed the Weather Bureau office, wrote in August of 1900 regarding the suitability of Kitty Hawk.

December 17, 1924: From the Monthly Weather Review, "a severe glaze storm occurred in west-central Illinois on December 17 and 18, the area of great destruction embracing a territory about 75 miles in width and 170 miles in length. In the affected area, trees were badly damaged, wires broken, and thousands of electric poles went down. Electric services were paralyzed, and it required weeks to restore operation and months to permanently rebuild the lines.

The street railway company and the Illinois Traction System resumed complete operation 17 days after the storm. Electric light service was completely restored January 10. The ice had practically disappeared from the trees and wires by January 4, but on January 20, there was still considerable ice on the ground.

The Western Union Telegraph Co. lost 8,000 poles and the Illinois Bell Telephone Co. about 23,000. The total damage to wire service in Illinois probably equaled or exceeded \$5,000,000." If the loss of business, the damage to trees and possible injury to winter grains, the storm may be considered one of the most disastrous of its kind in the history of Illinois."

1884 - A three week blockade of snow began at Portland, OR. A record December total of 34 inches was received. (David Ludlum)

1924 - A severe icestorm struck central Illinois. It coated the ground with nearly two inches of glaze at Springfield. The storm caused 21 million dollars damage along with much hardship. Ice was on the trees until the 4th of January, and electricity was not restored until January 10th. (David Ludlum)

1929 - An icestorm in western New York State resulted in much damage and hardship. A Buffalo report stated, "one was kept awake by the breaking limbs, which snapped off with a report much louder than a rifle shot." (17th-18th) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm in the southwestern U.S. brought heavy rain and heavy snow to parts of California, Nevada, Arizona, Utah and New Mexico. Charleston NV was blanketed with 12 inches of snow. Lake Havasu City AZ was drenched with 2.26 inches of rain. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Squalls brought locally heavy snow to the southeastern shores of Lake Michigan. Totals in Michigan ranged up to 14 inches at Harvey. Totals in Ohio ranged up to 16 inches at Chardon. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Twenty-one cities from Kentucky to Pennsylvania reported record low temperatures for the date, including Columbus OH with a reading of 12 degrees below zero. Heavy snow continued in the Colorado Rockies. Vail received 65 inches of snow between the 14th and the 18th of December. Steamboat Springs was buried under 74 inches, and reported a total of 108 inches of snow between the 10th and the 18th of the month. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2002 - Thunderstorms preceding a strong cold front pushed into the U.S. Mississippi Valley, producing severe weather and tornadoes. Three people were killed in Missouri and Arkansas with more than 40 injuries (Associated Press).

2008 - A winter storm dumped as much as 3.6 inches of snow across Las Vegas, Nevada, prompting the closure of schools and highways. This was the largest December snowfall on record and the heaviest snowfall since January 1979 when a total of 7.5 inches fell (Associated Press).

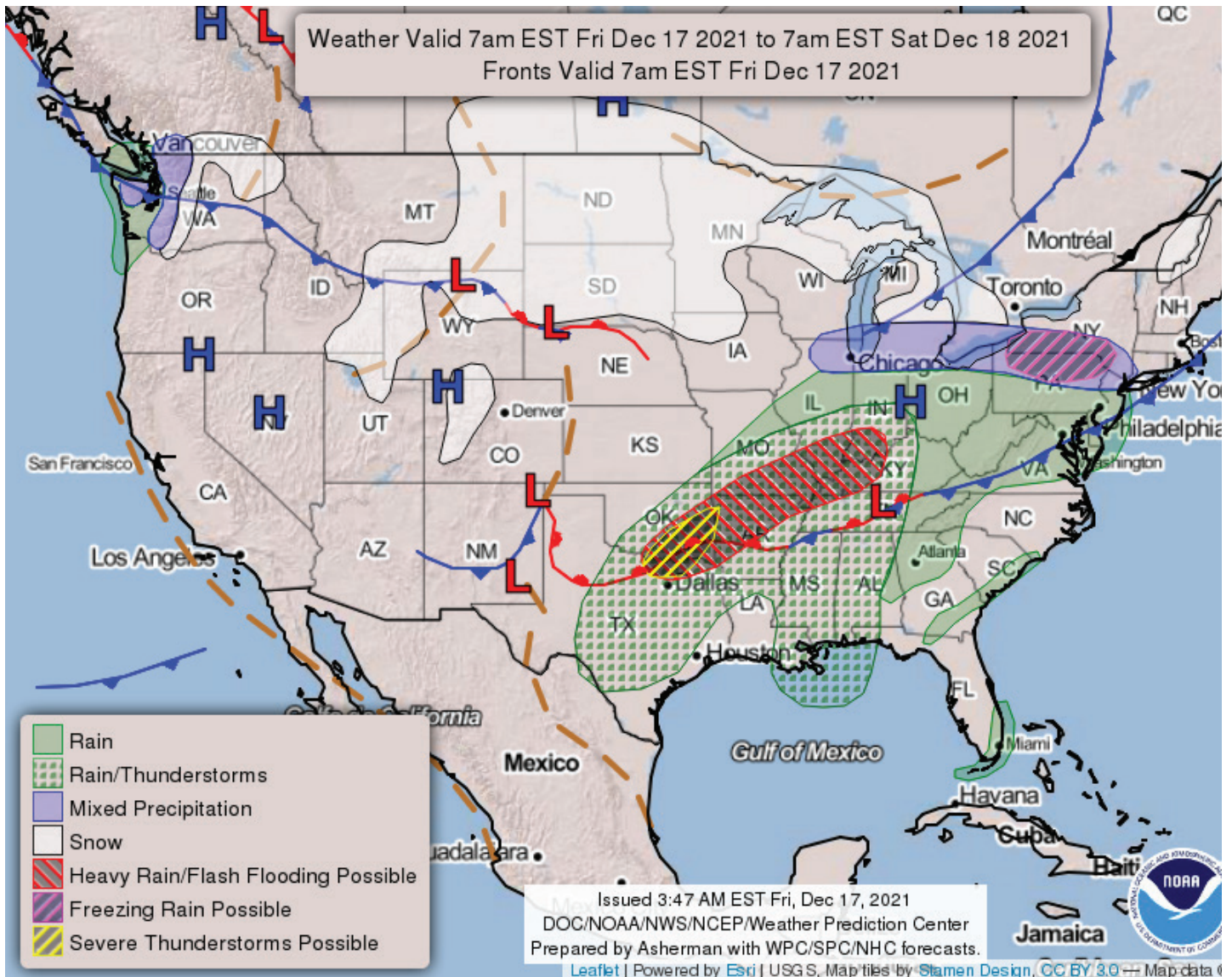
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

**High Temp: 22.0 °F at 2:30 PM**  
**Low Temp: 11.8 °F at 11:30 PM**  
**Wind: 35 mph at 12:45 AM**  
**Precip: 0.00**

**Record High: 53° in 1939**  
**Record Low: -32° in 2016**  
**Average High: 28°F**  
**Average Low: 7°F**  
**Average Precip in Dec.: 0.32**  
**Precip to date in Dec.: 0.11**  
**Average Precip to date: 21.53**  
**Precip Year to Date: 19.97**  
**Sunset Tonight: 4:52:07 PM**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:05:58 AM**



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## NEVER QUIT!

"Don't let this be you!" said a coach to his football team after a difficult loss. He was pointing to a picture of a player sitting in front of his locker. His helmet was between his feet. His elbows were on his knees and his head was between his hands with a look of sadness in his eyes. Under his helmet were the words, "I quit!"

As we look into the manger this Christmas, we can rejoice together and say, "Thank You, God, that You didn't quit – that You never gave up!"

Whenever we think of the eternal love that God has for us, we often forget about the disappointments He must have endured. Imagine, if you can, what must have entered into His mind and heart when Adam and Eve rejected His plan and the path before them. Consider, if you will, the many agreements He made with people who promised to obey Him and then abandoned their word when they thought He was out of sight. We will never know the grief He suffered because of the hope He had that people would love Him and be obedient to Him.

But, He never gave up. He never quit. Finally, John wrote, "We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world!"

All of us have suffered many losses in life. None, however, can ever be compared to God's losses. But He refused to give up even though it cost the life of His one and only Son.

Prayer: We thank You, Father, for Your unfailing love and determination to rescue us. We are overwhelmed when we think that You would sacrifice Your Son for us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: 1 John 4:14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world.

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## 2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)  
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)  
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm  
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)  
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)  
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)  
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)  
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS  
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.  
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove  
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament  
06/19/2021 **Postponed to Aug. 28th:** Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon  
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament  
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament  
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove  
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)  
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course  
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton  
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course  
08/13/2021 Groton Basketball Golf Tournament  
**Cancelled** Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am Olive Grove Golf Course  
08/29/2021 Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)  
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)  
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove  
09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport  
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)  
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)  
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm  
10/29/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)  
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)  
11/11/2021 Veteran's Day Program at the GHS Arena  
11/21/2021 Groton Area Snow Queen Contest  
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)  
11/30/2021 James Valley Telecommunications Holiday Open House 10am-4pm  
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes  
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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## The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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All prices listed include 6.5% Sales Tax

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- Colored ..... \$74.55/year
- Colored ..... \$42.60/6 months
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News from the  Associated Press

## Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 71, Leola/Frederick 37  
Bridgewater-Emery 49, Menno 41  
Britton-Hecla 83, Iroquois/Doland 42  
Castlewood 85, Arlington 56  
Centerville 36, Avon 28  
Corsica/Stickney 56, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 42  
Custer 59, McLaughlin 44  
DeSmet 68, Estelline/Hendricks 17  
Deuel 58, Webster 55  
Elk Point-Jefferson 63, Parker 45  
Ethan 72, James Valley Christian 60  
Faulkton 63, Herreid/Selby Area 40  
Flandreau 58, Beresford 29  
Gayville-Volin 71, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 40  
Gregory 73, Colome 50  
Groton Area 56, Hamlin 52  
Ipswich 40, Langford 33  
Kimball/White Lake 49, Mitchell Christian 43  
Lennox 57, Madison 55  
McIntosh 57, Newell 27  
New Underwood 68, Hill City 57  
Red Cloud 64, Tiospa Zina Tribal 49  
Sioux Falls Jefferson 63, Brandon Valley 43  
Stanley County 61, Philip 43  
Timber Lake 57, Harding County 45  
Wessington Springs 62, Hitchcock-Tulare 50  
Lakota Nations Invitational=  
Santee, Neb. 87, Dupree 35  
Todd County 68, St. Francis Indian 39  
Wakpala 108, Takini 12  
White River 65, Rapid City Christian 52

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 35, Leola/Frederick 26  
Aberdeen Roncalli 53, Redfield 25  
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 61, Gayville-Volin 41  
Arlington 50, Castlewood 41  
Brookings 60, Mitchell 48  
Centerville 56, Avon 43  
Corsica/Stickney 49, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 30  
DeSmet 46, Estelline/Hendricks 17  
Deuel 40, Webster 29  
Douglas 39, Hot Springs 32

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Elk Point-Jefferson 52, Parker 27  
Elkton-Lake Benton 56, Lake Preston 27  
Ethan 72, James Valley Christian 41  
Flandreau 48, Beresford 21  
Hamlin 52, Groton Area 22  
Highmore-Harrold 47, Potter County 41  
Hill City 45, New Underwood 19  
Hitchcock-Tulare 41, Wessington Springs 29  
Kimball/White Lake 61, Mitchell Christian 33  
Lemmon 46, Bison 40  
Lennox 52, Madison 46  
Newell 57, McIntosh 13  
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 48, Deubrook 12  
Ponca, Neb. 52, Vermillion 31  
Scotland 53, Bon Homme 50  
Sioux Falls Lincoln 44, Harrisburg 39  
Stanley County 54, Philip 46  
Timber Lake 62, Harding County 48  
Winner 54, Burke 16  
Lakota Nations Invitational=  
Lakota Tech 63, Dupree 33  
Lower Brule 52, Pine Ridge 39  
Tiospaye Topa 57, Santee, Neb. 30  
Todd County 51, Tiospa Zina Tribal 31  
White River 59, Crow Creek 47  
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=  
Wilmot vs. Wyndmere-Lidgerwood, N.D., ppd.

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

## Engineer accused of attempting to pass US secrets to Russia

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — An engineer who worked for decades as a federal defense contractor has been arrested on charges of trying to pass classified information to someone he thought was a Russian agent but who was actually an undercover FBI employee, the Justice Department said Thursday.

The FBI conducted an undercover operation against John Murray Rowe Jr., 63, of South Dakota, after he was fired from his job for security violations and because he had been identified as a potential insider threat, federal officials said.

As part of the investigation, over an eight-month period beginning in March 2020, Rowe traded more than 300 emails with an undercover FBI employee who posed as a Russian agent, the government said. Rowe shared operational details about U.S. military fighter jets in one email, and in another, said: "If I can't get a job here then I'll go work for the other team," according to court documents.

Court records do not list a lawyer for Rowe. Prosecutors say Rowe had worked for nearly 40 years as a test engineer for defense contractors and held security clearances.

He was fired in March 2018 from an unnamed company involved in aerospace matters after prosecutors say he tried to bring a thumb drive into a classified space and asked whether he could simultaneously possess a U.S. government security clearance and a Russian government clearance.

After that, authorities say, he was approached by an undercover FBI agent who posed as an agent of the Russian government. They met at a hotel in South Dakota, where Rowe said he'd be interested in moving

to Russia and giving information to its government, according to an FBI agent's affidavit.

"I've been saying this to people. I said, 'I'm gonna go work for the Russians. I've been saying that for the last two years,'" Rowe is quoted in the affidavit as saying. "We heard you. That's why I'm here," the undercover agent said in response.

Prosecutors say he then began communicating with another FBI employee based in Philadelphia who was posing as the same Russian agent. During a lengthy email exchange that spanned months, he shared information about electronic countermeasure systems used by U.S. fighter jets and again conveyed his interest in moving to Russia.

In other emails, according to the affidavit, Rowe discussed plans to travel to Pennsylvania to meet the undercover agent in person as well as other people he thought were Russian government agents.

Rowe was due in federal court in South Dakota on Friday. He was arrested Wednesday night in Lead, South Dakota, on a charge of attempting to communicate national defense information to aid a foreign government — which carries a potential life sentence.

The charge comes two months after a Maryland couple was arrested in a separate espionage case. In that case, prosecutors said, Jonathan Toebbe offered government secrets to someone he thought was a representative of a foreign government but who was actually an undercover FBI employee. Toebbe's wife, Diana, is charged with acting as a lookout at several dead-drop locations at which sensitive information was left behind.

The couple has pleaded not guilty.

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

## **Man charged in deaths of South Dakota couple, unborn child**

MILBANK, S.D. (AP) — A northeastern South Dakota man was charged Thursday with three counts of first-degree murder in connections with the deaths of a married couple and their unborn child, authorities said.

Brent Hanson, 57, is accused of killing Clyde and Jessica Hanson, whose bodies were found in their Milbank home Wednesday morning. Jessica Hanson was pregnant, police said.

Brent and Clyde Hanson are brothers and have joint ownership of the residential property where they both live in separate spaces, the Aberdeen American News reported.

Brent Hanson had a previous scuffle with the couple in July where he was arrested and charged with misdemeanor assault and domestic violence. Brent Hanson allegedly pushed around the couple after an argument over the care for Jessica Hanson's dog.

Milbank police have released few details about the killings. They said they were dispatched to the residence for a welfare check Wednesday and were simultaneously notified that two people in the home might be dead.

Brent Hanson is jailed on a \$5 million cash bond. It wasn't clear if he had an attorney.

Tim Bormann, chief of staff for the South Dakota Attorney General's Office, said there is no danger to the community,

## **Pair sentenced for killing Sioux Falls pizza delivery driver**

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Two men convicted of killing a Sioux Falls pizza delivery driver during a robbery in 2020 were ordered Thursday to serve decades in prison.

Judge Robin Houwman sentenced Raymond Banks, 20, to 60 years in prison and Jahennessy Bryant, 23, to 25 years behind bars.

Bryant and Banks pleaded guilty to first-degree manslaughter in connection to the killing of 30-year-old Casey Bonhorst, who was shot while he was delivering pizza to a residence in eastern Sioux Falls.

Bonhorst was shot in the neck after throwing a pocket full of change and lunging at the shooter when Bryant after Banks tried to rob him, police said.

Bryant and Banks accused each other of being the shooter.



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Prosecutors on Thursday played a portion of a video call between Banks and his girlfriend in which Banks joked about getting a prison tattoo in the shape of a pizza slice instead of a tear drop.

"This killing was brutal, inhumane and unjustified," Houwman said. "I said several times today, it was senseless. Casey did not deserve to die for a few coins, a little change."

## Defense bill bans private funds for deploying National Guard

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — The defense bill Congress has sent to President Joe Biden prohibits using private funds for interstate National Guard deployments like South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem did this year.

The bill's language took aim at the Republican governor's decision to accept a \$1 million donation from a Tennessee billionaire in July to send National Guard troops to the U.S. border with Mexico in response to a request from Texas and Arizona. The \$768.2 billion defense bill that cleared Congress on a bipartisan vote Wednesday contains a section that prohibits National Guard units from being ordered to cross state borders if their deployment is funded privately unless it is for a natural disaster as designated by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Noem's decision was met with intense scrutiny. Military experts raised concerns that the practice could allow wealthy patrons to effectively turn National Guard troops into soldiers-for-hire for their own political agendas. The Republican governor defended it as a way to save taxpayer money while acting on an issue that was vital to national — and state — security.

Those troops have since returned.

Noem's office did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the National Defense Authorization Act.

The annual bill also made landmark changes to the way the military handles sexual assaults, keeps women out of the draft and lays the groundwork for a new war memorial on the National Mall.

Both of South Dakota's Republican senators, John Thune and Mike Rounds, voted for it.

Rounds said it "includes many wins for South Dakota — including victories for Ellsworth Air Force Base, Dakota State University and Raven Aerostar."

The bill allocates \$5.7 billion for the B-21 bomber program, which will be hosted at Ellsworth Air Force Base. It also contained \$15 million for a National Guard training center in Sioux Falls.

Sen. John Thune, speaking on the Senate floor Wednesday, criticized the practice of amending the bill without taking a vote, but said the final product had been strengthened by Republicans, who pushed for a larger defense budget.

"We've made a lot of progress over the past several years on rebuilding our military," he said.

## South Dakota State heads to FCS semifinals this weekend

By HANK KURZ Jr. AP Sports Writer

South Dakota State is one victory away from doing something no team in the history of college football has ever done: play for the national championship twice in a span of just over eight months.

The Jackrabbits lost in the FCS title game in the spring after the coronavirus pandemic pushed the 2020 Football Championship Subdivision season back — South Dakota State fell to Sam Houston on May 16.

The Jacks (11-3) can earn another shot at the title Saturday when they seek their third straight road victory at eighth-seeded Montana State (11-2). North Dakota State hosts James Madison in the other semifinal Friday night.

For South Dakota State, it's a step toward taking care of some unfinished business.

The Jackrabbits came within seconds of winning it all in the spring. They rallied from a 17-7 deficit and led Sam Houston until the Bearkats scored on a 10-yard pass with 16 seconds left for a 23-21 victory and the championship.

Isaiah Davis, whose 85-yard touchdown run had put the Jackrabbits ahead, said Thursday the team tried not to spend too much time looking back, but the coaches did give them T-shirts this summer bearing a

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simple reminder: 23-21.

"It just reminds us of that score and how close we were," Davis said. "We know we can get back there. It really was a motivation during the summer, every day. We were hurting and during fall camp we were just thinking back to that 23-21 and that's what pushed us through."

South Dakota State coach John Stiegelmeier said the losses during this season gave his team a sense they had to prove themselves all over, which they've done by reaching the semifinals for the fourth time in the past five seasons.

"When we lost, they felt like they didn't live up to how good they can be, so I think that's a motivating factor," Stiegelmeier said.

The Jacks average 441 yards on offense, evenly divided between the run and pass, but meeting those averages against the Bobcats will be a tall task. Montana State allows just 13.15 points and 285.2 yards per game.

"To me, our guys are embracing a chance to get back to Frisco and that's exciting for them because they got a taste of that in spring," the coach said.

Frisco, Texas, has hosted the last 11 FCS national championship games.

Charleston, South Carolina, was the site when Montana State made its only appearance in the game, defeating Louisiana Tech in 1984. The Bobcats will be trying to make a return trip under first-year coach Brent Vigen.

Montana State advanced by ending Sam Houston's 22-game winning streak, 42-19. The Bobcats also are the only remaining team that did not play in the spring, something Vigen is not so sure counts as an advantage.

"They had a couple more games under their belt this fall," Vigen said of South Dakota State. "You know, they were obviously right on the doorstep of a championship last year, but they've been really close for a long, long time."

In Fargo, North Dakota, third-seeded James Madison will try win a playoff game in the Fargodome for the second time; no other school has ever won a postseason game in Fargo. The Dukes beat North Dakota State 27-17 in 2016 en route to the championship.

That's JMU's only victory in five meetings with the Bison, who had won eight of the last nine national championships before the spring season.

This is also the Dukes' last go-round in the playoffs because they are moving to the Sun Belt Conference next season, and quarterback Cole Johnson believes it's fitting that JMU faced Montana in the quarterfinals and now take on the Bison.

"It's really great to kind of go against all the big names and all the traditional big schools and powerhouse in FCS" during this last playoff run, he said.

Johnson, a "super senior" in his sixth season of college football, threw three touchdown passes in this spring's 38-35 semifinal loss to Sam Houston. His lone interception, however, led to the Bearkats' last points in their victory.

"We had that heart-breaking loss in the spring. We were up 21 points at halftime and that's kind of been our motivation all summer," Johnson said.

He has put up impressive numbers this season, throwing for 39 TDs with just two interceptions.

The Bison have a unique situation with graduation set for the afternoon and the game hours later, and coach Matt Entz said several players will do both.

It's a common occurrence for the Bison, and their first two playoffs games suggest they will be ready. They've won those games by 65-10, giving Entz confidence they'll also have an answer for the Dukes' 40-points-per-game offense.

"I think I think our defenses played well the majority of the year. Been very consistent. The things that we stress -- tackling, turnovers, third down, stopping the run -- are the things that I think we hang our hat on," he said.

The Bison are 30-1 in their playoff history on their home field.

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More AP college football: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-football> and [https://twitter.com/AP\\_Top25](https://twitter.com/AP_Top25) Sign up for the AP's college football newsletter: <https://apnews.com/cfbtop25>

## South Dakota's airports receive \$16.4 million in funding

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota airport officials are working on their plans to spend an estimated \$16.4 million in federal infrastructure funding.

Airport managers can submit their projects to the Federal Aviation Administration for review in the coming weeks. The FAA is encouraging airports to prioritize projects that increase safety and sustainability. The agency plans to reach out to minority business owners on opportunities available as a result of the funding.

South Dakota's 54 airports will receive some funding made available by the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act signed by President Joe Biden last month.

The money can be used to improve runways, taxiways, terminals and airport-transit connections and roads. It's the first of five annual rounds of funding South Dakota airports will receive.

The state's commercial airports in Aberdeen, Sioux Falls, Pierre, Rapid City and Watertown will receive nearly \$10 million in first-year funding.

The money comes from the Airport Infrastructure Grant program, one of three aviation programs created by the new law, which provides \$15 billion over five years.

An additional 49 smaller airports across South Dakota will also receive funding during the first year.

## Bankers say the rural economy remains strong in 10 states

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — The economy remains strong in rural parts of 10 Plains and Western states, but some of the bankers surveyed this month said they are worried about how inflation will affect farmers.

The overall index for the region slipped from November's 67.7 reading but the report released Thursday said the index remained firmly in positive territory at 66.7 for December. Any score above 50 suggests a growing economy, while a score below 50 suggests a shrinking economy.

Creighton University economist Ernie Goss said the region continues to benefit from low interest rates and strong exports. The USDA estimates that agricultural exports are up 23% over last year.

But the persistently high inflation is a concern as land costs and the price of supplies farmers need are expected to keep growing next year.

"Inflation is real and affecting folks in our service area," said Jeff Bonnett, CEO of Havana State Bank in Havana Illinois.

Yet the bank CEOs are optimistic about the next six months. The survey's confidence index rose to 55.2 in December from November's weak 48.4 reading.

Bankers from Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota and Wyoming were surveyed.

## Afghan currency slides, prices surge as economy worsens

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

HERAT, Afghanistan (AP) — The value of Afghanistan's currency is tumbling, exacerbating an already severe economic crisis and deepening poverty in a country where more than half the population already doesn't have enough to eat.

The afghani lost more than 11% of its value against the U.S. dollar in the space of a day earlier this week, before recouping somewhat. But the market remains volatile, and the devaluation is already impacting Afghans.

Afghanistan's economy was already troubled when the international community froze billions of dollars' worth of Afghanistan's assets abroad and stopped all international funding to the country after the Taliban seized power in mid-August amid a chaotic U.S. and NATO troop withdrawal. The consequences have been

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dire for a country heavily dependent on foreign aid.

Afghanistan was also slated to access about \$450 million on Aug. 23 from the International Monetary Fund, but the IMF blocked the release because of a "lack of clarity" about the country's new rulers. Since then, international envoys have warned of a looming economic meltdown and humanitarian catastrophe.

"People have no money and the prices have gone up," said Sayed Umid, a 28-year-old shopkeeper selling basic food items such as rice, beans and pulses in a main shopping street in the western Afghan city of Herat.

"Since this morning I haven't had a single customer," he said. With rent to pay on his shop and home expenses, he worries he can no longer make ends meet.

Khan Afzal Hadawal, former acting governor of Afghanistan's central bank, said that the sanctions on the Taliban and the freezing of Afghanistan's reserve funds "have put the country's aid-dependent economy on the verge of full economic collapse, leading to historic depreciation of currency,"

"The development agencies, donors, the international community, the U.S., all these should help in this crisis," he said. "We do understand the concerns of the international community but there are mechanisms (that) can help to manage the crisis and to assist the Afghan people."

According to the United Nations' World Food Program, 22.8 million of Afghanistan's 38 million people already face acute food insecurity, and malnutrition in the country is increasing. A combination of the coronavirus pandemic, a severe drought and the Taliban takeover have left many without jobs, and the currency's sliding value has been pushing up food prices.

Shopkeeper Jafar Agha said the price of a large container of cooking oil was about 700 afghanis three months ago (roughly \$8 at the time), but now costs about 1,800 afghanis (around \$18).

"My business has fallen to zero," he said. "I'm not selling because people have no money. ... We don't have any hope for the future."

In the bedlam of the Herat Money Exchange market, traders frantically check the ever-changing currency rate on their mobile phones as they jostle through the crowd shouting out prices and waving wads of cash.

A taser-wielding guard keeps the entrance free from the crush, the sound of its sharp clicks enough to send money changers scurrying past into the exchange.

Wednesday wasn't a good day for trader Said Nadir. He sold U.S. dollars at a rate of 105 afghanis, but then bought at 113 afghanis to the dollar as the currency began to slide and he worried it might fall further.

"The situation is very bad. When the price increases, we cannot find dollars," he said.

In early August, the afghani was trading at around 80 to the dollar, jumping to around 90 in October. It briefly spiked from 110 on Sunday to 123 on Monday, before recouping somewhat. On Thursday it was trading at around 100 afghanis to the dollar.

For Farzad Haidari, a 34-year-old who imports and sells women's shawls and scarves, the currency fluctuations have wreaked havoc on his business.

Importing many of his goods from neighboring Iran and with rent on his store in a shopping mall in central Herat set in dollars, he's seen much of his income evaporate. If the situation continues and prices keep increasing, he said, he could be forced to close his shop.

"Before, when there was uncertainty because of war, we had our business," he said. "Now there is security, but we're losing our business."

Associated Press writer Tameem Akhgar in Islamabad contributed to this report.

## Travel curbs augur somber Christmas amid omicron uncertainty

BY KELVIN CHAN and DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Travel restrictions aimed at curbing the spread of the omicron variant of the coronavirus are hammering the already beleaguered travel and tourism industries and adding to the gloom in Europe in the midst of the crucial holiday season.

Travelers are rearranging or canceling trips because of tightening rules. Eurostar, which operates trains

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across the English Channel, sold out of tickets to France on Friday before new travel restrictions to and from Britain went into effect.

Much remains unknown about the new variant, although increasing evidence indicates it spreads more easily. While researchers race to figure out how severe it is and how well vaccines work against it, the uncertainty itself is also causing some to change their plans.

Amanda Wheelock, 29, a grad student at the University of Michigan, canceled a trip to France with her partner as cases spiked there. Even though the surge isn't necessarily due to omicron, the uncertainty about the new variant, and a new requirement that all U.S. travelers have to test negative before flying back to the U.S., made her worry that the trip would be more stressful than fun.

Instead, she's traveling to the Anchorage, Alaska, area to see friends. She feared that she would spend much of her trip trying to avoid getting infected — thus not able to take full advantage of being in France.

"A vacation with a lot of stress probably not a great vacation," said Wheelock, who is from Arvada, Colorado.

She is not alone. The Advantage Travel Group, which represents about 350 U.K. travel agents, said business had fallen by 40% in mid-December from a month earlier. Those numbers, including flights, cruise bookings and package holidays, add to the travel industry's existing slump, which had already seen business fall by two-thirds since the pandemic began, CEO Julia Lo Bue-Said.

"Our members are dealing with customers who are really nervous about traveling now," she said "They're really nervous about bookings for the New Year because they fear that there's a risk that the government will make more knee-jerk reactions."

Britain is currently experiencing one of the most dramatic surges, dealing a blow to pubs and restaurants that have seen mass cancelations of parties in the runup to Christmas. Treasury Chief Rishi Sunak met with representatives of the hospitality sector on Thursday to hear their concerns about how they would make it through another season with slashed revenue.

Travel trade association Abta argued it deserved the same attention from the government. It demanded an "urgent meeting" with Sunak and Transport Secretary Grant Shapps to discuss the sector's "current financial situation and its pressing need for financial support."

"The government has recognized the plight of the U.K. hospitality sector, with trade down by 40% in December," chief executive Mark Tanzer said. "But at the same time, the travel industry, where income has been down by 78% this year, and further impacted by omicron restrictions since late November, continues to be ignored."

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Associated Press writer Mae Anderson in New York contributed to this report.

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

## Suspected arson in downtown Osaka building leaves 24 dead

By CHISATO TANAKA and MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

OSAKA, Japan (AP) — A fire that spread from a fourth-floor mental clinic in an eight-story building in downtown Osaka in western Japan on Friday left 24 dead in what police were treating as a possible case of arson.

Media reports said police were searching for a man who witnesses saw carrying a paper bag from which an unidentified liquid was dripping. The man could have been among the 24 dead, reports said. Police declined to confirm those reports.

Fire officials who reached the building in the major business, shopping and entertainment area of Kitashinchi in Osaka found 27 people in a state of cardiac arrest, said Osaka fire department official Akira Kishimoto.

One woman was conscious and brought down by an aerial ladder from a window on the sixth floor and was being treated in a hospital, he said.

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Later Friday, 24 people were pronounced dead, the fire department said. It said three others were resuscitated and are in serious conditions.

In Japan, the authorities customarily describe those without vital signs as being in "shinpai teishi" or a state of cardiac and pulmonary arrest, and do not confirm deaths until they are pronounced at hospitals and other necessary procedures are done.

A doctor at one of the hospitals treating the victims said he believed many of them died after inhaling carbon monoxide as they had limited external injuries.

Hours later Friday night, crowds were still gathering outside of the building to take a glimpse of the scene where firefighters and police officers were investigating.

"I haven't heard of the cause but I'm shocked and wondering why someone would do this," said Yuji Uehara, who works for a finance company. "I also offer my condolences to those who died."

The building houses the mental and internal medicine clinic, an English language school and other businesses. Most of the victims are believed to be visitors at the clinic on the fourth floor, fire officials said.

The cause of the fire and other details were not immediately known. Osaka police earlier said they were working to determine whether the fire was caused by arson. They later set up a team at the prefectural police headquarters, a sign they strongly suspect arson and murder.

According to NHK, a female outpatient at the clinic's reception desk saw the man being sought by police. Another person nearby said the fire started soon after he put the leaky bag next to a stove on the floor and kicked it, with more of the liquid pouring out.

The clinic's psychiatrist, Kotaro Nishizawa, could not be reached since the fire, NHK said. It quoted his father as saying the doctor hinted at a problem at the clinic but did not elaborate.

People on other floors of the building were believed to have been safely evacuated, fire officials said.

NHK quoted a witness as saying she heard a woman's voice coming from the fourth floor calling for help. Another witness told TV Asahi he saw flames and smoke coming out of windows on the fourth floor when he stepped outside after hearing a commotion.

In total, 70 fire engines were mobilized to fight the fire, which was fully extinguished more than six hours later, officials said.

In 2019 at the Kyoto Animation studio, an attacker stormed into the building and set it on fire, killing 36 people and injuring more than 30 others. The incident shocked Japan and drew an outpouring of grief from anime fans worldwide. In 2001, an intentionally set blaze in Tokyo's Kabukicho entertainment district killed 44 people — the country's worst known case of arson in modern times.

Yamaguchi reported from Tokyo.

## Pope at 85: No more Mr Nice Guy, as reform hits stride

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis celebrated his 85th birthday on Friday, a milestone made even more remarkable given the coronavirus pandemic, his summertime intestinal surgery and the weight of history: His predecessor retired at this age and the last pope to have lived any longer was Leo XIII over a century ago.

Yet Francis is going strong, recently concluding a whirlwind trip to Cyprus and Greece after his pandemic-defying jaunts this year to Iraq, Slovakia and Hungary. He has set in motion an unprecedented two-year consultation of rank-and-file Catholics on making the church more attuned to the laity, and shows no sign of slowing down on his campaign to make the post-COVID world a more environmentally sustainable, economically just and fraternal place where the poor are prioritized.

"I see a lot of energy," said the Rev. Antonio Spadaro, one of Francis' trusted Jesuit communications gurus. "What we're seeing is the natural expression, the fruit of the seeds that he has sown."

But Francis also is beset by problems at home and abroad and is facing a sustained campaign of opposition from the conservative Catholic right. He has responded with the papal equivalent of "no more

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Mr. Nice Guy.”

After spending the first eight years of his papacy gently nudging Catholic hierarchs to embrace financial prudence and responsible governance, Francis got tough this year, and appears poised to keep it that way.

Since his last birthday, Francis ordered a 10% pay cut for cardinals across the board, and slashed salaries to a lesser degree for Vatican employees, in a bid to rein in the Vatican's 50-million-euro (\$57 million) budget deficit. To fight corruption, he imposed a 40-euro (\$45) gift cap for Holy See personnel. He passed a law allowing cardinals and bishops to be criminally prosecuted by the Vatican's lay-led tribunal, setting the stage for the high-profile trial underway of his onetime close adviser, Cardinal Angelo Becciu, on finance-related charges.

Outside the Vatican, he hasn't made many new friends, either. After approving a 2019 law outlining the way cardinals and bishops could be investigated for sex abuse cover-up, the past year saw nearly a dozen Polish episcopal heads roll. Francis also approved term limits for leaders of lay Catholic movements to try to curb their abuses of power, resulting in the forced removal of influential church leaders. He recently accepted the resignation of the Paris archbishop after a media storm alleging governance and personal improprieties.

“In the past year, Pope Francis has accelerated his efforts at reform by putting real teeth into the church's canon law regarding finances,” said the Rev. Robert Gahl, director of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross's Program of Church Management.

“While celebrating his birthday, Vatican watchers are also looking for more concrete signs of compliance regarding the pope's new rules, especially from those who report directly to him within the Vatican,” he said in an email, noting that a change in culture is needed alongside Francis' new rules and regulations.

Despite Francis' tough line, he nevertheless got a round of birthday applause Friday morning from Holy See cardinals, bishops and priests who joined him for an Advent meditation.

But if there was anything Francis did this past year that riled his critics, it was his July decision to reverse his predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, and reimpose restrictions on celebrating the old Latin Mass. Francis said he needed to take action because Benedict's 2007 decision to allow freer celebration of the old rite had divided the church and been exploited by conservatives.

“Some wanted me dead,” Francis said of his critics.

Speaking with his fellow Jesuits in Slovakia in September, Francis confided that he knew his 10-day hospital stay in July for surgery to remove 33 centimeters (about 13 inches) of his large intestine had sparked momentum among conservative Catholics eager for a new pope.

“I know there were even meetings among priests who thought the pope was in worse shape than what was being said,” he told the Jesuits, in comments that were later published in the Vatican-approved Jesuit journal *La Civiltà Cattolica*. “They were preparing the conclave.”

That may not have been the case, but if history were any guide, those priests might not have been wrong to have at least discussed the prospect.

Benedict was 85 when he resigned in February 2013, becoming the first pope to step down in 600 years and paving the way for Francis' election. While enjoying robust health at the time, Benedict said he simply didn't have the strength to carry on.

Before him, John Paul II died at age 84 and John Paul I died at 65 after just 33 days on the job. In fact, all 20th-century popes died in their early 80s or younger, with the exception of Pope Leo XIII, who was 93 when he died in 1903.

Early on in his pontificate, Francis predicted a short papacy of two or three years, and credited Benedict with having “opened the door” to future papal retirements.

But the Argentine Jesuit made clear after his July surgery that resigning “didn't even cross my mind.”

That is welcome news to Sister Nathalie Becquart, one of the top women at the Vatican. Francis tapped her to help organize the two-year consultation process of Catholics around the globe that will end with a meeting of bishops, known as a synod. She knows well what the pope is up against as he tries to remake the church into a less clerical, more laity-focused institution.

“It's a call to change,” she told a conference this week. “And we can say it's not an easy path.”

## COVID-19 fears dash hopes for the holiday season — again

By MICHAEL RUBINKAM, JENNIFER PELTZ and ALI SWENSON Associated Press

Lines again stretch around blocks at some COVID-19 testing sites. Refrigerated mobile morgues are on order, and parts of Europe are re-tightening borders amid a winter spike in coronavirus infections.

This year's holiday season was supposed to be a do-over for last year's subdued celebrations. Instead it's turning into a redux of restrictions, cancellations and rising angst over the never-ending pandemic.

"This year, more than ever, everyone needed a holiday," said John McNulty, owner of Thief, a Brooklyn bar that had to close for a day earlier this week because of an infected employee.

As Christmas and New Year's approach, a pall lingers over the season. Infections are soaring around the world, and the quickly spreading omicron variant has triggered new restrictions on travel and public gatherings reminiscent of the dark days of 2020.

The accelerating cancellations seem "to have thrown us back into that sort of zombie world of the first week of March of the pandemic last year," said Jonathan Neame, the chief executive of Shepherd Neame, Britain's oldest brewery and chain of pubs.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday that the city would "watch very carefully" whether to press ahead with plans to welcome a fully vaccinated crowd back to Times Square on New Year's Eve, a celebration that was canceled last year. It's a go for now, the mayor said.

Multiple Broadway shows, including "Hamilton," "Mrs. Doubtfire" and "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child," called off performances in recent days because of virus cases in their all-vaccinated casts and crews. California and New York brought back indoor mask mandates.

In Philadelphia, Health Commissioner Cheryl Bettigole urged residents not to go to indoor holiday parties, calling them "just too dangerous." She ruefully advised against even getting together with other households for Christmas.

"It's hard, and it feels impossible, and it feels unfair," she acknowledged, but "I have to say it."

Many Americans have spent nearly two years on an emotional seesaw as the pandemic worsened and waned in cycles and the hoped-for return to normal was repeatedly pushed back. A recent poll by MTV Entertainment Group and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that nearly half of American adults said the pandemic made it harder to maintain their mental health.

"I think for a large number of people, there was this hopefulness that this holiday season was going to be different. So if you went in with that expectation, and you weren't adjusting it over the last couple of months, I think you're going to be all the more disappointed," said Dr. Vaile Wright, a clinical psychologist who works for the American Psychological Association.

Her advice? "Try to get to a place where the expectation is that this is going to continue on for a while, and if you're feeling stuck, try to find ways to make your life meaningful right now."

The world has been on edge over the omicron variant, which could become the dominant strain of coronavirus in weeks in many nations. Adding to that anxiety is the fact that hospitals in many U.S. states are already slammed with patients infected with the delta variant. The military and the National Guard have been enlisted to help at hospitals.

Refrigerated mobile morgues, a grim symbol of the early pandemic, are making a comeback. In Arizona, one county voted this week to spend \$65,000 on a mobile morgue because virus deaths have far exceeded capacity. A hospital in Akron, Ohio, brought in a trailer to more than triple its morgue space, Cleveland television station WKYC reported.

Some people are striving to keep fears in check.

Yvonne Sidella, a "50-something" from Orwigsburg, Pennsylvania, views the steep rise in cases and the looming threat of omicron with equanimity. She does not plan to let it alter holiday plans that include spending time with her elderly parents, her four children and her eight grandchildren.

"I'm not going to let this blow my spirit," said Sidella, a manufacturing supervisor. "I'm going to continue to live my life. I'm not going to let this here thing have me afraid to go places or to do things or to touch



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people.”

After last winter’s brutal COVID-19 surge forced him to skip his usual Christmas trip home to visit family and friends in the Midwest, Don Carlson booked plane tickets in September. The college administrator in San Francisco figured with vaccinations available and a lower number of infections, the trip to Minneapolis and Nebraska would be fine.

Soon after, hospitals started filing up in the Midwest. Then came the discovery of the omicron variant.

Carlson, 59, couldn’t in good conscience make the trip, so he canceled. He will stay in Northern California and get together with a few vaccinated friends for small dinners around the holiday. He plans to do Zoom calls with the friends and relatives he would have visited.

“It’s disappointing, but what would be far more disappointing is spreading it to an elderly person in your family because you went through airports,” Carlson said. “I think it’s just prudent to stay put.”

Dakota LeRoy, a 25-year-old product designer in Manhattan who is fully vaccinated, had reasoned that it would be safe to go to a Christmas-themed dive bar to celebrate a new job last week. But on Wednesday she found she was infected with COVID-19, after a scratchy throat and some sniffles prompted her to get tested before a holiday visit with her boyfriend’s family in Boston.

“Everyone I know is either positive or has been in direct contact with somebody who is,” she said.

April Burns, a bill collector for New York City, said things are far from being back to normal. But she considers the worst to be over.

“Last year, everybody was shut down. At least now, things are open, you know. You can get out more, and you still get to see people,” said Burns, who is unvaccinated and was standing in line Thursday near Wall Street to comply with city rules that require her to be tested weekly.

Rubinkam reported from Hamburg, Pennsylvania, and Swenson and Peltz from New York. Associated Press writers Bobby Caina Calvin in New York, Brady McCombs in Salt Lake City and Pat Eaton-Robb in Columbia, Connecticut, contributed to this report.

## Pressure on PM Johnson after UK Tories suffer election upset

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s Conservative Party has suffered a stunning defeat in a parliamentary by-election that was a referendum on his government amid weeks of scandal and soaring COVID-19 infections.

Liberal Democrat Helen Morgan overturned a Conservative majority of almost 23,000 votes from the last election to win Thursday’s contest in North Shropshire, a rural area of northwest England that has been represented by a Conservative almost continuously since 1832. The election was called after the former Conservative member of Parliament resigned amid a corruption scandal.

The result will heap pressure on Johnson just two years after he was reelected with a seemingly unassailable 80-seat majority in Parliament. But his authority has been dented in recent weeks by allegations that he and his staff attended Christmas parties last year while the country was in lockdown, efforts to shield an ally from allegations of illegal lobbying and suggestions that he improperly accepted donations to fund the lavish refurbishment of his official residence.

Against this backdrop, supporters and opponents are questioning Johnson’s handling of the pandemic after coronavirus infections soared to records this week as the highly transmissible omicron variant swept through the U.K.

“Tonight the people of North Shropshire have spoken on behalf of the British people,” Morgan said in her victory speech. “They said loudly and clearly, ‘Boris Johnson, the party is over. Your government, run on lies and bluster, will be held accountable. It will be scrutinized, it will be challenged, and it can and will be defeated.’”

Thursday’s result is the second by-election defeat for the Conservatives this year. In June, the Liberal Democrat Sarah Green won a by-election in Chesham and Amersham, a constituency northwest of London

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that has been a traditional Conservative stronghold.

Johnson became prime minister almost 2½ years ago, riding his support for Brexit and his carefully curated image as a bumbling but likable politician.

He solidified his position by calling a snap election just five months later after Parliament rejected the withdrawal agreement he negotiated with the European Union. The Conservatives won 365 seats in the election, 80 more than all the other parties combined.

But Brexit is no longer the central issue in British politics.

Many voters are frustrated after two years of a pandemic that has claimed more than 145,000 lives, triggered a series of lockdowns and battered the economy.

Conservative lawmakers rebelled earlier this week, with 99 members of Johnson's party voting against his proposal to require proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test to enter nightclubs and large events. The measure passed only because the opposition Labour Party supported it.

Then there are the scandals and missteps that have made Johnson look more like someone who has lost control than his preferred persona of a slightly disheveled leader who's so busy he can't be bothered to comb his hair.

He was forced to apologize last month after trying to change parliamentary rules to avoid censure for Conservative lawmaker Owen Paterson who lobbied government agencies on behalf of companies he worked for. Paterson eventually resigned, triggering the by-election in North Shropshire.

Since then Johnson has been buffeted by a series of news reports alleging that he and his staff attended Christmas parties last November and December at a time when COVID-19 restrictions barred everyone else from visiting friends or even comforting dying relatives in the hospital.

Johnson initially stonewalled, saying that there were no parties and no rules had been broken. After a video surfaced in which staff members appeared to make light of the violations Johnson was forced to call for an investigation.

Even some members of Johnson's own party have now had enough.

Roger Gale, a Conservative lawmaker since 1983, said the result in North Shropshire was a clear indication that the public is dissatisfied with the way Johnson is running the government.

"I think this has to be seen as a referendum on the prime minister's performance, and I think that the prime minister is now in last orders time," Gale told the BBC. He has "two strikes already. One earlier this week in the vote in the Commons, now this. One more strike and he's out."

But Charles Walker, another Conservative member of Parliament, said the result was more about the anger and fatigue people are feeling after two years of the pandemic.

While he acknowledged that mistakes have been made, Walker stressed said it isn't unusual for the governing party to suffer defeats in by-elections.

"Every time there's a result like this people say it's seismic, people say it's a shockwave, it's a tsunami of change, and sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't," he told the BBC. "I don't think we can read too much into this."

## **NKorea calls for unity on anniversary of Kim Jong Il's death**

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — North Korea on Friday commemorated the 10th anniversary of former leader Kim Jong Il's death with calls for greater public loyalty toward his son and current leader Kim Jong Un, who is struggling to navigate the country out of deepening pandemic-related hardships.

In his 10 years at the helm of North Korea since his father's death, Kim Jong Un, 37, has secured the same absolute power enjoyed by Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung, the current leader's grandfather and state founder. Despite massive economic shocks caused by draconian anti-virus measures and long-dormant diplomacy with the United States, North Korea shows no signs of political instability and few outside experts question Kim's grip on power.

But the long-term stability of Kim Jong Un's rule could still be questioned if he fails to work out steps to

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address the ongoing difficulties and improve public livelihoods, some observers say.

At midday Friday, as a siren blared for three minutes, North Koreans fell silent and bowed in respect for Kim Jong Il. Cars, trains and ships blew their horns, national flags were lowered to half-staff and masses of people climbed Pyongyang's Mansu Hill to lay flowers and bow before giant statues of Kim Jong Il and Kim Il Sung.

During an outdoor ceremony, senior North Korean official Choe Ryong Hae called Kim Jong Il "the parent of our people" who built up the potentials for the North's military and economic might. Under Kim Jong Un, Choe said North Korea's "strategic status" has been boosted and urged the public to "faithfully uphold" his leadership.

The North's main Rodong Sinmun newspaper published articles venerating Kim Jong Il and calling for greater unity behind Kim Jong Un.

In an apparent echo of official propaganda, Pyongyang citizen Won Jong Rim also told the Associated Press Television News that "our great general (Kim Jong Il) went through so much hardship, pushing his way along such an arduous path, to build a paradise here, achieving what the people want."

On previous anniversaries, Kim Jong Un paid respect at a mausoleum where the embalmed bodies of his father and grandfather lie in state. But state media didn't say whether he went there this year too.

Kim Jong Il's 17-year rule was overshadowed by a famine in the 1990s that killed hundreds of thousands of people and international isolation over his nuclear ambitions. North Korea's economy had reported a slight yet gradual growth for the first several years of Kim Jong Un's rule. But the coronavirus pandemic, mismanagement and U.N. sanctions following Kim's nuclear and missile tests have taken their toll.

North Korea's trade with China, its biggest trading partner and an economic pipeline, shrank by about 80% last year before it plunged again by two-thirds in the first nine months of this year. Last year, the North's economy suffered its biggest contraction since 1997 while its grain production also dropped to its lowest level since Kim took office, according to South Korean government estimates.

Kim refuses to return to talks with Washington and Seoul. He has called for building a stronger, self-reliant economy while keeping tough virus restrictions including two years of border shutdowns. Analysts say Kim fears that his country's broken public health system could not afford a major virus outbreak — though he maintains a questionable claim that North Korea is coronavirus-free.

"Unless North Korea accepts offers for denuclearization talks with the U.S., it cannot stay away from powerful international sanctions. Without international cooperation, North Korea must continue to seal off its borders due to concerns about the spread of COVID-19. And this is a North Korean dilemma," analyst Cheong Seong-Chang at the private Sejong Institute in South Korea said in a recent paper.

The North's advancing nuclear arsenal is the core of Kim's rule, and he's called it "a powerful treasured sword" that thwarts potential U.S. aggressions.

During his 10-year rule, North Korea has performed 62 rounds of ballistic missile tests, which are banned by multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions, according to Seoul's Unification Ministry. The number is compared to an estimated nine rounds of tests during Kim Il Sung's 46-year rule, and 22 rounds during Kim Jong Il's 17-year rule. Four of the North's six nuclear tests and its three intercontinental ballistic missile launches all occurred under Kim Jong Un's rule.

"North Korea marked the 10-year memorial of Kim Jong Il with public ceremonies and state propaganda. More significant will be Kim Jong Un's attempt, after a decade in power, to map out a credible path for post-pandemic diplomacy and economic recovery," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

## Afghans push through snowy Alps toward new lives in Europe

By JOHN LEICESTER and DANIEL COLE Associated Press

CLAVIERE, Italy (AP) — When suicide attackers and gunmen massacred crowds flocking to Kabul's airport, they also severed the escape route that Ali Rezaie hoped would take him to a new life abroad, far from the Taliban and their suspicions of well-educated, middle-class people who worked with foreigners

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in Afghanistan.

In the chaos, Rezaie couldn't reach the airport where flight after flight took off without him. The 27-year-old was left with no choice but to take his future into his own leathery hands. Like many other Afghans, he resolved to find another way out and embarked on a forbidding journey of thousands of kilometers to Europe, large parts of it on foot.

More than three months later, Rezaie's odyssey through five countries has carried him high into the French-Italian Alps, where he is pushing through knee-deep snow to evade border guards, with a journalist from The Associated Press in tow.

The Afghan exodus that some feared would flood Europe with migrants after the Taliban swept to power hasn't materialized. And amid the toothy Alpine crags bristling with icicles, it quickly becomes apparent why: Only the hardest, most driven and most resourceful exiles make it this far.

Ahead of Rezaie in the snowscape is the French border, unmarked but guarded around the clock by police who peer through thermal binoculars for heat signatures. Rezaie's companion, another Afghan bearing scars from a suicide bombing that prompted him to flee, had already tried — and failed — to reach France via this wintry route.

So the Afghans advance carefully. They pause to listen for sounds in the frozen silence, to consult a map on Rezaie's phone before the chill kills its battery and to munch on jam-filled croissants they bought in the frontier village of Claviere in Italy. If caught by French guards patrolling the border on foot, ski-bikes and in vans, Italy is where they'll be forced to return.

The Taliban takeover and the swift collapse of Afghanistan's economy has sent people streaming illegally into neighboring Iran, which is often the first stepping stone for Afghans — including Rezaie — who push on into the European Union.

Afghans are now on course to overtake Syrians as Europe's leading asylum-seekers in 2021. Internal EU reporting on migration trends shows that more than 80,000 Afghans applied for asylum through November. That's a surge of 96% over the same span last year, and the increase was partly driven by the evacuations from Kabul airport.

Rezaie, from Herat in western Afghanistan, says he traveled to Kabul in search of a flight but then doubled back after the suicide bomb and gun attack in the waning days of the airlift. He believes he would have been killed had he stayed in Afghanistan because of work he did with foreign aid groups.

So he emptied out his savings, borrowed money and left behind his printing company, friends and comfortable life.

The quest took him first to Iran and Turkey, then onward by boat and for 25 days on foot into Greece. Next came Italy and then the French border.

Rezaie figures that crossing it will be easy, compared to all he's been through. But it's easier still for the European vacationers he suddenly encounters on a ski run that crosses his mountain path. They zoom past, paying him no heed, not having to worry about police patrols.

Feeling conspicuous on the manicured slope, Rezaie is struck by how sharply their carefree joy contrasts with his urgent need to get back in the camouflage of trees.

"Some people go down happy," he says, lungs heaving in the thin air. "Other people go up sad."

By finding paths deep into Europe, Rezaie and other migrants offer hope to those sure to follow. Their knowledge about the obstacles, their contacts and their travel tips will trickle back to Afghanistan. Migrants attempting the Alpine crossing share phone maps with GPS markers pointing the way.

Rezaie is aiming for the fortified French town of Briançon. Sayed and Mortaza, cousins and both 16, passed through Briançon hours earlier. They, too, fled in the days after Kabul fell and traveled through Iran to Turkey. From there, they were smuggled aboard a cramped boat to Italy, a brutal six-day voyage that left them too weak to stand.

Caught at the French border, they were allowed to continue because they are minors. Seven adult Afghans they crossed with were sent back.

The Taliban takeover scattered Sayed's family. His father and older brother worked as police officers.

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They've fled, and Sayed thinks they're hiding in Pakistan. Without their salaries, Sayed and his mother had no income, so they left, too. She is staying with a sister in Iran. He's aiming for Germany.

"Maybe Dortmund, because I like Dortmund football club," he said. "We just want to escape."

Others who left long before the Taliban takeover say they no longer hope to return.

"It's finished for us now, for everyone who is in Europe," said Abdul Almazai, 26, who left Afghanistan as a teenager. Turned away at the French border with eight other Afghans, he planned to try again.

"We have crossed so many mountains," he said. "I have to make my future."

Aid workers worry that Afghans more accustomed to mountains and winter's perils are taking riskier routes through the snow than migrants from warmer climes.

"They are confident, and sometimes being confident is not helpful," said Luca Guglielmetto, a volunteer worker at a refuge on the Italian side that equips migrants with warm clothes and boots for the crossing.

With darkness falling, the battery on Rezaie's phone dies. He and his companion forge on through the snow.

Rare are those who manage to cross on their first attempt. Rezaie pulled off that feat and glowed with pride the next morning as he tucked into breakfast at a refuge for migrants in Briancon.

He sent a video of himself wading through snow to his mother and brother in Iran.

He has his sights set on Germany. But he hopes one day to go home.

"I had a car. I had a job, work," he said. "I had a good life."

Follow AP's global migration coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/migration>

## Biden acknowledges \$2T bill stalled, but vows it will pass

By LISA MASCARO and ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden has all but acknowledged negotiations over his sweeping domestic policy package will likely push into the new year, as he does not yet have the votes in the Senate to lift the roughly \$2 trillion bill to passage.

Biden issued a statement Thursday evening as it became increasingly apparent the Democratic senators would not meet their Christmas deadline, in large part because of unyielding opposition from one holdout: Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

The president said that in their recent discussions, the West Virginia senator has reiterated his support for the framework he, the president and other Democrats had agreed to on the flagship bill. Biden said he also briefed House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer earlier Thursday about the most recent round of talks with Manchin.

"I believe that we will bridge our differences and advance the Build Back Better plan, even in the face of fierce Republican opposition," Biden said in the statement.

Biden said he and his team will continue to have discussions with Manchin next week. The White House and the congressional leaders plan to work "over the days and weeks ahead" to finish up the details, he said. Both he and Schumer are determined, he said, to bring the package to the Senate floor for votes as early as possible.

"We will — we must — get Build Back Better passed," Biden said.

Biden's statement was a much-needed intervention, allowing Senate Democrats an off-ramp to what has been months of tangled negotiations that appear nowhere near resolved as time runs out ahead of the Christmas holiday.

At the same time, Democrats were rushing to show progress on another jammed-up priority: voting rights legislation that, Biden acknowledged, also faces hurdles. "We must also press forward on voting rights legislation, and make progress on this as quickly as possible," Biden said.

Schumer, D-N.Y., had set Senate passage before Christmas as his goal, but disputes with Manchin and other Democrats remain. It had become clear that the party was seeking an explicit move from Biden in hopes he would cut a deal with Manchin, or urge lawmakers to delay action until January.

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The sudden end-of-year shift comes as Democrats suffered another blow to their agenda late Thursday when the Senate parliamentarian decided that hard-fought efforts to include immigration law changes should be stripped from the package because they don't comply with the chamber's rules.

Schumer said Democrats "strongly disagree" with the parliamentarian's decision and vowed to "pursue every means" so that immigrants can achieve a path to citizenship in Biden's package.

The ruling is just one part of an ongoing, time-consuming review by Senate parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough about whether many of the bill's provisions violate the chamber's rules and should be dropped.

As the day's business began, Schumer barely mentioned what was becoming an obvious stall. Instead, he described Democrats' efforts to break a logjam on voting rights legislation and a pile of nominations the Senate will consider "as we continue working to bring the Senate to a position where we can move forward" on the social and environment bill.

Using his sway in a 50-50 Senate where Democrats need unanimity to prevail, Manchin has continued his drive to force his party to cut the bill's cost and eliminate programs he opposes. All Republicans oppose the package, arguing the measure carrying many of Biden's paramount domestic priorities is too expensive and would worsen inflation.

"The best Christmas gift Washington could give working families would be putting this bad bill on ice," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

McConnell and Manchin met in the GOP leader's office, as they often do, a very public reminder of the West Virginia senator's conservative leanings and Democrats' slim hold on the majority. "We do appreciate the fact that he seems to be one of the few remaining centrists left in the Democratic Party," McConnell said.

A person who was unauthorized to discuss the rocky status of the Biden-Manchin talks and spoke only on condition of anonymity said Wednesday that Manchin was pushing to eliminate the bill's renewal of expanded benefits under the child tax credit, a keystone of Democratic efforts to reduce child poverty.

As he exited a Democratic senators' closed-door lunch, Manchin was mum on his next move, telling reporters he had "nothing" to share.

Earlier Wednesday, Manchin said assertions he wants to strip the child tax credit improvements were "a lot of bad rumors."

Democrats were livid over the possibility of eliminating one of the bill's most significant achievements — the continuation of enhanced child tax credits that have been sending monthly checks to millions of families during the COVID-19 crisis and will expire next year without further action.

Letting the social and environment legislation slip into next year, when congressional elections will be held, would be ominous for the bill's ultimate prospects.

With Democrats having blown past previous self-imposed deadlines on the push, another delay would fuel Republican accusations that they are incompetently running a government they control. Democrats are bracing for November elections when the GOP has a real chance of winning control of the House and Senate.

Word of Manchin's stance prompted a backlash from colleagues, whom he's frustrated for months with constant demands to cut the bill's size and scope. The measure also has money for health care, universal prekindergarten and climate change programs, largely paid for with tax boosts on big corporations and the rich.

The second-ranking Democrat, Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, said "the level of emotion" among Democrats over the child tax credit "is very high," and said he was "stunned" when he heard about Manchin's demands.

Manchin has wanted the overall bill's 10-year price tag to fall below \$2 trillion. He also wants all its programs to last the full decade.

The current bill would extend the enhanced child tax credit for just one year, a device to contain the bill's cost. Renewing the improved benefits for 10 years would increase its current one-year cost of around \$100 billion to over \$1 trillion, and doing that while cutting the overall bill's size would wreak havoc on Democrats' other priorities.

The Treasury Department says the expanded tax credit has helped the families of 61 million children.

Manchin's other demands have included removing a new requirement for paid family leave. Disputes

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among other lawmakers include how to increase federal tax deductions for state and local taxes. The House approved its version of the legislation in November.

Associated Press writers Colleen Long, Darlene Superville and Farnoush Amiri contributed to this report.

## Power of one: Manchin is singularly halting Biden's agenda

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sen. Joe Manchin settled in at President Joe Biden's family home in Delaware on a Sunday morning in the fall as the Democrats worked furiously to gain his support on their far-reaching domestic package.

The two-hour-long session was the kind of special treatment being showered on the West Virginia senator — the president at one point even showing Manchin around his Wilmington home.

But months later, despite Democrats slashing Biden's big bill in half and meeting the senator's other demands, Manchin is no closer to voting yes.

In an extraordinary display of political power in the evenly split 50-50 Senate, a single senator is about to seriously set back an entire presidential agenda.

"We're frustrated and disappointed," said Sen. Dick Durbin, the majority whip. "Very frustrated," said another Democratic senator granted anonymity to frankly discuss the situation Thursday.

Biden said in a statement Thursday night that he still believed "we will bridge our differences and advance the Build Back Better plan, even in the face of fierce Republican opposition."

But with his domestic agenda stalled out in Congress, senators are coming to terms with the reality that passage of the president's plan, as well as Democrats' high-priority voting rights package, would most likely have to be delayed to next year.

Failing to deliver on Biden's roughly \$2 trillion social and environmental bill would be a stunning end to the president's first year in office.

Manchin's actions throw Democrats into turmoil at time when families are struggling against the prolonged COVID-19 crisis and Biden's party needs to convince voters heading toward the 2022 election that their unified party control of Washington can keep its campaign promises.

The White House has insisted Manchin is dealing with the administration in "good faith," according to deputy White House press secretary Andrew Bates.

Manchin, though, has emerged as an uneven negotiator — bending norms and straining relationships because he says one thing one day and another the next, adjusting his positions, demands and rationale along the way.

Democratic senators have grown weary of their colleague, whose vote they cannot live without — but whose regular chats with Republican leader Mitch McConnell leave them concerned he could switch parties and take away their slim hold on power.

"Mr. Manchin and the Republicans and anybody else who thinks that struggling working families who are having a hard time raising their kids today should not be able to continue to get the help that they have, then that's their view and they've got to come forward to the American people and say, 'Hey, we don't think you need help,'" said Sen. Bernie Sanders, the independent from Vermont. "Let them tell the American people that."

The senator appears to both relish and despise all the attention he has commanded over many months at Biden's home in Delaware with Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, in regular visits with Biden at the White House and in his daily strolls through the Capitol, where he banters amiably, swats back questions or simply clams up -- which becomes a statement of its own, leaving Manchin-whisperers to wonder what his silence means.

"I got nothing — n-o-t-h-i-n-g," he drawled to the reporters waiting outside the Democrats' closed door lunchroom Thursday as it became clear there would be no Christmas deal.

But between his endless hallway utterances is a consistent through-line in Manchin's months-long com-

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mentary about what he wants in — and out — of Biden's big package before giving his vote. The short version is he's not quite there yet.

Like the chief executive he once was — as governor of a state that surveys show ranked 47th in the nation for health care outcomes and 45th in education — Manchin ultimately decides where the attention goes next. And he has been effective.

So far, Manchin has gotten much of what he wanted: Biden halved what had been a \$3.5 trillion proposal to \$1.75 trillion, once Manchin gave his nod to that figure.

Manchin insisted the corporate tax rate Biden proposed raising to 28% would not inch past 25% — in fact, it ended up not being raised at all, thanks to opposition from another hold-out Democrat, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona.

The coal-state senator insisted the new renewable energy incentives to fight climate change would not come at the expense of fossil fuels. The White House scrapped plans for a nationwide renewable energy standard that environmental advocates viewed as the most significant tool for curbing climate change.

And Manchin's demands for "no additional handouts" have limited some of the proposed social programs, and appear destined to tank plans to launch the nation's first-ever paid family and medical leave program for workers whose employers don't provide the paid time off to temporarily care for loved ones.

But what Manchin actually does want is much more unclear. And it all raises the question of whether Manchin even wants Congress to pass any "Build Back Better Act" at all.

For progressives, the stalemate Manchin engineered was exactly what lawmakers have feared after Congress signed off on a companion \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure bill rather than force the two bills to move together to Biden's desk.

Rep. Rashida Tlaib of Michigan called it "tragic." Rep. Cori Bush of Missouri said, "We must not undermine our power as a government nor the power of the people by placing the fate of Build Back Better at the feet of one Senator: Joe Manchin."

Speaker Nancy Pelosi, who helmed Biden's latest compromise version to House passage, downplayed the Manchin negotiations as part of the process. "This is legislating," she said.

But this week, Manchin introduced a new demand, suggesting the enhanced child tax cut, which has been one of the most significant federal policies Democrats enacted this year — lifting some 40% of the nation's children from poverty — must run for the full 10 years of a traditional federal budget window rather than just one, as the House approved in a cost-cutting compromise.

It's a non-starter — the price of a decade-long child tax cut would consume the bulk of Biden's bill.

All this while Democrats also need support from Manchin, and Sinema, for Senate rules changes so they can overcome the 60-vote threshold needed to overcome a Republican filibuster to pass voting rights.

Manchin met with McConnell on Thursday, as they often do.

"As you know, he likes to talk," the Republican leader told reporters. "It would not surprise you to know that I've suggested for years it would be a great idea, representing a deep red state like West Virginia, for him to come over to our side."

McConnell added, "I don't think that's gonna happen."

## Australia mourns child victims of bouncy castle accident

SYDNEY (AP) — Christmas lights have been turned off and a candlelight vigil was held in the Australian town where five children died after falling from a bouncy castle that was lifted into the air by a gust of wind.

Three children were still in critical condition in the hospital and one child was discharged following the incident on Thursday in the island state of Tasmania. The dead included three boys and two girls aged 11 or 12.

Children at the Hillcrest Primary School in Devonport were celebrating the end of the school year when a sudden gust of wind lifted the bouncy castle almost 10 meters (33 feet) into the air.

The township, with a population around 25,000, has rallied to support the families of the victims and the wider community around the school where the accident occurred.



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A candlelight vigil was held outside the school Thursday night and some residents turned off their Christmas lights out of respect for the victims.

Devonport mayor Annette Rockliff said the tragedy would “undoubtedly rock the close-knit community for a long time.”

“As mayor my heart aches for my community. As a mother and a grandmother, I am rocked to the core. What should have been a day full of fun and celebration for the last day of the school year has ended in an unimaginable way,” said Rockliff, adding that the Australian flag would be flown at half-staff over the town hall.

Tasmania Premier Peter Gutwein described the incident as “utterly devastating and heartbreaking.”

A local supermarket worker, who gave her name only as Melissa, was among those placing flowers outside the school, which she said her children had attended years earlier.

“It’s almost unbelievable,” she said. “At work yesterday, you almost could not believe it after hearing what happened.”

## A fragile partnership in Iraq tries to prevent IS revival

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

LHEIBAN, Iraq (AP) — As a backhoe dug up the ground to build trenches, Iraqi soldiers scanned the vast farming tracts for militants; not far away, their Kurdish counterparts did the same.

The scene earlier this month in the small northern Iraqi farming village of Lheiban was a rare instance of coordination between the federal government and the semi-autonomous Kurdish region. The two sides were fortifying a joint position aimed at defending the village against attacks by the Islamic State group.

Despite a long-standing territorial dispute, Baghdad and Iraq’s Kurds are taking steps to work together to prevent a resurgence of the Islamic State group.

Whether the fragile security partnership can hold is the big test in the next chapter of Iraq’s war with IS. Both sides say they need the Americans to help keep it together — and they say that is one reason why the U.S. military presence in Iraq is not going away even as its combat mission officially ends on Dec. 31.

Iraq declared IS defeated four years ago this month. But the rivalry between Baghdad and the Kurds opened up cracks through which IS crept back: a long, disputed zone snaking through four provinces -- Nineveh, Kirkuk, Salaheddin and Diyala -- where the forces of either side did not enter. In some places, the zone was up to 40 kilometers (24 miles) wide.

Lheiban lies in one part of the zone, and a recent flurry of IS attacks threatened to empty the area of its residents, mostly Kurds. So for the first time since 2014, Iraqi troops and peshmerga are setting up joint coordination centers around the zone to better police the gaps.

“Daesh took advantage,” said Capt. Nakib Hajar, head of Kurdish peshmerga operations in the area, using the Arabic acronym for IS. Now, he said, “we are coordinating ... It begins here, in this village.”

### NIGHT VISIONS

Like all residents of Lheiban, Helmet Zahir is tired. In past months, the cement factory worker would spend all night on the roof of his humble home, his wife and children sleeping inside, holding his rifle and waiting.

Security personnel guarding a nearby oil company -- the only ones in the area equipped with thermal night vision -- would send the signal when they spotted IS militants making their way down the Qarachok Mountain range toward Lheiban.

It was up to Zahir and other armed residents to fend them off.

“We were abandoned. The peshmerga was on one side, the Iraqi army on another and neither was intervening,” he said.

A recent uptick in attacks on the village, with three in the first week of December alone, prompted many of the village’s residents, who are mainly Kurds, to leave. Zahir moved his family to Debaga in the relative safety of the Kurdish-run north.

Once numbering 65 families, Lheiban now has only 12 left, said village mukhtar Yadgar Karim.

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On Dec. 7, peshmerga and Iraqi forces moved into the village with plans to replicate coordination elsewhere across the disputed territories. Kurdish officials hoped this would prompt villagers to return. Maintaining a Kurdish population in the area is key to their territorial claims.

Zahir is not convinced. "I came to check on the situation only, I am too afraid to return," he said.

The peshmerga have positions all along the ridge of the Qarachok mountains. But they don't have orders to stop IS militants as they cross on attacks or to raid IS positions because of wariness over entering disputed territory, explained Col. Kahar Jawhar.

Moreover, the militants move at night, using tunnels and hiding in caves, and the peshmerga lack key equipment including night vision.

"That is why IS are able to terrorize the residents, because we can't see them," Jawhar said.

## DISPUTED LAND

The talks to re-establish joint coordination centers between the Iraqi army and peshmerga began over two years ago, but fell apart because of deep mistrust and differences over how to carve out lines of control.

Under current Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, talks were rekindled, paving the way for an agreement to set up six joint coordination centers in Baghdad, Irbil, and across the disputed zone.

Kadhimi also agreed to establish two joint brigades to conduct anti-IS operations. But this is awaiting budget approval from Baghdad's Finance Ministry, said Hajar Ismail, peshmerga head of relations with the coalition.

Between 2009-2014, Iraqi and Kurdish forces conducted joint security in the northern provinces of Ninevah, Kirkuk and Diyala. But the collapse of the Iraqi army during the IS onslaught of 2014 ended the arrangement.

Kurdish authorities managed to solidify control over Kirkuk and other disputed areas during this time, even developing oil fields and conducting an independent export policy, to the ire of the federal government.

After Iraq declared victory over IS in 2017, Baghdad turned its sights to these areas, launching a military operation in October 2017 to retake them. Relations soured, with Baghdad cutting off budget allocations to the Kurdish region, rendering it unable to pay public sector workers and debts to oil companies.

Baghdad was long reluctant to resume security talks partly due to political optics in the capital, with many dominant Shiite parties deeply mistrustful of Kurdish intentions, according to federal officials.

The Popular Mobilization Forces, made up largely of Shiite militia groups close to Iran, has opposed joint patrols with the peshmerga. The PMF also has a powerful presence in many areas in the disputed zone.

So far, the PMF has been surprisingly quiet about the new joint arrangement, as it copes with a devastating loss in federal elections earlier this year.

But "at some point they will speak out against it," Zmkan Ali, a senior researcher at the Institute of Regional and International Studies, a research center in Sulaymaniyah.

## COMMON FRIEND

The road to better coordination has often involved a common friend: The U.S.

Iraqi and Kurdish officials said the U.S.-led coalition's mediation and support were key in bringing parties to the table.

"They played an important role, coordinating with us and the Iraqi side," said Jawhar, the peshmerga based in Qarachok. "Without them we wouldn't speak — they wouldn't come here, and we wouldn't go there."

Both sides say they still need the Americans to play that role.

U.S. troops quietly stopped direct involvement in combat against IS months ago and have since been advising and training troops. That role will continue when the combat mission formally ends on Dec. 31.

The U.S. presence is also crucial in other ways. The Americans pay the salaries of many peshmerga fighters, amid ongoing budget disputes with Baghdad. Some \$240 million in U.S. funding covers the salaries of around 45,000 peshmerga personnel, according to Ismail.

"Thankfully, this will continue in 2022," he said.

## Rebuilding tornado-ravaged Kentucky town could take years

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press Writer

MAYFIELD, Ky. (AP) — Although his birthday is still a few days away, 60-year-old Harley Kelso knows what he's getting from his sister.

The retired truck driver, whose home and car were battered by last week's tornado — one of dozens that ripped across the South and Midwest, killing at least 90 people — said his sister is bringing chainsaws and her two sons to his home in hard-hit Mayfield to cut apart a tree that's resting on his family's minivan.

"I lost my car and the corner of my porch," Kelso said, sporting a T-shirt that read World's Greatest Papa. "I'm just glad everyone in the neighborhood survived."

Such gratitude may sound odd in the aftermath of a long-track tornado that demolished huge parts of Mayfield, but it's a common refrain these days in this tight-knit community of 10,000 people.

Even with his minivan crumpled under a giant tree, most of his front yard hanging from its roots, smashed windows and a home with no power or running water, Kelso says he's well aware that things could have been worse — and resolute if not downright upbeat about the task ahead.

"I'm going to bring a hot breakfast to my daughter," he said with a smile, clutching a bag of breakfast tacos dropped off by one of the dozens of volunteers combing the neighborhood, offering a hot meal or a cold drink.

President Joe Biden, who visited the community Wednesday and described the damage as some of the worst he's seen, vowed the full support of the federal government to help the town rebuild.

"I intend to do whatever it takes as long as it takes to support your state, your local leaders, as you recover and rebuild, and you will recover and rebuild," the president said, standing before a decimated town center.

Among the biggest and most pressing challenges facing Mayfield and other devastated communities is removing the mountains of debris that the storms turned homes and businesses into, Kentucky Emergency Management Director Michael Dossett said.

"This is going to be one of the largest pieces of the recovery," Dossett said Thursday during a press conference at the state Capitol in Frankfort. "Debris removal is one of the most important pieces because it is part and parcel to rebuilding not just the city infrastructure, but for all of our homeowners."

In neighborhoods across the city, yards and streets are filled with debris: downed tree limbs, shingles, mangled children's toys, mud-caked clothes. Trees that haven't been uprooted completely have had upper branches shorn off. Others have crashed into cars or homes.

Many houses have had roofs torn off or been pulled from their foundations. Others have been reduced to nothing more than a massive pile of bricks, insulation and splintered lumber.

In the center of town, heavy equipment operators rumbled through the back-and-forth task of clearing piles of rubble that covered entire blocks. At what was once a steam-cleaning business, volunteers sifted through piles of debris to salvage what they could. Several steam cleaners stood at the edge of the pile.

The damage and devastation in Mayfield is so severe that it could take years before the community returns to normal, said Chris Chiles, disaster response coordinator for the Danville, Virginia-based God's Pit Crew, which has been aiding storm-ravaged communities for more than two decades.

"There's a ton of work that needs to be done," Chiles said. "I've been doing this for 14 years all over the country, and it's hard to get much worse than this."

"It'll take a long time. Years, unfortunately."

When a town that has lived through such a catastrophic event does finally get rebuilt and back on its feet, Chiles said, it's often stronger and more close-knit than before.

"The loss of life is horrific, but sometimes neighbors don't know each other and things like this bring people together," he said.

Still, not everyone is prepared to rebuild.

Chris Eigenrauch, 49, whose home was among those badly battered by the storm, said the prospect of rebuilding an entire community is simply too daunting. He said he's considering moving to neighboring Illinois, where several of his relatives live.

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"It's going to take months, if not years," he said. "I just plan on leaving. For the ones who are staying, I hope God helps them rebuild."

Kelso, who works 20 hours a week as a short-order cook, isn't sure how long it will take to get his own home back to normal, let alone the devastated community. But his confidence is unwavering.

"This is a tough community," he said. "We'll come together."

Associated Press reporter Piper Hudspeth Blackburn contributed to this report from Louisville, Kentucky.

## Manchin's child tax credit stance draws criticism back home

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Sen. Joe Manchin's reluctance to endorse the Biden administration's expanded child tax credit program is rippling through his home state of West Virginia.

Manchin, a moderate Democrat, is one of the last holdouts delaying passage of President Joe Biden's massive social and environmental package, dubbed the Build Back Better Act. The West Virginia senator has expressed concerns over multiple aspects of the roughly \$2 trillion package, including the continuation of the expanded Child Tax Credit program.

The expansion, passed earlier this year as part of pandemic relief legislation, boosted the monthly payments for parents and greatly expanded the scope of those eligible. In West Virginia, one of the country's poorest states, the effect was immediate, advocates say.

"There is no state that's more impacted by the CTC," said Kelly Allen, executive director of the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy. "West Virginia, frankly, wasn't doing great before the pandemic. So this is absolutely needed now and in the long term."

On Dec. 15, CTC payments went out to 181,000 West Virginia families, according to Treasury Department figures. The payments averaged \$446 and reached 305,000 children. Those payments could end this month, if the Biden package doesn't pass in the next few days.

A coalition of West Virginia groups has been lobbying Manchin from the local end, emphasizing the ground-level stories of families who benefitted from the expansion.

"We're hearing it from every corner of the state," said Jim McKay of TEAM for West Virginia Children. "This program is really having a profound impact in a positive way."

Allen warned that 50,000 children in the state are in danger of slipping into poverty if the payments lapse, or the negotiations drag on so long that the Jan. 15 payment doesn't happen. One in five West Virginia children is estimated to live in poverty and 93% of children in the state are eligible for the CTC payments, tied for the highest rates in the country.

"Households across the state would have trouble meeting their basic needs," Allen said. "There is real urgency right now to make sure families don't get left short."

Faced with unified Republican opposition, Biden is trying to pass the package with Democrats alone, which the House has already done. But the path in the evenly split 50-50 Senate is more difficult, with no room for dissent. Biden has been in talks with Manchin, who appears to be the final obstacle for Democrats trying to pass the big bill by Christmas.

The rocky status of the Biden-Manchin talks was described Wednesday by a person who spoke only on condition of anonymity. The person said Manchin was pushing to eliminate the bill's renewal of expanded benefits under the child tax credit, a keystone of Democratic efforts to reduce child poverty.

Manchin told reporters Wednesday that assertions he wants to strip the child tax credit improvements were "a lot of bad rumors." Asked if he backed eliminating one of the bill's child tax credit improvements — monthly checks sent to millions of families — he said, "I'm not negotiating with any of you."

Last month, a group of West Virginians gathered outside Manchin's office in the state capital, Charleston, to present the senator with a quilt covered in personal testimonials from CTC recipients describing how the payments had improved their lives.

"It's a life-changer," said Rick Wilson of the American Friends Service Committee who participated in

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the demonstration. "People are saying they paid off debt, kept the lights on, or bought or repaired their car so they could go to work."

Studies suggest the child tax credit expansions are expected to cut child poverty by 40% — with 9 of 10 American children benefiting. All told, some 4.1 million children are on track to be lifted above the poverty line, according to analysis from the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities.

In West Virginia, recipients spent 52% of their CTC money on food, with 39% going toward clothing and other essentials for their children, according to a study by Washington University in St. Louis' Social Policy Institute.

Allen, of the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, said the CTC money doesn't just benefit the recipient families. With few in a position to save the funds, the cash gets immediately spent in the community. She estimated that more than \$530 million in CTC funds had flowed into the West Virginia economy.

"When families get money in their pockets, they're spending it in grocery stores, clothing stores and child care centers," she said. "Households know what they need and they're spending it in a way that most folks would think is responsible."

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Associated Press writers Lisa Mascaro and Alan Fram contributed to this report.

## **Biden back in South Carolina to address HBCU, honor Clyburn**

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

ORANGEBURG, S.C. (AP) — To House Majority Whip Jim Clyburn, President Joe Biden's Friday trip to South Carolina is more than an ally's visit to a crucial early-voting state. It's a manifestation of the decades-long relationship between the two powerful Democrats, in a place that's played a pivotal role in cementing both of their legacies.

Biden is addressing December graduates at South Carolina State University, a historically Black school in Orangeburg. It's the alma mater of Clyburn, the top-ranking Black member of Congress and South Carolina's only congressional Democrat.

There were no December ceremonies when Clyburn graduated in 1961, so he received his diploma by mail. Instead of addressing this year's graduates, as had been planned, Clyburn will be marching with the students himself, crossing the stage to receive his diploma from Biden, whom he asked to appear in his stead.

The president's visit comes at a fraught time for his agenda, with the future of his \$2 trillion social and environmental spending package in doubt. While Democrats had hoped to make progress on the bill before Christmas, continued disagreements among lawmakers have all but halted negotiations, and Biden himself has signaled Democrats should shift their focus to passing a voting rights bill — another heavy lift in the evenly-divided Senate.

Biden has spent much of the week engaged in those legislative negotiations, but he has said he's eager to help his longtime friend out.

"I'd almost walk to South Carolina to be able to do that for Jim," Biden said this week in an interview with WLTX-TV in Columbia. "Jim has been a champion for all the things that matter."

The two men had been planning a gathering in South Carolina, Clyburn told reporters this week, and they figured this occasion would suffice. The meetup is significant for both, in that it's Biden's first time as president in South Carolina, where Clyburn's public support is credited with boosting him to the Democratic nomination.

On the cusp of South Carolina's first-in-the-South primary, after struggling through less-than-stellar performances in other early-voting contests, Biden secured a public endorsement from Clyburn, an awaited signal for many Black voters that Biden would be the candidate to stand up for their interests.

"My buddy Jim Clyburn, you brought me back!" Biden said in his victory speech, after winning South Carolina by nearly 30 percentage points, crediting Clyburn for breathing new life into his campaign.

Biden subsequently bested chief rival Bernie Sanders on Super Tuesday and claimed the nomination before defeating Republican incumbent Donald Trump in the general election.

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On Wednesday, Clyburn said he was glad to have played a role in Biden's win, but said the president had earned it.

"People can give me credit for his resounding victory here in South Carolina, but he deserves it," Clyburn said during a call with reporters. "I'm a good enough politician to accept the credit, but Joe Biden has a great relationship with this state. ... He's deserving of a lot more credit from South Carolina than he will ever get, and I suspect that's because he has a 'D' behind his name."

Biden's roots in the state are much deeper than his 2020 campaign. Often coming to Kiawah Island near Charleston for family vacations, Biden also spent decades as desk mate to Fritz Hollings, South Carolina's longtime Democratic senator. Biden eulogized Hollings at his 2019 funeral, a task he previously performed for another South Carolina senator, Republican Strom Thurmond.

During Wednesday's call with reporters, Clyburn at times got emotional conveying the gravitas of Friday's combination of personal and professional accomplishments. As a politician, the ability to bring a sitting president to his home state shows constituents his ties to Biden, with whom Clyburn said Tuesday he has a "very special" relationship.

Moreover, South Carolina State is also the alma mater of his late wife Emily for whom the honors college is named. Clyburn said he would revel in the ability to receive his degree not only from the president, but also accompanied by his three daughters and all of his grandchildren.

"I suspect that the students will remember it for the rest of their lives," Clyburn said of the event. "Not only will I get to march, but the president of the United States is going to hand me my degree."

Meg Kinnard can be reached at <http://twitter.com/MegKinnardAP>.

## Potter expected on stand as trial in Wright death nears end

By STEVE KARNOWSKI and AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The Minnesota police officer on trial in the shooting death of Daunte Wright was expected to take the stand Friday, hoping to persuade jurors to acquit her of manslaughter charges in what she has said was a gun-Taser mixup.

A compressed defense case for Kim Potter appeared likely to wrap up after just two days, with jurors also expected to hear from an expert on how such errors can occur.

Potter, 49, shot Wright after he pulled away from officers seeking to arrest him on a weapons warrant on April 11 in the Minneapolis suburb of Brooklyn Center. Body-camera video recorded her shouting "I'll tase you!" and "Taser, Taser, Taser!" before firing once.

The death of Wright set off angry demonstrations for several days in Brooklyn Center. It happened as another white former officer, Derek Chauvin, was standing trial in nearby Minneapolis for the killing of George Floyd.

Besides arguing that Wright's death was a tragic mistake, Potter's attorneys have also said that she would have been justified in using deadly force to stop Wright from driving away and possibly dragging one of Potter's fellow officers.

Potter's chief at the time, Tim Gannon, testified on her behalf Thursday. Gannon called Potter "a fine officer" and said he "saw no violation" of policy by her in the traffic stop.

Gannon resigned two days after the shooting, saying he was essentially forced out because he wouldn't immediately fire Potter. Potter resigned the same day.

Under questioning from Potter attorney Earl Gray, Gannon testified that he viewed body-camera video immediately after the shooting and dashcam video recently, and when he had "all the data in front of me, I saw no violation."

"Violation of what?" Gray asked.

"Of policy, procedure or law," Gannon said.

Prosecutor Matthew Frank jabbed at Gannon on cross-examination, asking him whether it was consistent with policy "for an officer to not know they have their firearm in their hand when they shoot it."

Prosecutors argue that Potter was an experienced officer who had been thoroughly trained in the use

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of a Taser, including warnings about the danger of confusing one with a handgun. They have to prove recklessness or culpable negligence in order to win a conviction on the manslaughter charges.

Gannon testified that it appeared to him from dashcam video that Sgt. Mychal Johnson, who was assisting in the stop, was "leaning into" Wright's car. He said it was his opinion that deadly force was reasonable.

Gannon recalled his own experience in a situation where he was dragged by a car. He said he felt "sheer terror" and a feeling of "simply trying to survive."

Gannon said Potter was known for handling calls, acting professionally and writing good police reports. He testified that she volunteered with a group that helped families when officers were killed in the line of duty. She also worked with domestic abuse victims and was a field training officer.

Earlier Thursday, the defense opened its case with use-of-force expert Stephen Ijames, a former assistant police chief in Springfield, Missouri. Ijames testified that officers were legally bound to arrest Wright after discovering he had a warrant for an outstanding weapons violation.

Ijames also testified it was very unlikely that Wright could have driven away had Potter actually used her Taser. That contradicted a prosecution use-of-force expert who testified earlier that using either a gun or a Taser on Wright would have made things worse because he could have been incapacitated and his vehicle could have become a weapon.

After Potter shot Wright, his car took off and crashed seconds later into an oncoming vehicle, hurting his passenger and someone in the other car.

Ijames, who said he wrote the Taser policy for the International Association of Chiefs of Police, told the court Thursday that he disagreed with the prosecution use-of-force expert, Seth Stoughton, who testified that Potter was too close to Wright for the Taser to be effective.

The defense also called several character witnesses for Potter who testified she is a peaceful person. Former Brooklyn Center Officer Colleen Fricke testified about working alongside Potter, saying she saw her as a mentor and friend.

Fricke was asked to watch over Potter after the shooting. "I saw her curled up in the corner of the room" — by herself and crying, Fricke said.

After Fricke testified that Potter was law-abiding, prosecutor Joshua Larson said: "In terms of following the law, though, generally speaking, you'd agree that following the law on one day does not absolve you from accountability the next day." The defense objected, stopping that line of questioning.

The case is being heard by a mostly white jury.

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Associated Press writers Tammy Webber in Fenton, Michigan, and Doug Glass in Minneapolis contributed to this report.

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

## Delaware judge rejects Fox News motion to dismiss lawsuit

WASHINGTON (AP) — A judge Thursday rejected a motion by Fox News to dismiss a \$1.6 billion defamation lawsuit brought against the cable news giant by Dominion Voting Systems over claims about the 2020 presidential election.

In the 52-page ruling Delaware Superior Court Judge Eric Davis said that the voting machine company had shown that "At this stage, it is reasonably conceivable that Dominion has a claim for defamation per se."

Denver-based Dominion filed a lawsuit earlier this year against the media organization alleging that some Fox News employees elevated false charges that Dominion had changed votes in the 2020 election through algorithms in its voting machines that had been created in Venezuela to rig elections for the late dictator Hugo Chavez. On-air personalities brought on Trump allies who spread the claims, and then amplified those claims on Fox News' social media platforms.

There was no evidence of widespread fraud in the 2020 election, a fact that a range of election officials across the country — and even Trump's attorney general, William Barr — confirmed. An Associated Press

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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.

In denying the motion to dismiss the lawsuit Davis said that Dominion's complaint "supports the reasonable inference that Fox either (i) knew its statements about Dominion's role in election fraud were false or (ii) had a high degree of awareness that the statements were false."

Davis said that "Fox possessed countervailing evidence of election fraud from the Department of Justice, election experts, and Dominion at the time it had been making its statements. The fact that, despite this evidence, Fox continued to publish its allegations against Dominion, suggests Fox knew the allegations were probably false."

The judge also wrote that despite emails from Dominion attempting to factually address Fox's fraud allegations, Fox and its news personnel continued to report Dominion's "purported connection to the election fraud claims without also reporting on Dominion's emails."

"Given that Fox apparently refused to report contrary evidence ... the Complaint's allegations support the reasonable inference that Fox intended to keep Dominion's side of the story out of the narrative."

Fox News Media said in a statement that "As we have maintained, Fox News, along with every single news organization across the country, vigorously covered the breaking news surrounding the unprecedented 2020 election, providing full context of every story with in-depth reporting and clear-cut analysis. We remain committed to defending against this baseless lawsuit and its all-out assault on the First Amendment."

Fox News had sought to have the lawsuit dismissed arguing that its coverage is protected by the First Amendment and that a free press must be able to report both sides of a story involving claims that strike at the core of democracy.

## Chris Noth accused of sexual assaults; actor denies claims

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Actor Chris Noth has been accused of sexually assaulting two women in separate encounters that took place in 2004 and 2015, according to a report Thursday.

The women's identities were withheld by The Hollywood Reporter in order to protect their privacy, said the trade publication, which used pseudonyms for them instead.

Noth, 67, who starred in "Sex and the City" and appears briefly in its newly released sequel, "And Just Like That..." said in a statement to the Reporter that the encounters were consensual.

"The accusations against me made by individuals I met years, even decades, ago are categorically false. These stories could've been from 30 years ago or 30 days ago — no always means no — that is a line I did not cross," Noth said in a statement to the Reporter.

"It's difficult not to question the timing of these stories coming out. I don't know for certain why they are surfacing now, but I do know this: I did not assault these women," he said.

Noth's publicist did not respond to a request for further comment. A call to an attorney listed as representing him was not immediately returned.

The two women reached out independently and months apart to the Hollywood Reporter, the publication said. One, with the pseudonym Zoe, said the revival of Noth's "Sex and the City" character, a man-about-town nicknamed Mr. Big, "set something off in me" and prompted her to go public with "who he is," she told the Reporter.

She asked her name be withheld because she works in the entertainment industry and feared repercussions if she were identified.

Noth's character dies in the opening episode of "And Just Like That..." after suffering a heart attack following an intense workout on a Peloton bike. The bikemaker poked fun at the attention the episode generated with an ad featuring Noth, but the spot was pulled on Thursday after the Reporter's story posted.

At media requests, the Los Angeles Police Department checked into whether there was an open investigation involving Noth and found none, police Sgt. Hector Guzman said. The special victims bureau of the



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Los Angeles Sheriff's Department also has no open investigation, sheriff's Capt. Richard Ruiz said.

Zoe, now 40, alleges she was assaulted in Noth's Los Angeles apartment in 2004, when she was 22. She'd met Noth because he did business with the firm where she was employed, the paper said.

A friend told the Reporter that she took Zoe to Cedars-Sinai hospital, where she told staff she'd been assaulted and was treated for an injury. The friend, who's not identified in the story, said police were called but Zoe declined to name her assailant to them.

Her then-boss, who was not identified, said that Zoe told her of the attack later that day but asked to keep it private, according to the story. In January 2006, Zoe sought counseling at a rape crisis center, which the center confirmed to the Reporter while keeping details private.

The other woman, called Lily, now 31 and a journalist, said she met Noth in 2015 when she was 25 and working as a server in the VIP section of a now-closed New York nightclub. She recounted crying and feeling "violated" when Noth abruptly initiated sex.

According to a friend, identified by the Reporter as Alex, a distraught Lily called her and said that Noth has "pretty forcibly" had sex with her in his apartment. Alex said she declined her advice to call police.

Lily told the publication she didn't remember the call.

In texts said to have been exchanged by Noth and Lily and reviewed by the Reporter, Noth allegedly referred to "our night last week," calling it "a lot of fun" and adding, "I wasn't quite sure how you felt."

In her reply, according to the paper, Lily said she "certainly enjoyed" his company but "I did feel slightly used." She said she put off his further attempts to meet.

The allegations prompted a blunt online post from actor Zoe Lister-Jones, who worked with Noth when he starred on a "Law & Order" series and she was a guest star.

"Last week, my friend asked me how I felt about Mr. Big's death on *And Just Like That*, and I said, honestly, I felt relieved," she wrote. "He asked why and I told him it was because I couldn't separate the actor from the man, and the man is a sexual predator."

Lister-Jones recalled how, during one take, he leaned in to sniff her neck and said, "You smell good."

## Biden acknowledges \$2T bill stalled, but vows it will pass

By LISA MASCARO and ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday all but acknowledged negotiations over his sweeping domestic policy package will likely push into the new year, as he does not yet have the votes in the Senate to lift the roughly \$2 trillion bill to passage.

Biden issued a statement in the evening as it became increasingly apparent the Democratic senators would not meet their Christmas deadline, in large part because of unyielding opposition from one holdout: Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

The president said that in their recent discussions, the West Virginia senator has reiterated his support for the framework he, the president and other Democrats had agreed to on the flagship bill. Biden said he also briefed House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer earlier Thursday about the most recent round of talks with Manchin.

"I believe that we will bridge our differences and advance the Build Back Better plan, even in the face of fierce Republican opposition," Biden said in the statement.

Biden said he and his team will continue to have discussions with Manchin next week. The White House and the congressional leaders plan to work "over the days and weeks ahead" to finish up the details, he said. Both he and Schumer are determined, he said, to bring the package to the Senate floor for votes as early as possible.

"We will — we must — get Build Back Better passed," Biden said.

Biden's statement was a much-needed intervention, allowing Senate Democrats an off-ramp to what has been months of tangled negotiations that appear nowhere near resolved as time runs out ahead of the Christmas holiday.

At the same time, Democrats were rushing to show progress on another jammed-up priority: voting

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rights legislation that, Biden acknowledged, also faces hurdles. "We must also press forward on voting rights legislation, and make progress on this as quickly as possible," Biden said.

Schumer, D-N.Y., had set Senate passage before Christmas as his goal, but disputes with Manchin and other Democrats remain. It had become clear that the party was seeking an explicit move from Biden in hopes he would cut a deal with Manchin, or urge lawmakers to delay action until January.

The sudden end-of-year shift comes as Democrats suffered another blow to their agenda late Thursday when the Senate parliamentarian decided that hard-fought efforts to include immigration law changes should be stripped from the package because they don't comply with the chamber's rules.

Schumer said Democrats "strongly disagree" with the parliamentarian's decision and vowed to "pursue every means" so that immigrants can achieve a path to citizenship in Biden's package.

The ruling is just one part of an ongoing, time-consuming review by Senate parliamentarian Elizabeth MacDonough about whether many of the bill's provisions violate the chamber's rules and should be dropped.

As the day's business began, Schumer barely mentioned what was becoming an obvious stall. Instead, he described Democrats' efforts to break a logjam on voting rights legislation and a pile of nominations the Senate will consider "as we continue working to bring the Senate to a position where we can move forward" on the social and environment bill.

Using his sway in a 50-50 Senate where Democrats need unanimity to prevail, Manchin has continued his drive to force his party to cut the bill's cost and eliminate programs he opposes. All Republicans oppose the package, arguing the measure carrying many of Biden's paramount domestic priorities is too expensive and would worsen inflation.

"The best Christmas gift Washington could give working families would be putting this bad bill on ice," said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky.

McConnell and Manchin met in the GOP leader's office, as they often do, a very public reminder of the West Virginia senator's conservative leanings and Democrats' slim hold on the majority. "We do appreciate the fact that he seems to be one of the few remaining centrists left in the Democratic Party," McConnell said.

A person who was unauthorized to discuss the rocky status of the Biden-Manchin talks and spoke only on condition of anonymity said Wednesday that Manchin was pushing to eliminate the bill's renewal of expanded benefits under the child tax credit, a keystone of Democratic efforts to reduce child poverty.

As he exited a Democratic senators' closed-door lunch, Manchin was mum on his next move, telling reporters he had "nothing" to share.

Earlier Wednesday, Manchin said assertions he wants to strip the child tax credit improvements were "a lot of bad rumors."

Democrats were livid over the possibility of eliminating one of the bill's most significant achievements — the continuation of enhanced child tax credits that have been sending monthly checks to millions of families during the COVID-19 crisis and will expire next year without further action.

Letting the social and environment legislation slip into next year, when congressional elections will be held, would be ominous for the bill's ultimate prospects.

With Democrats having blown past previous self-imposed deadlines on the push, another delay would fuel Republican accusations that they are incompetently running a government they control. Democrats are bracing for November elections when the GOP has a real chance of winning control of the House and Senate.

Word of Manchin's stance prompted a backlash from colleagues, whom he's frustrated for months with constant demands to cut the bill's size and scope. The measure also has money for health care, universal prekindergarten and climate change programs, largely paid for with tax boosts on big corporations and the rich.

The second-ranking Democrat, Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, said "the level of emotion" among Democrats over the child tax credit "is very high," and said he was "stunned" when he heard about Manchin's demands.

Manchin has wanted the overall bill's 10-year price tag to fall below \$2 trillion. He also wants all its pro-

grams to last the full decade.

The current bill would extend the enhanced child tax credit for just one year, a device to contain the bill's cost. Renewing the improved benefits for 10 years would increase its current one-year cost of around \$100 billion to over \$1 trillion, and doing that while cutting the overall bill's size would wreak havoc on Democrats' other priorities.

The Treasury Department says the expanded tax credit has helped the families of 61 million children.

Manchin's other demands have included removing a new requirement for paid family leave. Disputes among other lawmakers include how to increase federal tax deductions for state and local taxes.

The House approved its version of the legislation in November.

Associated Press writers Colleen Long, Darlene Superville and Farnoush Amiri contributed to this report.

## Tornado, storm death toll at 90 after Ky teen's body found

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. (AP) — A Kentucky neighborhood ravaged by a tornado by got more bad news Thursday: the body of a missing teenager was found.

Nyssa Brown was the seventh member of her family to die in the tornado that hit Bowling Green last week. Warren County coroner Kevin Kirby said the 13-year-old's body was found Thursday morning in a wooded area near her subdivision.

The girl's parents, three siblings ranging in age from 4 to 16, and a grandmother also died in the tornado.

According to Kirby, eight children were among the 12 victims who died on a single street, Moss Creek Avenue. Also among the dozen were five relatives from another family.

Overall, there were 17 storm-related fatalities in Warren County, Kirby said.

The teen's death pushed the total of storm-related casualties in five states to 90, including 76 in Kentucky.

## US regulators lift in-person restrictions on abortion pill

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Food and Drug Administration on Thursday permanently removed a major obstacle for women seeking abortion pills, eliminating a long-standing requirement that they pick up the medication in person.

Millions of American women will now be able to get a prescription via an online consultation and receive the pills through the mail. FDA officials said a scientific review supported broadening access, including no longer limiting dispensing to a small number of specialty clinics and doctor's offices.

But prescribers will still need to undergo certification and training. Additionally, the agency said dispensing pharmacies will have to be certified.

The decision is the latest shift in the polarized legal battle over medication abortion, which has only intensified amid the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is certain to spur legal challenges and more restrictions in Republican-led states.

Earlier this year the FDA stopped enforcing the in-person requirement because of the pandemic. Under Thursday's decision, the agency permanently dropped the 20-year-old rule, which has long been opposed by medical societies, including the American Medical Association, which say the restriction offers no clear benefit to patients.

The FDA's latest scientific review stems from a 2017 lawsuit led by the American Civil Liberties Union, which argued that the agency's restrictions block or delay medical care, especially for people in low-income and rural communities.

The ACLU hailed the elimination of the strictest requirements but said regulators should have gone further and allowed prescribing by any physician and broader pharmacy dispensing. Abortion opponents said the FDA decision would result in more drug-related side effects and complications for women.

Physicians who prescribe the drug, mifepristone, will have to certify that they can provide emergency care to deal with potential adverse effects, including excessive bleeding, FDA officials said Thursday.

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The change still means many more doctors will be able to write prescriptions and American women will be able to fill their orders at far more pharmacies, including via online and mail-order services.

The effect will vary by state. More than a dozen Republican-led states have passed measures that limit access to the pills, including outlawing delivery by mail.

Increased use of mail-order abortion pills could pose a dilemma for the anti-abortion movement, given that its leaders generally say they don't favor criminalizing the actions of women seeking abortions and because mail deliveries can be an elusive target for prosecutors.

The latest policy shift comes as advocates on both sides of the abortion debate wait to see whether the conservative Supreme Court will weaken or even overturn the Roe v. Wade decision that guarantees the right to abortion nationwide.

Roe's demise would likely prompt at least 20 Republican-governed states to impose sweeping bans while perhaps 15 states governed by Democrats would reaffirm support for abortion access. More complicated would be politically divided states, where fights over abortion laws could be ferocious.

Medication abortion has been available in the United States since 2000, when the FDA first approved mifepristone to terminate pregnancies up to 10 weeks. Taken with a hormone blocker called misoprostol, it constitutes the so-called abortion pill.

About 40% of all abortions in the U.S. are now done through medication — rather than surgery — and that option has become more pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic.

At the time of approval, the FDA imposed limits on how the drug could be distributed, including barring it from regular pharmacies and requiring that all doctors providing the drug undergo special certification. Women were also required to sign a form indicating they understood the medication's risks. The FDA said Thursday there have been 26 deaths associated with the drug since 2000, though not all of those can be directly attributed to the medication due to underlying health conditions and other factors.

Common drug side effects include cramping, bleeding, nausea, headache and diarrhea. In some cases excess bleeding needs to be stopped with a surgical procedure.

Near the beginning of the outbreak, the FDA waived in-person requirements for virtually all medications, but left them in place for mifepristone.

That triggered a lawsuit from the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, which successfully overturned the restriction in federal court. The Trump administration then appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court, which reinstated the requirement in January.

The point became moot — at least temporarily — in April when the FDA said it would not enforce the dispensing limits during the current public health emergency.

"The FDA's decision will come as a tremendous relief for countless abortion and miscarriage patients," said Georgeanne Usova, a lawyer with the ACLU. "However, it is disappointing that the FDA fell short of repealing all of its medically unnecessary restrictions on mifepristone and these remaining obstacles should also be lifted."

Jeanne Mancini, president of the March for Life Education and Defense Fund, said the decision "will lead to more lives lost to abortion, and will increase the number of mothers who suffer physical and psychological harm from chemical abortions."

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Associated Press writer David Crary contributed to this story from New York.

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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.

## Schools step up security in response to threats on TikTok

By CAROLYN THOMPSON Associated Press

Educators announced plans to increase security in response to TikTok posts warning of shooting and bomb threats at schools around the country Friday as officials assured parents the viral posts were not

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considered credible.

The social media threats had many educators on edge as they circulated in the aftermath of a deadly school shooting in Michigan, which has been followed by numerous copycat threats to schools elsewhere.

School officials in states including Arizona, Connecticut, Illinois, Montana, New York and Pennsylvania said Thursday there would be an increased police presence because of the threats.

The vague, anonymous posts circulating online warned that multiple schools would receive shooting and bomb threats.

"We are writing to inform you and not alarm you," Oak Park and River Forest, Illinois, school administrators said in an email to parents. "We have been made aware of a nationwide viral TikTok trend about 'school shooting and bomb threats for every school in the USA even elementary' on Friday, December 17."

The administrators said local police departments would increase their presence around schools "out of an abundance of caution."

In a statement on Twitter, TikTok said it was working with law enforcement to investigate.

"We handle even rumored threats with utmost seriousness," the statement said, "which is why we're working with law enforcement to look into warnings about potential violence at schools even though we have not found evidence of such threats originating or spreading via TikTok."

At least a few districts announced plans to close school buildings Friday, including Gilroy High School in northern California. Gilroy police said they had found threats on social media not to be credible, but school officials said final exams scheduled for Friday, the last day before winter break, would be postponed to January out of an abundance of caution.

"Making the decision to cancel classes tomorrow has not been an easy one," Principal Greg Kapaku said in a message to parents.

The posts follow a disturbing trend that has had students acting out in response to social media challenges. In September, students across the U.S. posted videos of themselves vandalizing school bathrooms and stealing soap dispensers as part of the "devious licks" challenge.

In October, students were challenged to slap a teacher, prompting the National Education Association to call on the leaders of Facebook, Twitter and TikTok to intervene.

The Michigan State Police, among law enforcement agencies responding to the posts, said in a statement Thursday it was unaware of any credible threats.

Internet companies such as TikTok are generally exempt from liability under U.S. law for the material users post on their networks, thanks in large part to the legal "safe harbor" they are given by Section 230 of the 1996 Communications Decency Act.

"It would be unlikely that TikTok would be liable if there were actually to be a shooting," said Jeff Kosseff, who wrote a book about Section 230 and teaches cybersecurity law at the U.S. Naval Academy. "Even without 230, there are just a lot of barriers against being able to bring a cause of action against the medium on which a threat was posted."

But Kosseff, who got a warning about the TikTok challenge Thursday from his daughter's school district in Arlington, Virginia, said that doesn't mean TikTok can't do something about it.

"They have a lot of flexibility to be doing the right thing and taking down harmful content. I am hopeful they are doing that," he said.

The threats outraged educators around the country.

"Whether done as a joke or with malicious intent, it's unacceptable. We know our school personnel will do everything in their power to keep our students safe," officials with the Iowa State Education Association, the Iowa Association of School Boards and School Administrators of Iowa said in a joint statement.

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Associated Press writer Matt O'Brien contributed from Providence, Rhode Island.

## All from US missionary group freed in Haiti, police say

By EVENS SANON and PETER SMITH Associated Press

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PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti (AP) — The remaining members of a U.S. missionary group who were kidnapped two months ago in Haiti have been freed, Haitian police and the church group said Thursday.

The spokesman for Haiti's National Police, Gary Desrosiers, confirmed to The Associated Press that the hostages had been released, but did not immediately provide additional details.

"We glorify God for answered prayer — the remaining 12 hostages are FREE!" Christian Aid Ministries said in a statement. "All 17 of our loved ones are now safe."

A convoy of at least a dozen vehicles, including U.S. Embassy SUVs and Haitian National Police, brought the missionaries to the Port-au-Prince airport late Thursday afternoon from the missionary group's offices in Titanyen, north of the capital.

Earlier, people at the Christian Aid Ministries campus could be seen hugging each other and smiling.

News of their release spread quickly in and around Berlin, Ohio, where CAM is headquartered.

"It's an answer to prayer," said Ruth Miller, who was working at the front desk of the town's Amish & Mennonite Heritage Center.

Berlin is in Holmes County, Ohio's Amish heartland, and many Amish and Mennonites volunteer in CAM ministries and donate to it.

Wes Kaufman, who attends a church where some CAM leaders also worship, said many congregations had heeded the mission group's recent request to devote three days to fasting and praying over the situation.

"It's amazing how God works," Kaufman said as dined with family in nearby Walnut Creek at Der Dutchman, a restaurant featuring traditional Amish and Mennonite fare.

In Washington, White House Principal Deputy Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre praised the law enforcement work and Haitian officials who helped get the hostages freed. "We welcomed reports that they are free and getting the care that they need after their ordeal," she said.

The missionaries were kidnapped by the 400 Mawozo gang on Oct. 16. There were five children in the group of 16 U.S. citizens and one Canadian, including an 8-month-old. Their Haitian driver also was abducted, according to a local human rights organization.

The gang's leader had threatened to kill the hostages unless his demands were met. Authorities have said 400 Mawozo was demanding \$1 million per person, although it wasn't clear if that included the children.

It remained unclear whether any ransom was paid or what efforts led to the hostages' freedom.

Carleton Horst, a member of Hart Dunkard Brethren Church in Hart, Michigan, whose members were among the hostages, said church members received a text message Thursday morning from "someone connected to the situation" that all of the hostages had been released.

A mother and her five children, two of them adults, who belong to the church were among the hostages. Horst, who is friends with the family, said the church is rejoicing and he's "elated that that portion of things is finally over, just praise the Lord for that."

"We're feeling great," said the Rev. Ron Marks, a minister at the church.

"From what I gathered, they were treated relatively well," Marks said later in a news conference held on Zoom.

Two of the hostages were released in November, and three more earlier this month. They were not identified, but members of the Hart congregation told local media in Michigan that two were from Hart.

In addition to Michigan, the hostages are from Wisconsin, Ohio, Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Oregon and Ontario, Canada, according to the missionary group.

"Today is the day we have been hoping for, praying for and working so hard to achieve," said Congressman Bill Huizenga, whose western Michigan congressional district includes Hart.

"I want to thank members of the hostage negotiation team for their diligence in securing the safe release of all the hostages. This is a great day for families in Michigan and across the nation who have been worried about the safety of their loved ones," Huizenga said.

Christian Aid Ministries is mainly staffed and supported by conservative Anabaptists — members of various Amish, Mennonite and related churches characterized by such things as plain dress, a belief in non-resistance to violence and separation from the dominant society.

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The organization's roots date to the 1980s, when it began working in then-communist Romania. It has since expanded worldwide but has been particularly active in Haiti.

CAM's work ranges from starting churches and providing food, school supplies and other materials to those in need, to disaster relief and putting up billboards with evangelistic messages.

Smith reported from Berlin, Ohio. AP writer Anna Nichols in Lansing, Michigan, and Colleen Long in Washington contributed to this report.

This story has been corrected to reflect that a woman and five children who belong to the church were hostages, not four children.

## **CDC recommends Pfizer, Moderna COVID-19 shots over J&J's**

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MIKE STOBBE Associated Press

Most Americans should be given the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines instead of the Johnson & Johnson shot that can cause rare but serious blood clots, U.S. health officials said Thursday.

The strange clotting problem has caused nine confirmed deaths after J&J vaccinations — while the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines don't come with that risk and also appear more effective, said advisers to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The panel recommended the unusual move of giving preference to the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines, and late Thursday the CDC's director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, accepted the panel's advice.

Until now the U.S. has treated all three COVID-19 vaccines available to Americans as an equal choice, since large studies found they all offered strong protection and early supplies were limited. J&J's vaccine initially was welcomed as a single-dose option that could be especially important for hard-to-reach groups like homeless people who might not get the needed second dose of the Pfizer or Moderna options.

But the CDC's advisers said during a meeting Thursday that it was time to recognize a lot has changed since vaccines began rolling out a year ago. More than 200 million Americans are considered fully vaccinated, including about 16 million who got the J&J shot.

New data from unprecedented safety tracking of all those vaccinations persuaded the panel that while the blood clots linked to J&J's vaccine remain very rare, they're still occurring and not just in younger women as originally thought.

In a unanimous vote, the advisers decided the safer Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are preferred. But they said the shot made by J&J's Janssen division still should be available if someone really wants it — or has a severe allergy to the other options.

"I would not recommend the Janssen vaccine to my family members" but some patients may -- and should be able to -- choose that shot, said CDC adviser Dr. Beth Bell of the University of Washington.

The clotting problems first came up last spring, with the J&J shot in the U.S. and with a similar vaccine made by AstraZeneca that is used in other countries. Eventually U.S. regulators decided the benefits of J&J's one-and-done vaccine outweighed what was considered a very rare risk — as long as recipients were warned.

European regulators likewise continued to recommend AstraZeneca's two-dose vaccine although, because early reports were mostly in younger women, some countries issued age restrictions.

COVID-19 causes deadly blood clots, too. But the vaccine-linked kind is different, believed to form because of a rogue immune reaction to the J&J and AstraZeneca vaccines because of how they're made. It forms in unusual places, such as veins that drain blood from the brain, and in patients who also develop abnormally low levels of the platelets that form clots. Symptoms of the unusual clots, dubbed "thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome," include severe headaches a week or two after the J&J vaccination — not right away — as well as abdominal pain and nausea.

While it's still very rare, the Food and Drug Administration told health care providers this week that more cases have occurred after J&J vaccinations since the spring. They occur most in women ages 30 to 49

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-- about once for every 100,000 doses administered, the FDA said.

Overall, the government has confirmed 54 clot cases— 37 in women and 17 in men, and nine deaths that included two men, the CDC's Dr. Isaac See said Thursday. He said two additional deaths are suspected.

The CDC decides how vaccines should be used in the U.S., and its advisers called the continuing deaths troubling. In comparing the pros and cons of all the vaccines, the panelists agreed that side effects from the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines weren't as serious — and that supplies now are plentiful.

Nor is J&J still considered a one-and-done vaccine, several advisers noted. The single-dose option didn't prove quite as protective as two doses of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. Plus, with extra-contagious virus mutants now spreading, booster doses now are recommended.

For J&J recipients, a booster is recommended at least two months after vaccination. U.S. health officials had previously OK'd mixing vaccines for booster shots.

Several countries, including Canada, already have policies that give preference to the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. But J&J told the committee its vaccine still offers strong protection and is a critical option especially in parts of the world without plentiful vaccine supplies or for people who don't want a two-dose shot.

While blood clots are rare, "unfortunately cases of COVID-19 are not," J&J's Dr. Penny Heaton said.

The U.S. is fortunate in its vaccine availability and Thursday's action shouldn't discourage use of J&J's vaccine in places around the world where it's needed, said CDC adviser Dr. Matthew Daley of Kaiser Permanente Colorado.

The FDA also warned this week that another dose of the J&J vaccine shouldn't be given to anyone who developed a clot following either a J&J or AstraZeneca shot.

The committee also heard some of the first data on reported side effects of Pfizer vaccinations in younger children. Early last month, the CDC recommended a two-dose series for that age group, and more than 7 million doses have been given so far. But few problems have been reported. Of the 80 reported cases of serious side effects, about 10 involved a form of inflammation that has been seen in male teens and young adults.

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## Elizabeth Holmes jurors hear different takes on her downfall

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — Jurors in the case of former Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes on Thursday heard starkly different interpretations of her motives and actions as her long-running criminal trial nears the finish line.

A federal prosecutor cast Holmes as a desperate con artist who brazenly lied to get rich, while her lawyer depicted her as a well-meaning entrepreneur who never stopped trying to perfect Theranos' blood-testing technology and deliver on her pledge to improve health care.

The closing arguments are the final act in a three-month-old trial revolving around allegations that Holmes duped investors, business partners and patients into believing that Theranos had invented a more humane, quicker and cheaper way to test blood. The case could be handed over to the jury Friday.

Prosecutor Jeff Schenk opened his closing argument by painting a sordid portrait of Holmes, once a Silicon Valley billionaire — on paper — now trying to avoid conviction on fraud charges that could result in a 20-year prison sentence.

As he methodically walked the jury through the testimony of the 29 witnesses called by the government, Schenk emphasized that Holmes had a critical choice to make on several occasions during her 15-year reign running Theranos. Holmes could have acknowledged troubling flaws in Theranos' blood-testing technology, Schenk contended, but she covered them up instead as part of her pursuit of fame and fortune.

"She chose fraud over business failure," Schenk told the jury at the outset of a three-hour presentation. "She chose to be dishonest. This choice was not only callous; it was criminal."



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Holmes' lawyer, Kevin Downey, quickly countered that assertion when he got his turn to sway the jury. "Elizabeth Holmes was building a business and not a criminal enterprise," Downey said before trying to convince the jury that the federal government had presented a distorted snapshot of her dealings at Theranos.

Instead of relying on needles to draw vials of blood from a vein, Holmes spent years promising Theranos would be able to scan for hundreds of diseases and other health problems with just a few drops of blood taken with a finger prick.

It was such a compelling concept that Theranos raised more than \$900 million, struck partnerships with major retailers Walgreens and Safeway and turned Elizabeth Holmes into the subject of cover stories on business magazines.

But unknown to most people outside Theranos, the company's blood-testing technology was flawed, often producing inaccurate results that could have endangered the lives of patients who took the tests at Walgreens stores.

After the flaws were exposed in 2015 and 2016, Theranos eventually collapsed and the Justice Department filed a criminal case in 2018 that charged Holmes with 11 felony counts of fraud and conspiracy.

While Schenk made the case for conviction, Holmes peered at both the prosecutor and the jurors from across a packed courtroom in San Jose, California. Just a few feet behind her, Holmes' mother and current partner, Billy Evans, sat in the front row listening intently, as did Holmes' father, who hadn't previously attended the trial in the presence of the jury.

Schenk occasionally played recordings of separate conversations Holmes had with a group of Theranos investors in December 2013 and with a Fortune magazine reporter in May 2014. In both recordings, Holmes makes a series of inaccurate and exaggerated comments about the capabilities of Theranos' technology and purported contracts with the U.S. military that never materialized.

In other evidence displayed by Schenk, Holmes distorted the scope and prospects of partnerships that Theranos had allegedly struck with Walgreens and major drug makers such as Pfizer.

"You should find her guilty, but you shouldn't find her guilty because of my words," Schenk said. "You should find her guilty because of her words."

In his presentation, Downey urged jurors to carefully pore through evidence that includes more than 900 exhibits to get a fuller picture and understanding of what she was trying to do. He pointed to contracts that Theranos had with several pharmaceutical companies that the government didn't mention during its case as an example of the half-baked story that he said prosecutors presented.

The prosecution focused at a series of events at Theranos that "look bad, but at the end of the day when all the evidence flows together, isn't that bad," Downey said.

Downey also emphasized to the jury needed to be convinced "beyond a reasonable step" to declare Holmes guilty on any count. To illustrate the difficulty of that challenge, he displayed a graphic showing the seven steps that had to be scaled before reaching that threshold.

The verdict could hinge on how the jury reacts to seven days of testimony from Holmes in her own defense. During a particularly pivotal two hours on the stand, Holmes told the court she was raped while she was a freshman at Stanford University before dropping out in 2003 to found Theranos when she was 19.

Around the same time, Holmes testified, she became involved in a lengthy romance with a successful technology executive, Sunny Balwani, who eventually became Theranos' chief operating officer while the couple were secretly living together. During that time, Holmes said, Balwani controlled everything from her diet to her friendships while subjecting her to mental, emotional and sexual abuse that she implied affected her judgment as Theranos' CEO.

Balwani's attorney has adamantly denied Holmes' allegations, but the jury in her trial never heard from Balwani, who intended to invoke his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination had he been called to testify. He faces a separate trial on similar fraud charges in February.

Schenk urged the jury to disregard Holmes' abuse revelations as an irrelevant attempt to garner sympathy. "If you return a guilty verdict, you are not saying you don't believe her abuse allegations," Schenk said.

The closing arguments are expected to wrap up Friday, setting stage for jury deliberations to finally begin.

## Congress approves import ban targeting forced labor in China

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senators gave final congressional approval Thursday to a bill barring imports from China's Xinjiang region unless businesses can prove they were produced without forced labor, overcoming initial hesitation from the White House and what supporters said was opposition from corporations.

The measure is the latest in a series intensifying U.S. penalties over China's alleged systemic and widespread abuse of ethnic and religious minorities in the western region, especially Xinjiang's predominantly Muslim Uyghurs. The Biden administration also announced new sanctions Thursday targeting several Chinese biotech and surveillance companies, a leading drone manufacturer and government entities for their actions in Xinjiang.

The Senate vote sends the bill to President Joe Biden. Press secretary Jen Psaki said this week that Biden supported the measure, after months of the White House declining to take a public stand on an earlier version of the legislation.

The United States says China is committing genocide in its treatment of the Uyghurs. That includes widespread reports by rights groups and journalists of forced sterilization and large detention camps where many Uyghurs allegedly are compelled to work in factories.

China denies any abuses. It says the steps it has taken are necessary to combat terrorism and a separatist movement.

The U.S. cites raw cotton, gloves, tomato products, silicon and viscose, fishing gear and a range of components in solar energy as among goods alleged to have been produced with the help of the forced labor.

Xinjiang is a resource-rich mining region, important for agricultural production, and home to a booming industrial sector. Detainees also are moved outside Xinjiang and put to work in factories, including those in the apparel and textiles, electronics, solar energy and automotive sectors, the U.S. says.

"Many companies have already taken steps to clean up their supply chains. And, frankly, they should have no concerns about this law," Sen. Marco Rubio, the Florida Republican who introduced the earlier version of the legislation with Oregon Democratic Sen. Jeff Merkley, said in a statement.

"For those who have not done that, they'll no longer be able to continue to make Americans — every one of us, frankly — unwitting accomplices in the atrocities, in the genocide," Rubio said.

As in the House earlier this week, the compromise version passed the Senate with overwhelming approval from Democrats and Republicans. The swift passage came after what supporters said was offstage opposition from corporations with manufacturing links to China, although there was little to no overt opposition.

Apple's lobbying firm lobbied on Apple's behalf, a federal disclosure form shows. Apple, like Nike and other corporations with work done in China, says it has found no sign of forced labor from Xinjiang in its manufacturing or supply chain.

Some Uyghur rights advocates and others said they had also feared private opposition from within the Biden administration as it sought cooperation from the Chinese on climate change and other issues.

Psaki, in her statement Tuesday night, noted export controls and import restrictions, sanctions, diplomatic initiatives and other measures the Biden administration had already taken targeting forced labor from Xinjiang.

The Senate also approved Biden's nominee for ambassador to China, veteran diplomat Nicholas Burns, on a 75-18 vote Thursday.

Advocates credited unrelenting support from rights groups and lawmakers, including statements from House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, with helping the bill prevail.

With the legislation, sanctions and months of other new measures, "the United States is way ahead" of the international community on confronting China on abuses of Uyghurs, said Nury Turkel, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and vice chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

How can anyone get China to change "without going after the most important thing to the Chinese government, which is their economic interest?" asked Turkel, who praised Congress — but not the administration — for what he called coherent messaging on the matter.

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The legislation requires government agencies to expand their monitoring of the use of forced labor by China's ethnic minorities. Crucially, it creates a presumption that goods coming from Xinjiang are made with forced labor. Businesses will have to prove that forced labor, including by workers transferred from Xinjiang, played no part in a product to bring it into the United States.

Meanwhile, the Commerce Department announced new penalties targeting China's Academy of Military Medical Sciences and its 11 research institutes that focus on using biotechnology to support the Chinese military.

The move bars American companies from selling goods and technologies to the entities without a license. China "is choosing to use these technologies to pursue control over its people and its repression of members of ethnic and religious minority groups," Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said in a statement.

Separately, the Treasury Department announced it was placing DJI, the world's largest drone manufacturer, and seven other Chinese companies on an investment blacklist over their alleged involvement in biometric surveillance and tracking of Uyghurs.

The measure means individuals in the U.S. will be prohibited from purchasing or selling publicly traded securities connected with the companies.

DJI dominates the global market for the small, low-altitude drones used by hobbyists, photographers and many businesses and governments.

Other companies added to the Treasury blacklist are image-recognition software firm Megvii, super-computer manufacturer Dawning Information Industry, facial recognition specialist CloudWalk Technology, cybersecurity group Xiamen Meiya Pico, artificial intelligence company Yitu Technology and cloud computing firms Leon Technology and NetPosa Technologies.

U.S. intelligence has established that Beijing has set up a high-tech surveillance system across Xinjiang that uses biometric facial recognition and has collected DNA samples from all residents, ages 12 to 65, as part of a systematic effort to suppress Uyghurs, according to a senior administration official who briefed reporters on the sanctions on the condition of anonymity.

The Commerce Department said multiple federal agencies determined that the Chinese academy and research institutes "use biotechnology processes to support Chinese military end uses and end users, to include purported brain-control weaponry."

The White House announced last week it would stage a diplomatic boycott of the upcoming Winter Olympics in Beijing, citing China's "egregious human rights abuses and atrocities in Xinjiang." U.S. athletes will compete but Biden will not send the usual contingent of dignitaries.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington did not immediately respond to a call and email seeking comment.

Rights groups note prison labor has long been a part of the U.S. economy, with inmates producing goods and providing services such as call centers for what is typically reduced pay. Opponents say the system disproportionately profits off the labor of incarcerated Black Americans.

## Soaring infections rattle Europe, fuel dread about holidays

By DANICA KIRKA and MIKE CORDER Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Soaring infections in Britain driven in part by the omicron variant of the coronavirus rattled Europe on Thursday, prompting new restrictions on the Continent and fueling a familiar dread on both sides of the Atlantic about entering a new phase of the pandemic just in time for the holidays.

Much remains unknown about omicron, but officials increasingly warn that it appears more transmissible than the delta variant, which has already put pressure on hospitals worldwide. With so many questions unanswered, uncertainty reigned over how quickly and how severely to crack down on Christmas travel and year-end parties.

After the U.K. recorded its highest number of confirmed new COVID-19 infections since the pandemic began, France announced Thursday that it would tighten entry rules for those coming from Britain. Hours later, the country set another record, with a further 88,376 confirmed COVID-19 cases reported Thursday, almost 10,000 more than the day before.

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In England, the chief medical officer urged people to limit who they see in the festive period. Pubs and restaurants said many people were heeding that advice by canceling Christmas parties, though there has been much debate about what's OK to do. In the U.S., the White House insisted there was no need for a lockdown, despite signs that omicron was gaining ground there.

Globally, more than 75 countries have reported confirmed cases of the new variant. In Britain, where omicron cases are doubling every two to three days, omicron was expected to soon replace delta as the dominant strain in the country. The government has accelerated its booster program in response. Authorities in the 27-nation European Union say omicron will be the dominant variant in the bloc by mid-January.

Early data suggests that omicron may be milder but better at evading vaccines — making booster shots more crucial. Experts have urged caution in particular about drawing conclusions because hospitalizations lag behind infections and because many variables contribute to how sick people get.

Even if omicron proves milder on the whole than delta, it may disarm some of the lifesaving tools available and put immune-compromised and elderly people at particular risk. And if it's more transmissible, more infections overall raise the risk that more cases will be serious.

While experts gather the data, some governments rushed to act, while others sought to calm fears that the new variant would land countries back on square one.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson insisted Thursday that the situation in the U.K. is different from last year because of the widespread use of vaccines and the ability to test.

If people want to attend an event "the sensible thing to do is to get a test and to make sure that you're being cautious," he said.

"But we're not saying that we want to cancel stuff. We're not locking stuff down, and the fastest route back to normality is to get boosted," he said.

Professor Chris Whitty, England's chief medical officer, struck a more cautious note, advising people earlier in the week to limit their social contacts.

On Thursday, he told a parliamentary committee hearing that the government could have to review measures if vaccines prove less effective than expected against omicron.

He said that "would be a material change to how ministers viewed the risks going forward."

Among those taking the more cautious route was Queen Elizabeth II, who opted to cancel her traditional pre-Christmas family lunch.

In the United States, President Joe Biden's administration said tighter restrictions are not planned. He said the omicron variant is not spreading as fast as in Europe because of steps his administration has taken.

However, he warned that unvaccinated Americans faced "a winter of severe illness and death."

White House coronavirus response coordinator Jeff Zients said that the U.S. was "in a very different and stronger place than we were a year ago."

Still, feelings of unease persisted among some people.

Michael Stohl, 32, was relieved when he got the Pfizer vaccine last spring, but the spread of omicron has turned his optimism to dread.

"Even though I'm fully vaccinated right now, that doesn't seem to give me any sort of guarantee anymore," he said. "It just puts this anxiety over you because they tell you the boosters will work, but that's what they said about the original vaccines. Am I going to have to keep getting vaccinated every couple months?"

He said he booked an appointment to receive his booster shot Thursday morning.

Stohl, who works at the concierge desk at an apartment building in downtown Washington, said his family all lives in the city so he isn't traveling for Christmas. However, he worries about friends and coworkers who will travel.

"I just remember how bad everything was last year, and it's looking like it might be that bad again," he said.

People in the Netherlands, meanwhile, have been in a partial lockdown since November to curb a delta-driven surge. While infection numbers are now declining, the government this week ordered elementary

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schools to close for Christmas a week early amid fears of a new rise. Authorities also sped up a booster campaign as caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte cited Britain as an example of how swiftly the variant can spread.

EU leaders gathering in Brussels for a summit Thursday sought to balance tackling the surge of infections across the continent while keeping borders open with common policies throughout the bloc.

"Let's try to maintain the European solution," Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo said. "If every country goes it alone again, we'll be even further from home."

But ahead of the meeting, European nations already were acting to rein in the spread. Greece and Italy tightened entry requirements for travelers earlier this week, and Portugal decided to keep stricter border controls in place beyond their planned Jan. 9 end.

France said Thursday that it will slap restrictions on travelers arriving from the U.K. — which is no longer part of the EU — putting limits on reasons for traveling and requiring 48 hours of isolation upon arrival. The new measures will take effect early Saturday.

French Prime Minister Jean Castex said the measures were being imposed "in the face of the extremely rapid spread of the omicron variant in the U.K."

The abrupt move comes after weeks of political tensions between France and Britain over fishing rights and how to deal with migration across the English Channel. The French government is desperately trying to avoid a new lockdown that would hurt the economy and cloud President Emmanuel Macron's expected reelection campaign.

Waiting outside a Paris train station, Constantin Dobrynin said that he sometimes felt governments overreacted and imposed unnecessary measures. As for omicron, it wasn't yet clear how serious it would be. "So we should be balanced, and we shouldn't be panicked," he said.

Britain said it was not planning reciprocal measures.

Fearing a raft of canceled parties and a general drop in business at the height of the crucial and lucrative Christmas season, British restaurants and pubs demanded government help Thursday. They said concerns about the new variant have already wiped out 2 billion pounds (\$2.6 billion) in sales over the last 10 days.

Across London, restaurants that would normally see bustling crowds clinking glasses and tucking into festive meals were reporting droves of cancellations and empty rooms.

"It's a complete nightmare. ... This week should be the busiest week of the year for hospitality," said Sally Abé, a chef at the Conrad Hotel in central London. "It's everywhere, everybody's canceling, but there's no support from the government."

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Corder reported from The Hague, Netherlands. Associated Press writers Sylvia Hui in London, Parker Purify in Washington and AP reporters across Europe contributed to this report.

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## EPA details push to tighten rules for lead in drinking water

By SUMAN NAISHADHAM and MICHAEL PHILLIS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration took steps Thursday aimed at reducing lead in drinking water, announcing plans to release \$2.9 billion in infrastructure bill funds next year for lead pipe removal and impose stricter rules to limit exposure to the health hazard.

Vice President Kamala Harris made the case for the administration's push to eliminate every lead service line in the country, reiterating the administration's pledge that the effort would create jobs across the country and begin to undo the harm pollution has caused in poor, often minority communities.

"The challenge that we face is, without any question, great. Lead is built into our cities. It is laid under our roads and it is installed in our homes," Harris said in remarks at AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington.

The White House estimates between 6 million and 10 million U.S. households and 400,000 schools get water through lead service lines, which connect buildings to the water main and can leach particles of

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the neurotoxin into drinking water and potentially cause severe developmental and neurological issues — especially when consumed by children. In recent years, the risks facing cities with lead service lines have come into focus, most notably after the Flint, Michigan, water crisis.

The administration estimates 24 million homes are at risk of having lead paint, which can pose significant health risks even when absorbed at low levels.

While the EPA considers how to strengthen the nation's lead-in-water rules, it will allow the previous Trump administration's overhaul of lead regulations to move forward, officials said Thursday. The Biden EPA's requirements are expected to be finalized by 2024, and would require the replacement of remaining lead drinking water pipes "as quickly as is feasible."

"The science on lead is settled — there is no safe level of exposure and it is time to remove this risk to support thriving people and vibrant communities," said EPA administrator Michael Regan in a statement.

Some environmental advocates were lukewarm to the administration's announcement, saying the 10-year goal for replacing lead lines and other provisions were vague on commitments and detail.

"The top priority must be to require removal of all lead pipes within the decade and to set a strict at-the-tap standard, which is the only way to prevent another generation of kids from drinking water through what is essentially a lead straw," said Erik Olson, senior strategic director of health at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "Good intentions won't be enough to get the job done," he added.

John Rumpler, senior attorney with Environment America, called the administration's plans "long-overdue and an indispensable step toward securing safe water." He also said the EPA should set a 10-year deadline to replace lead service lines, as New Jersey did in July.

At a Thursday briefing, deputy White House national climate adviser Ali Zaidi acknowledged the difficulty of locating and mapping out lead lines, which can be hard to assess in older cities and towns.

"A little bit of this ... is mapping the topography of the mountain as we're starting to climb it," Zaidi said. "We have to go out there, we have to collect the data. There are communities around the United States where we do not know where the pipes are."

The White House also has plans to commit \$5 billion for the removal of lead-based paint in Democrats' \$2 trillion social and environmental package. That bill remains stalled in the Senate.

The Trump-era rule said public water systems should replace 3% of their lead service lines each year if lead levels exceed 15 parts per billion. That rate is lower than the previous 7% standard established in 1991, but Trump administration officials said at the time that the rule eliminated loopholes that allowed water systems to avoid removing pipes and would actually make the replacement process faster.

But environmental groups were critical, saying it allowed removal to happen too slowly.

The Trump administration also set requirements to ensure water systems prevent lead in pipes from corroding into drinking water. And it revamped lead testing to make sure the samples water systems use in testing come from water sitting in lead pipes instead of near the faucet — a move that experts say could push lead level results higher for many utilities around the country.

The Biden EPA said it is considering ways to strengthen key parts of the regulation, including the 15 parts-per-billion threshold,

Congress approved \$15 billion for lead service line replacement in the infrastructure bill — about a third less than what the White House and water experts say it would cost to replace them nationally.

Administration officials spoke about additional efforts being taken to limit lead exposure, including more childhood surveillance testing for lead exposure by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and grants from the Department of Housing and Urban Development to remove lead paint in public housing. The Treasury Department is also announcing that surplus COVID-19 relief funds can be used for lead service line replacement projects.

"There is no reason in the 21st century for why people are still exposed to this substance that was poisoning people back in the 18th century," Harris said.

The Associated Press receives support from the Walton Family Foundation for coverage of water and environmental policy. The AP is solely responsible for all content. For all of AP's environmental coverage, visit <https://apnews.com/hub/environment>

## **Biden presents 3 soldiers with top military award for valor**

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Thursday presented the Medal of Honor, the nation's highest military award for valor in combat, to three soldiers who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq. Two were recognized posthumously.

"Our hearts are overflowing with gratitude today as we honor the unparalleled courage, the commitment to duty, and the indispensable, indisputable gallantry," Biden said at a White House ceremony.

Those honored were:

—Master Sgt. Earl Plumlee, a Special Forces soldier who fought off Taliban insurgents after an attack in Afghanistan in 2013.

—Sgt. 1st Class Christopher Celiz, 32, an Army Ranger who died after stepping between Taliban fighters and a U.S. helicopter evacuating wounded in 2018 in Afghanistan.

—Sgt. 1st Class Alwyn Cashe, 35, who died as a result of burns he suffered while rescuing fellow soldiers from a burning vehicle in Iraq in 2005.

Kate Celiz and Tamara Cashe accepted the medals on behalf of their families.

"As honored as you are, it's gotta be tough to be here today," Biden told Cashe's family.

Cashe is the first Black service member to receive the Medal of Honor for military actions since Vietnam, according to the White House.

He was on patrol in Iraq in October 2005 when the Bradley Fighting Vehicle he was commanding was attacked with small arms fire and a roadside bomb. Cashe repeatedly returned to the burning vehicle and pulled six soldiers from the wreckage. Despite his burns, Cashe refused to board the medical evacuation helicopter until the other soldiers were evacuated first.

Cashe, who grew up in Oviedo, Florida, died of the burn at a Texas hospital the following month. Three of the soldiers he pulled from the flaming vehicle also died.

Celiz was leading an operation to clear an area of enemy forces in Afghanistan in 2018 when his team came under attack. He used his body to shield his unit from enemy fire as a casualty was loaded on to a medical evacuation helicopter. Celiz stayed behind to cover the aircraft.

As the helicopter lifted off, Celiz positioned himself to shield the cockpit. He was hit by enemy fire. Despite his injuries, he motioned to the aircraft to depart rather than remain to load him at the risk of further casualties.

Celiz was a South Carolina native and had enlisted in the Army in 2006.

Plumlee was serving at a base in Afghanistan when it came under attack, with insurgents blowing a 60-foot breach in the perimeter wall.

Ten insurgents wearing Afghan National Army uniforms and suicide vests poured through. Plumlee and five other soldiers drove toward the explosion to head off the attack.

Armed with just a pistol, Plumlee killed two insurgents and engaged several others at close range, despite heavy enemy fire and his own injuries. At one point, Plumlee ran to a wounded soldier, carried him to safety and rendered first aid.

Plumlee is currently serving with the 1st Special Forces Group at Fort Lewis, Washington.

Associated Press writer Darlene Superville contributed to this report.

## **Across services, troops face discipline for refusing vaccine**

By LOLITA C. BALDOR Associated Press

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WASHINGTON (AP) — All of the U.S. military services have now begun disciplinary actions and discharges for troops who have refused to get the mandated coronavirus vaccine, officials said Thursday, with as many as 20,000 unvaccinated forces at risk of being removed from service.

On Thursday, the Marine Corps said it has discharged 103 Marines so far for refusing the vaccine, and the Army said it has reprimanded more than 2,700 soldiers and will begin discharge proceedings in January. The Air Force said earlier this week that 27 airmen had been discharged for refusing the vaccine order. And the Navy laid out its new discipline procedure this week, and has already fired one sailor from his command job for refusing to be tested while he pursues an exemption.

Military leaders have warned for months that troops would face consequences if they did not follow what is considered to be a lawful order to get the COVID-19 vaccine. But only in the last week or so have they publicly begun following through on those threats.

It's not clear how many could end up being discharged. But according to the services, at least 30,000 service members are not yet vaccinated, but several thousand of those have gotten temporary or permanent medical or administrative exemptions approved. Of the remaining — which is likely 20,000 or more — thousands are working their way through the exemptions process or have flatly refused. That's about 1.5% of the roughly 1.3 million active duty troops.

The figures reflect a calculated risk — that the number of troops who would be forced from service for refusing the vaccine posed less of a threat to military readiness than the prospect of the virus running rampant among unvaccinated troops.

More than 12,000 have sought religious exemptions. And about 4,800 Army soldiers and Air Force airmen have flatly refused the vaccine, without seeking an exemption. The Navy and Marine Corps have not released their refusal totals.

Pentagon chief spokesman John Kirby said Thursday that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's main concern is getting as many service members vaccinated as possible.

"What he would tell these individuals if he had the chance to speak to them directly is to get the vaccine, if they are medically eligible," said Kirby. "Get the vaccine because it's the best way to protect themselves and their units. That's the readiness concern — getting the vaccination rate as close to 100% as possible."

His comments came as the Army became the last military service to reach the deadline for requiring active duty troops to get vaccines. On Thursday, the Army said 98% of its active duty force had gotten at least one shot, but that more than 3,800 soldiers flatly refused and could start being removed from the military next month.

The Marine Corps said 95% of its force has gotten at least one dose as of Thursday. About 97.5% of the Air Force and Space Force have gotten at least one shot, and a bit more than 1,000 have flatly refused. And 98.4% of the Navy is fully vaccinated. The Navy does not release totals of those with one dose.

Asked about the impact on military readiness if service members continue to refuse the shots and are discharged from the service, Kirby said troops still have time to do the right thing.

"We obviously hope that they will," he said. "But if they don't, it is a lawful order and it has to be obeyed because it is a valid medical requirement."

While each service has developed its own process, all are following existing rules for when a service member disobeys a lawful order. Getting thrown out of the military for refusing a vaccine has been done very rarely. But service members are routinely discharged for disobeying orders — often getting an honorable discharge or general discharge with honorable conditions.

According to the data released Thursday, the Army, the largest military service, reported the fewest service members seeking religious exemptions — a bit more than 1,700 soldiers — compared with the three smaller services. In comparison, more than 4,700 in the Air Force, 3,100 in the Marine Corps and 2,700 in the Navy sought religious exemptions, according to data released by the services in the past week. None has yet been approved.

The Pentagon this year made the COVID-19 vaccine mandatory for all service members, including the National Guard and Reserve. Austin has said repeatedly that getting the vaccine is critical to maintaining a healthy, ready force that can be prepared to defend the nation. The Pentagon is also weighing making



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the vaccine booster shots mandatory for service members.

The Army's 478,000 active duty soldiers had until Wednesday to get the shots. The Air Force required vaccines for the active duty by Nov. 2, while members of the Navy and the Marine Corps had until Nov. 28 to get the shots and their Reserve members have until Dec. 28. Air Force Guard and Reserves had until Dec. 2, and the Army Guard and Reserve soldiers have until next June.

"Vaccinating our soldiers against COVID-19 is first and foremost about Army readiness," Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said in a statement. "To those who continue to refuse the vaccine and are not pending a final decision on a medical or administrative exemption, I strongly encourage you to get the vaccine. If not, we will begin involuntary separation proceedings."

In addition to the more than 2,700 Army soldiers who received written reprimands for refusing the shot, six were fired from leadership positions. Students at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point who refuse the vaccine and do not get an approved exemption will not be commissioned as officers.

The Army said more than 6,200 soldiers are seeking a temporary or permanent exemption, including the 1,746 religious requests. Nearly 3,900 have received temporary medical or administrative exemptions and four got a permanent medical exemption.

Temporary medical exemptions can include pregnancy or other reasons, and administrative can include those who are retiring or are in remote locations with no available vaccines.

Across the military, the vaccine reaction has mirrored that of society, with thousands reluctant to get shots. But overall the percentage of troops — particularly active duty members — who quickly were vaccinated exceeds nationwide numbers. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 72% of the U.S. population age 18 or older has gotten at least one shot.

Members of the U.S. military are already required to get as many as 17 vaccines, depending on where they are deployed, including for smallpox, hepatitis, polio and the flu.

## Chilean women, wary of rightist, may decide president's race

By PATRICIA LUNA and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) — When Chileans went to the polls last month, Elizabeth Padilla, like more than half of eligible voters in the South American country, stayed home, not feeling represented by any of the seven candidates on the ballot.

But her apathy suddenly lifted when a politician she feared, José Antonio Kast finished first. In recent days, as Chileans gear up for a runoff pitting the far-right candidate against leftist lawmaker Gabriel Boric, the 45-year-old artist has been hanging campaign posters in her downtown Santiago neighborhood and warning friends of what she sees as a serious threat to women if Kast wins.

"We are four sisters and I have three nieces. I'm very worried about what could happen," said Padilla, who has spent many a sleepless night contemplating a return of "fascism" in a country that until 1990 was governed by a military dictator, Gen. Augusto Pinochet, who Kast has defended. "The truth is I didn't know there were so many people who think like this."

It's a sentiment shared widely by Chilean women, especially younger urban professionals, who are shaping up to be the clincher in a tight race between political extremes battling for Chile's future.

Kast, the 55-year-old founder of the fledgling Republican Party, secured 28% of the vote on Nov. 21, edging out Boric by two points. Historically, every candidate in Chile who led in the first round of balloting went on to prevail in the head-to-head runoff.

Emerging from dictatorship, Chilean women voted in larger numbers and favored conservative candidates more consistently than their male compatriots, perhaps fearing a return of the turmoil seen during the 1970-1973 rule of the toppled socialist President Salvador Allende, when women, then mostly stuck in the kitchen, banged on pots and pans to protest food shortages.

But the gender gap abruptly closed with the election in 2005 of leftist Michelle Bachelet, which triggered a "pink wave" of presidential victories for women across the region.

Several opinion polls indicate that this time women are flocking in droves to Boric — a millennial who

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uses non-binary pronouns from the stump — as he capitalizes on Kast's long record of sexist comments and policy goals seen as out of step with fast changing societal norms.

"Don't vote for the Nazi. No, no, no," a few thousand women shouted Wednesday at boisterous feminist rally in downtown Santiago against Kast, the son of a German immigrant who was recently revealed to be a card-carrying member of Adolf Hitler's political party.

Giovanna Roa, who was in attendance, said that a Kast victory would be a major setback for women.

"Kast explicitly wants to move us back to a place we already left behind," said the 34-year-old Roa, a member of the convention redrafting Pinochet's constitution — the first such institution in the world where gender parity is mandatory. "He wants us hidden and out of the public arena."

Chile, despite its reputation as one of Latin America's most socially conservative countries, has always had a combative feminist movement that in recent years has made great strides passing laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, loosen abortion restrictions and boost the representation of women in politics.

One sign of its strength is the feminist anthem "A Rapist in Your Path," which has been adopted by activists across the world to denounce violence against women since first being performed during a wave of anti-government protests in 2019.

The rise of Kast, in the eyes of his critics, is a backlash against those gains and the emergence in Chile of a kind of identity politics that has roiled democracies across the world.

Polls show that he has made inroads with middle-class and rural voters who fear that Boric — a former student protest leader who doesn't shy away from vindicating Allende — would disrupt three decades of economic and political stability that has made Chile the envy of many in Latin America.

Kast, who has donned Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again" hat in television interviews, has recently started to walk back some of his past views to shore up support among women.

But courting the key voting bloc was made harder when a video surfaced days after the first round in which a key supporter, YouTuber-turned-congressman-elect Johannes Kaiser, can be heard mocking voting rights for women — which dates to 1949 — if its end result is that "schizophrenic" women keep supporting parties that welcome immigrants who threaten to rape women when they go jogging in the park.

As a lawmaker in 2004, Kast voted against legislation legalizing divorce — a position he reaffirmed as recently as 2010. In an interview during the campaign he said it was no longer an issue.

In a 2018 newspaper column, he attacked Chile's most famous actress, Daniela Vega, referring to the transgender star of the Academy Award-winning film "A Fantastic Woman" as a man. His column opposed a bill — later passed — allowing individuals to select their gender identity on legal documents.

"I wouldn't write (the newspaper column) in the same terms," he said in a televised debate this week, adding that he would respect the existing legislation.

The campaign platform he presented ahead of the first round of voting opposes same-sex marriage — which Chile's congress approved this month by a wide majority — and vows to tighten Chile's already restrictive abortion laws, which allows a woman to terminate pregnancy only in the case of rape, when the fetus won't survive or the mother's health is at risk.

The 204-page document instead highlights "family-focused" policies such as marriage courses, incentives to have babies and health care subsidies for married women. The platform also calls for the elimination of the Ministry of Women — a position he has since abandoned.

"I want to confess that we made a mistake," said Kast, surrounded by female supporters, at a campaign rally this month highlighting policies he said would promote women. "We ask for forgiveness. We changed positions and clearly we aren't only going to keep the Ministry of Women but we are going to strengthen it."

In sharp contrast, the 35-year-old Boric seems to embrace his portrayal by the far right as Chile's first "woke" presidential candidate.

On the stump, he addresses supporters using gender-neutral terms popular with only a handful of fellow Chilean millennials and not found in traditional Spanish grammar. His unmarried partner, a fellow activist, said she's not interested in serving as first lady, a traditional role she believes Chile has outlived.

Unlike Kast, Boric also refused to appear on the online "Bad Boys" program hosted by the surprise third

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place finisher, Franco Parisi, who garnered more than 13% of first round votes. In rejecting the invitation, Boric cited Parisi's large child-support debt to his ex wife.

"Electorally it would be profitable. ... However I believe that in elections as in life one has to be guided by principles," he said.

Recent polls show that women and young voters overwhelmingly favor Boric, sometimes by as much as 20 points.

"In a tight race, a spike in votes from young women, who tend to skew more left wing and feel threatened by Kast's conservative discourse, may make a big difference," said Marcela Rios, a political scientist at the United Nations Development Program in Chile who has focused on gender issues. "It all depends on turnout."

But outside the capital, where traditional gender roles have changed less, it's unclear how deep support for Boric really is among women.

To be sure, Boric has not been exempt of criticism for his past behavior toward woman.

In July, following Boric's victory in a primary, a fellow activist denounced what she said were "acts of violence" involving the leftist standard bearer in 2012, when he headed the student union at the University of Chile. It's unclear what transpired but Boric, who she said acted like a "harassing pig," recently apologized to the woman, who in turn has accused Kast of "unscrupulous and violent" promotion of the incident.

Boric's mother says she's partly to blame for any of her son's lingering machismo.

"I raised him with basically a sexist mentality ... because that's how I was taught too," María Soledad Font said in an interview her home in southern Chile.

But over time, after Boric traveled to Santiago for college and expanded his horizons, he began to shed what she called the "old Gabriel."

"He made it a goal to listen and understand," said Font, showing her son's childhood bedroom — replete with framed soccer jerseys, a photo of Cuban guerrilla leader Ernesto "Che" Guevara and spray-painted slogans from the French Revolution. "That's when he began to see (men and women) are equal in values and talents."

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Goodman reported from Miami. Claudio Monge contributed to this report from Punta Arenas, Chile.

## Can your pet get COVID-19?

By EMMA H. TOBIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Can your pet get COVID-19?

Yes, pets and other animals can get the coronavirus that causes COVID-19, but health officials say the risk of them spreading it to people is low.

Dogs, cats, ferrets, rabbits, otters, hyenas and white-tailed deer are among the animals that have tested positive, in most cases after contracting it from infected people.

While you don't have to worry much about getting COVID-19 from your pets, they should worry about getting it from you. People with confirmed or suspected COVID-19 should avoid contact with pets, farm animals and wildlife, as well as with other people, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"If you wouldn't go near another person because you're sick or you might be exposed, don't go near another animal," says Dr. Scott Weese at Ontario Veterinary College.

Not all infected pets get sick and serious illness is extremely rare. Pets that show symptoms typically get mildly ill, the CDC says.

Some zoos in the U.S. and elsewhere have vaccinated big cats, primates and other animals that are thought to be at risk of getting the virus through contact with people.

This particular coronavirus most likely jumped from animals to humans in the first place, sparking a pandemic because the virus spreads so easily between people. But it does not easily spread from animals to people. Minks are the only known animals to have caught the virus from people and spread it back,

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according to Weese.

Three countries in northern Europe recorded cases of the virus spreading from people to mink on mink farms. The virus circulated among the animals before being passed back to farmworkers.

How easily animals can get and spread the virus might change with different variants, and the best way to prevent the virus from spreading among animals is to control it among people, Weese says.

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

How can I protect myself from the new omicron variant?

How will the world decide when the pandemic is over?

Can at-home COVID-19 tests make holiday gatherings safer?

## Jittery Ukrainian villagers 'fear that a big war will start'

By INNA VARENYTSIA and YURAS KARMANAU Associated Press

NEVELSKE, Ukraine (AP) — Liudmyla Momot wipes away tears as she searches for clothes and household items to salvage from the ruins of her home that was shelled by Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Her village of Nevelske, northwest of the rebel-held city of Donetsk, is only about 3 kilometers (2 miles) from the line of contact between the separatists and the Ukrainian military and has been emptied of all but five people.

Small arms fire frequently is heard in the daytime, giving way to the booms of light artillery and mortar shelling after dusk.

With the bloody conflict now more than seven years old, there are fears in Ukraine and the West that a buildup of armed forces on Russia's side of the border could lead to an invasion or the resumption of full-scale hostilities.

Rebels targeted Nevelske with shelling twice in the last month, damaging or destroying 16 of the village's 50 houses and rattling the handful of nervous residents who remain.

"The worse Ukraine-Russia relations are, the more we simple people are suffering," said 68-year-old Momot, who has worked at a dairy farm all her life.

Now with no home, "who could have imagined that? I was preparing for the winter, stocking up coal and firewood."

After the shell hit her house, Momot fled to a nearby settlement where her son lives. But the anxiety has followed her there.

"We fear that a big war will start. People are scared and packed up their bags," said Momot, who collected some blankets, warm clothes and other items in the debris.

The conflict in the eastern industrial heartland known as the Donbas erupted in April 2014, weeks after Russia annexed the Crimean Peninsula following the ouster of Ukraine's Moscow-friendly former president. Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of supporting the rebels with troops and weapons, but Moscow says that Russians who joined the fight were volunteers acting on their own.

More than 14,000 people have been killed in fighting that has driven more than 2 million people from their homes in the east.

When the conflict began, Nevelske had a population of 286. Now, the five older people who remain in the ruined village collect rainwater for drinking and cooking. Between shipments of humanitarian aid, they rely on eating stale bread.

"We have grown accustomed to the shelling," said 84-year-old Halyna Moroka, who has stayed in Nevelske with her disabled son.

A 2015 peace agreement brokered by France and Germany ended large-scale battles, but frequent skirmishes have continued. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, which monitors the shaky cease-fire, has reported an increasing number of such incidents, with both sides trading the blame for truce violations.

"The security situation along the contact line is still of concern, with a high level of kinetic activity," Mikko Kinnune, the OSCE representative for the group that involves representatives of Ukraine, Russia and the rebels, said earlier this month.

Amid the recent Russian troop buildup, Washington and its allies have warned Moscow that it will pay a high economic price if it attacks Ukraine. Moscow denies having such intentions and accused Ukraine of planning to reclaim control of rebel-held territory, something Kyiv has rejected,

Russian President Vladimir Putin has urged the West to provide guarantees that NATO won't expand to include Ukraine or deploy the alliance's forces and weapons there, calling that a "red line" for Moscow. The U.S. and its allies have refused to make such a pledge, but U.S. President Joe Biden and Putin decided last week to hold talks to discuss Russian concerns.

The geopolitical threats resonate in Nevelske on those few occasions that the village has power, enabling its remaining residents to watch Russian television news.

"We don't want war!" exclaimed 75-year-old Kateryna Shklyar, who shares her fears with her husband, Dmytro. Their daughter and grandchildren live in nearby Krasnohorivka, a Ukrainian-controlled western suburb of Donetsk.

"For how long will this torment last?" asked Shklyar. "It has worn out our souls and hearts. You can't call that life, but we have no place to go."

Humanitarian groups provide basic supplies to Nevelske and other villages and even try to offer housing in safer areas, but their resources are limited.

"I just survive each day, trying to make it to the evening, and my soul aches," said Moroka, who has lost vision in one eye but can't get any medical help.

"We are frightened," she added. "It's really scary to sit here and wait for death. It's horrible!"

Yuras Karmanau reported from Kyiv, Ukraine.

## Pressure builds against doctors peddling false virus claims

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

They have decried COVID-19 as a hoax, promoted unproven treatments and pushed bogus claims about the vaccine, including that the shots magnetize the human body.

The purveyors of this misinformation are not shadowy figures operating in the dark corners of the internet. They are a small but vocal group of doctors practicing medicine in communities around the country.

Now medical boards are under increasing pressure to act. Organizations that advocate for public health have called on them to take a harder line by disciplining the doctors, including potentially revoking their licenses. The push comes as the pandemic enters a second winter and deaths in the U.S. top 800,000.

At least a dozen regulatory boards in states such as Oregon, Rhode Island, Maine and Texas recently issued sanctions against some doctors, but many of the most prolific promoters of COVID-19 falsehoods still have unblemished medical licenses.

"Just because it is physicians, it is no different than if someone called you claiming to be the IRS trying to steal your money," said Brian Castrucci, president and chief executive officer of the de Beaumont Foundation. "It's a scam, and we protect Americans from scams."

Castrucci's organization, which advocates for public health, and No License For Disinformation, which fights false medical information, issued a report Wednesday that highlighted some of the cases. The report emerged a week after the Federation of State Medical Boards released a survey that found that 67% of the boards had seen an increase in complaints about COVID-19 misinformation.

That figure "is a sign of how widespread the issue has become," said Dr. Humayun Chaudhry, president and CEO of the federation.

Dr. Kencee Graves, a physician at the University of Utah hospital in Salt Lake City, said one of her patients decided not to get vaccinated after listening to misinformation from a physician.

"She was led astray" by someone she should have been able to trust, Graves said, describing the patient

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as a "very, very sweet older lady."

The woman later acknowledged her mistake, saying "I realize now I am wrong, but that is who I thought I should listen to."

There is widespread support for cracking down on such doctors, according to a national poll conducted by the de Beaumont Foundation. In the survey of 2,200 adults, 91% of respondents said doctors do not have the right to intentionally spread false information.

But policing doctors is no easy feat for boards that were created long before social media. Their investigations tend to move slowly, taking months or even years, and many of their proceedings are private.

Castrucci said it is time for them to "evolve," but doing so is challenging. This month, Tennessee's medical licensing board removed from its website a recently adopted misinformation policy amid pressure from a GOP state lawmaker and a new law imposing sprawling virus-related restrictions.

Even individual board members have been targeted. In California, the president of the state's medical board, Kristina Lawson, said a group of anti-vaccine activists stalked her at home and followed her to her office last week. She said the people identified themselves as representing America's Frontline Doctors, a group that criticizes the COVID-19 vaccine and spreads misinformation.

The group's leader, Dr. Simone Gold, who was arrested during the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol, tweeted this month to her nearly 390,000 followers that "nurses know that Covid patients are dying from government subsidized hospital protocols (Remdesivir, intubation), NOT from Covid."

Gold remains a licensed physician in California, although her emergency medicine certification lapsed last year. Complaints and investigations are not public in the state, so it is unclear whether she faces any.

In Idaho, the state's medical association got so frustrated with pathologist Dr. Ryan Cole's promotion of the anti-parasite drug ivermectin that it filed a complaint with the state medical board. Susie Keller, the association's chief executive director, said she believed it was the first time the group sought action against one of its own. Many doctors, she explained, are fed up.

The spreading falsehoods have "actually caused our physicians and nurses to be subjected to verbal assaults" by patients who are convinced that the fake information is true, Keller said.

Cole did not respond to a request for comment from The Associated Press, but his work voicemail said that he is "unable to prescribe medications or issue vaccine or mask exemption letters." The voicemail also directed callers to the website of the Front Line COVID-19 Critical Care Alliance, a group that champions ivermectin.

Under Idaho law, all investigations of physicians are conducted in private unless there is a formal hearing. The Washington state medical board, meanwhile, is investigating five complaints about Cole, spokeswoman Stephanie Mason said.

Investigating misinformation is "very challenging in that a lot of action isn't documented," she wrote in an email. Many examples "happen quietly in an office."

In Ohio, the state's medical board automatically renewed the license of Sherri Tenpenny in September after the Cleveland-based osteopathic doctor testified this summer before a state House Health Committee that COVID-19 vaccines cause magnetism.

Vaccine recipients "can put a key on their forehead; it sticks," Tenpenny said.

Jerica Stewart, a spokesperson for the state's medical board, said that a recent license renewal doesn't prevent the board from taking action.

"Making a false, fraudulent, deceptive or misleading statement" is grounds for discipline, Stewart said.

In Texas, Dr. Stella Immanuel appeared in a video that promoted the anti-malarial drug hydroxychloroquine. "You don't need masks. There is a cure."

In October, the Texas Medical Board ordered her to pay \$500 and improve her consent procedures because it found she had prescribed hydroxychloroquine to a COVID-19 patient without adequate explanation of the potential health consequences, records show.

Immanuel did not respond to a Facebook message from the AP, and the medical practice where she works did not respond to an email.

Dr. Nick Sawyer, who heads No License For Disinformation, described the action against Immanuel as

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a "small slap on the wrist" and accused the nation's medical boards of "not doing their job of protecting public health."

He said he has seen the damage firsthand as he practices emergency medicine in Sacramento, California. He said a diabetic patient in her 70s insisted just this month that she didn't have COVID-19 despite testing positive, then demanded ivermectin and signed out against medical advice when the drug was denied.

"She said, 'If I have COVID, you gave it to me,'" he recalled, blaming the woman's resistance on misinformation-spreading doctors. "It is killing us."

## Meals from a box hold a helping of nostalgia, too

By TRACEE M. HERBAUGH Associated Press

My children had no idea a salad could come in a cardboard box on a grocery store shelf until I took them to buy Suddenly Salad.

The Betty Crocker meal had been a staple at my Grandma's house, where I was raised. And the trio of noodles, dried red peppers and flavorful seasoning packet brought me back there as instantly as the Suddenly Salad was made.

I hadn't consumed boxed convenience foods since I was a child, but grief over my grandmother's death before the pandemic caused me to make the special trip to the store.

Food and grief have been inextricably tied for millennia. We take food to families who have lost a loved one. We serve food at lunches after funerals. We "eat our feelings." During the coronavirus lockdown, with time on my hands after a job layoff, I found myself obsessing about things over which I have no control. At night, I lay awake ruminating about how much I hated that Grandma was dead.

Suddenly Salad and its ilk, I thought, might assuage the pain by conjuring feelings of closeness to Grandma. It might help maintain her connection to my children.

Boxed foods aren't especially cool anymore, but they do have a market. For women of my grandmother's generation, they were a time-saving miracle. And for anyone who grew up in the latter half of the 20th century, they can evoke memories and nostalgia.

### FROM FARM TO TOWN

Grandma didn't cook from scratch much, despite coming of age during the Great Depression on a homestead in the southeastern corner of Colorado.

Her family had a huge vegetable garden and, as a child, she prepared everything from the very basics. Nothing was wasted. If butter was needed, it was churned. Cows for milking. If poultry was on the dinner menu, Grandma would break the neck of an unlucky chicken, then scald it in boiling water to release its feathers.

But sometime in the 1960s, Grandma abandoned those old school methods, opting instead for ready-to-eat meals from a box. Dinner, cakes, sides. The shift coincided with her taking a job outside the home.

For 25 years, she worked a physically demanding job as a grocery store cashier. After standing on the cold-tiled floor for eight-hour stretches, the last thing she wanted to do was stand in the kitchen and cook.

In this, Grandma mirrored the women's movement of the time.

### A MOVE TOWARD CONVENIENCE

"After the war, women were moving out of the countryside and into town," says Jenny Barker-Devine, a professor of American agricultural and rural women's history at Illinois College. "They lived through the Depression, through the war, there was a lot of deprivation, and they didn't want to cook anymore."

Betty Crocker (founded 100 years ago and now owned by General Mills) was no home chef but an invented marketing scheme, notes Leah Lizarondo, entrepreneur in residence at Carnegie Mellon University.

Boxed meals are relatively cheap, last a long time on shelves and taste good enough, she says. "At that point between the '50s and the '70s, women started working more and convenience was important. That primary role of homemaker didn't decrease for women."

### THE NEXT GENERATION

When I was growing up in the '80s and '90s, boxed foods were on the menu daily. Ground beef with

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cheesy noodles, broccoli cheese soup from a packet, and mashed potatoes were regulars in our cupboards. We paid no mind to sodium levels or if these "convenience foods" contained preservatives.

After I left Grandma's nest and went to college in Boulder, Colorado, I experienced my own shift in eating behaviors.

I started shopping at farmers' markets and buying organic. I gave up meat most of the time and never drank soda. I became interested in the old-timey methods of cooking, and had Grandma show me how to can fresh tomato sauce.

As an opinionated young person, I thought Grandma's reliance on boxed foods was silly, even tacky. Why would she resort to a box when her culinary skills were unrivaled?

But her decision to shun elaborate cooking allowed her to have a job and tend to things she saw as more important, like raising her granddaughter. Now, instead of questioning her actions, I looked inward. If I enjoyed the experience of eating a Suddenly Salad or any other box of food, who's to care?

## A TRIP TO THE GROCERY STORE

After Grandma died, I wasn't sure if Suddenly Salad and other boxed foods from my childhood were still popular. They are.

Hamburger Helper has enough pop-culture cachet that the New York Times cooking app offers a home-made version of it, with caramelized onion and white wine.

I returned home from the store not only with Suddenly Salad but also with boxes of Tuna Helper and a Confetti Betty Crocker cake. My husband watched in disbelief as I unpacked the bag. He never expected his organic-evangelist wife to bring home a spread quite like this.

The novelty of these foods was not lost on my kids. My 10-year-old son, a pickier eater than his 5-year-old sister, loved all of it. But about 20 minutes after lunch, he complained of a stomachache. I, meanwhile, couldn't drink enough water after all the salt I'd consumed.

Even though I wouldn't go back to eating these boxed foods regularly, revisiting them did fill me with joy. More than anything, I remembered my childhood with Grandma, loving and sharing that instant pasta salad from a box.

"The foods of our childhood are the most powerful, they have a big pull on us," says Laura Shapiro, a food historian and author of "Something from the Oven: Reinventing Dinner in 1950s America."

"Memory and nostalgia and love are far more important than sweet, salt, umami and whatever else."

And I'll happily do another boxed foods meal with my kids, in memory of my Grandma and her cooking.

"As you move through this life and this world you change things slightly, you leave marks behind, however small," the late Anthony Bourdain put it wisely. "Most of the time, those marks — on your body or on your heart — are beautiful."

## How brothers in arms plotted theft, sale of US Army weaponry

By JAMES LAPORTA and JASON DEAREN Associated Press

Packed with rifles and explosives, the SUV hurtled down a Florida interstate beneath bright blue autumn skies, passing other motorists with little notice.

It was November 2018, and the driver, Tyler Sumlin, was uncomfortable. Clammy. The husky, bearded former U.S. Army soldier was getting a cold, and understandably tense: He was transporting a platoon's worth of stolen rifles, enough C4 to blow up his car and those around him, a live hand grenade.

He would recall thinking, "Is it too late to turn around?"

Riding shotgun was Sumlin's military blood brother, Sgt. 1st Class Jason Jarvis, a soldier on active-duty from Fort Bragg's 18th Ordnance Company in North Carolina — Sumlin's old unit.

The two men, who'd been close since they served in Afghanistan, tried to distract themselves with idle road-trip chatter. Their wives, war stories, favorite movies.

A few months earlier, Jarvis had reached out to ask if Sumlin had interest in making some money. Jarvis was looking to sell stolen military equipment from an armory at Bragg.

Sumlin said he might be able to find a buyer.



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Now they were headed to El Paso, Texas, to sell the stolen weapons. The two men had heard from contacts that the customers were taking the haul into Mexico.

In a series of stories, The Associated Press has detailed how the U.S. military has a problem with missing and stolen guns and explosives, and how some weapons have been used in domestic crime.

But the inside story of how two men who'd forged a deep bond amid the violence of the battlefield attempted to sell stolen Army weapons reveals another kind of threat: an organized group of soldiers and veterans taking advantage of flaws in the military's system to make fast money.

This story is based on extensive interviews, text messages associated with a federal criminal case, private Facebook group messages, court records and documents from military investigative proceedings.

While information about Sumlin and Jarvis has come to light before, this account offers new details about a case that left other soldiers appalled and enraged — betrayed, they believed, by two of their own.

A photograph captures a day in 2009 as Sumlin and Jarvis sat together on a rock in Kunar Province, Afghanistan. A rifle rests on Sumlin's lap, and he wears a tactical vest, his T-shirt sleeves cut off to expose a farmer's tan and tattoo on his left shoulder. Jarvis is off to his side, his rifle in hand.

The two young men had become brothers amid the breakneck tempo of wartime Afghanistan. Sumlin and Jarvis specialized in explosive ordnance disposal, or EOD, the kind of work — with its stifling, hulking bomb suits — given the Hollywood treatment in "The Hurt Locker."

Their work eliminating improvised explosive devices set by the Taliban was nonstop, and gave them little time to process what they saw, heard and smelled. It was a pressure cooker of a job inside a pressure cooker, intense even in the high stakes world of the battlefield. They stashed traumatic experiences and images deep inside themselves, and their comradery helped blunt the stress.

When they returned stateside both struggled with adjusting to the slower pace of life. Like many soldiers, they found some balm in the friendship of others who'd seen what they'd seen.

Like many military subcultures, the tight-knit EOD community has its own code of conduct, ethics and language. Sumlin joined a private Facebook group where the EOD community commiserated, argued and pranked one another. They also held each other to account, debating whether a member's conduct violated the brotherhood's code.

Sumlin left the Army in December 2017, but deployed again to do bomb disposal with a private defense contracting company.

Meanwhile, Jarvis remained in the Army. At Fort Bragg, home to some of the Army's most elite units, Jarvis worked in an armory. And that gave him access to a wealth of military firearms, parts and other equipment such as night vision goggles and explosives.

Inside the Fort Bragg armory, Jarvis took photographs of weaponry — and then he stole it, and set out to sell it.

His buddy, Sumlin, sent the photos and an inventory list of the pilfered weapons and explosives to an accomplice who called himself "Mr. Anderson." Anderson, a former Army combat engineer who had served in both Iraq and Afghanistan, was one of several other soldiers or veterans connected to the scheme.

In May 2018, Sumlin and Jarvis began mining their contacts to offload the haul. They would find a promising lead with the help of a man identified as "Evan," who they hadn't met but who said he had connections with a willing buyer.

"Inventory: NVG-13, Aimpoint-8, ACOG-18, PEQ2A-10, DD Rail-24, DD-Barrel-15, Various Troy toys," Anderson texted Evan, including Jarvis' photos. The letters and numbers described a litany of arms and night vision goggles, rifle optics and lasers designed for aiming, and rifle parts.

"Wow, items are good, any idea on price if I took everything?" Evan texted back.

"I'll let you know as soon as I hear back from him," Anderson wrote, referring to Sumlin.

Over the next few days, the conversation continued, copies of messages show. Anderson and Evan complained about the weapons' high prices. They sounded paranoid when they discussed dealing with

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amateur gun dealers like Sumlin and Jarvis, and feared they would attract attention from law enforcement.

"As soon as he named his price (for the gunsights) I thought he was joking since they're definitely USED," Anderson wrote. "I'm not sure if it's his first time or not. But it's the last time I ask around for (Sumlin)."

After a few days, Evan said he'd found a buyer who wanted it. All of it.

What Anderson didn't know is that Evan was a longtime confidential informant working with Homeland Security Investigations, an arm of the Department of Homeland Security.

In his communication with Sumlin and Anderson, Evan said, he represented a buyer who claimed to be connected to narcotraffickers. (Sumlin has denied that the weapons were meant to be sold to drugrunners.)

"I didn't know (the buyer) was south of Texas," Anderson wrote.

"Yep he goes between Texas and Mexico all the time," Evan wrote back.

"I wouldn't sell anything to anyone down there," Anderson replied.

"Lol ... well he has always been a cash buyer without question and never any issues at all," Evan responded. "It sounds like they've made a deal."

"I hope so. They still have to meet and conclude," wrote Anderson.

By mid-November 2018, Jarvis had rented a Chevy Tahoe SUV in North Carolina and drove the stolen cache south. He met Sumlin in Inverness, a small town in central Florida's lakes region, so they could prepare the weapons for sale, according to a federal criminal complaint.

Sumlin would say he and Jarvis had initially sought \$250,000 for the firearms and explosives. After some back-and-forth, they settled on a much lower price: \$75,000.

It seemed a paltry amount, considering the risk, but the weapons sale may have been just one in which they were involved. According to the Army Criminal Investigation Division's case file, Jarvis and Sumlin would later tell agents about "criminal transactions" in Colorado, North Carolina, Florida, Georgia and Texas. In the document, another soldier confessed to stealing multiple rifle optic systems and a bomb suit, which were given to Sumlin.

In Florida, Jarvis and Sumlin cleaned the firearms to remove their fingerprints. They also paid to have some parts modified to fit the rifles. With the cache assembled, cleaned, packed in storage containers and loaded for delivery, the men got into the SUV for the 24-hour drive to Texas.

Arriving in El Paso, they pulled into a truck stop the morning of Nov. 14, 2018. A man they thought was the buyers' contact, known as Andy, waited with some others. They told Sumlin and Jarvis to follow them to a nearby warehouse — and into the trap.

There, the agents confirmed that the two men were indeed carrying multiple firearms, military equipment and C4 plastic explosives. A SWAT team pounced, arrested them and secured the cache.

Homeland Security agents seized more than 30 firearms; several blocks of C4; a hand grenade; shaped charges; body armor; night vision devices; binoculars; ammunition; lasers and magazines. In Mexico, where drug traffickers have fought openly, the equipment could unleash carnage.

Yet the weapons recovered did not account for all that was missing from Bragg's armory. According to the report by Army criminal investigators, the items stolen between Sumlin, Jarvis and their accomplices between 2014 and 2018 were valued at close to \$180,000. But the U.S. government only recovered roughly \$26,000 worth.

The Army referred questions to Homeland Security Investigations, which initially promised to discuss the case with AP, then canceled the interview and, later, did not respond to written questions.

Jarvis and Sumlin were indicted on eight different federal charges, including conspiracy and gunrunning.

"Holy hell they had to be planning a crazy something for sure," Evan texted a Homeland Security agent.

"Boss is extremely happy ... It was a good hit," the agent replied. "Bad guys thought we were narco traffickers from Mexico ... Using their weapons against troops."

Sumlin posted bail and returned to his Florida home to pick up the pieces. He faced a possible 70 years in prison, and struggled under the weight of PTSD.

He logged onto the EOD community's private Facebook group page and saw a message directed at him.

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"Dude is this you?" an EOD brother asked.

There on the page for everyone to see was a copy of his indictment, which had not been made public or attracted any media attention.

"Yup," Sumlin typed.

"Mistakes were made," a fellow EOD member responded, glibly.

"A lot of them," Sumlin wrote.

In the months after the arrests, word had swirled in the small EOD community about fellow soldiers who'd tried to sell firearms and explosives. But the Army sent no official press release and there were no news reports. The chatter was dismissed as a rumor traded among troops.

The indictment confirmed the rumor, and some of Sumlin's brethren were livid. Explosive ordnance disposal technicians work on the border amid Mexican drug-related violence. What if the weapons had ended up with narcos? They might have been used against the good guys.

"Bro, (obscenity) you AND your service. You're a piece of (obscenity)," wrote one EOD group member. "You betrayed everyone you ever worked with as soon as you tried to sell weapons and explosives to a cartel."

In response, Sumlin indicated there had been six others involved in the conspiracy. Pressed to identify them, he refused.

Why, asked another community member, was he protecting the other conspirators?

"I'd like to hope they learned from what's going to happen to me," Sumlin explained. He said he didn't think any of them had been arrested, and he wanted to keep it that way. He hoped his and Jarvis' punishment would dissuade them from future arms dealings.

For many in the EOD community, Sumlin's mea culpa and excuses about needing money were not enough. He had crossed a line by selling items that could have killed one of their own.

Sumlin and Jarvis had faced decades in prison, but both reached deals with federal prosecutors. They pleaded guilty to attempting to smuggle goods from the United States.

The other seven counts were dropped. The maximum term was now 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine.

But they didn't even get that.

Each was sentenced to five years' probation, and Jarvis was ordered to mental health counseling and required to take prescribed medication.

Jarvis and Anderson did not return messages seeking comment. Sumlin declined to be interviewed for this story, but said in a 2019 interview that he planned to finish his probation and complete a psychology degree.

"I want to try and help veterans that have lost their way and try to help veterans transition out of the military and back into civilian life ... people that have gone through the issues of losing that rush ... that spark in life," he said.

The investigators, meanwhile, were incensed. They speculated that the federal judge was moved by the defendants' service records and claims of post-traumatic stress disorder.

"I don't mind getting my ass kicked in court fair and square ... but when they take a plea agreement and admit to everything we charged him with ... I just don't know what to say," a federal agent wrote to Evan.

"It's like if they pulled over (Timothy) McVeigh on the way to Oklahoma City ... and gave him probation because he didn't actually blow up the building," Evan responded.

As for Sumlin's insistence that drug traffickers were never discussed when he was negotiating the deal with undercover agents, Evan is adamant: The veteran was lying.

"They definitely planned to steal the weapons, the C4, the blasting caps and everything and they were going to sell it to the Mexican cartel, period," Evan told the AP.

The legal record is unclear. Sumlin told federal officials he believed the weapons were going to be exported to Mexico. But the federal complaint does not mention drug cartels.

To Evan, Sumlin and Jarvis are terrorists. If they were Muslim or Black, he said, they wouldn't have got-

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ten off so easily.

"It was very frustrating that so many risked their lives, so many undercover people. There were all kinds of agencies involved and this is the outcome?" Evan wrote a Homeland Security agent. "There's other guys who got much worse for much less."

LaPorta reported from Boca Raton, Florida; contact him at <https://twitter.com/JimLaPorta>. Dearen reported from New York; contact him at <https://twitter.com/JHDearen>. Randy Herschaft in New York contributed.

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

## Young Americans motivated to make change: AP-NORC, MTV poll

By FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — There are plenty of reasons for Sebastian Garcia to feel downbeat about the future. After his family immigrated from Mexico, he was raised on a farm in northwest Texas, where he says there aren't many racial slurs he hasn't heard. When the now-24-year-old graduated from college, he decided to become an educator. But the first few years of his teaching career have been upended by the coronavirus pandemic, which forced his public school system to close for months.

Garcia and his peers, meanwhile, have had to navigate the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression, weighed down by student loans that have made affordable housing and access to healthcare out of reach.

Despite the challenges of what Garcia describes as the endless pursuit of the American Dream, he says he's confident that better things are ahead. He's part of a broader trend among millennials and Generation Z Americans who say they are more likely to be optimistic about the future and their ability to create change than their older counterparts, according to a new poll from MTV and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

The poll measured attitudes among Gen Z Americans ages 13 through 24, as well as 25- to 40-year-old millennials and 41- to 56-year-old Gen X Americans.

"I know that as long as there are people willing to work hard and push through the hard times, you can persevere," Garcia said. "Me and my family are proven facts of that."

The poll finds 66% of Gen Z and 63% of millennial Americans think their generation is motivated to make positive change, compared with 56% of Gen X Americans. Those generations are also more likely than Generation X to feel they can impact what the government does, with 44% of Gen Z and 42% of millennials saying they can at least a moderate amount, compared with only 31% of Gen X.

For Jonathan Belden, 29, being optimistic about the future and potential for positive change is necessary as a father of five.

"Despite the challenges, in many regards, the U.S. is the only place where we have as much of an opportunity without hindrance," the New Mexico resident said. "And I want my kids to grow up in a place where they can succeed at whatever they do."

While members of all three of these generations have mixed views of the state of the country and the future, the poll shows Gen Z and millennials are not as negative about the world that their generation is facing.

Despite the fact that millennials, some of whom are now creeping toward middle age, are reaching milestones like marriage, parenthood and homeownership later in life than previous generations, close to half of them reported that their standard of living is better than their parents' at the same age. For Gen Z, about half likewise think their standard of living is better than what their parents had, while just about a quarter think it is worse.

Additionally, about half of Gen Z and millennials say the world they face is worse than other generations, compared with about 6 in 10 Gen X.

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Along with less pessimism and motivation to create change, many Gen Z and millennials put stock in progressive policies aimed at race, class and gender disparities.

Roughly half of Gen Z and millennials say they favor a universal basic income, while about a quarter are opposed. Among Gen X, about a third are in favor and roughly as many are against.

About 3 in 10 Gen Z and millennials favor reducing funding for law enforcement agencies, while about 4 in 10 are opposed. Opposition is much higher among Gen X, with 56% against.

And while few across the three generations oppose prohibiting workplace discrimination on the basis of gender identity, millennials and Gen Z are more likely than Gen X to support that policy.

Despite a clear divide in policy attitudes, Gen Z and millennials are more optimistic than Gen X that Americans can come together and work out their political differences (45% and 41%, compared with 33%).

"Where I find the most hope is when I talk to people and we find the common ground," Belden said. "When that happens, even if there are differences, it helps me to feel like there is actually good in people and in the world and that it's not going to hell in a handbasket."

Garcia agreed, saying that while the past few years have been hard, "I know eventually one day, maybe not today, maybe not next year, but we will eventually overcome it."

The AP-NORC poll of 3,764 teens ages 13-17 and adults ages 18-56 was conducted Sept. 1-19 using a combined sample of interviews from NORC's probability-based AmeriSpeak Panel, which is designed to be representative of the U.S. population, and interviews from opt-in online panels. The margin of sampling error for all respondents is plus or minus 3.3 percentage points. The AmeriSpeak panel is recruited randomly using address-based sampling methods, and respondents later were interviewed online or by phone.

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 17, the 351st day of 2021. There are 14 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 17, 1944, the U.S. War Department announced it was ending its policy of excluding people of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast.

On this date:

In 1777, France recognized American independence.

In 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright of Dayton, Ohio, conducted the first successful manned powered-airplane flights near Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, using their experimental craft, the Wright Flyer.

In 1933, in the inaugural NFL championship football game, the Chicago Bears defeated the New York Giants, 23-21, at Wrigley Field.

In 1969, the U.S. Air Force closed its Project "Blue Book" by concluding there was no evidence of extra-terrestrial spaceships behind thousands of UFO sightings.

In 1975, Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme was sentenced in Sacramento, California, to life in prison for her attempt on the life of President Gerald R. Ford. (She was paroled in Aug. 2009.)

In 1979, Arthur McDuffie, a Black insurance executive, was fatally injured after leading police on a chase with his motorcycle in Miami. (Four white police officers accused of beating McDuffie were later acquitted, sparking riots.)

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney (muhl-ROO'-nee) and Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari (sah-LEE'-nuhs deh gohr-TAHR'-ee) signed the North American Free Trade Agreement in separate ceremonies. (After President Donald Trump demanded a new deal, the three countries signed a replacement agreement in 2018.)

In 2000, President-elect George W. Bush named Stanford professor Condoleezza Rice his national security adviser and Alberto Gonzales to the White House counsel's job, the same day Bush was named Time magazine's Person of the Year.

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In 2001, Marines raised the Stars and Stripes over the long-abandoned American Embassy in Kabul, Afghanistan.

In 2007, Iran received its first nuclear fuel from Russia, paving the way for the startup of its reactor.

In 2014, the United States and Cuba restored diplomatic relations, sweeping away one of the last vestiges of the Cold War.

In 2018, a report from the Senate intelligence committee found that Russia's political disinformation campaign on U.S. social media was more far-reaching than originally thought, with troll farms working to discourage Black voters and "blur the lines between reality and fiction" to help elect Donald Trump.

Ten years ago: North Korean leader Kim Jong Il died after more than a decade of iron rule; he was 69, according to official records, but some reports indicated he was 70.

Five years ago: President-elect Donald Trump said he intended to nominate Mick Mulvaney, a conservative Republican congressman from South Carolina, to be the White House budget director. Dr. Henry Heimlich (HYM'-lihk), the surgeon who created the life-saving Heimlich maneuver for choking victims, died in Cincinnati at age 96.

One year ago: A government advisory panel endorsed a second COVID-19 vaccine, paving the way for the shot from Moderna and the National Institutes of Health to be added to the U.S. vaccination campaign. California reported 52,000 new COVID-19 cases in a single day – equal to what the entire country had been averaging two months earlier – as the state emerged as the latest epicenter of the U.S. outbreak. French President Emmanuel Macron tested positive for COVID-19 following a week in which he met with numerous European leaders. Federal authorities expressed increased alarm about a long-undetected intrusion into U.S. and other computer systems that officials suspected were carried out by Russian hackers. Russian President Vladimir Putin rejected allegations that the Kremlin was behind the poisoning of opposition leader Alexei Navalny, and accused U.S. intelligence agencies of fomenting the claims.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Armin Mueller-Stahl is 91. Pope Francis is 85. Singer-actor Tommy Steele is 85. Actor Bernard Hill is 77. Actor Ernie Hudson is 76. Comedian-actor Eugene Levy is 75. Actor Marilyn Hasset is 74. Actor Wes Studi is 74. Pop musician Jim Bonfanti (The Raspberries) is 73. Actor Joel Brooks is 72. Rock singer Paul Rodgers is 72. R&B singer Wanda Hutchinson Vaughn (The Emotions) is 70. Actor Bill Pullman is 68. Actor Barry Livingston is 68. Country singer Sharon White is 68. Producer-director-writer Peter Farrelly is 65. Rock musician Mike Mills (R.E.M.) is 63. Pop singer Sarah Dallin (Bananarama) is 60. Country singer Tracy Byrd is 55. Country musician Duane Propes is 55. Actor Laurie Holden is 52. DJ Homicide (Sugar Ray) is 51. Actor Sean Patrick Thomas is 51. Actor Claire Forlani is 50. Pop-rock musician Eddie Fisher (OneRepublic) is 48. Actor Sarah Paulson is 47. Actor Marissa Ribisi is 47. Actor Giovanni Ribisi is 47. Actor Milla Jovovich (YO'-vuh-vich) is 46. Singer Bree Sharp is 46. Singer-songwriter Ben Goldwasser (MGMT) is 39. Rock singer Mikky Ekko is 38. Actor Shannon Woodward is 37. Actor Emma Bell is 35. Actor Vanessa Zima is 35. Rock musician Taylor York (Paramore) is 32. Actor Graham Rogers is 31. Actor-singer Nat Wolff is 27.