

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

Monday, Dec. 27

6 p.m.: Boys Basketball at Jamestown College Classic (Harold Newman Arena), Groton Area vs. Kindred, N.D.

Thursday, Dec. 30

9:30 a.m.: Wrestling at Webster

Friday, Dec. 31

Girls Basketball at Webster. C game at 11 a.m. followed by JV and then varsity

Monday, Jan. 4

School resumes

Basketball Double Header at Warner. Girls JV at 4 p.m. followed by Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity.

5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling Tournament at Groton.

Thursday, Jan. 6

6 p.m.: Wrestling Tri-angular at Groton with Redfield and Webster

Friday, Jan. 7

Penguin Classic Debate on-line

5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling at Milbank

Girls Basketball hosts Sisseton with JV at 6 p.m. and varsity to follow

Saturday, Jan. 8

Groton Robotics Tournament, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Penguin Classic Debate on-line

Girls Basketball Classic at Redfield

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

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

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

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Which Is the World's Highest Vineyard?



Pure Land & Super-High Altitude Vineyard in Cai Na Xiang, Xushui County of Lhasa, Tibet is the highest vineyard in the world. It is located 3563.31 meters above sea level.

Where Is the World's Highest Vineyard?

It is one of the world's most extreme vineyards and is owned by Rong Shun Biotechnology. It set the Guinness world record for the highest vineyard beating its close competitor Altura Maxima vineyard in Argentina's Salta province which was believed to be the world's highest vineyard.

What Are the Types of Grapes Planted in Tibetan Plateau?

The Tibetan vineyard is planted with eleven varieties of grapes including Vidal, Muscat, and the Bein Bing Hong, the indigenous variety and it is one of the highest vineyards in the world. Viticulture has been practiced in 67 hectares of Xushui County from the year 2012. The soil and weather are perfect for vine plantation.

How Do Vine Plants Grow in High Altitudes?

From what we learned, the vine grows incredibly well at high altitudes like the Tibetan plateau. However, there are a few challenges that viticulturists face. Falling temperatures, drought during spring and sandstorms during winter are a few of the challenges they have to overcome. But the viticulturists plan and follow counter methods like dry farming in spring, late picking and special irrigation systems imported from Israel to minimize the effects of natural calamities.

Why Does Altitude Matter in Wine Production?

In high altitudes, the temperature tends to drop by one degree for every 600 meters elevation. This affects how the grapes taste in the world's most extreme vineyards in the hill region. The temperature is cool at night so the grapes become more acidic when compared to the grapes grown in tropical regions. Wine with more acidity is one of the preferred qualities and that's why the labels in the wine bottles mention the altitude level of the vineyard from which the grapes were used in the wine-making.

Although Tibetan wine is not world-famous it is part of the culture and Tibetans have wine to keep their body warm as a custom during festivals.

Ron Shun Biotechnology has plans to expand its vine plantations with the help of the government and start wine tourism with the intention of creating more jobs in the locality.

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Groton Prairie Mixed

Dec. 22 Team Standings: Chipmunks 3, Cheetahs 3, Foxes 3, Shih Tzus 1, Coyotes 1, Jackelopes 1

Men's High Games: Brad Waage 233, Mike Siegler 224, Brad Larson 205

Women's High Games: Lori Giedt 176, Darci Spanier 171, Vicki Walter 169

Men's High Series: Brad Waage 579, Mike Siegler 574, Brad Larson 572

Women's High Series: Vicki Walter 498, Michelle Johnson 458, Darci Spanier 458, Lori Giedt 452

November Gaming Up 30.38%

DEADWOOD, S.D. (12/23/21) - According to statistics released yesterday by the South Dakota Commission on Gaming, Deadwood's November gaming handle was up 30.38 percent over November of 2020, despite a slight decrease in sports wagering handle from the previous month; with slot machine handle increasing by 29.20 percent when compared to November 2020. The table game handle increased by 36.39 percent when compared to 2020 November's table game handle. Deadwood gaming operators rewarded players with \$1,398,358 in "free-play" for the month of November, leaving taxable adjusted gross revenues of \$10,265,947 for November of 2021. Deadwood's November YTD revenues are up 37.20% over 2020 and up 31.50% over 2019, the last full year of gaming revenues.

"The perfect fall weather coupled with an outstanding event and concert series lineup came together to set a record for Deadwood gaming in November," said Mike Rodman, executive director of the Deadwood Gaming Association. "Also, the ability to wager on your favorite sporting event has brought new sports enthusiasts to Deadwood."

Deadwood's sports wagering operators look forward to being able to offer expanded wagering options beginning December 31, on action recently taken by the South Dakota Commission on Gaming.

Locke on Mitchell Tech President's List

Mitchell- A total of 320 students at Mitchell Technical College have been placed on the Fall Semester 2021 President's List, according to MTC President Mark Wilson. To be named to the list, students must earn a term GPA of at least 3.5 on a 4.0 scale and be registered for at least 12 credit hours of academic work during the semester.

Included on the Fall 2021 President's List is Wyatt Locke of Groton.

South Dakota State Agencies Launch Updated South Dakota Truck Info Website

PIERRE, S.D. – The South Dakota Department of Transportation (DOT), in collaboration with the South Dakota Department of Public Safety (DPS) and South Dakota Department of Revenue (DOR), officially launched a major update to the SDTruckInfo website. The website is a central location for South Dakota trucking information, including Commercial Driver Licensing (CDL); special load permits; emergency notices for the trucking industry; legal weights and sizes for loads; and rules and regulations for interstate, intrastate, and agricultural carriers.

“This launch represents a major upgrade to the current system,” said Dave Huft, Intelligent Transportation Systems Program Manager for the DOT. “The website is a true expression of the state’s commitment to safety, efficiency, convenience for the trucking industry, the traveling public, and the state economy.”

“The website update is partially funded by grant from the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration,” said Highway Patrol Capt. John Broers, who leads the Patrol’s Motor Carriers Division. “The website provides a one-stop portal to access vital information for motor carriers to operate lawfully within the state of South Dakota. The newly designed website is better organized, has more content, and provides easier navigation for our users.”

Users can also access contact information for South Dakota agencies and click on direct links to South Dakota’s Automated Permitting System, SD511 travel information, other states’ motor carrier agencies, and the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration.

“One of the newest features is a searchable electronic copy of the completely updated 2022 South Dakota Commercial and Agricultural Vehicle Handbook,” said Huft. “We are excited to offer the electronic version of the new handbook in addition to the published hard copy, which will be available from SDDOT, SD Highway Patrol, SDDOR, and county treasurers in January 2022.”

The website <https://sdtruckinfo.sd.gov/> is jointly maintained by the South Dakota Departments of Transportation, Public Safety, and Revenue.

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Paper Reading Time

The Groton Area student section put up their papers during the introduction of the Redfield players. (Photo by Braden Kucker)

South Dakota State Parks Celebrate The New Year

PIERRE, S.D. – South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks (GFP) will offer free, guided hikes in six state parks on New Year's Day as part of America's State Parks First Day Hikes initiative in all 50 states.

America's State Parks First Day Hikes offer individuals and families an opportunity to begin the New Year rejuvenating and connecting with the outdoors by taking a healthy hike on Jan. 1 at a state park close to home. First Day Hikes offer a great way to get outside, exercise, enjoy nature and welcome the New Year with friends and family.

The First Day Hikes are part of the national effort to get people outdoors and into our parks. First Day Hikes are a great way to cure cabin fever and burn off those extra holiday calories by starting off the New Year with an invigorating walk or hike in one of our beautiful state parks.

In South Dakota, hikes will be offered at the following locations:

Big Sioux Recreation Area near Brandon, 2 p.m. CST. Info: 605-582-7243

Custer State Park, 8 a.m. MST, pre-registration required. Info/register: 605-225-4515

Good Earth State Park near Sioux Falls, 2 p.m. CST. Info: 605-213-1036

Hartford Beach State Park near Corona, 12 p.m. CST. Info: 605-432-6374

Lewis and Clark Recreation Area near Yankton, 1 p.m. CST. Info: 605-668-2985

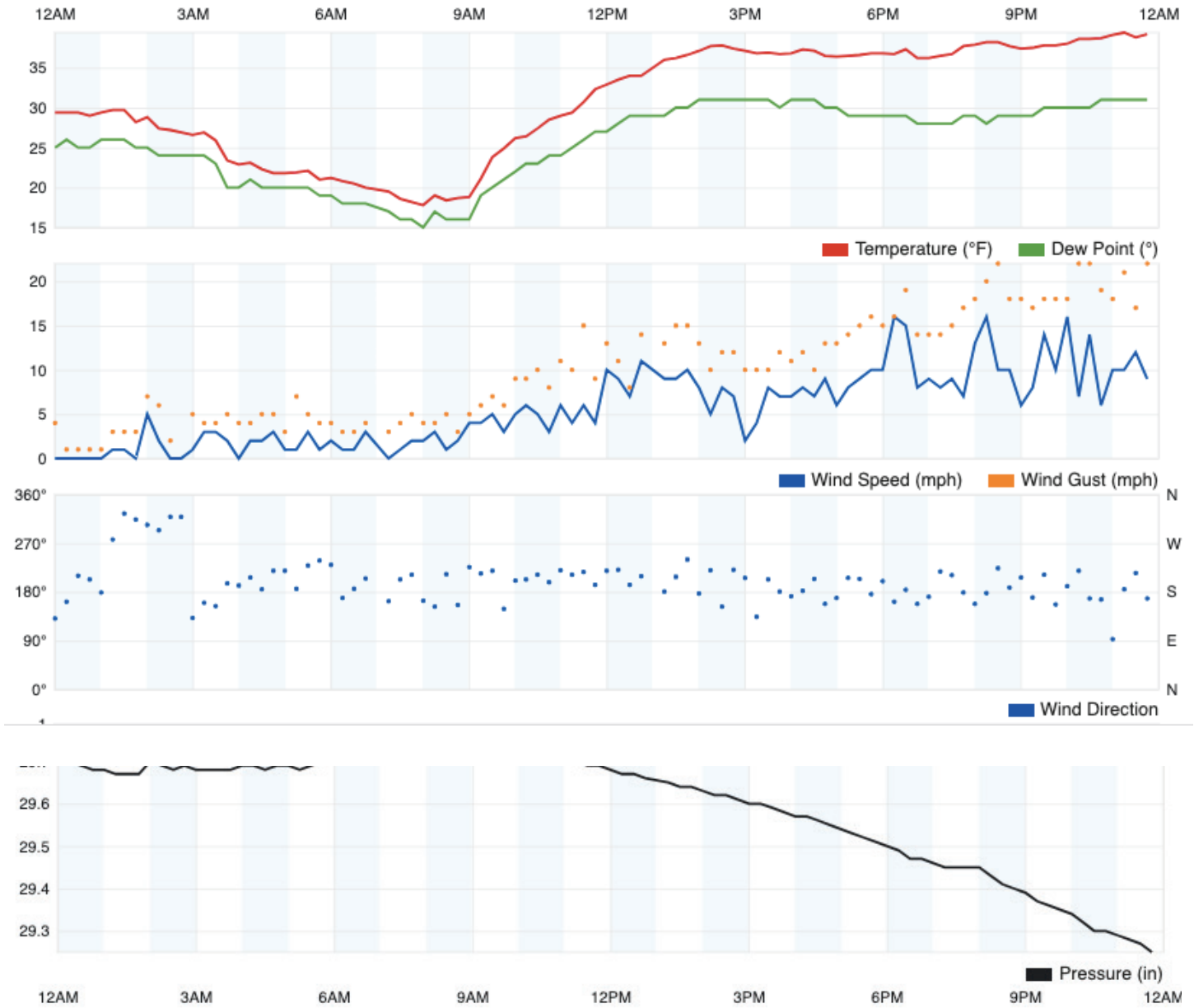
Oakwood Lakes State Park near Bruce, 2 p.m. CST Info: 605-627-5441

First Day Hikes originated more than two decades ago at the Blue Hills Reservation, a state park in Milton, Mass. The program was launched to promote both healthy lifestyles throughout the year and year-round recreation at state parks. Last year marked the first time all 50 state park systems sponsored First Day Hikes, offering 400 hikes nationwide.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Christmas Day	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Sunny and Breezy	Partly Cloudy then Slight Chance Snow	Snow Likely	Slight Chance Snow then Mostly Cloudy	Slight Chance Snow then Chance Snow
High: 42 °F ↓	Low: 9 °F	High: 12 °F	Low: 1 °F	High: 24 °F

What

A system is expected to bring **light snow** to north central and northeast parts of South Dakota, and west central Minnesota on Saturday. Some pockets of mixed precipitation is also possible.

When

Early Saturday morning through late Saturday afternoon. More rounds of light snow and mixed precipitation remain in the forecast Sunday through early next week.

Impacts

Some reduction in visibility when snow is falling. Driving times could be impacted, taking a bit longer to get to your destination.

Uncertainty

Moderate to high confidence on timing. Lower confidence on snow amounts.

Light Christmas Snow



Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Valid Sat 12:00AM through Sat 6:00PM CST
Issued Dec 24, 2021 3:25 AM CST

Location	Percent Chance
McIntosh	75%
Eureka	76%
Britton	80%
Wheaton	74%
Mobridge	65%
Sisseton	65%
Aberdeen	58%
Ortonville	31%
Eagle Butte	12%
Gossysburg	13%
Starfield	9%
Wastowish	15%
Mundy	12%
Pierre	0%
Miller	0%
Huron	0%
Brookings	0%
Philip	0%
Murdo	0%
Chamberlain	0%
Mitchell	0%
Sioux Falls	0%
Winner	0%
Martin	0%

www.weather.gov/abr

A winter storm system will track across the region on Saturday bringing chances for accumulating snow to parts of the area. The best chance for seeing snowfall will be across parts of north central and northeast South Dakota and west central Minnesota. Some pockets of freezing drizzle could be possible by late morning through the afternoon. It should all be done by Saturday evening with generally a 1-3 inch snowfall along and north of U.S. Highway 12. More chances for light snow and possibly mixed precip is anticipated for Sunday into early next week.

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New Record High Temperatures Already this Christmas Eve Morning!

**Pierre ~ 54°F @ 2:09 AM
Previous Record
54°F in 1999**

**Sisseton ~ 56°F @ 5:57 AM
Previous Record
50°F in 1994**

 **NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE**
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION  

www.weather.gov/abr
12/24/2021 9:04 AM

New record high temperatures have occurred earlier this morning at Pierre and Sisseton. Today will feature the last much above average temperature day for the rest of December as colder air moves into the area.

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Today in Weather History

December 24, 1985: Snow fell over western South Dakota on December 23, with the greatest amounts in the northern Black Hills. Strong winds gusting to 50-60 mph developed over the western part of the state on the evening of December 23rd and continued into the morning of the 24th, with gusts to above 40 mph in the east. The winds caused ground blizzard conditions in the northern and central sections of South Dakota, and many vehicles were reported in ditches. Many people were stranded for a time in Martin in Bennett County. Several roads were blocked entirely during this time, such as Highway 248 near Murdo in Jones County.

December 24, 1992: A deep area of low pressure traveled across the United States/Canada border, dragging a cold front southward across South Dakota and Minnesota by Christmas Day. Southerly winds gusted up to 50 mph over western Minnesota on the 23rd in advance of the storm, causing ground blizzard conditions. As the arctic cold front swept across the area, temperatures tumbled from the 20s and 30s to well below zero by Christmas morning. Wind gusts were up to 50 mph behind the front, causing ground blizzard conditions and wind chill readings from 40 to 60 degrees below zero. A church that was under construction in Litchfield in Meeker County, Minnesota, was destroyed by strong winds. Many motorists were stranded on Christmas Eve and spent the night at area homes and motels. Interstate 94 from Alexandria to Moorhead, MN, was closed for nearly eight hours. High winds gusted up to 55 mph in the Watertown, SD area, causing a steel frame building under construction to collapse sometime between 9 and 10 pm CST.

December 24, 2009: A broad upper-level low-pressure area over the Upper Midwest associated with an intense surface low-pressure area brought widespread heavy snow along with blizzard conditions to central and northeast South Dakota as well as west-central Minnesota. The storm was a slow mover and produced several rounds of snow over three days. Total snowfall amounts were from 7 to as much as 25 inches. The heavy snow combined with winds of 25 to 40 mph with gusts to 50 mph brought widespread blowing and drifting snow with visibilities frequently less than a quarter of a mile. This blizzard ranked in the top three for South Dakota snowfall with a state average of 15.4 inches. Most of the state received 10 inches of snow or more with many locations with 20 inches or more. Pollock in north-central South Dakota set an all-time high three-day snowfall total with 17 inches. Before the onset of the storm, the Governor declared a state of emergency for South Dakota. Large portions of both Interstates 29 and 90 across South Dakota were closed late on Thursday, December 24th. Both Interstates were closed through Christmas Day and into Saturday, December 26th. There were some stranded holiday travelers due to the road closings, along with a few rescues. Most roads were reopened by Sunday morning, December 27th. There were also several vehicle accidents with nothing serious. Several airports were also closed throughout the storm, along with a few spotty power outages occurring in Lyman County in central South Dakota. Total snowfall amounts over the three days predominantly ranged from 1 to 2 feet. Snowfall amounts with a foot or more included; 12 inches at Mobridge, Eureka, Waubay, and Eagle Butte; 13 inches at Highmore and Miller; 14 inches at

Castlewood, Summit, Watertown, Pierre, and Ree Heights; 15 inches at Groton, Gettysburg, Webster, Wilmot, Hayti, and McLaughlin; 16 inches at McIntosh, east of Hayes and east of Hosmer; 17 inches at Timber Lake, Britton, and Pollock; 18 inches near Victor; 20 inches near Keldron; 22 inches at Murdo; 23 inches at Sisseton and 25 inches at Kennebec. In west-central Minnesota Wheaton received 11 inches, Browns Valley received 15 inches with 16 inches at Ortonville and Artichoke Lake.

1851: The Library of Congress caught fire. About 35,000 of the Library's 55,000 volumes were destroyed.

1963: At 0326 CDT on December 24th, 1963, a new all-time low for Memphis occurred with a reading of -13°F. The record still stands today.

1968: The crew of Apollo 8 took this photo, later dubbed "Earthrise," on December 24th, 1968. During a broadcast that night, pilot Jim Lovell said: "The vast loneliness is awe-inspiring, and it makes you realize just what you have back there on Earth."

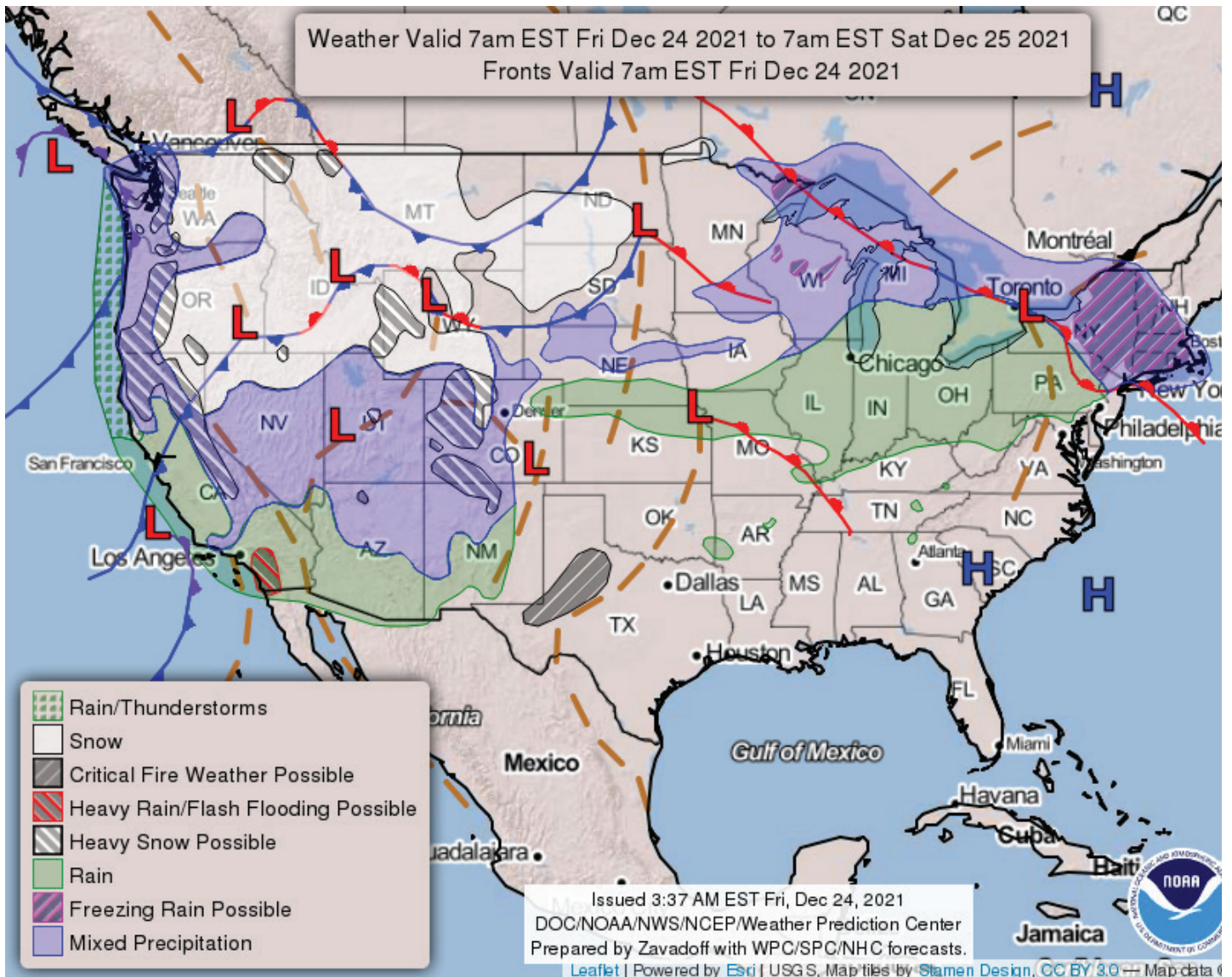
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 39 °F at 11:12 PM
Low Temp: 18 °F at 7:58 AM
Wind: 24 mph at 10:07 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 50° in 1943
Record Low: -24° in 1996
Average High: 26°F
Average Low: 5°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.46
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.47
Average Precip to date: 21.67
Precip Year to Date: 20.03
Sunset Tonight: 4:55:29 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:15 AM



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JOSEPH'S DREAM

"...Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, her fiancé, was a good man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly.

As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream. 'Joseph, son of David,' the angel said, 'do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through his prophet:

'Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means "God is with us."'

When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife."

When the Lord calls us to do His work, and we are faithful and obedient to Him, great things happen!

Prayer: Father, when You call us to do Your work in Your world, may we accept the challenge, knowing that great things will happen that will bless us and others, and Your Name glorified. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Matthew 1:18-24 For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'

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2021 Community Events

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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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News from the Associated Press

Flandreau bakery to close doors after 91 years

FLANDREAU, S.D. (AP) — A small-town South Dakota bakery is shutting its doors after 91 years in business. The Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported that the owners of Flandreau Bakery will close up shop for the last time on Friday.

Mel Duncan opened the bakery in 1930 and worked there until he turned 90. His sons, Ed and Don, took over the business in 1981. Don is 71; Ed is 69. The brothers say they want to retire and relax.

They had planned to close the bakery on New Year's Eve but stepped up their time table after Ed slipped on ice and broke his wrist following a Dec. 15 storm.

Sixty-nine-year-old Jeannie Manzer of Brookings went to school with the Duncans and always got her birthday cakes at the bakery. Mel Duncan also baked wedding cakes for her and her sisters. She had her husband stop by the bakery a few weeks ago to pick up what she describes as "the world's best peanut brittle."

The bakery's mocha cake was so popular it was featured on the Food Network.

Flandreau lies on the South Dakota-Minnesota border. It's home to about 2,340 people.

Man found dead in burning vehicle in Sioux Falls

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Firefighters in Sioux Falls have discovered a dead man in a burning vehicle.

The Argus Leader reported firefighters and police were called to a parking lot in the central portion of the city just before 5 a.m. on Thursday for a burning vehicle.

The vehicle was fully engulfed when they arrived. They found a man dead inside the vehicle. He was in his mid-30s.

Authorities haven't released his name pending notification of next of kin. He was the only occupant of the vehicle. The cause of the fire is under investigation.

As COVID fueled the drug crisis, Native Americans hit worst

By CLAIRE GALOFARO AP National Writer

BEMIDJI, Minn. (AP) — The medicine man told her she should soon give her son back to the earth.

Rachel Taylor kissed her fingertips and pressed them to the crow sewn onto a leather bag nestled on the couch in the living room. "Oh, my baby," she whispered, and hugged the buckskin satchel filled with his ashes.

Nearly a year ago, she had opened his bedroom door and screamed so loud she woke the neighbor. Kyle Domrese was face down on his bed, one of more than 100,000 Americans lost in a year to overdoses as the COVID-19 pandemic fueled America's addiction disaster.

When he was 4, the medicine man had given him his Ojibwe name: Aandegoons — "little crow." She traced the outline of the black bird on the sack.

"Love you," Taylor said to the bag, as she does each time she leaves for work in this city surrounded by three Ojibwe reservations in remote northern Minnesota.

As the pandemic ravaged the country, deaths from drug overdoses surged by nearly 30%, climbing to a record high. The drug crisis has also diversified from an overwhelmingly white affliction to killing people of color with staggering speed. The death rate last year was highest among Native Americans, for whom COVID-19 piled yet more despair on communities already confronting generations of trauma, poverty, unemployment and underfunded health systems.

It is no longer an opioid epidemic, but one in which people are dying from deadly cocktails of many drugs. Deaths involving methamphetamine have nearly tripled in recent years, with Native Americans 12 times more likely to die from it.

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As Taylor began her shift at the Northwest Indian Community Development Center, a posterboard propped against the wall was pasted with 49 faces — a collage of their dead to drugs.

Taylor's tribe, the White Earth Nation, studied of the lives they've lost to addiction.

"Their death certificates say they died of an overdose, but that's not right," one member of their study group said.

These deaths were a culmination of far more than that: Despite their resilience, Native Americans carry in their blood 500 years worth of pain from being robbed of their land, their language, their culture, their children. In living people's memory, children were taken from their families and sent to boarding schools with the motto, "Kill the Indian, save the man."

"What they died of is a broken heart," the study says.

For years, Taylor tried to break the cycle.

Her grandmother was sent to a Christian boarding school, where she was taught to be so ashamed of her Ojibwe language that she would only speak or sing it after drinking.

Taylor had her daughter when she was 19 and her son a few years later. She lost custody of them for a couple years as she battled her own addiction to opioids and cocaine. She told them she wished she could fix all the dysfunctional things that happened when she was using.

"Then I thought, well, then my mom would have to go back and fix things, and then my grandma would have to go back, it would have to go on like that for generations," she said.

Taylor had lived in more than 50 places before she turned 18 — foster homes, battered women's shelters, on the streets — and faced sexual, physical and mental abuse.

"The things I blame on generational trauma are not feeling good enough, not feeling worthy enough, not feeling loved," she said.

She prayed to her creator to spare her children, and she told her son every day that she loved him.

White Earth Nation too worked hard to save its people from addiction, and many years lost no one to overdoses on the reservation. But then the pandemic arrived and proved too painful for some.

And now in Taylor's shaking hands, she holds her son's picture — another face for the posterboard, lost January 11, 2021.

At first, she put his ashes in an urn, but it was sharp metal. A friend made the buckskin bag that she could hug. It's become the center of her world.

He'd always loved to laugh, so Taylor teases the bag of ashes.

"Keep an eye on the cat," she'll say when she leaves the house. Then she tells the cat to keep an eye on him.

The wind churned snow across the prairies, so Dr. Carson Gardner, the medical director of White Earth Nation's health department, told the tale of the Windigo as a metaphor for addiction.

This story of an evil spirit in Ojibwe folklore can only be spoken with snow on the ground as a layer of protection from the monster. The Windigo is a cannibal that sings a song, and anyone who hears it must cover their ears and run away, he said. Otherwise, they develop an insatiable hunger.

"You will first eat everything in your lodge, and when that's gone, you'll eat everything in your neighbors' lodges. When that's gone, you will eat your neighbors. You will finish off by eating yourself," said Gardner.

Their reservation spans more than 800,000 rugged acres of prairie and lakes, dotted with small villages, known for glorious summers and long unforgiving winters. But despite the vast terrain, it's sparsely populated, and they live the belief that all should be loved like family.

"Those who listen to the Windigo song aren't bad people," Gardner said. "They just didn't plug their ears and walk away. They didn't know how powerful the song was."

Rachel Taylor's son once wrote her a letter because he thought his addiction was killing him: "I can't control it. I hope you can forgive me. I'm sorry, I love you, I wanted to spend more time with you."

He'd started abusing pills as a teenager when he got a prescription after having surgery for an infected finger. Then, consumed by the madness of addiction, he would smoke anything — methamphetamine, heroin, fentanyl — that might quiet his lifelong anxiety and depression.

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But just before the pandemic bore down, his mother felt hopeful.

She and her son quarantined together at her home in Bemidji, a city of 15,000 people. Her son had gone to treatment, sober 168 days. His cheeks were full again, and he asked her to make his favorite peanut butter cookies.

"I'm glad I still have a chance to make my loving mom proud," he wrote in a journal.

But the months dragged on, and he told her it seemed like the pandemic would never end. He couldn't get a job. He was isolated. He said he felt like a bum.

"He just gave up," she said. He started using again, then dealing drugs to support his habit.

All around them, people were dying. On the White Earth reservation, ambulance calls for overdoses tripled, Gardner said. They posted big red signs in gas stations and tribal buildings: "overdose alert," they said. "Please look out for each other."

Joe Kleszyk, the commander of the region's drug task force, sounded the alarm, too: "An epidemic within a pandemic," he told the local newspaper in August 2020. The task force covers five counties and two reservations, including White Earth.

The number of overdoses it investigated skyrocketed from 20 in 2019 to 88 last year. Fifteen of those were fatal, triple the year before.

It's getting worse: This year, there's been 148 overdoses, and 24 of those victims died.

In Minnesota, as across the country, drug dealers now cut nearly every drug on the street with fentanyl, a cheap and deadly synthetic opioid so potent the equivalent of a sugar packet can make 40 doses, Kleszyk said. "It's a game of Russian roulette," he said.

At the same time, the pandemic pushed many toward addiction, called a "disease of despair."

Unemployment in Indian County surged to 26%. And with the federal government's disinvestment in Native communities, many were already living on the brink of poverty — sometimes just across the street from predominantly white gated communities and summer vacation resorts.

On top of that, the healing traditions many turn to in troubled times, like sweat lodges and talking circles, were suspended. There is a communal culture, and people were suddenly isolated.

Of the 148 overdoses the task force investigated this year, 124 victims were Native.

"I'm sick of telling people that their kids are dead," Kleszyk said.

When officers on the White Earth reservation arrived on Aug. 5, 2020 to deliver the news to Betty Opegard, her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the ground. Her daughter, Beth Renee Hill, a 32-year-old mother of three, died of an overdose involving methamphetamine.

Hill's Ojibwe name, Bebaanimadookwe, is the word for how snow sparkles in the sunshine.

"She was like that, she sparkled in people's lives, she was so beautiful," said Opegard. "She could make a lot happen in a day."

Hill started taking methamphetamine a couple years ago and fell apart fast. She lost custody of her kids and despaired, so she did even more drugs.

Opegard used to wake up each morning and run through the names of her eight children from oldest to youngest, imagining where they were and what they were doing. She forced herself to stop, because when she got to Hill, it felt too much to bear.

For months, Hill's father just held her picture and cried. Now he's buried next to her. He died in January, and Opegard blames a broken heart.

Amid all this death and dying, one of the most urgent questions White Earth and other Native American communities are facing is how to spare the next generations from starting the cycle anew.

Indian health care has been underfunded for decades. When the American government forced Native Americans off their land, it signed treaties with tribes promising to provide for them necessities like health care. The dead from addiction is proof it's never kept its word, said Minnesota Sen. Tina Smith.

The national average for health care spending is just over \$11,000 per person, but tribal health systems receive about a third of that and urban Indian groups even less, according to the National Council of Urban

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Indian Health. COVID-19 added another blow to this already stressed system.

Smith introduced a bill this summer that would usher \$200 million in grants to Indian organizations to bolster their mental health and addiction treatment. The bill, still stalled in Congress, would empower Native organizations to address addiction their own way.

In the years before the pandemic, the White Earth tribe married western medical interventions with the traditional healing practices that helped their people survive as the government tried to erase them. They trained thousands how to use the overdose-reversal medication naloxone and estimate that's saved 1,000 lives, Gardner said. They saved just as many through the millennia of inherited wisdom: drum circles, tobacco ceremonies, the dark, humid honesty of praying in a sweat lodge to balance their bodies, souls and minds.

Their motto is unconditional love, Gardner said. People can recover if they're given hope and healing, so they don't give up on anybody, no matter how deep their addiction.

Georgianna Garbow-Warren's addiction to methamphetamine for years left her homeless — she and her husband lived in abandoned houses, in shelters, eventually under a bridge. She lost custody of her three children. She felt like she was living in circles: She'd use drugs, get her kids taken, clean up, get them back, start the cycle again.

She grew up on the White Earth reservation near Beth Hill. She can rattle off names of other neighbors they've lost to addiction.

Garbow-Warren had a fourth child in 2019, a son born premature at four pounds, seven ounces. They took him straight from the hospital.

She kept using meth: "I wanted to take all that pain away," she said.

Then she couldn't breathe, went back to the hospital and was diagnosed with congestive heart failure from the damage meth had done. She was in and out of emergency rooms. One day she was lying in bed there and thought: "Oh God, do I really hate myself this much?"

She turned herself into the police on an outstanding warrant, and told them she wanted treatment. It was February 2020, just as the pandemic began brutalizing so many battling addiction.

"This year there's been the most funerals I've been to in my whole life," she said. Her sister was hospitalized in March with liver and kidney infections from drinking and drug use.

She couldn't see when Garbow-Warren visited her. The doctors said she could hear them. They played her favorite song by Sir Mix-A-Lot and she wiggled like she was trying to dance. She died a couple days later.

"I'll never get the image out of my head," she said. One of her sisters is now in treatment, a brother still uses, and she's afraid of getting a phone call that he's dead.

Her husband found recovery, too. They got an apartment, a dog, a car, and slowly regained custody of their baby, who has cerebral palsy. He can't crawl, and scoots around on his back.

"I blamed myself. I felt a lot of guilt and shame, a lot of pain," she said, about her son's medical difficulties. Then a doctor told her there was no way to know if it was from her drug use or something else.

She doesn't know about her older children. Her son turned 18 this year, the others are 17 and 10. She sometimes imagines tracking them down, but then wonders if they're better off without her.

"I live with that everyday," she said, "wondering if they're OK."

In January, Rachel Taylor's heart began aching, like someone had reached into her chest and was squeezing it.

"It was like my heart knew before I did," she said. "My heart was broken four days before he even died."

She had an uneasy feeling the morning of Jan. 11. It was quiet in the house and her son's bedroom door was closed.

"Are you awake?" Taylor texted him at 9:21 a.m.

She never wanted to seem overbearing, and she knew it made him happy to think she trusted him. So she vacuumed the living room just outside his bedroom and hoped the commotion would wake him.

Eventually, she opened his door. At first she thought it must be a dream, like she was seeing from outside

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herself that his skin was purple.

She dialed 911, and the operator said to check his vitals. He was ice cold. She dropped the phone and screamed. "Come back, my baby, come back."

When he was born, the nurse put him on her chest, and he'd looked at her with such intensity. His eyes were always like that, like a cat's, she thinks.

He loved animals. In stacks of photos albums, he's often holding some little creature. She kept everything he ever made her — birthday cards, childhood pottery. "You're the best mom in the world," he'd write, and she loved it because she'd always felt like a bad one.

She knew the hell her son was living because she had lived it, too.

In December 2020, he punched holes in the walls until his fists bled and screamed he wanted to die. She called police, and when officers arrived she stepped in front of her bloody, hysterical son. "Please don't shoot him," she pleaded, "this isn't him."

They took him to a hospital, but he broke a camera, and the hospital kicked him out.

A month later, she watched as they covered him in blue plastic, and begged them to let her kiss his forehead.

The toxicology report said that he'd died of a combination of alprazolam, the drug in Xanax, and fentanyl. For a time, she didn't want to live.

Then the medicine man took her to a sweat lodge on the reservation. When she came out, the chatter of two cranes on the wind sounded like a crow — a sign from her son. Now she feeds the crows so they'll keep coming to the yard.

She still smells him, she said. She swears she hears his particular way of knocking on the door.

The anniversary of his death is approaching on Jan. 11, and it is customary in her culture to return him to nature after a year of grieving, she said.

But every morning, she kisses his bag. Her daughter took her out for a buffet dinner, and the bag went too. She fixed him a plate of his favorite foods, prime rib, mashed potatoes, she buttered him a bun.

"The medicine man says I have to let him go back to the earth," she said. "But I don't think I'm going to be able to do that. He left me too soon."

Medtronic pays \$400K to settle South Dakota kickback case

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Minnesota-based Medtronic has agreed to pay \$400,000 to South Dakota to resolve allegations that it paid kickbacks to a neurosurgeon, Attorney General Jason Ravensborg announced Thursday.

The settlement resolves allegations that Medtronic paid for more than 100 social events at a restaurant owned by Dr. Wilson Asfora, at Asfora's request. Medtronic allegedly sponsored the events over a nine-year period to persuade Asfora to use Medtronic products.

The agreement is the latest settlement involving Asfora. The former Sanford Health neurosurgeon and two medical device distributorships that he owns also agreed to pay \$4.4 million earlier this year to settle allegations that they defrauded the federal government through illegal kickback schemes.

Sanford Health had already agreed to pay \$20 million to settle its role in the kickback scheme. And, last year medical device giant Medtronic agreed to pay \$9.2 million for its role in paying kickbacks to Asfora through the restaurant Carnaval Brazilian Grill, which Asfora and his wife owned.

Ravensborg said Medtronic cooperated with the state's investigation.

Tribes hope legal win will shift attention to health care

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — Native American tribes across the Great Plains are hoping that a decisive legal victory will shift federal officials' attention to their struggle to obtain quality health care.

The Rapid City Tribune reported Wednesday that the U.S. Justice Department has dropped an appeal of a federal judge's 2020 ruling that the Indian Health Service must provide adequate health care to the

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South Dakota-based Rosebud Sioux Tribe as part of a treaty dating back to 1868.

The tribe sued after the agency, which is part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, closed its Rosebud emergency room in 2015, forcing tribal members to travel at least 50 miles to other hospitals.

The U.S. Department of Justice under the Trump administration appealed the ruling to the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The appellate court upheld the ruling in August, saying the federal government must provide competent health care for the tribe.

Rosebud Sioux Tribe attorney Tim Purdon tweeted on Monday that DOJ officials had informed him they've dropped the appeal.

Tribal advocates say they hope the victory will focus attention on the health care problems facing tribes across the country and encourage Congress to spend more money on tribal health care.

Airlines cancel flights due to COVID staffing shortages

By DAVID McHUGH and TALIE ARBEL Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Airlines canceled hundreds of flights as the omicron variant jumbled schedules and drew down staffing levels at some carriers during the busy holiday travel season.

Delta Air Lines and United Airlines said they canceled flights because of staff shortages tied to the omicron variant. Delta canceled 145 flights on Friday and 111 for Christmas Day, according to FlightAware. (Other factors, such as weather, are also causing cancellations.) United called off 175 flights on Friday and 69 on Saturday.

Not all airlines said COVID was disrupting their travel schedules. American Airlines said it had "nothing to report," while Southwest Airlines said "things are running smoothly." JetBlue did not respond to a request for comment.

Flight delays and cancellations tied to staffing shortages have been a regular problem for the U.S. airline industry this year. Airlines encouraged workers to quit in 2020, when air travel collapsed, and were caught short-staffed this year as travel recovered.

"The nationwide spike in omicron cases this week has had a direct impact on our flight crews and the people who run our operation," United said in a statement. "As a result, we've unfortunately had to cancel some flights and are notifying impacted customers in advance of them coming to the airport."

Delta said it canceled flights Friday because of the impact of omicron and possibility of bad weather after it had "exhausted all options and resources — including rerouting and substitutions of aircraft and crews to cover scheduled flying."

The airlines both said they were trying to rebook passengers.

While some travelers canceled holiday plans because of rising case numbers, many others kept to their vacations during some of the year's busiest travel days. The Transportation Security Administration said it expects to screen nearly 30 million people from Dec. 20 through Jan. 3, compared with nearly 44 million during the last holiday season before the pandemic.

Germany-based Lufthansa said Friday that it was canceling a dozen long-haul transatlantic flights over the Christmas holiday period because of a "massive rise" in sick leave among pilots. The cancellations on flights to Houston, Boston and Washington come despite a "large buffer" of additional staff for the period. The airline says it couldn't speculate on whether COVID-19 infections or quarantines were responsible because it was not informed about the sort of illness. Passengers were booked on other flights.

According to FlightAware, there are nearly 3,400 canceled flights on Friday and Saturday, with at least half of the cancellations by Chinese airlines. About 20% of affected flights — 745 — were to, from or within the U.S. This is a small fraction of global flights. FlightAware says it has tracked more than 120,000 arrivals in the past 24 hours.

Coronavirus infections fueled by the new variant have also squeezed staffing at hospitals, police departments, supermarkets and other critical operations that have struggled to maintain a full contingent of front-line workers.

To ease staffing shortages, countries including Spain and the U.K. have reduced the length of COVID-19 quarantines by letting people return to work sooner after testing positive or being exposed to the virus.

Delta CEO Ed Bastian was among those who have called on the Biden administration to take similar steps or risk further disruptions in air travel. On Thursday, the U.S. shortened COVID-19 isolation rules for health care workers only.

McHugh reported from Frankfurt, Germany.

Russian court slaps Google, Meta with massive fines

By ULIANA PAVLOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A Moscow court on Friday slapped Google with a nearly \$100 million fine and also fined Facebook's parent company Meta \$27 million over their failure to delete content banned by local law, as Russia seeks to step up pressure on technology giants.

The Tagansky District Court ruled that Google repeatedly neglected to remove the banned content, and ordered the company to pay an administrative fine of about 7.2 billion rubles (about \$98.4 million).

Google said it would study the court documents before deciding on its next steps.

Later Friday, the court also slapped a fine of nearly 2 billion rubles (\$27.2 million) on Meta for failure to remove banned content.

Russian courts had previously imposed smaller fines on Google, Facebook and Twitter this year, and Friday's rulings marked the first time the size of the fine was calculated based on revenue.

Russian state communications watchdog Roskomnadzor said Google and Meta were specifically accused of violating the ban on distributing content that promotes extremist ideology, insults religious beliefs and encourages dangerous behavior by minors, among other things.

The agency said that Facebook and Instagram have failed to remove 2,000 items despite the courts' requests to do so, while Google has failed to delete 2,600 such items.

It warned that they may face more revenue-based fines for failure to delete the banned content.

Russian authorities have steadily ramped up pressure on social media platforms, accusing them of failing to purge content related to drug abuse, weapons and explosives and extremist views.

Earlier this year, authorities criticized tech companies for not deleting announcements about unsanctioned protests in support of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

Russian authorities also have demanded that foreign tech giants store the personal data of Russian citizens on servers in Russia, threatening them with fines or possible bans if they fail to comply.

Alexander Khinshtein, head of the committee on information policies in the lower house of Russian parliament, said the massive fine should send a clear message to all IT giants.

He added that Russian law envisages other forms of punishment for failure to comply with court orders, including slowing down traffic and complete blocking.

San Francisco board OKs mayor's emergency order over opioids

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The Board of Supervisors approved an emergency order to tackle the opioid epidemic in San Francisco's troubled Tenderloin neighborhood, despite reservations by some that the declaration will be used by the mayor to criminalize people who are homeless, addicted to drugs or both.

The vote shortly after midnight on Friday was 8-2, following a marathon 10 hours of debate and public comment. The public health emergency declaration authorizes the Department of Emergency Management to re-allocate city staff and bypass contracting and permitting regulations to set up a new temporary center where people can access expanded drug treatment and counseling.

Advocates for the homeless and substance users urged supervisors to reject the emergency order because Mayor London Breed has also pledged to flood the district with police to halt crime, which some residents want. The mayor also said some drug users may wind up in jail unless they accept services,

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although drug possession is a misdemeanor crime and rarely enforced.

The board ultimately approved the declaration, calling the abundance of cheap fentanyl a crisis. More people in San Francisco died of overdose last year than of COVID-19.

"I know that this is an incredibly painful, traumatic and emotional conversation," said Matt Haney, the supervisor who represents the neighborhood, before the vote. He said he hopes the city will bring all of its "innovation, unyielding compassion and relentless determination" to confront the crisis.

Several supervisors raised objections, although only Board President Shamann Walton and Dean Preston voted no. They decried the lack of details and dearth of available treatment beds, and said that over-policing would victimize African Americans and the homeless.

Walton, the only African American person on the board, said he wished more attention would be paid to homicides in his district, which includes the traditionally Black neighborhoods of Bayview and Hunters Point.

The Tenderloin includes museums, the main public library and government offices, including City Hall. But it's also teeming with people who are homeless or marginally housed, a high concentration of drug dealers and people consuming drugs in broad view.

The order itself does not call for increased police and police Chief Bill Scott assured supervisors that officers have no intention of locking up people just because they are addicted to drugs. Still, he said police can't simply ignore what's happening in a neighborhood where children are scared to go outside and people are injecting poisonous drugs.

"We're out there to help," Scott said. "We're not out there to turn a blind eye to people killing themselves on the street."

In announcing the emergency declaration last week, the mayor said it was time to be "less tolerant of all the bull— that has destroyed our city." On social media this week, she said people openly using drugs will be given treatment and other service options.

"But if they refuse, we're not going to allow them to continue using on the street," she said on social media this week. "The families in the neighborhood deserve better."

Breed has committed to opening a supervised drug consumption site as well as a drug sobering center, and said the emergency management department will lead the response much like it coordinated efforts to address the pandemic. The department will, in part, streamline emergency medical calls, disrupt drug dealing and use, and make sure streets stay clean.

Deaths attributable to overdoses have increased more than 200% in San Francisco since 2018, and last year, more than 700 people died from drug overdoses in the city, more than the number who died from COVID-19, according to the proclamation.

Nearly 600 people have died of a drug overdose this year, through November, with nearly half of the deaths occurring in the Tenderloin and in the neighboring South of Market district, says the proclamation. These areas make up 7% of San Francisco's population.

Politically liberal cities across the U.S. are grappling with crime in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd, when their elected leaders pledged ways to reduce friction between police and vulnerable communities of color, particularly African Americans such as Floyd.

San Francisco DA Chesa Boudin joined the city's public defender earlier this week to denounce the mayor's plan, saying that jailing people struggling with addiction, mental health issues and homelessness would not work. They want her to use the money on adding more treatment beds, shelters, job training and other social services.

"What we currently see in the Tenderloin didn't happen overnight and stems from years of massive disinvestment and displacement," said Jeannette Zanipatin, California director at the Drug Policy Alliance.

The emergency order will last 90 days.

Biden, first lady visit hospitalized kids on Christmas Eve

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden brought some Christmas Eve cheer

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to hospitalized children who aren't well enough to go home for holidays.

It's longstanding tradition for first ladies to visit Children's National Hospital at Christmastime, but Joe Biden's visit on Friday was a surprise. It marked the first time that a sitting president had joined the fun, the White House said.

The Bidens are set to help a group of children making lanterns as part of a winter craft project. Jill Biden will also sit by the Christmas tree and read "Olaf's Night Before Christmas" to the kids. Video of her reading will also be shown in patient rooms throughout the hospital.

The Walt Disney Co. provided copies of the book for each patient so they can follow along with the first lady, the White House said. Each book includes a White House bookmark designed by her office.

The annual tradition of a hospital visit by the first lady dates to Bess Truman, who served in the role from 1945-1953.

NOT REAL NEWS: A look at what didn't happen this week

The Associated Press undefined

A roundup of some of the most popular but completely untrue stories and visuals of the week. None of these are legit, even though they were shared widely on social media. The Associated Press checked them out. Here are the facts:

NY lawmakers aren't voting on bill to detain the unvaccinated

CLAIM: New York lawmakers will vote Jan. 5 on a bill that would allow for the "indefinite detention of the unvaccinated."

THE FACTS: The claim is misrepresenting a bill, first introduced in the New York state legislature in 2015, that would allow for the temporary detention of individuals infected, or suspected of being infected, with a contagious disease during a public health emergency. The state Assembly's health committee has no plans to take action on the bill, and its sponsor, Assemblyman N. Nick Perry, now says he will withdraw it. While the proposal failed to find support among lawmakers, it is still causing a stir online. In recent days, social media users have pushed a claim that lawmakers are planning to vote on the bill as soon as Jan. 5 — and that it would allow for the "indefinite detention" of people who aren't vaccinated against COVID-19. But no such vote on the bill in question was slated for that day, which is actually just the start of the legislative session. Citing "concocted stories" online about the bill, Perry, its sponsor, tweeted Monday that he would take "legislative action to strike the bill, remove it from the calendar, thus ending all consideration, and actions that could lead to passage into law." The bill proposed allowing the state to temporarily detain someone carrying or suspected to be carrying a contagious disease — or someone they came into contact with — in a "medical facility or other appropriate facility." The bill also said such a person "shall not continue to be detained" after they are determined to be no longer contagious. It also included a provision to require the state to seek a court order if a person was to be held for more than three days. Frank Shea, a spokesman for Perry, told The Associated Press that the bill was first proposed in 2015 after a nurse defied quarantine after treating Ebola patients in Sierra Leone. Shea said that while Perry reintroduced the bill year after year, he had not actively pushed for the legislation and said it would be withdrawn because it had become a "distraction." The most recent introduction came in January 2021, when it was referred to the Assembly's Committee on Health. There was no other action on it. Before Perry announced Monday that he would withdraw the bill, the office of Assemblyman Richard Gottfried — the chair of the Committee on Health — also said in a statement to the AP that there were no plans to vote on it. "This bill has been introduced every year since 2015, has never been taken up by the Committee, has not been cosponsored by other legislators, and has not had a companion bill in the Senate," the statement said. "The Committee does not plan to put the bill on an agenda."

— Associated Press writer Angelo Fichera in Philadelphia contributed this report.

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Posts misrepresent Washington University study on COVID-19 immunity

CLAIM: Researchers from Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis released data showing that if you have had COVID-19, even a mild case, you are likely protected from the virus for life.

THE FACTS: The researchers found that people who have recovered from COVID-19 have bone marrow cells that can create antibodies for decades, but that doesn't mean those individuals will be immune to new variants of the virus. As the highly contagious omicron variant quickly became the dominant version of the coronavirus in the U.S., a misleading article and several social media posts falsely claimed that people who have had COVID-19 before are immune for the rest of their lives. "If you've had COVID-19, even a mild case, major congratulations to you as you've more than likely got long-term immunity," read an article published Tuesday on the news site The Epoch Times. "In fact, you're likely to be immune for life, as is the case with recovery from many infectious agents — once you've had the disease and recovered, you're immune, most likely for life." However, the posts misrepresent the research they cite — a study published in May in the journal Nature — according to study co-author Dr. Ali Ellebedy, who teaches pathology and immunology at Washington University's medical school. The study examined the blood and bone marrow of people who had experienced mild COVID-19 infections and found long-lived antibody-producing cells, evidence that people who have recovered from COVID-19 would likely create antibodies against it for a long time. Still, the study "does NOT show nor claim that people recovering from mild SARS-CoV-2 infection are protected for life," Ellebedy said in an email. "Epidemiological data clearly show that people recovered from earlier infection can be infected especially with emerging variants of concerns like Delta and Omicron." Ellebedy explained that having detectable antibody response for a lifetime doesn't necessarily mean being protected from the virus for a lifetime. "Not all antibodies are protective especially if the virus they are raised against is constantly changing," Ellebedy said. A prior infection doesn't seem to offer much protection against an omicron infection although, like with vaccination, it may reduce the chances of severe illness. Scientists in South Africa and Britain have found that reinfections among people who have battled COVID-19 appear more likely with omicron than with earlier mutants of the virus, including delta. The Epoch Times did not respond to an emailed request for comment.

— Associated Press writer Ali Swenson in New York contributed this report.

Scientists identify COVID variants through sequencing, not symptoms

CLAIM: The illness that scientists are labeling the omicron variant of COVID-19 may actually just be the common cold or the respiratory syncytial virus, both of which appear more often in the winter months.

THE FACTS: Despite posts claiming scientists are "just calling the common cold or an RSV infection the omicron variant," no one is just putting a new scientific name on a cold. Scientists have identified the omicron variant through precise genetic sequencing, not simply by noticing cold-like symptoms. By sequencing the genome of the coronavirus in a respiratory sample from someone who has tested positive for COVID-19, scientists can pinpoint the ways in which the virus has mutated. That's how they know when a new coronavirus variant is spreading in the population, as opposed to a previous strain. "Every bacteria and virus has specific genetic markers," said Dr. Anita Gupta, a professor and anesthesiologist at Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine. Scientists, she added, look for those genetic markers when they sequence the viral genome, "and that's how they're able to identify which type of variant they have." The post also ignores that COVID-19 diagnostic tests do more than just confirm you are sick: They are designed specifically to identify the presence of SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19. Whether you use a PCR test, which looks for genetic material from the virus, or a rapid test, which looks for proteins on the surface of the virus, a COVID-19 test identifies that the virus that causes COVID-19 was found inside your body. COVID-19 tests are designed to register as positive only in the presence of SARS-CoV-2, not other viruses, Gupta explained.

— Ali Swenson

Fauci's sister did not publish book about the omicron variant

CLAIM: Fauci's sister "Angelique Fauci" published a book on the omicron variant of the coronavirus the

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same week it was discovered.

THE FACTS: The self-published e-book, which Amazon removed from the website, was not written by Dr. Anthony Fauci's sister. Fauci, head of the National Institute of Health and Infectious Diseases, only has one sibling. Her name is Denise Scorce. Social media users shared a screenshot of the e-book titled "Omicron and the Other COVID-19 Variants: All You Need to Know About COVID-19 Vaccines & Variants" by "Dr. Angelique Fauci" with false claims about its author. "How did Fauci's sister publish a book on Omicron in the same week Omicron was supposedly 'discovered'?! #Plandemic #Omicron," one Twitter user wrote. A National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases spokesperson confirmed in an email to The Associated Press that Dr. Fauci's sister did not write a book about the omicron variant. His sister was mentioned in a 2007 tribute to Fauci. The 17-page Kindle edition was published on Nov. 26 — the same day the World Health Organization designated omicron a variant of concern — can no longer be purchased on Amazon. An Amazon spokesperson said the book was removed for violating content guidelines but provided no further details. The book's synopsis contained multiple punctuation, capitalization and word choice errors. Multiple self-published books about the omicron variant appeared on Amazon in recent weeks. Books can be published on Amazon through Kindle Direct Publishing in minutes. According to the website, "Publishing takes less than 5 minutes and your book appears on Kindle stores worldwide within 24-48 hours" and changes can be made to the books at "any time." Amazon's content guidelines note that self-published books can be pulled for being incomplete, including content that "disappoints our customers," is poorly translated or is already freely available online.

— Associated Press writer Arijeta Lajka in New York contributed this report.

COVID-19 vaccines stored in building that caught fire in Italy

CLAIM: A video shows a fire at a military warehouse in Italy that was storing COVID-19 vaccines. The fire occurred on the date members of law enforcement had to be vaccinated.

THE FACTS: A fire did break out at an Italian paramilitary police barracks on Dec. 15, the vaccination deadline, but there were no COVID-19 vaccines on site as some online posts falsely claimed. Social media users shared a video showing a fire consuming a building in Italy along with the false claim that the building is a military warehouse that stores COVID-19 vaccines. While a fire did occur on Dec. 15 at the Salvo D'Acquisto barracks, which houses Carabinieri, Italian paramilitary police, the site did not contain a store of COVID shots, a spokesperson for the Carabinieri confirmed to The Associated Press. Carabinieri are posted in every town and city in Italy. The spokesperson said the fire affected an area used as housing, and that vaccinations are not performed at the location. There is an infirmary at the barrack, but it is used for everyday medical calls, officials said. Some Italian newsoutlets reported on the fire at the time, including iNews24. The outlet shared a video of one angle of the fire on Facebook. Their video, which contained a watermark, was among those misappropriated on social media. But iNews24's coverage did not mention vaccines or the vaccine mandate, nor did other local reports. The video caption just said the footage showed the "carabinieri barracks are on fire." The cause of the fire remains unknown. One person was injured.

— Associated Press writer Karena Phan in Sacramento, California, contributed this report with additional reporting from Associated Press writer Colleen Barry in Milan.

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Live updates: Outbreak recorded on Florida-based cruise ship

By The Associated Press undefined

MIAMI — A COVID-19 outbreak has been recorded on a South Florida-based cruise ship, as the number of coronavirus cases in Florida has hit its second-highest level since the start of the pandemic.

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An undisclosed number of passengers and crew aboard the Carnival Freedom caught the virus and the ship was denied entry to Bonaire and Aruba, Carnival said in a statement.

The ship has 2,497 passengers and 1,112 crew members and was scheduled to return to Miami on Sunday following an 8-day cruise. Passengers were required to be vaccinated and they were tested before leaving last Saturday, according to Carnival.

"Carnival Freedom is following all protocols and has a small number on board who are in isolation due to a positive COVID test," the statement said. "Our protocols anticipate this possibility and we implement them as necessary."

It was the third outbreak this week affecting cruise ships operated by Carnival and Royal Caribbean departing Miami and Fort Lauderdale ports.

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

- Hospitals, police departments struggle to stay staffed as omicron infects workforces
- Fear of infection takes back seat to food insecurity as pandemic pummels African economies
- Coronavirus dampens Christmas joy in biblical Bethlehem

Go to <https://APNews.com/coronavirus-pandemic> for updates throughout the day.

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING TODAY:

ISTANBUL — Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, spiritual leader of the world's Orthodox Christians, has tested positive for COVID-19 and is displaying mild symptoms.

The Istanbul-based Patriarchate said Friday that Bartholomew, who is 81 and recently had heart surgery, is fully vaccinated. It added that "his general condition is good."

The Patriarch has urged people to get their shots and follow the recommendations of doctors.

Bartholomew was hospitalized overnight in the United States in late October and later had a stent installed to open up a clogged coronary artery.

He is considered first among equals among Eastern Orthodox patriarchs, which gives him prominence but not the power of a Catholic pope.

NEW DELHI — India's Health Ministry says an analysis of 183 omicron variant infections showed that 87 were in fully vaccinated people and three involved individuals who had booster doses.

India has confirmed a total of 358 cases of the omicron variant and 114 of the infected individuals already have recovered, Health Secretary Rajesh Bhushan told reporters Friday.

He said Asian countries are seeing COVID-19 cases decline overall, unlike in North America and Europe.

India was overwhelmed by two massive outbreaks in September 2020 and in May of this year. It recorded more than 400,000 new cases in 24 hours at the peak of its second surge in May. In the past two weeks, the country has averaged around 7,000 new cases a day.

Bhushan said 61% of India's over-18 population has received two vaccine doses. Despite being home to some of the world's largest vaccine makers, India has relied largely on two jabs: the Astra Zeneca vaccine made by Serum Institute and Bharat Biotech's domestically developed vaccine.

BERLIN — Germany's health minister says the country's proportion of coronavirus infections with the new omicron variant will increase sharply in the days ahead.

Health Minister Karl Lauterbach acknowledged there would be delays in local health offices reporting figures over the holidays, but he appealed on Twitter for people to take steps to avoid infection during Christmas festivities.

According to the national disease control center, Germany had 3,198 COVID-19 cases attributed to omicron as of Wednesday, a 25% increase from the previous day. The disease control center said Thursday that of those cases, 48 people were hospitalized and one person had died.

So far, the delta variant remains the dominant form of the coronavirus in Germany.

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Authorities are introducing new contact restrictions, while most regions are shutting nightclubs and putting other measures in place. In most cases, the curbs are set to take effect just after Christmas, though a few will go into force starting Friday.

TOKYO — Japan has approved the COVID-19 pill developed by U.S. pharmaceutical company Merck & Co. for use beginning next week, the Japanese health minister said Friday.

Health Minister Shigeyuki Goto told reporters that a ministry drug panel authorized Merck's molnupiravir under a fast-track process and the drug will be shipped to hospitals and pharmacies beginning next week.

It's one of two medications for treating COVID-19 that Japan has secured. Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the country is procuring 1.6 million doses from Merck.

Japan has also arranged for a shipment of 2 million doses of a COVID-19 pill made by Pfizer that hasn't yet received approval for use in the country.

Until recently, Japan largely kept out coronavirus infections involving the new omicron variant by enforcing stringent border controls. The first known locally transmitted cases were reported in Osaka on Wednesday.

BETHLEHEM, West Bank — The biblical town of Bethlehem is marking its second straight Christmas Eve under the shadow of the coronavirus.

Small crowds and gray, gloomy weather dampened celebrations on Friday in the traditional birthplace of Jesus. A ban on nearly all incoming air traffic by Israel -- the main entry point for foreign visitors heading to the occupied West Bank -- kept international tourists away for a second consecutive year.

Instead, local authorities are counting on the Holy Land's small Christian community to lift spirits. It is a theme seen around the world as revelers, weary from nearly two years of lockdowns and safety restrictions, search for ways to celebrate safely.

Before the pandemic, Bethlehem would host thousands of Christian pilgrims from around the world, bringing a strong dose of holiday spirit to the town and a huge jolt to the local economy.

PARIS — Protesters angry over virus and vaccine rules have occupied Guadeloupe's regional legislature because of stalled negotiations over their grievances about management of the French Caribbean island.

Officials in Guadeloupe and Paris denounced Thursday's incursion as unacceptable and a threat to the democratically elected Regional Council.

Officials posted images online that showed a Christmas tree knocked over and a banner reading "No to Obligatory Vaccination, No to the Health Pass."

Vaccinations are mandatory for all French health workers and a "health pass" is required to enter many venues. The measures have met the stiffest opposition in Guadeloupe and Martinique, reflecting long-running frustrations over inequality between the islands and the French mainland.

SYDNEY — Australia's New South Wales state is reporting more than 5,000 new coronavirus cases in 24 hours for the second straight day as the state and federal governments roll out measures meant to curb the spread of the virus.

The Federal health minister also said experts have recommended the gap between second vaccine doses and boosters be shortened from five months to four starting Jan. 4 and down to three beginning Jan. 31.

State Premier Dominic Perrottet had resisted mandating mask-wearing indoors until Thursday's record caseload led him to reconsider.

Testing centers have been swamped by people seeking tests before traveling for family Christmas gatherings. People are now being advised to seek tests only if they are symptomatic or are close contacts of existing cases.

QUITO, Ecuador — Ecuador is making vaccination against the coronavirus mandatory.

The government said Thursday that only Ecuadorians with a medical condition that could be complicated

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by vaccination will be exempt. Those people must provide documentation.

Officials say the order comes because of an increase in coronavirus infections and the circulation of new variants such as omicron.

Ecuador says it has enough vaccine to immunize the entire population. As of Tuesday, about 77% of Ecuador's 17.3 million people had been vaccinated. About 33,600 people in Ecuador have died from COVID-19.

SANTIAGO, Chile -- Chile plans to offer a fourth dose of the coronavirus vaccine to its citizens.

President Sebastián Piñera said Thursday that the fourth dose is expected to start in February.

Health Secretary Enrique París says the shot will be different than the one people got previously.

Chile has reported almost 86% of its population fully vaccinated. It has the highest level of immunization against the coronavirus in Latin America, and among the best levels in the world, according to online research website Our World in Data.

Piñera says 10.2 million out of Chile's 19 million people have received a third dose.

Chile has recorded almost 39,000 COVID-19 deaths.

LONDON — Britain's public health agency says preliminary data suggest that people with the omicron variant of the coronavirus are between 50% and 70% less likely to need hospitalization than those with the delta strain.

The U.K. Health Security Agency findings add to emerging evidence that omicron produces milder illness than other variants -- but also spreads faster and better evades vaccines.

The agency said Thursday that, based on cases in the U.K., an individual with omicron is estimated to be between 31% and 45% less likely to attend a hospital emergency department compared to delta, "and 50 to 70% less likely to be admitted to hospital."

It cautioned that the analysis is "preliminary and highly uncertain" because of the small number of omicron patients in hospitals and the fact that most were in younger age groups. As of Dec. 20, 132 people had been admitted to U.K. hospitals with confirmed omicron, of whom 14 -- aged between 52 and 96 -- died.

Coroner IDs girl killed by police in Los Angeles shooting

By STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The coroner's office has identified the 14-year-old girl who was fatally shot by Los Angeles police Thursday when officers fired on an assault suspect and a bullet went through the wall and struck the girl as she was in a clothing store dressing room.

Police also fatally shot the suspect Thursday morning at a Burlington store in the North Hollywood area of the San Fernando Valley, police said.

The Los Angeles County coroner identified the girl as Valentina Orellana-Peralta. The suspect's name has not yet been released.

Witnesses told KCBS-TV that a man began acting erratically, threatening to throw items from the upper floor, and attacked a woman with a bicycle lock shortly before noon as the store was crowded with holiday shoppers.

Officers answered a report of an assault and others of shots being fired, police said. Investigators have not found a gun at the scene.

The suspect was shot and died at the store but one of the bullets went through drywall behind the man and killed the girl, who was in a changing room with her mother, police said.

Officers found the teenager dead after seeing a hole in "a solid wall that you can't see behind," LAPD Assistant Chief Dominic Choi said.

Investigators didn't immediately know whether she was in the dressing room before the violence began or ran in there to hide, he said.

"This chaotic incident resulting in the death of an innocent child is tragic and devastating for everyone involved," Police Chief Michel Moore said in a statement late Thursday night. "I am profoundly sorry for

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the loss of this young girl's life and I know there are no words that can relieve the unimaginable pain for the family."

Moore promised a "thorough, complete and transparent investigation" into the shooting and said a critical incident video that will include 911 calls, body camera and other video will be released by Monday.

The woman who was attacked is not being identified.

Investigators were trying to determine whether the assault was random or targeted. Choi said they don't believe the teenager was related to the person who was attacked.

Police found a heavy metal cable lock near the suspect, Choi said.

The California Department of Justice was investigating the shooting, Attorney General Rob Bonta said.

News reports showed a woman with a bloodied face, who appeared to be the assault victim, being placed in an ambulance.

The victim was taken to the hospital with moderate to serious injuries, Fire Department spokesperson Nicholas Prange said. Choi said she had wounds to her head, arms and face.

The shooting recalled a July 21, 2018, confrontation in which LAPD officers accidentally shot and killed a woman at a Trader Joe's market. Officers got into a gunfight with a man who authorities say shot his grandmother and girlfriend before leading police on a chase that ended when he crashed his car outside the market.

A police bullet killed Melyda Corado, 27, the assistant store manager, as she ran toward the store's entrance after hearing the car crash.

The suspect, Gene Evin Atkins, took employees and shoppers hostage for three hours before surrendering, authorities said.

Atkins has pleaded not guilty to the killing.

Prosecutors found two police officers acted lawfully when they returned Atkins' gunfire.

EXPLAINER: What next as high court wades into COVID mandate?

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court will hear oral arguments Jan. 7 on whether the Biden administration can order workers at private companies and health care employees to be vaccinated for COVID-19. Until the court rules, millions of workers face a patchwork of requirements depending on where they live.

HOW DID WE GET TO THIS POINT?

Under a rule published by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration on Nov. 5, businesses with 100 or more workers must require employees to be vaccinated or, if they are not, to be tested weekly and wear masks while working. There are exceptions for those who work alone or mostly outdoors.

The same day, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services published a rule requiring a wide range of health care providers who receive federal Medicare or Medicaid funding to get the first vaccine dose this month and to be fully vaccinated by Jan. 4.

That rule was projected to affect more than 17 million workers in about 76,000 health care facilities as well as home health care providers.

WHY IS THE SUPREME COURT STEPPING IN?

The court is intervening because the rules spawned multiple court challenges from more than two dozen Republican-led states, some conservative and business groups, and some individual businesses that opposed the vaccination mandates. Those challenges produced rulings among several federal district and circuit courts that contradicted one another.

A three-judge panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Cincinnati ruled 2-1 this month that the vaccine-or-test requirement for workers at companies with 100 or more employees could take effect. Multiple legal challenges to the OSHA rule originally were filed in various U.S. appeals courts.

The cases subsequently were consolidated with the 6th Circuit in a random drawing using ping-pong balls, a process employed when challenges to certain federal agency actions are filed in multiple courts.

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The requirement could affect some 84 million U.S. workers.

In the health care employee case, a decision by the New Orleans-based 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals kept a preliminary injunction in place for 14 states, altering an earlier ruling by a federal district judge, who applied the order nationwide. A separate preliminary injunction on appeal before the St. Louis-based 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals applied to 10 additional states. That means the vaccine requirement for Medicare and Medicaid providers is blocked by courts in about half states but not in the other half.

DOES THE SUPREME COURT HEARING PUT THE MANDATES ON HOLD?

No, the court hearing is unlikely to put the mandates on hold, unless the court moves extremely fast and reverses the 6th Circuit ruling while expanding the preliminary injunctions of the 5th and 8th circuits to include all the states.

WHAT'S NEXT?

OSHA has said the vaccination mandate will go into effect Jan. 10. The testing requirement deadline is Feb. 9. The agency said in a statement that it would not issue citations before the listed dates "so long as an employer is exercising reasonable, good faith efforts to come into compliance with the standard." Employers who fail to comply with the emergency, temporary standard may be subject to penalties, up to \$13,653 per violation for serious violations.

As for the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, its guidance says non-compliance among hospitals and "certain other acute and continuing care providers" can lead to termination from the Medicare and Medicaid programs as a final measure. That, however, would occur only after providing a facility an opportunity to make corrections and come into compliance.

TSA officer saves infant who stopped breathing at airport

NEWARK, N.J. (AP) — A security officer leapt over conveyor belt rollers and saved a 2-month-old boy who stopped breathing at a security checkpoint at Newark Liberty International Airport in New Jersey, newly released video shows.

The footage, released Thursday by the U.S. Transportation Security Administration, shows TSA officer Cecilia Morales springing into action to resuscitate the child Dec. 9 after his mother picked him up from a car carrier and noticed he wasn't breathing.

Morales, an EMT who has been a TSA officer for about two months, told the agency she performed the infant version of the Heimlich maneuver, placing the baby face down on her arm and patting him on the back to get him breathing again.

It was the first time she had performed the technique on an infant, she said. A pediatric EMT arrived a short time later to give the baby oxygen. A TSA spokesperson said the agency didn't know what caused the baby to stop breathing.

"I saw the video afterward," Morales said. "It was the first time I've ever seen myself in action, saving a life. It was mind-blowing to watch. I felt that my training and experience just took over."

"Two months on the job and she's literally a life-saver," Thomas Carter, the TSA's Federal Security Director for New Jersey said in a statement. "Officer Morales's quick reaction and actions helped ensure that this family will have a happy holiday season. Her actions were inspiring."

EXPLAINER: Are more defendants testifying at trial?

By MICHAEL TARM AP Legal Affairs Writer

CHICAGO (AP) — Defendants spoke directly to jurors in a series of recent high-profile trials, defying conventional wisdom that the risks of taking the stand usually outweigh the benefits.

Among those who chose to testify was Kim Potter, convicted Thursday of manslaughter for killing Daunte Wright during a traffic stop when the Minnesota police officer mistook her gun for a Taser.

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Another was Kyle Rittenhouse, who was acquitted of murder last month for shooting three protesters in Kenosha, Wisconsin, killing two and wounding a third.

The run of testifying defendants raises the question of whether a shift in thinking is occurring among lawyers, many of whom have long regarded putting clients on the stand as a desperate, last-resort option.

ARE MORE DEFENDANTS TESTIFYING?

Anecdotally, there may be some indication of that.

"There has been a spate of defendants taking the stand — and that is a break from tradition," said Chicago-based jury consultant Alan Tuerkheimer.

He surmised that defendants are more prone to speak in the age of social media, when people post or read public comments on everything. That may have altered jurors' expectations, too.

"There seems to be this growing expectation (among jurors) that if a defendant is on trial — he or she should fight for themselves and tell their story," he said.

Former federal prosecutor Phil Turner said he wasn't convinced lawyers were changing their dim views overall about clients testifying.

"I would want to see a lot more trials to tell," he said.

AT WHAT OTHER RECENT TRIALS HAVE DEFENDANTS TESTIFIED?

Actor Jussie Smollett testified at his Chicago trial this month, telling jurors he told the truth about being the target of a racist, homophobic attack. Days later, jurors convicted him of lying to police.

So did Travis McMichael, a white man who fatally shot Ahmaud Arbery, a Black man, as Arbery ran empty-handed through a Georgia subdivision. He and two co-defendants were later convicted of murder.

Former Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes testified for seven days in November at her fraud and conspiracy trial in California. Her jury is still deliberating.

Potter testified last week, sobbing as she described her horror at realizing she had shot Wright during a traffic stop.

ARE THERE STUDIES ON DEFENDANT TESTIMONY?

There's no recent data on percentages of defendants nationwide who have chosen to testify. That'll take years to compile. And studies on defendant testimony are few and far between.

One study of over 300 criminal trials published in the Cornell Law Review in 2009 found that some 77% of defendants who testified were found guilty. Among the defendants who chose not to testify, around 72% were convicted.

A 1950s study by Harry Kalven and Hans Zeisel found that defendants without criminal records testified over 90% of the time and those with criminal histories testified around 70% of the time.

Defendants with records are more reluctant to testify out of fear it'll enable prosecutors to expose the extent of their criminal pasts to jurors. The high-profile defendants who testified recently had no criminal records or minimal ones.

WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE RECENT DECISIONS TO TESTIFY?

Both Rittenhouse and McMichael claimed self-defense, so their states of mind during the shootings were central to their trials. They had little choice but to testify since only they could tell jurors what they were thinking and feeling.

Rittenhouse conveyed that he feared for his life, breaking down on the stand as he described a protester he fatally shot charging at him. McMichael told jurors he was forced to open fire, alleging Arbery attacked him and grabbed his shotgun.

Although it wasn't as crucial to their trials, Holmes and Potter also testified about their states of mind.

Holmes testified that she never intended to dupe anyone about blood testing technology her startup touted as revolutionary and that she sincerely believed the company could make it work.

Potter told jurors she was overwhelmed with fear right before she shot Wright because she believed he was about to drive off with another officer partially inside his car.

In Smollett's case, it's unclear what he thought he would gain by testifying, especially amid overwhelming evidence that he faked an attack on himself.

Turner said Smollett's lawyers may have tried to talk him out of it.

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"But a lot of times, lawyers don't control their clients," he said. Asked how he thought Smollett did on the stand, Turner answered: "It was a disaster."

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF TAKING THE STAND?

The biggest risk is that, by testifying, defendants open themselves up to a potentially devastating cross-examination.

Prosecutors seek to rattle defendants or catch them in lies, or to provoke them into losing their temper or into blurting out something incriminating.

During cross at his trial, Rittenhouse made no obvious blunders. But McMichael undermined his case under tough questioning, admitting that Arbery neither threatened him verbally nor brandished a weapon.

One defendant whose lawyers likely concluded the risks of testifying were too great was Ghislaine Maxwell. The British socialite, who is charged with recruiting teenage girls for financier Jeffrey Epstein, didn't testify at her New York sex trafficking trial. No verdict has been reached.

ISN'T NOT TAKING THE STAND RISKY, TOO?

It can be.

Jurors aren't supposed to hold a defendant's silence at trial against them. And prosecutors are barred from citing a defendant's decision not to testify as evidence of guilt.

But Tuerkheimer said that even with instructions from a judge not to, some deliberating jurors likely do factor in a defendant's decision not to testify.

Foreign college athletes left out of rush for NIL windfall

By PAT EATON-ROBB AP Sports Writer

STORRS, Conn. (AP) — UConn forward Dorka Juhasz, like many of her teammates, was excited when she heard college athletes would be allowed to make money through celebrity endorsements and other means.

The problem? Juhasz, who is from Hungary, is among the more than 12% of college athletes in the U.S. from a foreign country — including more than 3,000 Division I athletes — the vast majority of whom are at school on F-1 student visas, according to the NCAA.

Those visas prohibit students from working off campus except in rare authorized exceptions, such as participating in an internship or work in their field of study, said Leigh Cole of Dinse P.C., an immigration lawyer who works with education clients and employers. On-campus work is limited to 20 hours a week or full-time during the summer and breaks, she said.

"If the school finds out that one of their international student-athletes has been doing side jobs, making money off their name, image or likeness, the school is legally obligated to terminate their visa," she said. "It has drastic consequences."

Juhasz and other international students say they have been told not to accept any NIL deals because of that possibility.

"Back in Europe, everybody is getting paid for playing basketball, and obviously over here it's not the same thing," she said this month. "It was kind of disappointing, because we thought (NIL) was going to be equal opportunity, kind of. We thought there would be a chance for us to show ourselves, show our brand and build our brand."

Juhasz, a senior transfer from Ohio State, is among three Huskies on F-1 visas, along with Nika Muhl, who is from Croatia, and Canadian Aaliyah Edwards. Their coach, Geno Auriemma, points out they are among a majority of his players who are not getting NIL deals.

"But, the international kids don't even have an opportunity to see whether anybody wants to do anything with them or not," he said. "So, should they be treated like everybody else? Of course they should."

The U.S. policy for enforcing student visa rules was formalized after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks 20 years ago in an attempt to make sure foreign nationals are actually in the country for the reason it states on their visas, legal experts said.

"We can't really cross the line with having a work visa and not being able to study or just having a study visa and not being able to work," Juhasz said. "So, it's hard."

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U.S. Sen. Chris Murphy, a Connecticut Democrat, said he believes Congress should carve out an exception to the work rules for student-athletes. He also has called for a federal law allowing all college athletes to make money that goes beyond the NCAA's decision July 1 to allow the current compensation based on use of an athlete's name, image or likeness.

"There is something flat out wrong with an industry that makes billions of dollars a year while many of its athletes can't afford to put food on the table or buy a plane ticket for their parents to see them perform," he said. "At a minimum, all college athletes deserve the ability to use their own name, image, and likeness how they see fit, and that includes international athletes who shouldn't need to worry about losing their visa status and ability to pursue higher education in this country to benefit as well."

Most athletes are not making big money from NIL compensation, according to Opendorse, a company that helps athletes navigate the NIL landscape. The median for all DI student athletes between July 1 and Nov. 30 was just \$6 per month.

But for those who actually land an NIL deal, the average compensation was \$1,256, or \$250 a month, said Blake Lawrence, the company's chief executive officer.

"That doesn't sound like much, but when you are student athlete, especially if you're from a foreign country, an extra \$300 a month, that's some level of significance," he said.

UConn star Paige Bueckers, who has signed lucrative endorsement deals with the Gatorade and clothing marketplace StockX, said she is well aware that she is being given opportunities that are not available to her international teammates.

"It hasn't affected our chemistry at all," she said. "But obviously, the people who can get those opportunities, I want to share that with them, share stuff from my deal with them. Anything we can do to make them feel like they have the same opportunities. I know I think they're fighting it. It should be changed. Anything I can do to help them, that's what I want to do."

The NCAA said it is possible for athletes making money through NIL to gift some of that to their teammates.

"First, the school would have to confirm whether the NIL activity is permissible under the current NIL policy," said Saquandra Heath, an NCAA spokeswoman. "If it is permissible, then a student-athlete can give a reasonable gift to a teammate, provided it is given under the normal circumstances of a personal relationship/friendship. The gift should be consistent with what other students who are friends might gift to one another."

There may be some other loopholes.

For example, experts say if Juhasz gets an NIL deal in Hungary, does the work in that country and is paid outside the United States, that probably wouldn't be a problem, experts said.

Lawrence said students who sign a "passive" NIL deal — meaning they aren't making a television commercial or running a camp, just signing an agreement allowing their name to be used on something like a T-shirt — might be OK if they sign the document in their home country. He said he knows of several athletes from Canada who travel back home to make social media postings so they aren't in violation of the U.S. visa laws.

Still, Peter Schoenthal, who runs the Athliance, another firm that helps schools navigate compliance with NIL rules as well as state and federal laws, said the system is so confusing that most schools tell international students to avoid all NIL opportunities to prevent any possible violation.

"Remember, it isn't how the school interprets the law," he said. "It isn't how your lawyer interprets the law. It isn't how the student interprets the law. It's how the federal government interprets it. So, if you go out and do an NIL deal because you've interpreted the law allows you to do the deal and the federal government disagrees, the federal government wins. That's the risk."

Meanwhile, international students remain on the outside looking in, which is frustrating to players such as Florida punter Jeremy Crawshaw, who is from Australia.

"It kind of is, because I've had a few people come and ask," he said. "But, I mean, life goes on with or without it. As long as I'm here and playing football, I'm really over the moon."

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More AP sports: <https://apnews.com/hub/apf-sports> and https://twitter.com/AP_Sports

US to lift omicron-linked travel ban on southern Africa

By ASHRAF KHALIL Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. will lift travel restrictions on eight southern African countries that it imposed to try to blunt the spread of the COVID omicron variant, the White House announced Friday.

The variant, which was first detected by scientists in South Africa, has since spread around the world. The World Health Organization and leaders in southern Africa criticized the travel ban as ineffective and unfairly damaging to local economies.

The Nov. 29 ban barred nearly all non-U.S. citizens who had recently been in South Africa, Botswana, Eswatini, Namibia, Lesotho, Malawi, Mozambique and Zimbabwe. The restrictions will be lifted on New Year's Eve.

White House spokesman Kevin Munoz said on Twitter that the decision was recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Munoz said the temporary travel bans bought scientists necessary time to study the new virus variant and conclude that the current vaccinations are effective in blunting its impact.

Omicron is now spreading rapidly throughout the U.S., including among the vaccinated, but a huge majority of those being hospitalized are unvaccinated.

"The restrictions gave us time to understand Omicron and we know our existing vaccines work against Omicron, esp boosted," Munoz tweeted.

Much about the omicron coronavirus variant remains unknown; scientists say omicron spreads even easier than other coronavirus strains, including delta. The government reports that 73% of new infections nationwide are from the omicron variant. But while breakthrough infections among vaccinated people have become common, they have rarely led to severe illness or hospitalization.

The rapid advance of omicron, along with more people gathering indoors during winter, has led to a major infection spike. The seven-day rolling average for U.S. COVID-19 cases climbed past 160,000 this week, according to data collected by Johns Hopkins University. That's more than double the average in late November.

The rapid spread of the new variant hasn't overwhelmed most domestic hospital systems yet, but it has roiled businesses, sports leagues and Christmas travel plans across the country. Multiple NBA and NFL games have been rescheduled due to COVID outbreaks, and the Hawaii Bowl, scheduled for Friday, was cancelled outright after Hawaii was forced to withdraw. Three major airlines have cancelled dozens of domestic and international flights, citing staffing shortages.

Yes, there is a Santa Claus. And no, COVID-19 won't stop him

By JAMES ANDERSON Associated Press

PETERSON SPACE FORCE BASE, Colo. (AP) — Rest assured, kids of all ages: Santa's coming this Christmas Eve, and a second holiday with COVID-19 won't stop him.

That's the word from the joint U.S.-Canadian military operation that for 66 years has been tracking Jolly Old St. Nicholas on his global mission and has assured us all — first by land line and more recently by iPhone, Android, OnStar, Facebook, YouTube and more — that he's on his way with a sleigh stuffed with toys and a welcome dose of joy.

In what's become its own wildly popular tradition, the Colorado-based North American Aerospace Defense Command provides real-time updates on Santa's progress Dec. 24, from 4 a.m. to midnight MST. NORAD's Santa Tracker lets families watch Father Christmas in 3D as he transits the South Pacific, Asia, Africa, Europe and the Americas.

From deep inside NORAD headquarters, dozens of volunteers field an unrelenting wave of phone calls

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to 1-877-HI-NORAD (1-877-446-6723). They and other volunteers working off-site because of coronavirus distancing protocols will answer such questions as "When will he come to my house? What kind of cookies does he like?" said program manager and NORAD spokesman Preston Schlachter.

Want to watch? Visit <https://www.noradsanta.org>, check out #NORADTracksSanta and @NoradSanta on Twitter, or use the associated apps. You can also email noradtrackssanta@outlook.com for the latest.

Even before Friday's takeoff, the NORAD webpage had been visited more than 3 million times, Schlachter said.

"Every household, every country is having to deal with the impact of this pandemic. Santa Claus is an icon, and he is a source of joy for a lot of people," Schlachter said.

For those worried about Santa's safety — or their own — the bearded man likely will be wearing a mask at each stop, and of course he's wearing gloves, Schlachter noted. For the technically inclined, NORAD's website offers more data on the voyage (Weight of gifts at takeoff: 60,000 tons, or 54,600 metric tons; sleigh propulsion: nine RP, or reindeer power).

Like any good Christmas tale, the program's origin has been told for generations.

In 1955, Air Force Col. Harry Shoup — the on-duty commander one night at NORAD's predecessor, the Continental Air Defense Command — answered a call from a child who dialed a number that was misprinted in an ad in a newspaper, thinking she was calling Santa.

Shoup "answered the call, thought it was a prank at first, but then realized what had happened and assured the child that he was Santa, and thus started the tradition that we are celebrating now 66 years later," Schlachter said.

NORAD's mission is to watch the skies above North America for any potential threats. Come early Christmas Eve, the Santa operation begins when a cluster of radar stations in northern Canada and Alaska pick up an infrared signature emanating from Rudolph's nose. NORAD's array of geostationary satellites above the Earth monitor the journey.

It's all shown on large, "unclassified" display screens in a festively decorated command post at Peterson Space Force Base in Colorado Springs. Masked volunteers sit at tables equipped with telephones, garland, miniature Christmas trees, plenty of caffeine-laden candy and coffee — and hand sanitizer.

"We Have the Watch," is NORAD's military-mission motto.

And when it comes to Santa, NORAD adds:

"Santa calls the shots. We just track him."

Associated Press journalist Terry Chea in San Francisco contributed to this report.

Virus weighs again on Christmas festivities in Bethlehem

By JACK JEFFERY Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank (AP) — Musicians banging drums and playing bagpipes marched through the biblical town of Bethlehem on Friday to the delight of smaller than usual crowds — a mix of conviviality and restraint reflected in celebrations around the world on a Christmas Eve dampened once again by the coronavirus.

Travel restrictions imposed by Israel — the main entry point for foreign visitors heading to the occupied West Bank, home to the traditional birthplace of Jesus — kept international tourists away for a second year. The ban on nearly all non-Israeli travelers is meant to slow the spread of the highly contagious omicron variant.

Instead, authorities were counting on the Holy Land's small Christian community to lift spirits.

It was a theme seen around the world as revelers, weary from nearly two years of lockdowns and safety restrictions, searched for ways to return to rituals that were called off last year, while still celebrating safely at a time of surging cases.

"We can't let the virus take our lives from us when we're healthy," said Rosalia Lopes, a retired Portuguese government worker who was doing some last-minute shopping in the coastal town of Cascais.

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She said she and her family were exhausted by the pandemic and determined to go ahead with their celebrations with the help of safety measures like vaccines and booster shots, rapid home tests and wearing masks in public. She planned a traditional Portuguese Christmas Eve dinner of baked cod.

"We have to take precautions, of course, but we're really looking forward to it," she said.

But holiday travel was dealt a blow when three major airlines, Lufthansa, United and Delta, canceled dozens of flights due to staff shortages largely tied to the omicron variant. And church services were scaled back in Germany and the United States.

In the United Kingdom, where omicron is ripping through the population, some houses of worship hoped to press on.

At St. Paul's Old Ford, an Anglican church in East London, priests planned to hold services on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, though that decision will be kept under constant review. The clergy were regularly testing themselves for COVID-19 and limiting the number at each service to make sure others can go ahead even if one tests positive.

But to protect parishioners, the church ditched its nativity play.

"You might have to cancel the service, but you can't cancel Christmas," said the Rev. April Keech, an associate priest. "You can't stop love. Love still stands."

That spirit was also alive in Bethlehem, where Mayor Anton Salman said the town was optimistic that 2021 would be better than last year's Christmas, when even local residents stayed home due to lockdown restrictions, and marching bands paraded through empty streets.

This year, hundreds of people gathered in the town's central Manger Square as a line of bagpipe-and-drum-playing bands streamed through the area. Later, Latin Patriarch Pierbattista Pizzaballa, the top Roman Catholic clergyman in the Holy Land, waved to well-wishers as his motorcade made its way through town.

"This year we see a lot of people, very crowded, and a lot of joy," he said, before entering the Church of the Nativity to prepare for Midnight Mass. The church is built on the grotto where Christians believe Jesus was born.

Before the pandemic, Bethlehem would host thousands of Christian pilgrims from around the world, bringing a strong dose of holiday spirit to town and a huge jolt to the local economy.

In early November, Israel lifted a year and a half ban that had kept most foreign tourists out of the area. But weeks later, it was forced to re-impose the restrictions as the omicron variant began to spread worldwide.

Tourism is the lifeblood of Bethlehem's economy, and the lack of visitors has hit hotels, restaurants and gift shops especially hard.

"Under normal conditions for this time of year, I usually have a 20-meter (20-yard) queue outside," said Adil Abu Nayaf, owner of an empty food stall in Manger Square.

Those who attended tried to make the best of a difficult situation. Billy Stuart, an employee at the British Consulate in Jerusalem, said his experience in Bethlehem was uplifting, despite the small crowds.

"The parade is amazing and I did not realize there were so many Palestinian bagpipers," he said.

Celebrations in Europe, where infections are surging in many countries, were also more subdued — but forging ahead.

Parisians lined up at chocolate shops, farmers' markets — and testing centers — across the French capital. France has recorded record numbers of daily COVID-19 infections and hospitalizations have been rising, but the government has held off on imposing curfews, closures or other restrictions for the holidays.

Fabienne Maksimovic, 55, stood in line at a Paris pharmacy waiting to get tested. "It does affect our enthusiasm to celebrate Christmas, it does make us a bit sad. But at least we are sure not to contaminate or get contaminated. We will all do the test in our family," she said.

As Spain returned Friday to mandatory face-covering outdoors, 19-year-old student Andrés Pérez and a group of volunteers headed out to offer homeless people masks and a warm breakfast.

"It's hard to do it (wear the mask), but it's better for all of us," said Pérez, whose group brought a guitar to serenade homeless people with Christmas carols.

In Germany, churchgoers faced a thicket of health restrictions and limits on attendance.

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Frankfurt's cathedral, which can hold 1,200 people, offered only 137 distanced spaces, which were booked up days in advance. Singing was allowed only through masks. In some regions, churches required proof of vaccination or testing on top of strict capacity limits and masking.

A line wound halfway around Cologne's massive cathedral, not for midnight Mass but for vaccinations in an adjacent church hall, the DPA news agency reported. The offer of shots was a sign of "care for one's neighbor" that was consistent with the message of Christmas, cathedral provost Guido Assmann said.

Numerous churches in the U.S. canceled in-person services, including Washington National Cathedral in the nation's capital and the historic Old South Church in Boston, while others planned outdoor celebrations or mix of online and in-person worship.

In France, some celebrated by visiting loved ones who are in the hospital. In the Mediterranean city of Marseille, the intensive care unit at La Timone Hospital has been taking in more and more COVID-19 patients in recent days.

Amelie Khayat has been paying daily visits to her husband Ludo, 41, who is recovering from spending 24 days in a coma and on a breathing machine. They touched their heads together as she sat on his bed, and now that he's strong enough to stand, he got up to give her a farewell hug.

Outside, a medical worker put final decorations on the ICU Christmas tree.

Associated Press journalists Danica Kirka in London, Barry Hatton in Lisbon, Aritz Parra in Madrid, David McHugh in Frankfurt, Germany, Daniel Cole in Marseille, France, and David Crary in New York contributed.

On Broadway, a playwright becomes an actor, saving a show

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Keenan Scott II made his Broadway acting debut this week in "Thoughts of a Colored Man," which is a remarkable milestone. It's even more remarkable when you consider he also wrote it.

The actor-turned-playwright was pressed into acting duties at the last moment Tuesday night to keep his show open while all around Broadway battles spikes in COVID-19. He saved at least one performance.

"Like any other actor, I've always wanted to make my Broadway acting debut in whatever show wanted to hire me," Scott says. "I did not know it was going to happen like this and on my show during the same season."

His heroic efforts saved the night but it wasn't enough. Late Thursday, COVID-19 claimed "Thoughts of a Colored Man," joining "Waitress" and "Jagged Little Pill" as shows closed this winter due in part to rising infection rates.

Scott's path to the stage was frantic on Tuesday. He had left the theater and was on a subway platform waiting for a train to take him home to Brooklyn when he got the call from producers: Come back to the John Golden Theatre right now.

Two non-COVID-19 illnesses had already stretched the seven-person cast but now an actor had tested positive for COVID-19. While everyone waited for a PCR result to see if it was a false positive, Scott was being readied.

He was hooked up to a microphone, crewmembers were piecing together a costume for him and checking his shoe size. A stage manager printed out the script and Scott highlighted his lines. At 7:55 p.m., the second test came back — positive.

Five minutes later, Scott was onstage.

"It was just beautiful to be up there with my brothers — we are all family now — and for me to be able to step in to save the show for that night so the audience can get what they deserve. They purchased tickets. They're traveling to come see us. They are also battling and trying to stay diligent with being safe with this new variant but still wanting to come out and support us."

"Thoughts of a Colored Man" is made up of related vignettes and set over the course of a single day in Brooklyn, where seven Black men discuss gentrification, violence, racial and sexual identity and what it means to be part of a community. Several characters, ranging in age from late teens to mid-60s, have

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specific themes to illustrate — Wisdom, Anger and Happiness.

Scott went on as Wisdom, a 65-year-old man. While the playwright had performed various characters in his play over the years at workshops and festivals, he had never played Wisdom before. But he knew the blocking and cues, and had originally trained as an actor and was a slam poet. He went on with a script in hand.

"That was a challenge of sorts, but it was really great to be up there. The actor me always wanted to be up there," Scott says. "There wasn't even enough time for me to get nervous or even wrap my head around what was what was happening. I think if I would've known the day before or something like that, you know, there's time for nerves to build."

Multiple Broadway shows, including "Hamilton," "Aladdin," "Mrs. Doubtfire" and "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child," have called off performances in recent days because of breakthrough virus cases in their all-vaccinated casts and crews.

Other creators who have gone into their own Broadway shows include Sara Bareilles slipping into "Waitress," Sting in "The Last Ship" and Green Day's frontman Billie Joe Armstrong, who made several onstage visits to his show "American Idiot." But they all had days or weeks to prepare.

"My wife actually said, 'Are you proud of EXPLAINER: What COVID-19 therapies are available in US?"

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. recently added two new weapons to its small arsenal against the coronavirus: pills that patients can take at home to treat COVID-19.

The drugs from Pfizer and Merck join a handful of other therapies that have been shown to blunt the worst effects of the virus. But each treatment has different advantages and tends to work best for certain types of patients at different stages of the disease.

Here's a look at the current COVID-19 drugs and how they are used:

PILLS

The prescription pills are the first COVID-19 therapies that don't require infusions or injections delivered by health professionals.

The Food and Drug Administration authorized Pfizer's Paxlovid on Wednesday and Merck's molnupiravir on Thursday.

Merck's drug is for adults with a positive COVID-19 test, early symptoms and who face the highest risks of hospitalization. Pfizer's is for anyone 12 and older who likewise face the highest risks of hospitalization.

Pfizer's drug is likely to become the first-choice treatment against the virus, because of its superior benefits and milder side effects. Molnupiravir carries a warning against use during pregnancy and the potential to cause birth defects. The FDA also said molnupiravir should be considered only when other treatments are unavailable or otherwise inappropriate for a patient.

Both treatments should be started soon after symptoms develop, which means patients must get tested and diagnosed quickly.

Experts predict antiviral pills eventually could be used in combination to combat COVID-19, similar to HIV drugs.

ANTIBODY DRUGS

For more than a year, antibody drugs have been the first-choice treatment for patients with early COVID-19 symptoms who don't yet require hospitalization.

Three such drugs are authorized as treatments in the U.S. and they've been shown to reduce the risk of hospitalization and death by 70% or more when given within 10 days of symptoms. They are mainly used for high-risk adults with early COVID-19 symptoms, but they are also occasionally used to try to block infection in people who are highly vulnerable to the virus.

But the omicron variant is dampening enthusiasm for them. Drugmakers Regeneron and Eli Lilly recently warned that laboratory testing suggests their antibody therapies will be much less potent against omicron, which contains dozens of mutations that make it harder for the treatments to attack the virus.

The third option, from British drugmaker GlaxoSmithKline, appears to be the best positioned to fight omicron, but it's not widely available in the U.S.

The drugs have several limitations: They have to be infused or injected by a health worker and they are expensive and complicated to manufacture.

HOSPITAL TREATMENTS

Remdesivir, an antiviral infusion, remains the only drug for hospitalized patients that specifically targets the coronavirus.

It is used for patients who need extra oxygen but don't require breathing machines. In those cases it's been shown to cut recovery times by several days. But the drug has fallen out of favor with many doctors because it hasn't been shown to improve survival. And the World Health Organization doesn't recommend it, given its cost and the lack of clear benefit.

Steroids drugs — a staple of emergency care — have been shown to boost survival in hospitalized COVID-19 patients by blunting inflammation and other immune-system reactions, which drive the worst effects of the disease in later stages.

U.S. regulators also authorized giving newly infected people transfusions of blood plasma from people who have recovered from COVID-19. But there's little evidence it significantly reduces illness and death.

A U.S. panel of experts concluded the evidence is insufficient for many people and that it's not recommended for hospitalized patients without impaired immunity. And the WHO recently recommended against its continued use.

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.

what you did tonight?' And I said, 'Yes, I am.' Because as a performer, I know how hard it is even when you have four weeks of rehearsal and you're fully prepared," Scott says. "So to do what I did in a short amount of time — you know, half a costume, being able to hit my mark, hit the lights, hit most of my cues, being able to engage with my actors — I was truly proud of what I did."

Mark Kennedy is at <http://twitter.com/KennedyTwits>

How can I protect a child too young for a COVID-19 vaccine?

By The Associated Press undefined

How can I protect a child too young for a COVID-19 vaccine?

Children younger than 5 can't get COVID-19 vaccines in the U.S. yet, but there are steps you can take to protect them from infection over the holidays.

"Surround them with adults and siblings who are vaccinated, boosted if eligible," advises Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

She also encourages taking COVID-19 home tests before gatherings.

The CDC recommends that anyone who's not vaccinated — including children ages 2 and older — wear masks indoors in public. If your child is younger than 2 — or cannot wear a mask for other reasons — the agency suggests limiting visits with unvaccinated people. And it says to keep a distance between the child and others in public places.

Adults might also opt to wear a mask indoors in public to set an example for young children, the CDC says. But in virus hot spots, it says everyone should wear masks in those settings, regardless of whether they're vaccinated.

Matthew Binnicker, an expert in viral infections at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, says it might be a good idea to have everyone masked at family gatherings if unvaccinated children are present, since

there's still a chance vaccinated adults can spread the virus.

He also suggests limiting gatherings to 10 people or less.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's top infectious disease expert, says family get-togethers shouldn't be confused with "parties with 30, 40, 50 people" where you don't know who is vaccinated.

"Those are the kind of functions -- in the context of COVID and particularly in the context of omicron -- that you do not want to go to," he says.

In the U.S., children ages 5 to 11 can get kid-size doses of Pfizer's COVID-19 vaccine. The company is testing an even smaller dose for babies and preschoolers.

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

Is the COVID-19 vaccine safe for children?

How can I protect myself from the new omicron variant?

How will the world decide when the pandemic is over?

EXPLAINER: What will judge weigh in sentencing Kim Potter?

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The former suburban Minneapolis police officer who said she confused her handgun for her Taser when she killed Daunte Wright will be sentenced in February after a jury convicted her Thursday on two counts of manslaughter.

The most serious charge against Kim Potter — first-degree manslaughter — carries a maximum penalty of 15 years in prison. Here's how her sentencing could play out:

THE CHARGES

After roughly 27 hours of deliberation over four days, a jury found Potter guilty of both first-degree manslaughter and second-degree manslaughter in the April 11 killing of Wright, a Black motorist. For first-degree manslaughter, prosecutors had to prove Potter caused Wright's death while recklessly handling a firearm in a way that death or great bodily harm to any person was reasonably foreseeable.

The second-degree manslaughter charge required prosecutors to prove Potter caused his death "by her culpable negligence," meaning that Potter "caused an unreasonable risk and consciously took a chance of causing death or great bodily harm" to Wright.

WHAT SENTENCE IS POSSIBLE?

Under Minnesota statutes, Potter, who is white, will be sentenced only on the most serious charge of first-degree manslaughter. That's because both of the charges against her stem from one act, with one victim.

The max for that charge is 15 years. But state sentencing guidelines call for much less. For someone with no criminal history, like Potter, the guidelines range from just more than six years to about 8 1/2 years, with the presumptive sentence being slightly over seven years.

Prosecutors have said they'd seek a sentence above the guideline range, while the defense said they would seek no prison time. In order for Judge Regina Chu to issue a sentence that's outside the guideline range, she would first have to find either mitigating or aggravating factors. Both sides are expected to file written arguments.

POSSIBLE AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Prosecutors say aggravating factors in Potter's case include that she caused a greater-than-normal danger to the safety of other people when she fired into the car, including danger to her fellow officers, to Wright's passenger and to the couple whose car was struck by Wright's after the shooting.

Wright's passenger, Alayna Albrecht-Payton, told the court she still suffers from the effects of the broken jaw she sustained in the crash after the shooting. And Denise Lundgren Wells, whose father was in the car that Wright's struck, said her father had health issues before the crash, but that they accelerated after it happened. He's now in his 80s and in hospice care.

Prosecutors also say Potter abused her authority as a police officer.

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POSSIBLE MITIGATING FACTORS

Defense attorney Paul Engh said the defense would be seeking a “dispositional departure” from sentencing guidelines.

Under state statutes, a mitigated dispositional departure occurs when guidelines recommend a prison sentence, but a judge allows the sentence to be “stayed” — meaning the defendant doesn’t go to prison. Instead, the defendant is put on probation, home monitoring, or possibly sent to the local jail, said Marsh Halberg, a Minneapolis attorney who is not connected to the case. A defendant would be sent to prison to if conditions set by the court are violated.

In arguing that Potter should remain free on bail until she is sentenced, Engh said: “She is amenable to probation. Her remorse and regret for the incident is overwhelming. She’s not a danger to the public whatsoever. She’s made all her court appearances.” Chu was unmoved, and Potter was taken into custody after the verdicts were read.

Halberg said the defense has a lot to work with, because Potter has no prior record and is remorseful. The defense can also make the argument that as a police officer, Potter’s confinement would likely be harsher than most because of the need to keep her safe. The former Minneapolis police officer convicted in George Floyd’s death, Derek Chauvin, has been in solitary confinement for that reason.

WHAT WILL CHU DO?

Minnesota’s sentencing guidelines were created to establish consistent sentences that don’t consider factors such as race or gender.

In determining a final sentence, Chu will consider the arguments made by both sides, as well as victim impact statements. She has also ordered a pre-sentence investigation of Potter. And Potter can make a statement at her sentencing hearing — a time when judges are typically looking to see if a person takes responsibility for the crime or shows remorse.

Halberg said it’s unlikely Chu would sentence Potter below the guideline range, saying: “We live in such a politicized climate now for decisions.” He predicted Chu would go above what guidelines suggest, or sentence her to the top range.

“If you stay within the box as far as the sentences being reasonable, it’s a pretty hard thing to argue on appeal,” he said.

HOW LONG WOULD POTTER SERVE?

No matter what sentence Potter gets, in Minnesota it’s presumed that a defendant with good behavior will serve two-thirds of their penalty in prison and the rest on supervised release, commonly known as parole.

That means if Potter is sentenced to the presumptive seven years, she would likely serve about four years and nine months behind bars, and the rest on supervised release. Once on supervised release, she could be sent back to prison if she violates conditions of his parole. If she gets the maximum 15 years, she could be behind bars for 10 before being placed on parole.

Potter was sent to the state women’s prison in Shakopee after the jury returned its verdicts. Nicholas Kimball, a spokesman with the state Department of Corrections, said that in some cases, particularly those that are higher profile, people are transferred directly to the state prison as they await sentencing.

The same thing happened for Chauvin. He went directly to the state’s maximum security prison as he awaited sentencing for murder. He was ultimately sentenced to 22 1/2 years — above the guideline range — after a judge found aggravating factors in Floyd’s death.

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

Omicron is latest blow to pandemic-weary front-line workers

By PHILIP MARCELO, ANNE D’INNOCENZIO and BOBBY CAINA CALVAN Associated Press

BOSTON (AP) — Staff absences for COVID-19 tripled this month in London’s hospitals, and nearly 10% of the city’s firefighters called out sick.

In New York, about 2,700 police officers were absent earlier this week — twice the number who are ill

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on an average day. And on Cape Cod in Massachusetts, grocery worker Judy Snarsky says she's stretched to her limit, working 50 hours a week and doing extra tasks because her supermarket has around 100 workers when it should have closer to 150.

"We don't have enough hands. Everybody is working as much as they physically and mentally can," the 59-year-old in Mashpee said. "Some of us have been going like a freight train."

The worldwide surge in coronavirus cases driven by the new omicron variant is the latest blow to hospitals, police departments, supermarkets and other critical operations struggling to maintain a full contingent of front-line workers as the pandemic enters its third year.

Governments have taken steps to stem the bleeding across a range of jobs considered essential for society, from truckers and janitors to child care providers and train conductors. But nurses and other workers worry that continued staffing woes will put the public at greater risk and increase burnout and fatigue among their ranks.

Seattle Officer Mike Solan, who leads his city's police union, said his department is down about 300 officers from its usual force of 1,350.

"It's difficult for our community because they're waiting for that call for help," he said. "And then we're at risk because we don't have the proper safe numbers to have a safe working environment when we answer that call for help."

Michelle Gonzalez, a nurse at New York's Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx, said she and her intensive care unit colleagues never truly had a break from COVID-19, and the arrival of omicron has only reawakened her post-traumatic stress.

"Prior to work, I get really bad anxiety," she said. "If I've been off for two days, I will come back in a panic because I don't know what I'm walking into."

Countries including Spain and the U.K. have reduced the length of COVID-19 quarantines to ease staffing shortages by letting people return to work sooner after testing positive or being exposed to the virus. The U.S. did similar for health care workers only.

Meanwhile in the U.S., states such as Massachusetts have called in hundreds of National Guard members to help fill the gaps in hospitals and nursing homes, where they serve meals, transport patients and do other nonclinical work.

In Seattle, Mayor Jenny Durkan has promised to veto legislation repealing a \$4-an-hour hazard pay raise for grocery workers, which has been in place for nearly a year in some major West Coast cities, including Los Angeles and Berkeley and Long Beach, California.

"Now is not the time to roll back the pay for these critical front-line workers," the Democratic mayor said earlier this week.

Unions representing health care workers gripe that far too many hospitals failed to fill staff vacancies or to retain pandemic-weary staff.

For example, there are 1,500 nursing vacancies in New York's three largest hospitals alone, or about double the number at the onset of the pandemic, said Carl Ginsberg, a spokesman for the 42,000-member New York State Nurses Association.

"There are not enough nurses to do the job right, and so there are situations where the units have dangerous conditions, where patients are in jeopardy," he said.

In London, the U.K.'s omicron epicenter, a wave of staff absences is hitting hospitals just as COVID-19 admissions have doubled in three weeks. The latest surge will probably persist until mid-January, officials said.

"It wouldn't take much to cause a crisis," said David Oliver, a consultant physician at a hospital in south-east England.

The operators of U.S. nursing homes, which were crippled by some of the deadliest COVID-19 outbreaks early in the pandemic, are among those pleading for officials to do more.

While cases in long-term care facilities have not risen sharply yet, the industry is bracing for omicron with 15% fewer workers today than when the pandemic began, said Rachel Reeves, a spokesperson for

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the American Health Care Association and the National Center for Assisted Living, an industry trade group.

Nursing homes historically struggle to compete with other health care operators because their pay rates are effectively fixed by the government, she said, so providers hope President Joe Biden's administration can boost Medicaid funding and create staff recruitment and retention programs.

"Caregivers are burned out," Reeves said. "Not only have many experienced tremendous loss, it has been exhausting — physically and emotionally — battling this virus day in and day out."

Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief plan provides \$350 billion for state and local governments to provide "premium pay" to essential workers. States are also using other buckets of pandemic funds to bolster their workforce.

In West Virginia, Gov. Jim Justice said Tuesday that his administration will use \$48 million of the state's remaining CARES Act money on recruiting and training nurses to meet a goal of adding more than 2,000 new nurses over the next four years.

But it's not just health care systems warning of dire consequences and seeking more support.

Ed Bastian, CEO of Delta Air Lines, was among those who have called on the Biden administration to cut recommended COVID-19 quarantine times down to five days, or risk further disruptions in air travel. Delta, United and Lufthansa have canceled dozens of flights over the Christmas period as illnesses take a toll on flight crews.

Train operators also warn of sudden cancellations and other service issues as subways and commuter lines endure COVID-19-related staff shortages.

In the U.K., train company LNER said this week that it's canceling 16 trains a day until Christmas Eve. Transport for London, which operates the subway and employs about 28,000 people, also warned of slowdowns because 500 front-line staff are off work because of COVID-19-related illness.

Even small businesses such as restaurants and nail salons, which are not necessarily considered essential, are preparing to further curtail hours, or briefly shut down if worker shortages worsen.

Manhattan restaurateur Bret Csencsitz said the labor shortage prompted him to reduce seating and eliminate staples such as burgers and oysters from the menu at Gotham, which reopened last month.

Trophy Brewing in Raleigh, North Carolina, cut operating hours and decided to close three of the business' four locations early on New Year's Eve, said David Lockwood, the company's co-owner.

In Washington, D.C., DogMa Daycare & Boarding For Dogs said this week that it was canceling all day care until Jan. 3 because several staff members tested positive for COVID-19.

Daniel Schneider, a Harvard professor focused on low-income workers, said the public should keep in mind that essential workers simply don't have the luxury of working from home, as some Americans do.

"White-collar workers need to appreciate the real risks that these folks take," he said. "You can't ring up groceries from home. You can't stock shelves from home."

D'Innocenzio reported from Sandwich, Massachusetts, and Calvin reported from New York. Associated Press writers Jill Lawless and Kelvin Chan in London; Josh Boak in Washington; Mike Sisak in New York; John Raby in Charleston, West Virginia; and Bryan Anderson in Raleigh, North Carolina, contributed to this report.

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

Western storms bring flood threats, snow for Christmas

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Two people died in a submerged car, evacuations were ordered for wildfire-scarred California, and Seattle and Portland faced the rare chance of snowy streets as a wave of storms rolled through the West.

An atmospheric river — a sky-born plume of moisture from the Pacific Ocean — was fueling the weather, which could dump rain and snow over much of the region through Christmas, while the Pacific Northwest was looking at a dayslong cold snap.

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On Thursday, two people died when their car was submerged in a flooded underpass in Millbrae, just south of San Francisco. Firefighters rescued two people who had climbed atop a car but they couldn't reach the fully submerged vehicle, San Mateo County sheriff's Det. Javier Acosta said.

In the Sierra Nevada, an evacuation warning was issued for about 150 homes downstream of Twain Harte Lake Dam after cracks were found in granite that adjoins the manmade part of the 36-foot-high (11-meter) structure. Authorities began releasing some water, but the dam didn't seem in any immediate danger, Tuolumne County sheriff's Sgt. Nicco Sandelin said.

The Sierras could see 5 to 8 feet (1.5 to 2.4 meters) of snow through the holidays, with 10 feet (3 meters) possible at higher elevations, and authorities urged people to avoid traveling through the mountain passes, which could be treacherous.

In Southern California, evacuation orders were issued Thursday night in Orange County because of possible mudslides and debris flows in three canyons where a wildfire last December burned the ground bare. The Orange County Fire Authority reported a mudslide Thursday night in one canyon that affected some roads but no injuries were reported.

The area saw flooding in a storm last week and several homes were red-tagged.

Steve Learned left the area Thursday morning after doing what he could to protect his home.

"The last storm just killed us, buried our road," he told KABC-TV. "My street turned into a creek bed about 2-and-a-half feet deep with rocks and mud. I hope it doesn't do it again."

The Pacific Northwest was facing frigid temperatures and measurable snow was possible in both Seattle and Portland, forecasters said.

Seattle planned to open two severe weather shelters in the evenings starting Saturday. Daytime temperatures could struggle to reach freezing and overnight lows could drop to single digits into next week, National Weather Service meteorologist Reid Wolcott said.

"This is a rare event," Wolcott said Thursday. "It's been years since those of us at the weather service in Seattle have seen forecast data like this."

Portland and Multnomah County planned to open severe weather shelters on Saturday.

"If you don't have to go out, don't go out," Seattle Mayor Jenny Durkan said. She urged people to check on neighbors and pets and help to keep sidewalks clear of snow and ice.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown issued a state of emergency declaration Thursday evening to remain in effect through Jan. 3, saying expected snow and sustained temperatures below freezing could result in critical transportation failures and disruptions to power and communications infrastructure.

Portland and Multnomah County earlier declared states of emergency.

The storms do have a bright side by increasing mountain snowpacks that provide a substantial amount of water when they melt. Long-term drought conditions continue to blanket nearly 94% of the West, according to the National Weather Service Climate Prediction Center.

More Tiananmen massacre memorials removed in Hong Kong

HONG KONG (AP) — Universities in Hong Kong are removing memorials to the bloody suppression of the 1989 Chinese pro-democracy movement centered on Beijing's Tiananmen Square.

The Chinese University of Hong Kong early Friday took down the "Goddess of Democracy," a statue based on a figure created by art students and brought to the square shortly before the crackdown in which hundreds, if not thousands, of people were killed.

The removal of the monuments testifies to the ruling Communist Party's efforts to erase the bloody events from the public consciousness. It also comes as the party snuffs out democratic challenges in Hong Kong to its rule.

On Thursday, a monument at the University of Hong Kong was dismantled, wiping out one of the city's last remaining places of public commemoration of the crackdown.

The government has never provided a figure on casualties and the pro-democracy movement remains a taboo topic in mainland China. Hong Kong and Macao, the two semi-autonomous territories, were the only

places on Chinese soil where commemorations of the crackdown were allowed until authorities banned annual candlelight vigils for two consecutive years.

In a statement, Chinese University confirmed the removal of the statue and said it had never authorized its display and that no organization has claimed responsibility for its maintenance and management.

Separately, Lingnan University also removed a bas relief memorial wall display dedicated to the memory of the June 4 movement.

The university's decision was predicated on the "overall protection of the university community after a recent assessment," government-run Hong Kong Radio Television reported.

SKorea ex-President Park, jailed for corruption, is pardoned

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korean President Moon Jae-in said Friday he will pardon his chief conservative rival and predecessor, Park Geun-hye, who is serving a lengthy prison term for bribery and other crimes.

Moon's liberal government said the pardon is meant to promote national unity in the face of difficulties brought by the pandemic. Some observers say Moon may want to ease conservative criticism stemming from Park's health problems, or even use her to split the opposition ahead of a presidential election in March.

"We should move into a new era by getting over the pains of the past. It's time to boldly pull together all our strengths for the future rather than fighting against each other while being preoccupied with the past," Moon said in remarks released by his office.

"In the case of former President Park, we considered the fact that her health condition has deteriorated a lot after serving nearly five years in prison," he said.

The Justice Ministry said the 69-year-old Park is among 3,094 people who are to be pardoned on Dec. 31. South Korea often grants special pardons to mark New Year's Day or national holidays.

Park has been treated since last month in a hospital, from where she will be released, the ministry said. Officials refused to elaborate on Park's health, but local media said she has been suffering from a lumbar disc, a shoulder injury and dental problems as well as mental stress.

In comments released by lawyer Yoo Young-ha, Park thanked Moon for pardoning her and said she will focus on treating her illnesses. She said she wants to offer her greetings to the people at an early date.

Park, a daughter of assassinated dictator Park Chung-hee, was once the darling of conservatives in South Korea. Dubbed by local media as "the queen of elections," she won election as South Korea's first female president in late 2012 by beating Moon, then a unified liberal candidate, by a million votes. Park was propelled by conservatives who celebrate her father as a hero who pulled the country up from postwar poverty despite his suppression of human rights.

She was impeached by lawmakers in late 2016, and was formally removed from office and arrested the following year over an explosive corruption scandal that prompted months of massive street protests.

In January, the Supreme Court upheld her 20-year prison term. If she hadn't been pardoned, she could have served a combined 22 years behind bars because she was separately convicted of meddling in her party's nominations of candidates ahead of parliamentary elections in 2016.

Park has described herself as a victim of political revenge. She has refused to attend her trials since October 2017.

Among the main charges she faced was collusion with her longtime confidante, Choi Soon-sil, to take millions of dollars in bribes and extortion from some of the country's largest business groups, including Samsung, while she was in office.

Park's scandal led to the arrests, indictments and convictions of dozens of high-profile figures. Choi is serving an 18-year term. Samsung scion Lee Jae-yong was initially sentenced to five years in prison before his term was reduced and was eventually released on parole in August.

Park was succeeded by Moon, who easily won a special presidential by-election while the conservatives

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were in disarray amid fierce internal feuding over Park's ouster.

Moon's single five-year term ends in May and he is barred by law from seeking reelection. Recent public support surveys show candidates from the governing and conservative opposition parties running neck and neck.

It wasn't immediately clear how Park's pardon will affect voter sentiment. It could cause a backlash from the liberals, but some observers say it may also rekindle a division in the opposition camp.

"Even if the presidential Blue House may have impure intentions to influence the results of the presidential election with the pardon of ex-President Park Geun-hye, it's something that we opposition forces should address," Kim Jae-won, a senior member of the People Power Party, wrote on Facebook. "United we stand and divided we fall."

Moon's office said Park's pardon has nothing to do with the presidential election.

"Moon may be accused of trying to influence the next election, but releasing a predecessor from prison has precedent in Korean politics," said Leif-Eric Easley, a professor at Ewha University in Seoul.

"Now that staunch conservative and progressive candidates are set for the March 2022 election, this move is unlikely to change their positions or the public's opinion of them," Easley said.

Almost all South Korean former presidents, or their family members and key associates, have been mired in scandals near the end of their terms or after they left office.

Park's father was assassinated by his spy chief in 1979 after a 18-year rule. Moon's friend and former President Roh Moo-hyun jumped to his death in 2009 amid corruption investigations involving his family.

Two other former presidents, Chun Doo-hwan and Roh Tae-woo, spent time in prison but were later pardoned. Both died this year.

Park's conservative predecessor, Lee Myung-bak, is serving a 17-year prison term on corruption charges.

Those to be pardoned with Park on Dec. 31 include ex-Prime Minister Han Myung-sook, one of Moon's former political allies, who served a two-year prison term on corruption charges. The government will reinstate her civil rights so she can run in elections or cast ballots.

Separately, former leftist lawmaker Lee Seok-ki, who has been serving a more-than nine-year prison term for plotting a pro-North Korea rebellion and other charges, was released Friday on parole. Lee was arrested when Park was in office. He was affiliated with a now-disbanded small progressive party.

COVID-19 spike worsens Africa's severe poverty, hunger woes

By FARAI MUTSAKA Associated Press

HARARE, Zimbabwe (AP) — Outside a foreign currency exchange in Zimbabwe's capital, hordes of people desperate for U.S. dollars are pushed up against each other.

"That's it, keep it tight," some shout, trying to prevent others from jumping the line to buy the money that could get them a discount on goods pegged to a quickly devaluing local currency.

Nearly two years into a global pandemic, a new spike in coronavirus cases driven by the omicron variant is once again shuttering businesses, halting travel, reviving fears of overwhelmed hospitals and upending travel and holiday plans in countries around the world.

But in Zimbabwe and other African nations, the virus's resurgence is threatening the very survival of millions of people who have already been driven to the edge by a pandemic that has devastated their economies. When putting food on the table is not a given, worries about whether to gather with family members for the holiday or heed public announcements urging COVID-19 precautions take a back seat.

"Yes, I have heard of the new variant, but it can never be worse than having nothing to eat at home right now," says furniture store clerk Joshua Nyoni, one of the dozens waiting outside the exchange. Like many others in the chaotic crowd, Nyoni alternately wears his face mask below his chin or puts it in his pocket.

The United Nations Economic Commission on Africa, or ECA, noted in March that about 9 in 10 of the world's extremely poor people live in Africa. The ECA now warns that the economic effects already felt since the pandemic began in 2020 "will push an additional 5 to 29 million below the extreme poverty line."

"If the impact of the pandemic is not limited by 2021, an additional 59 million people could suffer the

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same fate, which would bring the total number of extremely poor Africans to 514 million people," the agency says.

The World Bank estimates the economy went from 2.4% growth in 2019 to a 3.3% contraction in 2020, plunging Africa into its first recession in 25 years.

"The economic disruption wrought by COVID-19 has pushed hunger crises off a cliff," Sean Granville-Ross, Africa regional director for the nonprofit charitable organization Mercy Corps, told The Associated Press.

Granville-Ross says his organization in 2021 saw "an alarming spike in need" in regions such as the Sahel, West Africa, East Africa and southern Africa where some countries were already experiencing humanitarian crises and conflict before COVID-19.

Worry is now intensifying amid a spike in COVID infections in Africa, which currently accounts for about 9 million of the world's roughly 275 million cases.

The World Health Organization has for months described Africa as "one of the least affected regions in the world" in its weekly pandemic reports. But in mid-December it said the number of new cases was "currently doubling every five days, the fastest rate this year" as the delta and omicron variants push up infections. Both South Africa and Zimbabwe have been reporting reduced numbers over the past week, but authorities remain cautious.

Renewed travel restrictions and possible lockdowns "will only push millions more people to poverty and undermine the slight economic recovery we have started to see," Granville-Ross says.

Compared to the continent as a whole, where just over 7% of the population has received two shots of the coronavirus vaccine, Zimbabwe is regarded as a success story — even though only about 20% of its 15 million people have been fully vaccinated.

Amid lingering hesitancy, the government has threatened to widen vaccine mandates. But for many people, virus infection fears have taken a back seat to the more urgent task of finding enough money to feed their families.

Dozens of residents desperate for access to money in an economy where cash, especially the U.S. dollar, is king, sleep outside both foreign currency exchanges and banks, huddled closely together for days. Elderly people, many without face masks or not properly wearing them, stand in tightly packed lines that snake for kilometers, waiting to withdraw their pensions.

"I would rather spend my time here than queue for the vaccine," says Nyoni, outside the crowded foreign currency exchange.

"If I catch the virus, they may quarantine me, treat me or even feed me if I am hospitalized," he says. "But hunger is different: You can't be put in quarantine because the family has nothing to eat. People just watch you die."

In UAE desert, camels compete for crowns in beauty pageant

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

LIWA, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Deep in the desert of the United Arab Emirates, the moment that camel breeders had been waiting for arrived.

Families hauled their camels through wind-carved sands. Servers poured tiny cups of Arabic coffee. Judges descended on desert lots.

A single question loomed over the grandstand: Which camels were most beautiful?

Even as the omicron variant rips through the world, legions of breeders from Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Qatar traveled to the UAE's southwestern desert this week with 40,000 of their most beautiful camels for the Al Dhafra Festival.

The five-man jury at the annual pageant insists beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. Camel aesthetics are evaluated according to precise categories determined generations ago. Only female camels participate because males fight too much, authorities said.

As hundreds of woolly black camels trotted through the dusty pastures, necks and humps bobbing, one of the organizers, Mohammed al-Muhari, outlined the platonic ideal.

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Necks must be long and slim, cheeks broad and hooves large, he told The Associated Press on Wednesday. Lips must droop. They must walk tall with graceful posture.

"It's not so different from humans," al-Muhari said, his robe sparkling white amid clouds of dust.

The high standards have prompted many breeders to seek an advantage, using banned Botox injections to inflate the camel's lips, muscle relaxants to soften the face and silicone wax injections to expand the hump.

Festival spokesman Abdel Hadi Saleh declined to say how many participants had been disqualified over plastic surgery this week. All camels undergo rigorous medical exams to detect artificial touch-ups and hormones before entering Al Dhafra Festival.

Since Emirati investigators began employing X-rays and sonar systems a few years ago, Saleh said the number of cheaters has plummeted.

"We easily catch them, and they realize getting caught, it's not worth the cost to their reputation," he said.

A great deal is at stake. Al Dhafra Festival offers the top 10 winners in each category prizes ranging from \$1,300 to \$13,600. At the main Saudi contest, the most beautiful fetch \$66 million. Camels change hands in deals worth millions of dirhams.

But breeders insist it's not only about the money.

"It is a kind of our heritage and custom that the (Emirati rulers) revived," said 27-year-old camel owner Saleh al-Minhali from Abu Dhabi. He sported designer sunglasses over his traditional headdress and Balenciaga sneakers under his kandura, or Emirati tunic.

Gone are the days when camels were integral to daily life in the federation of seven sheikhdoms, a chapter lost as oil wealth and global business transformed Dubai and Abu Dhabi into skyscraper-studded hubs with marbled malls, luxury hotels and throbbing nightclubs. Foreigners outnumber locals nearly nine to one in the country.

However, experts say Emiratis are increasingly searching for meaning in echoes of the past — Bedouin traditions that prevailed before the UAE became a nation 50 years ago.

"Younger Emiratis who have identity issues are going back to their heritage to find a sense of belonging," said Rima Sabban, a sociologist at Zayed University in Dubai. "The society developed and modernized so fast it creates a crisis inside."

Camels race at old-world racetracks in the Emirates, and still offer milk, meat and a historic touchstone to citizens. Festivals across the country celebrate the camel's significance. Al Dhafra also features falcon racing, dromedary dancing and a camel milking contest.

"People in Dubai may not even think about them, but young people here care deeply about camels," said Mahmoud Suboh, a festival coordinator from Liwa Oasis at the northern edge of the desert's Empty Quarter. Since 2008, he has watched the fairgrounds transform from a remote desert outpost into an extravaganza that draws camel lovers from around the world.

In a sign of the contest's exploding popularity, about a dozen young Emirati men who call themselves "camel influencers" filmed and posed with the camels on Wednesday, broadcasting live to thousands of Instagram followers.

The digital likes have proven important this year, as the coronavirus pandemic curtailed tourism to the festival and dampened the mood. Police checked that visitors had received both vaccine doses and tested negative for the virus. Authorities nagged attendees to adjust their face masks, threatening fines. There were few foreigners or other spectators strolling the site Wednesday.

Each category in the 10-day pageant is divided into two types of camels: Mahaliyat, the tan breed that originates from the UAE and Oman, and Majaheen, the darker breed from Saudi Arabia. Wednesday's showcase focused on 5-year-old black Majaheen camels.

For hours, judges scrutinized each camel, scribbling lists of the animal's body parts for scoring purposes. Breeders shouted to startle camels so they'd look up and show off elongated necks.

As the sun set over the sands, the winning breeders were called to accept their gleaming trophies. Down below in the dirt rings, camels were crowned with gold and silver-lined shawls.

"Until now we are the first in the category ... We've received over 40 prizes (in various camel contests)

this year alone," beamed Mohammed Saleh bin Migrin al-Amri as he juggled four trophies from the day, including two golds.

Then he jumped into his Toyota Land Cruiser. The victory parade of honking SUVs and grunting camels faded behind the desert dunes.

Search to resume for 1887 time capsule under Lee monument

By BEN FINLEY and STEVE HELBER Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. (AP) — The spot in Virginia where a towering statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee once stood over Richmond's tree-lined Monument Avenue is now just a pile of boulders, rubble and sand.

But for the next few weeks, workers will continue their search for a famed 1887 time capsule that was said to be buried under the massive monument, long viewed as a symbol of racial injustice.

"We know what to be on the lookout for," said Devon Henry, the contractor who took down the statue and its pedestal. "It will be a very decorative piece of granite that will look nothing like what's already there."

Henry spoke the day after one of the more anti-climactic moments in historic preservation: State conservators spent five hours gingerly prying open a corroded lead box that some believed — or at least hoped — was the 1887 time capsule.

But they didn't find the expected trove of objects related to the Confederacy, including a picture of a deceased President Abraham Lincoln. Instead, conservators pulled out a few waterlogged books, a silver coin and an envelope with some papers.

The prevailing theory among some Thursday was that the lead box was left by a person — or persons — who oversaw the monument's construction.

"They decided to have a little vanity project," said Dale Brumfield, a local historian who focuses on the Richmond area. "It was not so much a time capsule as it was a self-commemoration capsule. And who was going to stop them?"

The box contained a novel written by Collinson Pierrepont Edwards Burgwyn, a city of Richmond civil engineer who worked on the plans for Monument Avenue.

The envelope contained an image of a man, with the words "James Netherwood master stone mason" written on the back. Netherwood supervised construction of the pedestal on which the large equestrian statue of Lee had stood.

"While Netherwood was still alive, he had a sculptor create a granite, life-size statue of himself," Brumfield said. "Burgwyn probably had an ego about the same size."

Julie Langan, the director of the state's Department of Historic Resources, agreed that the box could be the work of people involved in the monument's construction, although she stressed that was still yet to be proven.

"If you go into historic buildings, you'll sometimes find places where craftsmen have carved their initials to sort of leave a lasting imprint of their involvement," she said. "And I see this as a similar sort of gesture."

Langan said the box that was opened Wednesday was "more interesting than exciting."

"What I found exciting is how excited the public has gotten around this story," she said. "It shows me that the public can really get excited about history."

The Lee statue was erected in 1890 in the former capital of the Confederacy. Its removal in September came more than a year after Gov. Ralph Northam ordered it in the wake of protests that erupted after the police killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis.

The statue was one of five Confederate tributes along Monument Avenue, and the only one that belonged to the state. The four city-owned statues were taken down in 2020, but the Lee statue's removal was blocked by two lawsuits until a ruling from the Supreme Court of Virginia in September cleared the way for it to be dismantled.

Henry, the contractor who took down the statue, said all of the decorative granite has been removed from the site. The work on the pile of rubble that's left — and the search for the 1887 time capsule — will resume Monday.

If all goes well, they'll find a much bigger box. It will be made of copper instead of lead. And there will be some 60 items, including a picture of President Lincoln lying in his coffin.

"We'll continue to do what we're doing in a very meticulous and professional and safe way," Henry said. "And we'll see what happens in a few weeks."

\$2.5B headed to tribes for long-standing water settlements

By SUMAN NAISHADHAM and FELICIA FONSECA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — For over a decade, residents of the rural Fort Apache Reservation in eastern Arizona have been promised miles of pipeline that would bring clean drinking water to their communities.

Now, a one-time windfall to help carry out the agreement could be on its way.

The federal infrastructure bill signed last month includes \$2.5 billion for Native American water rights settlements, a tool tribes have used to define their rights to water from rivers and other sources and get federal funding to deliver it to residents.

The federal government has not disclosed how the money will be divvied up. But tribes involved in more than 30 settlements — many in the U.S. West, including the White Mountain Apache of the Fort Apache Reservation — are eligible and eagerly awaiting specifics.

"These are longstanding lapses in the building out of infrastructure ... to make sure that people in Indian Country are not left behind," said Heather Whiteman Runs Him, who is from the Crow Nation of Montana and directs the University of Arizona's Tribal Justice Clinic.

Access to reliable, clean water and basic sanitation facilities on tribal lands remains a challenge for hundreds of thousands of people. The funding for settlements is part of about \$11 billion from the infrastructure law headed to Indian Country to expand broadband coverage, fix roads and provide basic needs like running water.

The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 1908 that tribes have rights to as much water as they need to establish a permanent homeland, and those rights stretch back at least as long as any given reservation has existed. As a result, tribal water rights often are more senior to others in the West, where competition over the scarce resource is often fierce.

Litigation can be expensive and drawn-out, which is why many tribes have turned to settlements. The negotiations generally involve tribes, states, cities, private water users, local water districts and others and can take years if not decades to hash out.

"What makes them a complicated and often very slow-moving process is there are huge potential ramifications for how a tribal water right gets quantified and developed," said Richard "Jim" Palmer, the White Mountain Apache Tribe's attorney general from 2010 to 2018.

Nearly 40 water rights settlements have been reached with tribes, some of which include more than one tribe. The Interior Department said 31 of the settlements are eligible for funds from the infrastructure bill.

"This money will really help us to fulfill our end of the deal," said Elizabeth Klein, senior counselor to the Interior secretary.

Congress approved the White Mountain Apache settlement in 2010. The tribe received more than one-third of the water it claimed it was entitled to from two rivers that flow on the mountainous reservation in exchange for the promise of federal money to deliver the water to tribal communities.

The tribe has said it needs federal funding for water storage, surface water treatment facilities and miles of pipeline so residents can have a reliable and clean source of drinking water.

The projects stalled, however, because of cost overruns and technical issues that took years to resolve and even more negotiations to secure additional funding, Palmer said. He added that's typical of many tribal water rights settlements.

"It's a situation of having a lot of money on paper but it being very, very difficult to access and implement ... without a staggering amount of red tape getting in the way," said Palmer, who is White Mountain Apache.

As a result, residents of the reservation still rely on over-pumped wells or consume water that's potentially contaminated with heavy metals, Palmer said.

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Congress' piecemeal approach to funding tribal water rights settlements is what makes the \$2.5 billion in the infrastructure deal important, said Jay Weiner, an attorney and Native American water law expert.

"It kind of clears the decks on these annual funding cycles so you have less competition for ... limited dollars," he said.

The Navajo Nation — the largest Native American reservation in the U.S. — said it expects to receive funding from the infrastructure law for a 2020 settlement it reached with Utah for water in the upper Colorado River basin.

Congress authorized \$210 million for water delivery infrastructure and agricultural conservation projects to help bring running water to the Utah side of the reservation, but lawmakers did not provide full funding.

Meanwhile, residents and public health experts are concerned about groundwater contamination from uranium and arsenic. On the Utah portion of the Navajo Nation, the tribe has said hundreds of households — or roughly 40% of the residents — lack running water or proper sanitation facilities.

The 27,000-square-mile (70,000-square-kilometer) reservation is larger than West Virginia and also stretches into Arizona and New Mexico. Homes are scattered on the landscape, adding to the difficulties in transporting water.

Tribes say the faster they get the funding, the sooner they can start long-anticipated projects to make use of water deemed theirs on paper.

"Ultimately, it really is about allowing and facilitating tribes to be able to put their water to use, which is the point of the whole exercise," Weiner said.

Fonseca reported from Flagstaff, Arizona.

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2 dead in submerged car as California storm worries spread

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Heavy overnight rains in Northern California left two people dead in a submerged car as authorities on Thursday ordered evacuations for a fire-scarred Southern California canyon area because of possible mud and debris flows.

Firefighters in Millbrae, just south of San Francisco, rescued two people who had climbed atop a vehicle at a flooded underpass. But they weren't able to reach people in a fully submerged car, San Mateo County sheriff's Det. Javier Acosta said.

In the Sierra Nevada, an evacuation warning was issued for about 150 homes downstream of Twain Harte Lake Dam after cracks were found in granite that adjoins the manmade part of the 36-foot-high (11-meter) structure. Authorities began releasing some water, but the dam didn't seem in any immediate danger, Tuolumne County sheriff's Sgt. Nicco Sandelin said.

The precautions for Southern California came as precipitation that had mostly been falling in Northern California this week spread throughout the state. Heavy rain was falling Thursday night in the southern part of the state.

Earlier, firefighters used a litter basket to rescue a man stranded on a bridge pillar above the flowing Los Angeles River.

The National Weather Service issued an advisory for minor flooding of roadways and low-lying areas in counties around San Francisco Bay and an avalanche warning was posted for eastern Sierra Nevada backcountry areas in Mono and Inyo counties.

Tire chains were required on several major routes through the Sierra, and flooding closed a stretch of coastal Highway 1 in San Luis Obispo County and a section of U.S. 101 in Santa Barbara County.

Forecasters issued a flood watch for areas east and southeast of Los Angeles starting Thursday evening because of possible heavy overnight rain fed by an atmospheric river, a long plume of moisture from the Pacific Ocean.

An evacuation order was issued by Orange County authorities for three canyons near a wildfire burn scar where rain last week unleashed muddy torrents.

Warnings urging voluntary evacuation were issued by San Bernardino County authorities for a half-dozen mountain areas.

Periods of rain and snow were predicted for California through Christmas and into next week. Snow levels in the north could drop to 1,000 feet (300 meters) or lower by Sunday, forecasters said, warning holiday travelers to be ready.

"Foothill locations that do not normally receive snow should prepare for winter conditions, especially from Sunday morning through Tuesday morning," the Sacramento weather office said.

LA police kill teen girl while firing shots at male suspect

By STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Los Angeles police fatally shot a 14-year-old girl who was inside a clothing store dressing room Thursday as they fired at a suspect who had assaulted a woman earlier, authorities said.

Police also killed the male suspect, authorities said. He and the girl have not been named. The woman who had been assaulted was taken to the hospital with moderate to serious injuries.

The shots were fired around 11:45 a.m. at a Burlington store — part of a chain formerly known as Burlington Coat Factory — in the North Hollywood area of the San Fernando Valley.

Police initially responded to reports of a person being assaulted with a deadly weapon as well as reports of shots being fired, said Los Angeles police Capt. Stacy Spell at a news conference. Spell said officers opened fire when they saw the suspect assaulting another person.

The suspect was struck by the officers' bullets and killed, Spell said.

One of the bullets went through a dressing room wall and struck the 14-year-old girl, according to LAPD Assistant Chief Dominic Choi. Officers later found her inside.

"You can't see into the dressing rooms and it just looks like a straight wall of drywall," Choi said at a second news conference.

Investigators do not yet know whether the teenager was in the dressing room before the violence began or ran in there to hide, he said.

The California Department of Justice was investigating the shooting, Attorney General Rob Bonta said.

Choi said authorities do not yet know the man's motive or whether he knew the woman he initially assaulted in the store.

Los Angeles Fire Department spokesperson Nicholas Prange said that woman had moderate to serious injuries and was transported to a hospital. It wasn't immediately known if she'd been shot but Choi said she had injuries to her head, arms and face.

Police found a heavy metal cable lock near the suspect that they say may have been used in that assault.

Spell said the injured woman was the victim in the first assault report. It was not immediately clear what weapon was involved in that assault.

He added that police had received calls about the suspect acting erratically before the incident.

Imelda Garcia said her sister works in the store and was on break when she heard gunshots and everyone started running. Garcia said she spoke to her sister on the phone and that she's OK but sounded "really nervous."

Police escorted people out of the store nearly two hours after the shooting.

The shooting recalled a July 21, 2018, confrontation in which LAPD officers accidentally shot and killed a woman at a Trader Joe's market. Officers got into a gunfight with a man who authorities say shot his grandmother and girlfriend before leading police on a chase that ended when he crashed his car outside the market.

A police bullet killed Melyda Corado, 27, the assistant store manager, as she ran toward the store's entrance after hearing the car crash.

The suspect, Gene Evin Atkins, took employees and shoppers hostage for three hours before surrender-

ing, authorities said.

Atkins has pleaded not guilty to the killing.

Prosecutors found two police officers acted lawfully when they returned Atkins' gunfire.

Kim Potter guilty of manslaughter in Daunte Wright's death

By AMY FORLITI and SCOTT BAUER Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A suburban Minneapolis police officer who said she confused her handgun for her Taser was convicted of manslaughter Thursday in the death of Daunte Wright, prompting tears from the young Black man's parents and a jubilant celebration by supporters outside the courthouse who chanted "Guilty, guilty, guilty!"

The mostly white jury deliberated for about 27 hours over four days before finding former Brooklyn Center Officer Kim Potter guilty of first-degree and second-degree manslaughter. Potter, 49, faces about seven years in prison under the state's sentencing guidelines, but prosecutors said they would seek a longer term.

Judge Regina Chu ordered Potter taken into custody and held without bail pending sentencing on Feb. 18. Potter had been free on \$100,000 bond posted the day last April that she was charged, which was three days after she killed Wright and a day after she quit the police force.

As she was led away in handcuffs, a Potter family member in the courtroom shouted "Love you, Kim!" Potter's attorneys left the courthouse without commenting and didn't immediately respond to phone messages or emails.

It was the second high-profile conviction of a police officer won this year by a team led by Attorney General Keith Ellison, including some of the same attorneys who helped convict Derek Chauvin in George Floyd's death in the very same courtroom just eight months earlier.

Wright was killed while that trial was happening not far away, and it set off a wave of angry protests outside the police station in Brooklyn Center, where demonstrators demanding "Justice for Daunte" clashed with officers in riot gear for several nights.

Outside the courthouse Thursday, dozens of people who had gathered erupted in cheers, hugs and tears of joy as the verdicts were read. A New Orleans-style jazz band played "When the Saints Go Marching In." Two men jumped up and down holding one another's shoulders, and then other people began jumping up and down and chanting "Guilty, guilty, guilty!"

They chanted "Say his name! Daunte Wright!" Some held yellow signs that said "guilty" in large block letters.

Potter, who testified that she "didn't want to hurt anybody," looked down without any visible reaction when the verdicts were read. As Chu thanked the jury, Potter made the sign of the cross.

Potter's attorneys argued that she should be allowed to remain free until she's sentenced, saying she wasn't going to commit another crime or go anywhere.

"It is the Christmas holiday season," Potter attorney Paul Engh argued. "She's a devoted Catholic, no less, and there is no point to incarcerate her at this point in time."

Chu rejected their arguments, though, saying she "cannot treat this case any differently than any other case."

Though Potter showed no visible emotion in court as the verdicts were read, she was photographed smiling in a mug shot taken later as she was processed at a women's prison near Minneapolis.

After Potter was led from the courtroom, prosecutor Erin Eldridge exchanged a long hug with a tearful Katie Bryant, Wright's mother and a frequent presence at the trial, and with Wright's father. Ellison also exchanged hugs with the parents.

Outside the courthouse afterward, Ellison said the verdict brought a measure of accountability for Potter but fell short of justice.

"Justice would be restoring Daunte to life and making the Wright family whole again," Ellison said. "Justice is beyond the reach that we have in this life for Daunte. But accountability is an important step, a critical

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necessary step on the road to justice for us all.”

Ellison said he felt sympathy for Potter, who has gone from being an “esteemed member of the community” to being convicted of a serious crime.

Wright’s mother hugged Ellison and said the verdicts triggered “every single emotion that you could imagine.”

“Today we have gotten accountability and that’s what we’ve been asking for from the beginning,” Katie Bryant said, crediting supporters for keeping up pressure.

“We love you, we appreciate you, and honestly, we could not have done it without you,” she said.

The time-stamps on the verdicts showed that jurors agreed on the second count on Tuesday, before they asked the judge that afternoon what to do if they were having difficulty agreeing. The guilty verdict on the more serious first-degree count was reached at 11:40 a.m. Thursday.

Potter, who is white, shot and killed the 20-year-old Wright during an April 11 traffic stop in Brooklyn Center as she and other officers were trying to arrest him on an outstanding warrant for a weapons possession charge. The shooting happened at a time of high tension in the area, with Chauvin standing trial in nearby Minneapolis for Floyd’s death.

Jurors saw video of the shooting from police body cameras and dashcams. As Wright pulled away while another officer attempted to handcuff him, Potter repeatedly said she would tase him, but instead shot him once in his chest with her gun, which was in her hand.

“(Expletive)! I just shot him. ... I grabbed the wrong (expletive) gun,” Potter said on video shown to the jury. Moments later, she said: “I’m going to go to prison.”

During her sometimes tearful testimony, Potter told jurors that she was “sorry it happened.” She said the traffic stop “just went chaotic.”

The maximum prison sentence for first-degree manslaughter is 15 years. Minnesota law sentences defendants only on their most serious conviction when multiple counts involve the same act and the same victim, and state guidelines call for about seven years on that charge.

Prosecutors have said they would seek to prove aggravating factors that merit what’s called an upward departure from sentencing guidelines. In Potter’s case, they alleged that her actions were a danger to others, including her fellow officers, to Wright’s passenger and to the couple whose car was struck by Wright’s after the shooting. They also alleged she abused her authority as a police officer.

Potter’s attorneys argued that she made a tragic mistake, but that she also would have been justified in using deadly force because of the possibility that Potter’s fellow officer, then-Sgt. Mychal Johnson, was at risk of being dragged if Wright had driven away from the traffic stop.

Potter testified that she decided to act after seeing a look of fear on Johnson’s face. But Eldridge pointed out to jurors that for much of the interaction, Potter was behind a third officer she was training and that Johnson didn’t come into her camera’s view until after the shot was fired — and then it showed the top of his head as he backed away.

“Sgt. Johnson was clearly not afraid of being dragged,” Eldridge said. “He never said he was scared. He didn’t say it then, and he didn’t testify to it in court.”

Eldridge also noted an inconsistency in Potter’s testimony, saying that when she gave an interview to a psychologist working for the defense team, she told him she didn’t know why she used her Taser. Potter told the jury she didn’t recall saying that.

First-degree manslaughter required prosecutors to prove that Potter caused Wright’s death while committing a misdemeanor — in her case, the reckless handling of a firearm. The second-degree charge required them to prove that she caused Wright’s death by “culpable negligence.”

Bauer reported from Madison, Wisconsin. Associated Press writers Mohamed Ibrahim in Minneapolis and Kathleen Foody in Chicago contributed to this report.

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

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This story has been corrected to delete a reference to Potter pulling out her gun after she shouted a Taser warning. Body camera video shows her gun was already in her hand at the time.

Officials question San Francisco's emergency over opioids

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The Board of Supervisors in San Francisco were meeting Thursday to consider an emergency order requested by the mayor to tackle the opioid epidemic in the city's troubled Tenderloin neighborhood, with some members clearly dismayed that the declaration could be used to criminalize people who are homeless, addicted to drugs or both.

The public health emergency declaration allows the Department of Emergency Management to re-allocate city staff and bypass contracting and permitting regulations to set up a new temporary center where people can access expanded drug treatment and counseling.

But advocates for the homeless and substance users are urging a no vote because Mayor London Breed has also pledged to flood the district with police officers to halt crime. Public health officials encourage treatment for drug addicts, not punishment, but Breed has said that people consuming drugs in public may wind up in jail unless they accept services.

Supervisors said they welcomed the idea of treating a drug epidemic fueled by cheap synthetic fentanyl as the crisis it is. More people in San Francisco died of overdose last year than of COVID-19.

"I believe that we should all be marshaling every resource we have in this city to address that crisis," said Supervisor Hillary Ronen. "But because of the way that this has been described in the media, I don't have faith that we're talking about the same thing."

The Tenderloin includes museums, the main public library and government offices, including City Hall. But it's also teeming with people who are homeless or marginally housed, a high concentration of drug dealers and people consuming drugs in broad view.

Breed said last week that it was time to be "less tolerant of all the bull— that has destroyed our city." She said it's not fair that residents can't use their parks or leave home.

"When someone is openly using drugs on the street, we're going to give them the option of going to the services and treatment we're providing. But if they refuse, we're not going to allow them to continue using on the street," she said on social media this week. "The families in the neighborhood deserve better."

Breed has committed to opening a supervised drug consumption site as well as a drug sobering center, and said the Department of Emergency Management will lead the response much like it coordinated efforts to address the pandemic. The department will, in part, streamline emergency medical calls, disrupt drug dealing and use, and make sure streets stay clean.

Deaths attributable to overdoses have increased more than 200% in San Francisco since 2018, and last year, more than 700 people died from drug overdoses in the city, more than the number who died from COVID-19, according to the proclamation.

Nearly 600 people have died of a drug overdose this year, through November, with nearly half of the deaths occurring in the Tenderloin and in the neighboring South of Market district, says the proclamation. These areas make up 7% of San Francisco's population.

Politically liberal cities across the U.S. are grappling with crime in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd, when their elected leaders pledged ways to reduce friction between police and vulnerable communities of color, particularly African Americans such as Floyd.

San Francisco DA Chesa Boudin joined the city's public defender earlier this week to denounce the mayor's plan, saying that jailing people struggling with addiction, mental health issues and homelessness would not work.

They want her to use the money on adding more treatment beds, shelters, job training and other social services.

"What we currently see in the Tenderloin didn't happen overnight and stems from years of massive disinvestment and displacement," said Jeannette Zanipatin, California director at the Drug Policy Alliance.

If approved, the emergency order would last 90 days unless Breed seeks renewal.

Cuomo won't be charged for touching trooper at racetrack

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo won't face criminal charges after a female state trooper said she felt "completely violated" by his unwanted touching at an event at Belmont Park in September 2019, a Long Island prosecutor said Thursday.

Acting Nassau County District Attorney Joyce Smith said in a statement that an investigation found the allegations against Cuomo "credible, deeply troubling but not criminal under New York law."

Smith opened the investigation after details of the encounter appeared in Attorney General Letitia James' August report on sexual harassment allegations against Cuomo. The report chronicled accusations from 11 women and led to Cuomo's resignation from office, though he has attacked the findings as biased and inaccurate.

Cuomo's spokesperson Rich Azzopardi, in a statement released Thursday afternoon, said Cuomo didn't recall touching the trooper.

Azzopardi said it was common for the former governor to acknowledge a trooper who would hold the door open for him. Azzopardi didn't respond to a question about whether Cuomo would acknowledge troopers by touching them.

"As he has said many times, Gov. Cuomo did not remember touching the trooper, but said that it was a common custom for him to acknowledge the presence of a trooper — male or female — holding a door as he walked past them," Azzopardi said. "This was only meant to be an acknowledgment of their presence and nothing more."

James' report found that Cuomo sexually harassed at least 11 women in violation of federal and state civil rights law. But she said pursuing potential criminal penalties would be up to prosecutors.

According to the report, the trooper said Cuomo ran the palm of his left hand across her abdomen, to her belly button and then to her right hip, where she kept her gun, while she held a door open for him as he left an event at Belmont Park on Sept. 23, 2019.

Cuomo was at the state-owned racetrack, home to the last leg of horse racing's Triple Crown, to break ground on a new arena for the NHL's New York Islanders. The arena, adjacent to the track's main grandstand and paddock, opened last month.

The trooper, a member of Cuomo's security detail, told James' investigators that Cuomo's conduct at the event made her feel "completely violated because to me, like that's between my chest and my privates."

James' report said that although the trooper was upset by Cuomo's unwanted touching, she did not feel she could do anything about it.

"I'm a trooper, newly assigned to the travel team. Do I want to make waves? No," she said, according to the report. "I've heard horror stories about people getting kicked off the detail or transferred over like little things. ... I had no plans to report it."

The trooper told James' investigators that what happened at Belmont Park was just one of many instances of Cuomo's "flirtatious" and "creepy" behavior toward her.

One time, in an elevator, he traced his finger from her neck to her back, she said. Another time, he asked to kiss her in the driveway outside his Mount Kisco home and proceeded to peck her cheek, she said.

"I remember just freezing, being — in the back of my head, I'm like, oh, how do I say no politely?" she told investigators.

The Nassau County investigation was limited to the encounter at Belmont Park, which is on the county's border with New York City. Authorities in other parts of the state have been looking into other allegations in James' report.

In October, the Albany County sheriff's office filed a misdemeanor groping complaint against Cuomo, but a week later the district attorney asked a judge for more time to evaluate the evidence.

The D.A. said that the sheriff's one-page criminal complaint, based on allegations from a woman who

said Cuomo slid his hand up her blouse and grabbed her breast at the governor's mansion in late 2020, was "potentially defective."

At the prosecutor's request, a court delayed Cuomo's scheduled arraignment until Jan. 7.

Following the release of James' report, the U.S. Department of Justice launched a civil inquiry in August into sexual harassment claims made against Cuomo. The exact nature of the inquiry and its current status is unclear.

Associated Press writers Michael Balsamo and Marina Villeneuve contributed to this report. Follow Michael Sisak on Twitter at twitter.com/mikesisak

Jury in Elizabeth Holmes trial hears replay of her boasts

By MICHAEL LIEDTKE AP Technology Writer

SAN JOSE, Calif. (AP) — Jurors in the fraud trial of former Theranos CEO Elizabeth Holmes returned to the courtroom Thursday to listen again to audio recordings that captured Holmes' brash promises about vaunted blood-testing technology that propelled her meteoric rise and scandalous downfall.

In those recordings from a December 2013 presentation to prospective investors, Holmes bragged about partnerships with established drug companies that hadn't panned out and potential U.S. military contracts that never materialized because of problems with Theranos' technology. She was unaware she was being recorded at the time.

The jurors previously heard the recordings in late October and a few excerpts in closing arguments last week. They sent a note before noon asking to review them, prompting U.S. District Judge Edward Davila to bring the eight men and four women of the jury back to the courtroom for the first time since they were ushered out at the end of last week to begin deliberations.

Holmes, 37, returned to the courtroom too, and intently watched the jurors and their reactions to the recordings from her usual seat in the courtroom. She seemed to try to make eye contacts with the jurors when as they walked out of the courtroom following the audio replay, but none appeared to return her gaze.

In the recordings, Holmes boasts about how Theranos would "change the reality of lab testing" and bring down health costs so dramatically that it would save Medicaid and Medicare about \$150 billion over a decade. But she didn't say how long that would take to happen.

Holmes also promised that a deal that Theranos had to deploy its blood-testing technology in Walgreens pharmacies was poised to quickly ramp up.

"The question now is how fast do we scale?" Holmes told the group of investors on the conference call.. "The fact that we will scale is a given."

Walgreens only ended up using Theranos technology in about 40 of its stores, mostly in Arizona, before bailing out of the deal because of concerns that the blood tests were wildly unreliable.

The recordings could prove pivotal to the jurors' decision because many of the accusations against her revolve around alleged lies she told to raise more money for Theranos.

By the time the recordings were made, a decade after she founded Theranos, Holmes estimated that the company was worth about \$7 billion. By mid-2014, Theranos was valued at \$9 billion, with half of that that paper wealth owned by Holmes, the company's controlling shareholder.

But it all began to unravel in 2015 and 2016 after a series of articles in The Wall Street Journal and regulatory audits exposed serious flaws in the Theranos technology, which Holmes repeatedly promised would quickly scan for hundreds of health problems using just a few drops of blood. That would have been a dramatic change from the traditional method of relying on vials of blood drawn through a needle stuck in a vein.

Holmes will face up to 20 years in prison if the jury finds her guilty. The jury left Thursday without reaching a verdict and are scheduled to resume deliberations Monday.

US sets shorter COVID-19 isolation rules for health workers

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By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Worried that a new COVID-19 wave could overwhelm understaffed U.S. hospitals, federal officials on Thursday loosened rules that call on health care workers to stay out of work for 10 days if they test positive.

Those workers now will be allowed to come back to work after seven days if they test negative and don't have symptoms. Isolation time can be cut to five days, or even fewer, if there are severe staffing shortages, according to the new Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance.

"As the health care community prepares for an anticipated surge in patients due to omicron, CDC is updating our recommendations to reflect what we know about infection and exposure in the context of vaccination and booster doses," CDC Director Rochelle Walensky said in a statement.

"Our goal is to keep health care personnel and patients safe, and to address and prevent undue burden on our healthcare facilities," she added.

Isolation is designed to keep infected people away from uninfected people, to prevent further spread of the virus.

CDC officials have advised that in calculating the 10-day isolation period, the first day should be the first full day after symptoms first developed or after a positive test. If a person develops symptoms sometime after a positive COVID-19 test, the quarantine period must restart, beginning one day after the symptoms develop.

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US tribes see hope for clean water in infrastructure bill

By GILLIAN FLACCUS, FELICIA FONSECA and BECKY BOHRER Associated Press

WARM SPRINGS, Ore. (AP) — Erland Suppah Jr. doesn't trust what comes out of his faucet.

Each week, Suppah and his girlfriend haul a half-dozen large jugs of water from a distribution center run by the Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs to their apartment for everything from drinking to cooking to brushing their teeth for their family of five. It's the only way they feel safe after countless boil-water notices and weeklong shutoffs on a reservation struggling with bursting pipes, failing pressure valves and a geriatric water treatment plant.

"About the only thing this water is good for is cleaning my floor and flushing down the toilet," Suppah said of the tap water in the community 100 miles (160 kilometers) southeast of Portland. "That's it."

In other, more remote tribal communities across the country, running water and indoor plumbing have never been a reality.

Now, there's a glimmer of hope in the form of a massive infrastructure bill signed last month that White House officials say represents the largest single infusion of money into Indian Country. It includes \$3.5 billion for the federal Indian Health Service, which provides health care to more than 2 million Native Americans and Alaska Natives, plus pots of money through other federal agencies for water projects.

Tribal leaders say the funding, while welcome, won't make up for decades of neglect from the U.S. government, which has a responsibility to tribes under treaties and other acts to ensure access to clean water. A list of sanitation deficiencies kept by the Indian Health Service has more than 1,500 projects, including wells, septic systems, water storage tanks and pipelines. Some projects would address water contamination from uranium or arsenic.

About 3,300 homes in more than 30 rural Alaska communities lack indoor plumbing, according to a 2020 report. On the Navajo Nation, the largest Native American reservation, about one-third of the 175,000 residents are without running water.

Residents in these places haul water for basic tasks such as washing and cooking, sometimes driving long distances to reach communal water stations. Instead of indoor bathrooms, many use outhouses or lined pails called "honey buckets" that they drag outside to empty. Some shower or do laundry at community

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sites known as “washeterias,” but the equipment can be unreliable and the fees expensive.

“You look at two billionaires competing to fly into outer space, yet we’re trying to get basic necessities in villages of interior Alaska,” said PJ Simon, a former chairman of an Alaska Native nonprofit corporation called the Tanana Chiefs Conference.

Many more tribal communities have indoor plumbing but woefully inadequate facilities and delivery systems riddled with aging pipes.

The coronavirus pandemic, which disproportionately hit Indian Country, further underscored the stark disparities in access to running water and sewage systems.

In Warm Springs, the water crisis has overlapped with COVID-19.

“During a worldwide pandemic, we’ve had a boil-water notice. How are we supposed to wash our hands? How are we supposed to sanitize our homes to disinfect, to keep our community members safe? How can we do that ... when our water isn’t even clean?” said Dorothea Thurby, who oversees the distribution of free water to tribal members and food boxes to those who are quarantined.

A 2019 report by a pair of nonprofit groups, U.S. Water Alliance and Dig Deep, found Native American homes are 19 times more likely than white households to lack full plumbing. And federal officials note tribal members without indoor toilets or running water are at increased risk of respiratory tract, skin and gastrointestinal infections.

On the Navajo Nation, Eloise Sullivan uses an outhouse and often drives before dawn to beat the crowd at a water-filling station near the Arizona-Utah border to get water for the five people in her household. They use about 850 gallons (3,200 liters) a week, she estimated.

Sullivan, 56, doesn’t mind hauling water, but “for the younger generation, it’s like, ‘Do we have to do that?’”

“It’s kind of like a big issue for them,” she said.

She once asked local officials what it would cost to run a water line from the closest source about 2 miles (3.2 kilometers) away. She said she was told \$25,000 and never pursued it.

Libby Washburn, special assistant to President Joe Biden on Native American affairs, recently told tribes the infrastructure bill included enough money to complete all the projects on the Indian Health Service list. The agency said it’s consulting with tribes and won’t make allocation decisions before that process is over.

Until now, tribes and outside organizations have worked to address needs with their own funding, donations or federal money, including pandemic relief.

“If you live without running water, you understand the importance and the connection you have with it, deep down as a person, as a human being,” said Burrell Jones, who sets up water systems and delivers water around Dilkon, Arizona, with Dig Deep’s Navajo Water Project. “You can’t exist without water.”

Andrew Marks recently moved back to Tanana, a community of about 190 people in Alaska’s interior. He initially relied on a washeteria but found the equipment unreliable. He now has running water and plumbing where he lives but hauls water for family members who don’t.

“I believe if we had more people with water, more people connected to the grid, it would drastically improve their life,” he said.

In Oregon, tribal officials have handed out about 3 million gallons (11 million liters) of water — almost all of it donated — from a decommissioned elementary school on the reservation. A steady stream of residents pick up a combined 600 gallons (2,270 liters) of water a day from the building. Former classrooms overflow with 5-gallon (19-liter) containers and cases of bottled water.

“The infrastructure bill brought joy to my heart because now it gives me hope — hope that it’s going to be repaired,” said Dan Martinez, the tribes’ emergency manager, who expects to receive federal funds to replace underground pipes and address the 40-year-old treatment plant.

“If you came to work one day and someone said, ‘Hey, you need to go and find water for a community of 6,000 people.’ ... I mean, where do you start?”

The money won’t provide immediate relief. Funding to the Indian Health Service is supposed to be distributed over five years. There is no deadline for its use, and projects will take time to complete once started. The money won’t cover operation and maintenance of the systems, a point tribes have criticized.

In Warm Springs, tribal members don't pay for their water, and proposals to charge for it are deeply unpopular. That provides little incentive for tribal members to conserve water and raises questions about how new infrastructure will be maintained.

"There are some Natives who say — and I believe this myself — 'How do you sell something you never owned? The Creator has given it to us,'" said Martinez, a tribal member.

Building out infrastructure in remote areas can be onerous, too. Most roads on the Navajo Nation are unpaved and become muddy and deeply rutted after big storms.

In Alaska, winter temperatures can fall well below zero, and construction seasons are short. Having enough people in a small community who are trained on the specifics of a water system so they can maintain it also can be a challenge, said Kaitlin Mattos, an assistant professor at Fort Lewis College in Colorado who worked on a 2020 report on water infrastructure in Alaska.

"Every bit of funding that is allocated is going to help some family, some household, which is wonderful," she said. "Whether it's enough to help every single household, I think, remains to be seen."

Fonseca reported from Flagstaff, Arizona. Bohrer reported from Juneau, Alaska.

Texas board withdraws pardon recommendation for George Floyd

By PAUL J. WEBER Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A Texas board that had unanimously supported a posthumous pardon for George Floyd over a 2004 drug arrest in Houston backpedaled in an announcement Thursday, saying "procedural errors" were found in their recommendation months after leaving the decision to Republican Gov. Greg Abbott.

The unusual reversal was announced by Abbott's office two days before Christmas, around the time he typically doles out his annual pardons.

The withdrawn endorsement was met with outrage from a public defender who submitted the pardon application for Floyd, who spent much of his life in Houston before his death in 2020 under the knee of a white Minneapolis police officer. Allison Mathis, an attorney in Houston, accused the two-term governor of playing politics ahead of Texas' March GOP primary elections as he faces challengers from the far right.

Floyd's name was withdrawn along with two dozen other clemency recommendations that had been submitted by the Texas Board of Pardon and Paroles. In a letter dated Dec. 16 but not released publicly until now, the board told Abbott that it had identified "unexplained departures" from its process of issuing pardons and needed to reconsider more than a third of the 67 clemency recommendations it sent to Abbott this year, including the one for Floyd.

In October, the board had unanimously recommended that Floyd become just the second person in Texas since 2010 to receive a posthumous pardon from the governor.

"As a result of the Board's withdrawal of the recommendation concerning George Floyd, Governor Abbott did not have the opportunity to consider it," Abbott spokeswoman Renae Eze said in a statement.

Mathis called the last-minute reversal a "ridiculous farce." She said the board — which is stocked with Abbott appointees — did not make her aware of any issues prior to the announcement from the governor's office.

"It really strains credibility for them to say now that it's out of compliance, after the board has already voted on it," she said.

Floyd grew up and was laid to rest in Houston. In June, former Minneapolis police Officer Derek Chauvin was sentenced to 22 1/2 years in prison for Floyd's murder, which led to a national reckoning in the U.S. over race and policing.

Pardons restore the rights of the convicted and forgive them in the eyes of the law. But in Floyd's case, his family and supporters said a posthumous pardon in Texas would show a commitment to accountability.

In February 2004, Floyd was arrested in Houston for selling \$10 worth of crack in a police sting, and later pleaded guilty to a drug charge and served 10 months in prison. But the global spotlight on the death of

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Floyd in police custody 16 years later is not why prosecutors revisited his Houston case. Instead, it was prompted by a deadly Houston drug raid in 2019 that involved the same officer who arrested Floyd.

Prosecutors say that officer, Gerald Goines, lied to obtain the search warrant for the raid that killed a husband and wife. Goines, who is no longer on the Houston force and faces murder charges, has denied wrongdoing. More than 160 drug convictions tied to him over the years have since been dismissed by prosecutors due to concerns about his casework.

David Gutierrez, chairman of Texas' parole board, said in the letter to Abbott that he ordered a review after the board had recommended more clemency recommendations this year than at any point in two decades. He did not specify how Floyd's recommendation skirted the usual procedures, instead only broadly pointing to several sets of rules that Gutierrez said the board did not follow.

A number listed for Gutierrez was not answered Thursday.

For months, Abbott gave no indication whether he would grant the pardon in the months since the parole board put the recommendation on his desk. The prolonged silence raised questions by Mathis and others over whether political calculations were at play in Abbott's decision. His office has not respond to those charges.

Abbott attended Floyd's memorial service last year in Houston, where he met with the family and floated the idea of a "George Floyd Act" that would take aim at police brutality. But when the Texas Legislature convened months later, Abbott was silent over policing reforms pushed by Democrats and made police funding a priority.

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

Biden signs bills on forced labor in China, ALS research

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden signed a bill into law Thursday to block imports from China's Xinjiang region unless businesses can prove the items were made without forced labor, the latest in a series of intensifying U.S. penalties against the Asian power for alleged abuses.

The measure had to overcome some initial hesitation from the White House, as well as corporate opposition, to win final passage last week in the Senate, following earlier House passage. Biden also signed a separate bill Thursday funding research into a cure for Lou Gehrig's disease.

"Today, I signed the bipartisan Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act," Biden said on Twitter, along with a photo of him as he signed the legislative text at his desk in the Oval Office. "The United States will continue to use every tool at our disposal to ensure supply chains are free from the use of forced labor — including from Xinjiang and other parts of China."

The new law is the latest in a series of attempts by the U.S to get tough with China over its alleged systemic and widespread abuse of ethnic and religious minorities in its western region, especially Xinjiang's predominantly Muslim Uyghurs.

It requires U.S. 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, was not used in manufacturing the product before it will be allowed into the U.S.

The House and Senate each passed the measure with overwhelming support from Democrats and Republicans.

It wasn't until shortly before the Senate voted last week that the White House said Biden supported the measure. The announcement followed months in which the White House declined, despite repeated questioning, to take a public stand on an earlier version of the measure.

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 forced to work in factories.

China denies any abuses and says the steps it has taken are necessary to combat terrorism and a sepa-

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ratist movement.

The U.S. cites raw cotton, gloves, tomato products, silicon and viscose, fishing gear and components in solar energy as among goods alleged to have been produced using forced labor in Xinjiang, a resource-rich mining region that is important for agricultural production. The region also is home a booming industrial sector.

Detainees also are moved outside Xinjiang and put to work in factories, including in the apparel and textiles, electronics, solar energy and automotive sectors, the U.S. says.

Some big corporations lobbied against the measure. Apple, like Nike and other companies with production done in China, said it had found no sign of forced labor from Xinjiang in its manufacturing or supply chain.

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

In a statement last week, White House press secretary Jen Psaki noted export controls and import restrictions, sanctions, diplomatic initiatives and other measures the administration had already taken targeting forced labor from Xinjiang.

The White House also recently announced that it would stage a diplomatic boycott of the coming Winter Olympics in Beijing, citing China's "egregious human rights abuses and atrocities in Xinjiang." U.S. athletes will be allowed to compete under a diplomatic boycott, but the president and other U.S. dignitaries will not travel to the games, which open in February.

While Biden signed the Uyghur bill in private, the White House arranged a public signing ceremony — with guests participating remotely — for the Accelerating Access to Critical Therapies for ALS Act.

The law will funnel \$100 million annually between 2022 and 2026 into research into Lou Gehrig's disease, an incurable neurodegenerative disorder also known as amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, and similar diseases. It will also create grant programs and provide early access to promising treatments for patients who aren't accepted into clinical trials.

"For too long there have been no survivors of ALS, but this bill can get us closer to changing that," Biden said.

ALS is named for the New York Yankees baseball player who retired 1939 because of the disease. Gehrig died in 1941.

Associated Press writer Alexandra Jaffe contributed to this report.

New Year's Eve in Times Square still on, with smaller crowd

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Revelers will still ring in the new year in New York's Times Square next week, there just won't be as many of them as usual under new restrictions announced Thursday as the city grapples with a spike in COVID-19 cases.

Viewing areas that normally accommodate about 58,000 people will be limited to about 15,000 to allow for more distancing, and everyone in attendance must show proof of vaccination and wear a mask, Mayor Bill de Blasio said in a news release announcing the changes.

"There is a lot to celebrate and these additional safety measures will keep the fully vaccinated crowd safe and healthy as we ring in the New Year," de Blasio said, noting the city's success in getting residents vaccinated while also keeping businesses open.

The added precautions for New Year's Eve in Times Square were spurred by the rapid spread of the omicron variant in the Big Apple, where lines for testing have snaked around blocks in recent days.

On Wednesday, the city set yet another one-day testing record with 22,808 new cases, though a true comparison to the number of cases during the initial COVID-19 surge in spring 2020 is impossible because tests were very limited at the time.

Because of vaccinations, hospitalizations and deaths from the current surge are far fewer than at the pandemic's height.

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The new wave of cases has led to the cancellation of concerts, sporting events and Broadway shows, but de Blasio has shown a strong preference for having the annual Times Square ball drop go on as planned — the last major event of his eight-year tenure, which ends Jan. 1.

Little more than a month ago, de Blasio gleefully announced that a fully vaccinated crowd of hundreds of thousands of people would be back at the iconic celebration — donning goofy 2022-themed glasses and watching a crystal-clad ball drop at midnight — after it was limited last year to small groups of essential workers.

But that was before omicron caught fire, forcing city officials and event organizers to rethink just how many people they wanted to squeeze into the bright, billboard-lined tourist haven known to some as the Crossroads of the World.

On Tuesday, the Fox network gave its verdict, pulling the plug on a planned live broadcast from the New Year's Eve event. Other networks plan to air the festivities, including Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve on ABC, the stalwart now hosted by Ryan Seacrest.

De Blasio said along with Thursday's announcement that the city is monitoring the COVID-19 situation and could impose additional precautions if needed. Among the other changes announced Thursday, revelers won't be allowed into viewing areas until 3 p.m., much later than in past years.

On New Year's Eve last year, Times Square was mostly empty, with Jennifer Lopez and other artists performing behind police barricades. After vaccines became widely available in the U.S., the city allowed crowds back to the Macy's Fourth of July fireworks, the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade and other events.

"New York is the best place in the world to celebrate New Year's Eve and now it will be one of the safest against COVID as well," Mayor-elect Eric Adams said in a written statement endorsing the new precautions. "New Yorkers and visitors alike can now enjoy Times Square and the rest of our city as we ring in 2022."

Associated Press writer Jennifer Peltz contributed to this report.

US has reunited 100 children taken from parents under Trump

By BEN FOX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A Biden administration effort to reunite children and parents who were separated under President Donald Trump's zero-tolerance border policy has made increasing progress as it nears the end of its first year.

The Department of Homeland Security announced Thursday that 100 children, mostly from Central America, are back with their families and about 350 more reunifications are in process after it took steps to enhance the program.

"I would have loved to have this happen much more quickly. But we are making progress and I feel like we're gaining momentum," said Michelle Brané, executive director of the administration's Family Reunification Task Force.

President Joe Biden issued an executive order on his first day in office to reunite families that were separated under the Trump administration's widely condemned practice of forcibly separating parents and children at the U.S.-Mexico border to discourage illegal immigration.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas thanked community organizations for helping to locate and contact family members as he announced the program's milestone on Twitter. "We have a lot more work to do," he wrote. "We are dedicated to finding every family and giving them the chance to reunite and to heal."

The work of the task force has been complicated by a number of factors, including inadequate or missing records on the separated families, the sheer number of cases and the fact that many parents are in remote Central American communities and were unable to track down their children or get to the United States to retrieve them.

In September, the task force had reunited 50 families when the administration announced a partnership to speed up the effort with the International Organization for Migration. A web portal — Juntos.gov or

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Together.gov — was created for parents to contact the U.S. government and work through the reunification process.

About 5,500 children were forcibly removed from their parents under Trump, mostly in 2018. His administration was seeking to stop an increase in people crossing the U.S.-Mexico border by resorting to criminal prosecutions, even if the migrants were presenting themselves to authorities to seek asylum as permitted under the law.

Amid widespread condemnation, including from Republicans, Trump stopped the practice in June 2018 just days before a judge ordered an end to the program in response to a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union.

Brané said in an interview ahead of Thursday's announcement that officials believe there are still about 1,150 children whose whereabouts have not been confirmed. The total fluctuates as some cases are resolved with new information and new ones emerge, including some who have reached out through the new web portal.

"Obviously, this is nowhere near the end," Brane said. "This is just the beginning of this ramp up and hopefully families will see that reunifications are happening and they will feel confident coming forward."

Reunited parents and children, including some who arrived at U.S. airports this week, are being granted humanitarian parole to reside in the country for a minimum of three years, and may pursue permanent status through asylum or another program. They are also receiving counseling services.

Hundreds of families have also filed lawsuits against the federal government.

The Justice Department last week told lawyers representing several groups of families that it was withdrawing from settlement negotiations, after eight months of talks, and would defend each case in court.

That came after media reports of a proposed settlement that would include payments of several hundred thousand dollars to each affected person sparked outrage among Biden administration critics in Congress and elsewhere.

EXPLAINER: What was Potter charged with in Wright death?

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A white suburban Minneapolis police officer has been found guilty of first-degree and second-degree manslaughter in the death of Daunte Wright, a Black man.

Kim Potter said she meant to use her Taser to try to stop the 20-year-old Wright from fleeing during an April 11 traffic stop but accidentally grabbed her gun instead.

Here's a look at the charges and potential penalties:

THE CHARGES

First-degree manslaughter in this case means prosecutors alleged that Potter caused Wright's death while committing a misdemeanor — the "reckless handling or use of a firearm so as to endanger the safety of another with such force and violence that death or great bodily harm to any person was reasonably foreseeable."

The second-degree manslaughter charge alleged that she caused his death "by her culpable negligence," meaning that Potter "caused an unreasonable risk and consciously took a chance of causing death or great bodily harm" to Wright, while using or possessing a firearm.

Neither charge required prosecutors to prove Potter intended to kill Wright, and they pointed that out to the jury during opening statements.

Defense attorney Paul Engh seemed to push against that during his opening, telling the jury that Potter didn't know she was holding a gun when she fired, adding: "It's not just shooting somebody, that's not the crime. It's being consciously aware of some kind of fact."

The attorney general's office added the first-degree manslaughter charge after it took over the case, though it fell short of the murder charge that Wright's family and activists wanted.

POTENTIAL PENALTIES

The maximum for first-degree manslaughter is 15 years; for second-degree, it's 10 years. But Minnesota

judges follow sentencing guidelines that normally call for less — just over seven years for first-degree, and four years for second-degree.

Under Minnesota law, defendants are sentenced only on the most serious conviction if multiple counts involve the same act and the same victim.

Prosecutors have said they will seek a longer sentence due to aggravating factors, which is what they did in former Minneapolis Officer Derek Chauvin's murder trial for killing George Floyd.

The longest sentences that could conceivably stick on appeal are double the top of the guidelines range. But that's more than the statutory maximum of 15 years for first-degree manslaughter, so 15 years would be the cap for Potter if she's convicted. The realistic maximum on the lesser charge would be 9 1/2 years.

Presuming good behavior, Minnesota offenders typically serve two-thirds of their time in prison and one-third on supervised release.

RECENT PRECEDENTS

The judge in Chauvin's case sentenced him to 22 1/2 years for second-degree unintentional murder. The presumptive sentence was 12 1/2 years. But Judge Peter Cahill found several aggravating factors, including that Chauvin abused his position of authority and treated Floyd with particular cruelty, and that several children witnessed the crime live. He also said Chauvin knew that kneeling on Floyd's neck was dangerous.

More recently, Judge Kathryn Quaintance resentenced former Minneapolis Officer Mohamed Noor to four years and nine months in prison for second-degree manslaughter in the shooting death of Justine Damond Ruzsczyk, which was at the top of the guidelines' range. She said she did so because Noor shot "across the nose" of his partner and endangered others. She couldn't sentence him to more because prosecutors did not request an "upward departure" from the sentencing guidelines.

Quaintance originally sentenced Noor to 12 1/2 years for third-degree murder, which was what the guidelines called for, but the Minnesota Supreme Court later clarified the definition of third-degree murder and sent the case back for resentencing only on the manslaughter charge.

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

Tesla to halt games on infotainment screens in moving cars

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — Under pressure from U.S. auto safety regulators, Tesla has agreed to stop allowing video games to be played on center touch screens while its vehicles are moving.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says the company will send out a software update over the Internet so the function called "Passenger Play" will be locked and won't work while vehicles are in motion.

The move comes one day after the agency announced it would open a formal investigation into distracted driving concerns about Tesla's video games, some of which could be played while cars are being driven.

An agency spokeswoman says in a statement Thursday that the change came after regulators discussed concerns about the system with Tesla. The first update went out Wednesday as part of Tesla's holiday software release, and the rest of the vehicles should get it today.

The statement says NHTSA regularly talks about infotainment screens with all automakers. A message was left Thursday seeking comment from Tesla, which has disbanded its media relations department.

The agency says its investigation of Tesla's feature will continue even with the update. It was not clear whether NHTSA would require Tesla to do a formal recall with the update. In the past the agency has asked Tesla why it should not be required to do recalls with safety-related software updates.

"The Vehicle Safety Act prohibits manufacturers from selling vehicles with defects posing unreasonable risks to safety, including technologies that distract drivers from driving safely," NHTSA's statement said. The agency said it assesses how manufacturers identify and guard against distraction hazards due to misuse or intended use of screens and other convenience technology.

The agency announced Wednesday that it would formally investigate Tesla's screens after an owner from

the Portland, Oregon, area filed a complaint when he discovered that a driver could play games while the cars are moving.

The agency said that the "Passenger Play" feature could distract the driver and increase the risk of a crash.

The probe covers about 580,000 Tesla Models S, X, Y and 3 from the 2017 through 2022 model years.

In documents detailing the investigation, NHTSA said "Passenger Play" has been available since December 2020. Before that, enabling gameplay was only possible when its vehicles were in park.

The NHTSA documents do not list any crashes or injuries caused by the problem.

Tesla owner Vince Patton, 59, filed the complaint last month after discovering the gaming feature could be played by drivers. Patton, who loves his car and says he has nothing against Tesla, worries that drivers will play games and become dangerously distracted. "Somebody's going to get killed," he said. "It's absolutely insane."

NHTSA already is investigating why Tesla's "Autopilot" partially automated driving system keeps crashing into stopped emergency vehicles. It's also looking into the performance of Tesla's "Full Self-Driving" software after getting a complaint that it nearly caused a crash.

Tesla says neither system can drive vehicles and that drivers must pay attention and be ready to intervene at all times.

UK data suggests hospitalization is less likely with omicron

By JILL LAWLESS and LAURA UNGAR Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Preliminary data suggests that people with the omicron variant of the coronavirus are 50% to 70% less likely to be hospitalized than those with the delta strain, Britain's public health agency announced Thursday in a finding that one researcher called "a small ray of sunlight."

The findings from the U.K. Health Security Agency add to emerging evidence that omicron produces milder illness than other variants. But scientists caution that any reductions in severity must be weighed against the fact that omicron spreads much faster than delta and is better at evading vaccines.

Based on cases in the U.K., a person with omicron is estimated to be 31% to 45% less likely to go to a hospital emergency department compared to someone with delta, "and 50 to 70% less likely to be admitted to hospital," the agency said.

It cautioned that the analysis is "preliminary and highly uncertain" because of the small number of omicron patients in hospitals and the fact that most were in younger age groups. As of Dec. 20, 132 people had been admitted to U.K. hospitals with confirmed omicron. Fourteen of them died, all between the ages of 52 and 96.

Countries around the world are looking closely at Britain, where omicron is now dominant and where COVID-19 cases have surged by more than 50% in a week.

Experts not involved with the analysis called it encouraging.

"To me, it's a small ray of sunlight among all the dark clouds," said Dr. Jonathan Li, director of the Harvard/Brigham Virology Specialty Laboratory.

The signs that omicron may cause less severe disease than delta also align with lab data suggesting omicron does not grow as well in cells derived from lungs, Li said.

The findings add to similar data from South Africa, added Dr. Bruce Walker, director of the Ragon Institute of Massachusetts General Hospital, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard.

Walker said there are still unknowns, such as the relative severity of omicron in someone who's been vaccinated compared with someone who's had COVID-19 before or someone who is unvaccinated and has not had the disease.

Vaccination remains crucial, he said.

"The bottom line is the best way that somebody can prepare for this new wave is to get immunized, and if somebody is already immunized, to get a booster," said Walker, who is an investigator with the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, which also supports The Associated Press' Health and Science Department.

The British agency's research said the protection a vaccine booster shot gives against symptomatic

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omicron infection appears to wane after about 10 weeks, though protection against hospitalization and severe disease is likely to hold up for longer.

The analysis "shows an encouraging early signal that people who contract the omicron variant may be at a relatively lower risk of hospitalization than those who contract other variants," said the chief executive of the U.K. HSA, Jenny Harries.

But she added that "cases are currently very high in the U.K., and even a relatively low proportion requiring hospitalization could result in a significant number of people becoming seriously ill."

The analysis follows two studies, from Imperial College London and Scottish researchers, that found patients with omicron were 20% to 68% less likely to require hospital treatment than those with delta.

Even if the early studies are borne out, the new variant could still overwhelm health systems because of the sheer number of infections. The British health agency said omicron appeared able to re-infect people more easily than previous variants, with 9.5% of omicron cases found in people who had already had COVID-19 — a figure it said was likely an underestimate.

Britain reported nearly 120,000 lab-confirmed COVID-19 cases on Thursday, the highest yet during the pandemic and the second day the number has topped 100,000.

Britain's Office for National Statistics estimated that about 1 in 45 people in private households in England — 1.2 million individuals — had COVID-19 in the week to Dec. 16, the highest level seen in the pandemic.

Britain's Conservative government this month reinstated rules requiring face masks in shops and ordered people to show proof of vaccination or a negative coronavirus test before entering nightclubs and other crowded venues in an attempt to slow omicron's spread.

The government said Thursday that it would not impose any new restrictions before Christmas, but might do so soon after.

Officials also urged people to get tested regularly and to cut back on socializing. Many in Britain have heeded that advice, leaving entertainment and hospitality businesses reeling at what should be their busiest time of the year.

Experts pointed out that staying out of the hospital should not be the only goal; people should also try to avoid long COVID-19, which can result from mild infections.

"We're all excited to hear that this is immediately less severe in terms of disease," Walker said. "But do we know what the possibility of long COVID is? No, we don't. There hasn't been enough time (that has) passed to have any sense of whether omicron is associated with long COVID."

Louis Mansky, director of the Institute for Molecular Virology at the University of Minnesota, said there's not enough data to know how omicron will play out in the U.S.

"It gets back to the health status of the average American," Mansky said. "We have other epidemics going on in terms of obesity, cardiovascular disease," he said, explaining that "the general health of the individual" will be an important factor in how sick they might get from omicron.

Ungar reported from Louisville, Kentucky.

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

Oklahoma sixth-grader praised for heroism twice in one day

MUSKOGEE, Okla. (AP) — An Oklahoma sixth-grader was honored by law enforcement and school officials for his heroic actions not just once, but twice in the same day.

Earlier this month, Davyon Johnson used the Heimlich maneuver on a classmate who was choking on a bottle cap at his school in Muskogee. Later that same day, he helped a woman escape from a burning house, the Muskogee Phoenix reported.

Last week, Davyon was named an honorary member of the police and sheriff's departments at the Muskogee Board of Education meeting, the newspaper reported.

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"I felt good, excited," Davyon said about the honor.

Principal Latricia Dawkins called Davyon a "dual hero" and said the recognition couldn't have happened to a better person.

"He is just a kind soul and well-liked by his peers and staff alike," she said.

Dawkins recalled the incident that earned Davyon the honor. She said a student was trying to fill his water bottle and loosen the cap with his mouth. The cap slipped into his throat, she said.

The choking student stumbled into a nearby classroom, where Davyon happened to be, she said.

"Davyon immediately sprinted over and did the Heimlich maneuver," Dawkins said. "From the account of the witnesses, when he did it the bottle cap popped out."

Davyon demonstrated how he got behind the choking student, wrapped his arms around the student and "burped him, kind of."

Davyon helped a woman evacuate her burning house later that day.

"It was a disabled lady and she was walking out of her house," Davyon said. "She was on her porch. But I thought, being a good citizen, I would cross and help her get into her truck and leave."

He said the back of the house was on fire, "but it eventually got to the front of the house."

Davyon said he learned to do the Heimlich maneuver on YouTube and said it is a valuable procedure to learn.

"Just in case you're in the situation I was in, you can know what to do," he said.

Davyon's mother, LaToya Johnson, said she's not surprised he behaved the way he did. She said her brother, Wendell Johnson, is an emergency medical technician.

"I'm just a proud mom," she said.

Putin to the West: 'It is not us who threaten anyone'

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin urged the West on Thursday to "immediately" meet Russia's demand for security guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine, saying the U.S. is "on the threshold of our home."

Speaking during a marathon annual news conference, the Russian leader welcomed talks with the U.S., which he said are set to start in Geneva next month, as a "positive" move, but warned that Moscow expects the discussion to produce quick results.

"We have clearly and precisely let them know that any further NATO expansion eastward is unacceptable," Putin said.

Last week, Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe. A key principle of the alliance is that membership is open to any qualifying country.

"Is it us who are putting missiles near the U.S. borders?" Putin said angrily. "No, it's the U.S. who came to our home with its missiles, it's already on the threshold of our home. Is it some excessive demand not to place any strike weapons systems near our home?"

Moscow presented its demand amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has stoked fears of a possible invasion. U.S. President Joe Biden warned Putin in a video call earlier this month that Russia will face "severe consequences" if it attacks Ukraine.

Russia has denied plans to launch an attack but has described a NATO expansion and weapons deployment in Ukraine as a "red line."

Asked Thursday if he could provide a guarantee that Russia will not invade Ukraine, Putin snapped in response: "It's you who must give us guarantees and give them immediately, now, and not have idle talk about it for decades."

"How would the Americans respond if we put our missiles on the U.S. borders with Canada or Mexico?" he exclaimed.

The U.S. and its allies have said they won't give Russia the kind of guarantee on Ukraine that Putin wants.

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American officials are conferring with European allies in advance of the Geneva talks.

The Russian leader charged during his news conference that the West had "swindled, blatantly cheated" Moscow by offering verbal pledges in the 1990s not to expand NATO's presence east and then enlarging to incorporate former Soviet bloc countries in Central and Eastern Europe and the ex-Soviet republics in the Baltics.

"They said they wouldn't expand, and then they did expand," he said. "They said there would be equal guarantees for all, but there is no equal security. It seems to me sometimes that we live in different worlds."

Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic joined NATO in 1999, followed in 2004 by Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and the former Soviet republics of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. In subsequent years, Albania, Croatia, Montenegro and North Macedonia also joined, bringing NATO's membership to 30 nations.

"It's not us who threaten anyone," Putin said. "Is it us who came to the U.S. or British borders or somewhere else? No, they have come to us, and now they say that Ukraine will be in NATO. Or they will just put bases and strike weapons there on a bilateral basis."

He accused the West of trying to make Ukraine "anti-Russia, constantly beefed up with modern weapons and brainwashing the population."

Russia can't keep living in anticipation of looming security threats posed by possible deployment of Western weapons in Ukraine, Putin said.

"Should Russia live constantly looking back at what's going on and what new weapon systems are put there?" he exclaimed. "We need to think about ensuring our security."

He argued that Western weapons could encourage hawkish forces in Ukraine to attempt to regain control over Russia-backed separatist regions by force and even try to reclaim Crimea, which Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014.

The Russian leader claimed that Western expressions of concern about an alleged Russian invasion could be a prelude to a possible attempt by Ukraine to launch an offensive against the rebels in the east following two botched attempts in the past.

"There is an impression that they are preparing a third military operation and warning us not to meddle," he said.

Ukrainian officials have denied any intention to launch an offensive against the separatists. Ukraine's Foreign Ministry spokesman Oleg Nikolenko said Thursday that Putin's claim about Kyiv preparing a military operation is untrue.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that "the only aggression at the border of Russia and Ukraine is the military buildup by the Russians and the bellicose rhetoric from the leader of Russia."

British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss also insisted that "NATO is a defensive alliance and Ukraine continues to show commendable restraint in the face of Russian provocation and aggression."

"Any Russian incursion would be a massive strategic mistake and would be met with strength, including coordinated sanctions with our allies to impose a severe cost on Russia's interests and economy," Truss said.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken discussed the situation around Ukraine with Truss and they "agreed on the importance of reinforcing coordinated support amongst allies and partners to impose consequences and costs for further Russian aggression towards Ukraine," State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

A senior White House official speaking on condition of anonymity said Thursday the U.S. was prepared to increase support to Ukraine to help it defend its territory and would reassure NATO allies of any change in posture in addition to economic sanctions if Russia invades its neighbor.

Shortly after annexing the Crimea, Moscow cast its support behind a separatist rebellion in Ukraine's east. The fighting over more than seven years has killed more than 14,000 people and devastated Ukraine's industrial heartland, known as the Donbas.

Putin's news conference lasted nearly four hours and also covered a range of domestic issues. He dismissed criticism of Russia designating scores of critical media and activists as "foreign agents," a pejorative label that entails additional government scrutiny and is intended to undermine the credibility of designees.

Asked about his top political foe, imprisoned opposition leader Alexei Navalny, Putin again rejected al-

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legations that Russian authorities were behind Navalny's poisoning with a nerve agent last year.

The Russian leader also dismissed arguments that Moscow was hoarding gas amid the EU energy crunch to press for a quick approval of the newly-built Nord Stream 2 pipeline, saying that Russia's Gazprom gas giant has even overfulfilled its obligations under long-term contracts.

Putin, who is set to attend the Winter Olympics in China early next year, also criticized the U.S. political boycott of the Beijing Games, describing it as a mistake and part of efforts by Washington to contain China's growing might.

Colleen Long and Benjamin Fox in Washington, Jill Lawless in London and Yuras Karmanau in Kyiv, Ukraine, contributed to this report.

Markets 2021: Stocks soar, IPOs explode, crypto goes wild

Associated Press undefined

Wall Street delivered another strong year for investors in 2021, as a resurgence in consumer demand fueled by the reopening of the global economy pumped up corporate profits.

As of Dec. 22, the S&P 500 had risen 25%, its third-straight annual increase. Along the way, the benchmark index set 67 all-time highs.

The market weathered a number of challenges along the way. Skyrocketing inflation, worldwide supply-chain disruptions and a global economy still vulnerable to the uncertainty created by the COVID-19 pandemic fueled market volatility, especially toward the end of the year.

Wall Street got a boost from the Federal Reserve, which kept its key short-term interest rate near zero all year. That helped keep borrowing costs for companies low and stock valuations high. However, investors expect the Fed to start pushing rates higher next year.

Investors had bullish expectations coming into 2021, betting that the distribution of COVID-19 vaccines would pave the way for businesses and their customers to get back to normal.

While many industries have yet to fully bounce back, especially travel and tourism, the gradual reopening of the economy in the spring ushered in a swell of demand that pushed corporate earnings growth above Wall Street's expectations, a trend that continued into the fall. That helped juice gains for stocks.

Energy sector stocks have led the S&P 500, vaulting 46% as the price of U.S. crude oil climbed 50%. Financial stocks also have had a banner year, vaulting 31% after falling in 2020. Technology companies, which led the market in 2020, had another solid year, gaining 32%.

Initial public offerings exploded as companies sought to take advantage of the rising stock market. Investing in Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies became more mainstream. And small investors, often taking their cues from social media and online forum sites like Reddit, sent shares in GameStop and other companies soaring and helped popularize the use of commission-free stock trading portals like Robinhood.

INFLATION GETS STICKY

Inflation awoke from a long slumber in 2021. The U.S. government's consumer price index skyrocketed 6.8% in the 12 months that ended in November — the sharpest such jump since 1982. The speed of the global economic recovery surprised businesses, which had laid off workers, let shelves and warehouses go bare, and cut factory output when the coronavirus pandemic first hit. They're still struggling to catch up with demand, creating supply bottlenecks and higher costs for raw materials and finished goods.

Many companies have raised prices to offset higher input costs and keep profit margins steady. Consumers are paying more for everything from diapers and detergent to cereal and household appliances. It's unclear exactly when the supply bottlenecks will ease, so further price increases could be in the picture for 2022.

— Paul Wiseman, Damian Troise

INVESTORS PILE INTO 'MEME STOCKS'

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Small investors piled into stocks in 2021, at times banding together on online forums like Reddit's Wall-StreetBets to stoke a frenzy over certain companies like GameStop. The financially struggling video-game retailer surged more than 1,600% in January as novice investors using trading apps like Robinhood snapped up shares. The mania led to big losses for some hedge funds, multiple halts in trading and congressional hearings asking who was getting hurt.

The rise of small investors is one reason stocks represented a quarter of household assets as of the third quarter, up from only 13% a decade ago, according to Wells Fargo Securities. The "meme stock" phenomenon even spurred at least one investment firm to launch an exchange-traded fund of stocks getting talked up on social media. The trend also helped boost revenue for Robinhood, an online trading platform popular with new investors, though the company's shares made an underwhelming stock market debut in July and are down sharply for the year.

— Alex Veiga

BONDED RETURNS

The U.S. economy grew strongly this year, and inflation jumped enough to jolt shoppers across the country. Usually such things send bond prices tumbling and, in turn, their yields soaring. But that didn't happen in 2021. Yields did rise through the year, and they to be sure left investors with losses in what's supposed to be the safe part of their portfolios. The largest bond fund lost 1.4% as of Dec. 13, on track for its worst yearly performance in eight.

But yields remain low relative to history. The yield on the 10-year Treasury, for example, is still below where it was in the spring. That could be a product of expectations for inflation to eventually fall and for the economy to moderate its growth too. Low bond yields have been one of the main reasons that stock prices have surged so high: With bonds paying so little, there's a widespread belief on Wall Street that there is no alternative to buying stocks.

— Stan Choe

BATTERY POWERS

Electric vehicle sales nearly doubled worldwide as automakers rolled out new models. Many consumers bought EVs to avoid burning oil, but others went for the quick acceleration and crisp handling. Shares of Tesla, the world's EV leader, were up more than 40% as of Dec. 22. An order of 100,000 Teslas from Hertz generated outsize enthusiasm from investors. Amazon-backed startup Rivian soared after going public even though it hasn't made a profit.

The industry's old guard revved up its commitment to EVs — for example, General Motors plans a GMC Hummer EV. But GM had to stop selling two EVs due to a recall for battery fires, and rival Ford is expected to top it in EV sales. GM shares still rose more than 30%; Ford shares more than doubled. Although EVs will only be 5.8% of global new-vehicle sales this year, that figure could grow close to 15% in 2025, says research firm LMC Automotive.

— Tom Krisher

GOT CHIPS?

A global chip shortage had repercussions across much of the economy in 2021, thwarting consumers who faced delays in getting new cars, video-game consoles and an array of other products. The shortage had its origins in the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, starting with the lockdowns shuttering Asian semiconductor factories in early 2020. As 2022 approaches, some analysts are now worried about what happens when the shortages ease and an oversupply of chips affects prices.

Many chipmakers, electronics manufacturers and governments have outlined long-term plans to diversify supply chains so that a virus outbreak, ice storm, earthquake or political conflict in one region doesn't disrupt the global supply of a key ingredient for so many tech products.

Shares of Nvidia, whose processors help power video games, data centers, artificial intelligence, virtual

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reality, and automobiles, have more than doubled in consecutive years.

— Matt O'Brien

CRYPTO GOES MAINSTREAM

Cryptocurrency prices went on another roller coaster this past year: surging, plunging and then cycling again. What made 2021 different was how many more people experienced those swings, as crypto crossed into the mainstream. In the most famous example, El Salvador became the first country to make Bitcoin legal tender. Perhaps more impactful for financial markets, the first exchange-traded fund tied to Bitcoin futures also began to trade. It offered professional investors an easy way into the market, and it took just a month to amass \$1.4 billion in assets.

Of course, crypto still retains a sense of iconoclasm, and even some fun. Dogecoin, a coin that started as a joke, climbed more than 15,500% from the start of the year to 74 cents in the summer, as traders tried to goose it to the \$1 level. It recently fell back below 16 cents.

— Stan Choe

CHINA TECH CRACKDOWN

Anxious investors knocked more than \$1 trillion off the value of high-flying Chinese tech companies on foreign stock exchanges after the ruling Communist Party tightened control over their industries. Industry leaders in e-commerce, entertainment and other fields have been warned not to use their dominance to keep out new competitors.

Alibaba Group, the world's biggest e-commerce company by sales volume, was fined \$2.8 billion on charges it suppressed competition. Tencent Holdings, operator of the popular WeChat message service, and others have been fined over acquisitions regulators said increased their dominance. Tencent was ordered to end exclusive contracts with music suppliers. Alibaba's stock market value has plunged more than 60% from its October 2020 peak of \$838 billion. Tencent lost 43% to \$539 billion. Didi Global Inc., China's dominant ride-hailing service, lost almost half its market value after regulators criticized its handling of customer data. Didi announced Dec. 3 it would pull out of the New York Stock Exchange and move share trading to Hong Kong.

— Joe McDonald

GONE TO MARKET

Initial public offerings exploded in 2021 as companies sought to take advantage of a soaring stock market. There were 389 IPOs through the first week of December, easily surpassing the total of 221 for all of last year, according to Renaissance Capital. Some of the more notable IPOs in 2021 included online broker Robinhood, which has helped reshape the stock market by bringing in millions of new investors. Dating app Bumble and electric vehicle maker Rivian Automotive were also highly anticipated IPOs.

It was also a blowout year for special-purpose acquisition companies. SPACs, as they are known, are an alternative way for companies to become publicly traded. Also referred to as blank-check companies, they raise money from public investors with the intent of buying a private company later. Southeast Asia's largest ride-hailing company Grab went public in the biggest-ever SPAC deal in December. However, SPACs have been facing tougher scrutiny from regulators. Securities and Exchange Commission Chair Gary Gensler has called for greater disclosures in SPAC deals.

— Damian J. Troise

ENERGY CRUNCH

Rising prices for oil and natural gas unsettled the global economic recovery in 2021. The biggest crunch came in Europe, where by December natural gas prices had soared more than nine times their level at the start of the year amid fears that reserves would run out in a colder than average winter. Energy prices spilled over into geopolitics as Russian President Vladimir Putin cited Europe's gas shortage to push for final regulatory approval of the contentious Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Amid tensions over Russian troop

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movements near Ukraine, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said it was "very unlikely" Nord Stream gas would flow if Russia attacked.

President Joe Biden tried pressuring OPEC to boost production and tapping his country's emergency stockpiles of oil in an effort to lower gasoline prices for U.S. drivers. Oil and gasoline prices did fall, but mostly due to fears of another possible economic slowdown from the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. The average pump price two days before Christmas was \$3.29 per gallon, down 11 cents in a month but up from \$2.25 a year ago.

— David McHugh

REALITY AND THE METAVERSE

Social media companies had an eventful year, starting with Twitter and Facebook banning then-President Donald Trump from their platforms after the Capitol riots. Later in the year the debate over social media's impact on the public exploded when Facebook whistleblower Frances Haugen leaked tens of thousands of damning internal documents about the harm the company is causing to its users around the world. Amid the fallout that has included congressional hearings, Facebook rebranded itself Meta Platforms, reflecting its commitment to developing the metaverse. CEO Mark Zuckerberg described the metaverse as a "virtual environment" you can go inside of — instead of just looking at on a screen.

Meta's stock price and revenue have so far withstood the turmoil. Twitter, on the other hand, has not fared as well, at least with investors. While some big investors had been calling for Jack Dorsey to step down as CEO, actual news of his departure in November failed to boost the company's stock price.

— Barbara Ortutay

EXPLAINER: Veteran Hubble vs. new Webb space telescope

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Don't ask astronomers to choose between the Hubble Space Telescope and the new kid on the cosmic block, the James Webb Space Telescope.

"Comparing Hubble and Webb is like asking if you will love your second child as much as your first," said Susan Mullally, Webb's deputy project scientist at the Space Telescope Science Institute in Baltimore.

"Hubble will always be loved for its awe-inspiring images of our universe and will continue to collect important data for astronomers. Webb gives us new and unique eyes of places that we have never been able to reach."

With NASA and the European Space Agency's Hubble pushing 32 years in orbit, the bigger, 100 times more powerful Webb is widely viewed as its successor even though the two are vastly different. Its liftoff is slated for Saturday morning from the coast of South America.

The lowdown on Hubble versus Webb:

ROCKET RIDES

Hubble caught a lift to orbit tucked inside NASA's space shuttle Discovery in 1990. It quickly ran into trouble: one of the telescope's solar wings jammed as it was unfurling. Astronauts suited up for an emergency spacewalk, but commands from Earth freed the panel. Within weeks, Hubble's blurry vision was detected. Spacewalking astronauts fixed it three years later. Soaring from South America on a European Ariane rocket, Webb won't be reachable by astronauts at its destination 1 million miles (1.6 million kilometers) away. Bigger and more intricate than Hubble, Webb will be a goner if its foldout mirror and sunshield snarl.

LET THERE BE LIGHT

Webb is expected to behold light from the universe's first stars and galaxies, beyond Hubble's range. This light will reveal how the original stars looked 13.7 billion years ago. Hubble has stared as far back as 13.4 billion years, disclosing a clumpy runt of a galaxy that is currently the oldest and farthest object ever observed. Astronomers are eager to close the 300 million year gap with Webb and draw ever closer in time to the Big Bang, the moment the universe formed 13.8 billion years ago. "It's like looking at the picture book of my kids and missing the first two years, right? Trying to figure out where they come from," said

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NASA science chief Thomas Zurbuchen.

INFRARED VISION

Hubble sees what we see — visible light — with a little ultraviolet and infrared thrown in. Webb has infrared vision, allowing it to pierce cosmic clouds of dust. The shorter visible and ultraviolet wavelengths emitted by the first stars and galaxies have been stretched as the universe expands, so Webb will see them in their elongated, heat-emitting infrared form. That's why Webb's detectors need to run at minus 400 degrees Fahrenheit (minus 240 degrees Celsius). To stay chilled, Webb carries a parasol the size of a tennis court. Between each of the sunshield's five layers is a gap so heat can escape out the sides. Multiple layers also better protect against micrometeorite hits.

SIZE MATTERS

To discern the universe's first, faint stars, Webb requires the largest mirror ever launched for astronomy. The mirror spans more than 21 feet (6.5 meters), yet is lighter than Hubble's, which is 8 feet (2.4 meters) across. That's because Webb's mirror is made of beryllium, a strong but lightweight metal. It's also segmented, allowing it to fold like a drop-leaf table for launch. Each of the 18 hexagonal segments are the size of a coffee table and coated with ultra-thin gold, an ideal reflector of infrared light.

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION

Hubble circles 330 miles (530 kilometers) overhead. The altitude was dictated by the capabilities of NASA's space shuttles, which delivered Hubble to orbit and then made five service calls. Webb is bound for more a more distant spot — 1 million miles (1.6 million kilometers) away at what's called the second Lagrange point. This is where the gravitational forces of the Earth and sun balance, requiring minimal fuel for a spacecraft to stay put. Webb will constantly face the night side of Earth as the spacecraft and planet swoop around the sun in unison.

GROWING PAINS

Hubble was years late and millions over budget by the time it rocketed into orbit in 1990. Webb also is years late with huge cost overruns. NASA's tab for Hubble from its 1970s development until now: \$16 billion, adjusted for inflation. That doesn't include all the shuttle flights for launch and repairs. Webb's price tag is an estimated \$10 billion; that includes the first five years of operation. The European Space Agency is picking up the launch costs, with a French-built Ariane rocket providing Webb's lift from French Guiana.

HUBBLE AND WEBB NAMESAKES:

Astronomer Edwin Hubble confirmed a century ago that countless galaxies exist beyond our Milky Way and the universe is constantly expanding. James Webb led NASA from 1961 to 1968, presiding over Projects Mercury and Gemini, and the early phase of Apollo's moon-landing program. In 2002, a decade after Webb's death, NASA chose his name for the new telescope. But now some scientists and others want a new name, given Webb's State Department and NASA leadership during the Truman administration, when government workers were fired for being gay. NASA's historian conducted an archival search of Webb this year, but found no evidence warranting a name change, said Administrator Bill Nelson.

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AP Exclusive: Polish opposition senator hacked with spyware

By VANESSA GERA and FRANK BAJAK Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Polish Sen. Krzysztof Brejza's mobile phone was hacked with sophisticated spyware nearly three dozen times in 2019 when he was running the opposition's campaign against the right-wing populist government in parliamentary elections, an internet watchdog found.

Text messages stolen from Brejza's phone — then doctored in a smear campaign — were aired by state-controlled TV in the heat of that race, which the ruling party narrowly won. With the hacking revelation, Brejza now questions whether the election was fair.

It's the third finding by the University of Toronto's nonprofit Citizen Lab that a Polish opposition figure was

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hacked with Pegasus spyware from the Israeli hacking tools firm NSO Group. Brejza's phone was digitally broken in to 33 times from April 26, 2019, to Oct. 23, 2019, said Citizen Lab researchers, who have been tracking government abuses of NSO malware for years.

The other two hacks were identified earlier this week after a joint Citizen Lab-Associated Press investigation. All three victims blame Poland's government, which has refused to confirm or deny whether it ordered the hacks or is a client of NSO Group. State security services spokesman Stanislaw Zaryn insisted Thursday that the government does not wiretap illegally and obtains court orders in "justified cases." He said any suggestions the Polish government surveils for political ends were false.

NSO, which was blacklisted by the U.S. government last month, says it only sells its spyware to legitimate government law enforcement and intelligence agencies vetted by Israel's Defense Ministry for use against terrorists and criminals. It does not name its clients and would not say if Poland is among them.

Citizen Lab said it believes NSO keeps logs of intrusions so an investigation could determine who was behind the Polish hacks.

In response to the revelations, European Union lawmakers said they would hasten efforts to investigate allegations that member nations such as Poland have abused Pegasus spyware.

The other two Polish victims are Ewa Wrzosek, an outspoken prosecutor fighting the increasingly hardline government's undermining of judicial independence, and Roman Giertych, a lawyer who has represented senior leaders of Brejza's party, Civic Platform, in sensitive cases.

Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki on Wednesday dismissed revelations that Giertych and Wrzosek were hacked as "fake news." Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro expressed no knowledge of "illegal actions aimed at the surveillance of citizens" but also said Poland was "not helpless" in taking action against people suspected of crimes.

Giertych was hacked 18 times, also in the run-up to 2019 parliamentary elections that the ruling Law and Justice party won by a razor-thin margin. That victory has continued a dangerous erosion of democracy in the nation where the popular 1980s protest movement Solidarity presaged the eventual collapse of the Soviet empire.

The intense tempo of the hacks of Brejza and Giertych "indicates an extreme level of monitoring" that raises pressing questions about abuses of power, Citizen Lab senior researcher John Scott-Railton said. Pegasus gives its operators complete access to a mobile device: They can extract passwords, photos, messages, contacts and browsing history and activate the microphone and camera for real-time eavesdropping.

"My heart sinks with each case we find," Scott-Railton added. "This seems to be confirming our worst fear: Even when used in a democracy, this kind of spyware has an almost immutable abuse potential."

Other confirmed victims have included Mexican and Saudi journalists, British attorneys, Palestinian human rights activists, heads of state and Uganda-based U.S. diplomats.

An NSO spokesperson said Thursday that "the company does not and cannot know who the targets of its customers are, yet implements measures to ensure that these systems are used solely for the authorized uses." The spokesperson claimed zero tolerance for governments who abuse it the software; NSO says it has terminated multiple contracts of governments who have abused Pegasus, although it has not named any publicly.

Despite any measures NSO might be taking, Citizen Lab notes, the list of abuse cases continues to grow. Brejza, a 38-year-old attorney, told the AP that he has no doubt data stolen from his phone while he was chief of staff of the opposition coalition's parliamentary campaign provided critical strategy insights. Combined with the smear effort against him, he said, it prevented "a fair electoral process."

Text messages stolen from Brejza's phone were doctored to make it appear as if he created an online group that spread hateful anti-government propaganda; reports in state-controlled media cited the altered texts. But the group didn't actually exist.

Brejza says he now understands where TVP state television got them.

"This operation wrecked the work of staff and destabilized my campaign," he said. "I don't know how many votes it took from me and the entire coalition."

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Brejza won his Senate seat in that October 2019 race. But since the ruling party held on to the more powerful lower house of parliament, it has steered Poland further away from EU standards of liberal democracy.

Election monitors from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe said at the time that control of state media gave the ruling party an unfair advantage but called the elections essentially free. They were unaware of the hacking.

Brejza has kept the ruling Law and Justice party on its heels since it won power in 2015. For example, he has exposed large bonuses paid to senior government officials. In another case, he revealed that the postal service sent tens of thousands of dollars to a company tied to ruling party leader Jaroslaw Kaczynski. Brejza fears the hacking could have compromised whistleblowers who had reached out to him with evidence.

NSO Group is facing daunting financial and legal challenges — including the threat of default on more than \$300 million in debt — after governments used Pegasus spyware to spy on dissidents, journalists, diplomats and human rights activists from countries including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Mexico and the United States. The U.S. blacklisting of NSO has effectively barred U.S. companies from supplying technology to the Israeli firm.

Apple sued NSO last month, bent on halting the violation of its operating systems with exploits including a so-called zero-click hack that can compromise a device with no user interaction. Apple alerted scores of users worldwide that they had been hacked. In 2019, Facebook sued the Israeli firm over allegations of hacking its globally popular WhatsApp messenger app.

Dutch EU parliamentarian Sophie in 't Veld told the AP on Wednesday that a committee has launched hearings on Pegasus and that the revelations from Poland "will only help intensify the process."

"EU governments using spyware on political opponents and critics is unacceptable," she tweeted, accusing the European Commission — the EU's executive branch — of "ducking the issue." She wants a ban on such practices in the 27-nation bloc.

That may be difficult, however, because national security matters are outside EU jurisdiction, said Lukasz Olejnik, a cybersecurity consultant who has worked with the International Red Cross. Some member states are apt to argue that the EU cannot prohibit their use of digital surveillance tools for that end, he said.

Bajak reported from Boston. Associated Press reporters Kelvin Chan contributed from London and Josef Federman from Jerusalem.

Atlanta owns up to legacy of convict labor that rebuilt city

By MICHAEL WARREN Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The City of Atlanta's official seal shows a phoenix rising from the ashes of the Civil War. What it doesn't show is that Atlanta was rebuilt with slavery's successor: convict labor, working in horrific conditions to break granite at the Bellwood Quarry and burn clay at the Chattahoochee Brick Company.

Thousands of Black men, women and children were pulled off the streets and convicted of petty or nonexistent crimes before vanishing into camps and factories where many were worked to death. The peonage system lasted across the South for seven decades until World War II, yet many Americans have never heard of it.

Restoring this long-ignored chapter of U.S. history to public memory is the goal of a coalition of politicians, executives, foundation chiefs, historians, educators and grassroots activists that has taken shape over the past few months.

"In the same way we served as an example during the civil rights movement of what's possible in America, I believe that that moment is before us now," Atlanta Mayor Keisha Lance Bottoms told The Associated Press. "I think it's very important for our children and for adults to know what that history is all about."

Advocates for Atlanta's struggling west side want memorials to forced labor erected at the quarry site and the abandoned brick company, which the city council voted to preserve this month. Another would go downtown, where white mobs killed 25 Black people in 1906 after rival newspaper publishers stirred

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outrage with false stories about rapes of white women while running for governor.

Atlanta profited more than most cities from the clause in the 13th Amendment that ended slavery and involuntary servitude in 1865 "except as a punishment for crime." Vagrancy laws in 48 states, nearly always enforced against people of color, made it a crime to switch jobs without permission, or even to be seen walking "without any lawful purpose."

Businesses paid the court fees to take custody of these inmates and lease them out to brutal workplaces across the industrializing South, according to Douglas Blackmon, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book "Slavery by Another Name." Government revenues swelled as people disappeared into a penal system without costly prisons.

"A husband might leave to go to town one day and you don't know why they didn't come back," said Donna Stephens, who co-founded the Chattahoochee Brick Company Descendants group. "You don't know whether he fell and bumped his head, or whether he ended up in a convict leasing site."

Former Confederate Army Capt. James W. English, a police commissioner and Atlanta mayor, controlled 1,206 of Georgia's 2,881 convict laborers by 1897, according to Blackmon's research. Some built his railroads, worked in his coal mine or cooked turpentine from lumber. Many were whipped if they didn't run while carrying riverbank clay to ovens that produced more than 200,000 bricks a day.

Testimony about whipping-bosses torturing and killing prisoners in atrocious conditions shocked Georgia's legislature into outlawing convict leasing in 1908, giving county sheriffs direct control. By 1930, the state had more than 8,000 forced laborers, and half the state's Black population couldn't leave homes or jobs without fearing arrest, Blackmon found.

Activists recently began pressing for official recognition of Atlanta's long-ignored history in response to a nationwide challenge by the Montgomery, Alabama-based Equal Justice Initiative. In July, the National Center for Civil and Human Rights formally launched a Truth and Transformation Initiative to participate.

Enlisting historians and directing grants from Microsoft, Home Depot co-founder and Atlanta Falcons owner Arthur Blank's foundation and other sources, the center is guiding a "constellation" of research and educational projects to restore public knowledge about what happened between slavery's end and Martin Luther King Jr.'s arrival nearly a century later in Atlanta, which prefers to be known as "the cradle of the civil rights movement" and the "city too busy to hate."

"The period we're missing is the era of racial terror," said Jill Savitt, the center's president and CEO.

English and other exploiters of convict labor invested in banks, railroads, utilities, real estate and other businesses. Norfolk & Southern, the Southern Company and Coca-Cola are among the Atlanta corporations initially seeded with profits from convict labor, Blackmon wrote.

The mayor isn't going to single them out for criticism.

"There are a lot of companies across America that have a complicated past. We as a country have a complicated past," Bottoms said. "I do know that those companies really serve as cornerstones in our city today."

Norfolk & Southern had planned to pave over the brick company site for a transport hub until the mayor and council persuaded the railroad to abandon that idea this year; Bottoms calls the company a "good partner."

The center is working on age-appropriate curricula on forced labor for grades 3-12, and will share them with Atlanta Public Schools and other districts. Other groups plan public "truth-telling" engagements and a virtual reality project, Savitt said.

"We have to lift up the rock," she said. "And for people who say this makes white people feel ashamed, I would say you should feel ashamed, but not because you're white. You should feel ashamed because you're a human."

Blackmon gives each of his Georgia State University students six people listed as inmates in Atlanta's 1900 census to research. Hank Klibanoff, another Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, wants his Emory University students to restore some humanity to the 1906 massacre victims.

A monument in English Park still honors the former mayor in the namesake neighborhood he built near

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the brick factory, but the city deprived its west side of resources after white residents fled in the 1950s rather than live near Black people. Now new investments are threatening to dislocate longtime residents.

Gentrification pressures are growing as technology companies move in, with Microsoft Corp. buying 90 acres around its Quarry Yards campus. New housing, a riverwalk and a nature trail linking the quarry and brick company site are planned. The 400-foot-deep (122-meter-deep) symbol of dystopia in "The Hunger Games," "Walking Dead" and "Stranger Things" now holds Atlanta's backup water supply, surrounded by its largest park.

Stephens hopes to identify burial sites, test any remains for DNA and interview descendants of forced laborers. She also wants her longtime neighbors to benefit after enduring the city's worst poverty and pollution.

"We have made great strides, yes, but we still have a ways to go, and until we make those amends, I can't say that I'm satisfied," Stephens said.

Bottoms, whose grandparents moved to English Avenue 100 years ago, had no idea until reading Blackmon's book that a previous mayor grew wealthy and powerful by perpetuating human bondage.

"It actually gives me chills when I think about it: My family took form in a community named after this man who was responsible for so much hurt and pain in our city," the mayor said. "People often like to bury pain, which is understandable. But now that we know better, it's incumbent upon all of us to do better."

Search for a COVID-19 test means sold-out signs, long lines

By JIM MUSTIAN, JEFFREY COLLINS and CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — President Joe Biden promised to distribute hundreds of millions of free COVID-19 tests and to open more testing sites to fight surging infections, but the stepped-up efforts will not come in time for people who want to find out if they are infected before the holidays.

Americans have been searching drugstores for scarce home tests or waiting hours in chilly temperatures at testing facilities across the country.

"Not everyone can take three hours off work to get tested, but it feels like it's the only thing we have the power to do," said Jordan Thomas, who waited nearly four hours for a test this week in the Brooklyn borough of New York City.

In Atlanta, drugstores ran out of home tests, and police shut down testing sites as traffic backed up a half-mile or more. A drive-thru testing site in Columbia, South Carolina, that for months had quicker lines than some nearby Chick-fil-A restaurants had waits of an hour or more days before Christmas. Workers warned that results could take longer than the typical 24 to 36 hours.

Fueling the surging demand for tests is a mix of factors, including families seeking to keep holiday gatherings safe and people needing to prove they are virus-free for travel, work or school. Adding to the pressure is the extra-contagious omicron variant, which has a multiplying effect on the number of people seeking tests after being exposed to an infected person.

In the United States, infections average around 149,000 a day, up from 75,000 a day at the start of November.

"The rise in infections is pretty dramatic," said Gigi Gronvall, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health who has tracked COVID-19 testing efforts during the pandemic.

Testing can help ensure safety at gatherings, even if people do not have symptoms and were not exposed to the virus, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"Take a test before you gather," the agency's director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, said this week as omicron led to spiking cases ahead of the holidays.

But efforts to follow that guidance and to meet the requirements of some employers and schools have strained testing capacity in many places.

Detjon Bushgjokaj was among hundreds of people seeking a test in Everett, Massachusetts, just north of Boston. He waited about 90 minutes after his 6-year-old daughter, who has not been vaccinated yet, tested positive after falling ill with a fever.

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"As soon as my wife called, I left work and came right here. I work with a lot of people and in different places so I needed to make sure," said Bushgjakaj, who is vaccinated. He said his daughter's illness has added uncertainty to their holiday break.

In New York City, drugstores posted signs alerting customers that they sold out of tests. Lines wrapped around blocks at some testing sites, with some saying results could take three to four days.

For next-day results, one site listed a price of \$150. For results in two hours, the price was \$389.

Though the technology to process PCR lab tests takes less than a day, testing sites and labs face staffing struggles like many other businesses, said Mara Aspinall, who teaches biomedical diagnostics at Arizona State University and is on the board of OraSure, a COVID-19 test maker.

Manufacturers are working to increase supplies. Abbott said it's seeing "unprecedented demand" for its popular BinaxNOW tests and that it plans to expand production to 70 million tests in January, up from more than 50 million this month. The company said it can further boost production in coming months.

In the meantime, Walgreens said it's limiting people to four boxes per purchase in stores and online. CVS said it's limiting people to six kits per purchase.

In New York City, officials planned to hand out rapid home tests to people facing long waits at testing sites to help ease demand. But the city is having trouble securing the tests as well.

Biden announced Tuesday that the federal government would for the first time start mailing 500 million free rapid tests directly to Americans in January. Details have not yet been released, but officials say people will be able to use a new website to order their tests, which will be mailed to them at no charge.

The government will use the Defense Production Act to help manufacture more tests. New federal testing sites will also be set up, starting this week in New York.

The changes come after public health experts for months urged U.S. officials to make testing more accessible, pointing to countries such as the United Kingdom and Germany, which have distributed billions of tests to the public and recommended people test themselves twice a week.

Experts say the latest efforts still will not be enough for all Americans to test at that rate. The U.S. would need 2.3 billion tests per month for everyone 12 and older to do that, according to the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation.

The availability of tests varies around the country.

At a city-run children's day camp in Fort Collins, Colorado, boxes of rapid tests were available for free this week. Staffers told parents to take as many as they needed.

Still, demand for testing is only set to increase after the holidays, when people will want to know if their travels and gatherings resulted in infections, noted Dr. Marcus Plescia, chief medical officer for the Association of State and Territorial Health Officials.

And high demand will likely to persist far into 2022 as people look to resume the activities they gave up during the pandemic, Aspinall said.

"The pandemic fatigue has moved into, 'I want to do what I want, when I want.' And tests provide that knowledge and power," she said.

Collins reported from Columbia, South Carolina. Associated Press writers Matthew Perrone in Washington, Philip Marcelo in Boston, Mike Sisak in New York and Mead Gruver in Fort Collins, Colorado, contributed to this report.

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US adds Merck pill as 2nd easy-to-use drug against COVID-19

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. health regulators on Thursday authorized the second pill against COVID-19, providing another easy-to-use medication to battle the rising tide of omicron infections.

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The Food and Drug Administration announcement on Merck's molnupiravir comes one day after the agency cleared a competing drug from Pfizer.

Pfizer's pill, Paxlovid, is likely to become the first-choice treatment against the virus, because of its superior benefits and milder side effects.

As a result, Merck's pill is expected to have a lesser role against the pandemic than predicted just a few weeks ago. Its ability to head off severe COVID-19 is much smaller than initially announced and the drug label will warn of serious safety issues, including the potential for birth defects.

Both treatments will be free to patients in the U.S. after being purchased by the federal government.

The FDA authorized Merck's drug for adults with a positive COVID-19 test, early symptoms and who face the highest risks of hospitalization, including older people and those with conditions like obesity and heart disease.

The agency said molnupiravir should be considered for patients "for whom alternative COVID-19 treatment options authorized by the FDA are not accessible or clinically appropriate." It did not include that restriction for Paxlovid, which was authorized for patients 12 and older.

Molnupiravir, made by Merck and Ridgeback Biotherapeutics, also will carry a warning against use during pregnancy. Women of childbearing age should use birth control during treatment and for a few days after while men should use birth control for at least three months after their final dose, the FDA said. The federal agency also said molnupiravir should not be used in patients under age 18 because it may affect bone growth.

Dr. Nick Kartsonis, Merck's senior vice president of clinical research, said company scientists are still studying the drug and they hope to eventually get it approved for use in children.

The restrictions were expected after an FDA advisory panel only narrowly endorsed the drug last month, warning that its use would have to be strictly tailored to patients who can benefit the most.

Kartsonis said Merck researchers are "very comfortable" with their drug's safety profile.

He also noted that molnupiravir has been studied in more than a thousand people, and researchers saw side effects like diarrhea and nausea in only a small percentage of patients.

"The drug has actually looked very well tolerated," he said.

Pfizer's Paxlovid also comes with limitations. Regulators say doctors have to consider how it will interact with other medicines a patient may be taking, and they've noted it shouldn't be prescribed to patients with severe liver or kidney problems.

Both treatments also should be started within five days of the beginning of symptoms, a deadline that puts pressure on patients to get tested and diagnosed quickly.

The two pills work differently and Pfizer's doesn't carry the same risks. Additionally, Pfizer's drug was roughly three times more effective in testing, reducing hospitalization and death by nearly 90% among high-risk patients, compared with 30% for Merck's.

Some experts question whether there will be much of a role for the Merck drug in the U.S.

"To the extent that there's an ample supply of Pfizer's pill, I think it won't be used," said Dr. Gregory Poland of the Mayo Clinic, referring to the Merck drug. "There would be no reason, given it has less efficacy and a higher risk of side effects."

For now, the FDA decision provides another potential option against the virus that has killed more than 800,000 Americans, even as health officials brace for record-setting cases, hospitalizations and deaths driven by the omicron variant.

The seven-day rolling average for U.S. COVID-19 cases climbed past 160,000 Wednesday, according to data collected by Johns Hopkins University. That's more than double the average in late November.

Antiviral pills like Merck's and Pfizer's are expected to be effective against omicron because they don't target the spike protein where most of the variant's worrisome mutations reside.

Researchers have warned that older COVID-19 treatments that are administered by IV are unlikely to work against the new strain.

The FDA based its Merck decision on results showing nearly 7% of patients taking the drug ended up in the hospital and one died at the end of 30 days. That compared with 10% of patients hospitalized who

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were taking the placebo and nine deaths.

Merck says several hundred thousand treatment courses will be available in the U.S. in the next several days and a million will be available over the next few weeks. The supply of Pfizer's drug is more limited before ramping up in 2022.

The U.S. will pay about \$700 for each course of Merck's drug, which requires patients to take four pills twice a day for five days. A review by Harvard University and King's College London estimated it costs about \$18 to make each 40-pill course of treatment.

Merck's drug inserts tiny errors into the coronavirus' genetic code to slow its reproduction. That genetic effect has raised concerns that the drug could cause mutations in human fetuses and even spur more virulent strains of the virus. But FDA scientists said the variant risk is largely theoretical because people take the drug for such a short period of time.

AP Health Writer Tom Murphy contributed to this report.

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Ode to Sports: A year when games and fans came off the bench

By FRED LIEF Associated Press

Essentially better, wouldn't you say?

Fans back in the stands and games back in play.

Clearly more settled but far from routine:

Some shots from the arc, some for the vaccine.

A year on the rebound crisscrossing sports.

A year next to normal, progress of sorts.

First Quarter

The New Year strikes, ignite the flame.

Bama, Buckeyes reach title game.

Browns and playoffs: Now there's a match.

DeVonta Smith, a Heisman catch.

Capitol Hill, a violent sea.

The Heat and Celtics take a knee.

New New York star, good as it gets --

Lindor leaves Cleveland, dealt to Mets.

A limb falls from the Dodger tree --

Tom Lasorda was 93.

Tide surges in a dull affair

To send Nick Saban past the Bear.

Nets nab Harden, aiming higher.

Jags try likewise, Urban Meyer.

Australian tennis, quarantine.

Olympics nearing, what's it mean?

A star grows dim in baseball's sky

As Henry Aaron passes by.

A shutout vote for baseball's Hall,

Though Schilling nearly gets a call.

Bucs, Brady ride on cruise control

And stay at home for Super Bowl.

Chiefs dethroned, Tampa Bay is king

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And Brady gets his seventh ring.
Lombardi Trophy tossed from boat --
Pass completed by football's GOAT.
Prep for Tokyo goes off the track,
With leaders talking sexist smack.
McDowell exults, Daytona bash —
Grabs first win, eludes last-lap crash.
Djokovic's season underway,
Ninth Aussie crown on resume.
A morning drive, a roll, a tree --
Woods wrecks his speeding SUV.
Shattered leg, orthopedic mess.
Any more golf? Anyone's guess.
Kyle Larson, banned for racist crack,
Returns and wins, Las Vegas track.
Conference tournaments, disarray.
Coronavirus comes to play.
A boxing marvel pound for pound,
Marvin Hagler goes one last round.
Drew Brees retires, time to go.
Roy Williams follows, ends the show.
March Madness not the same event,
The games now played in one big tent.
But NCAA proves all thumbs --
Men get red carpet. Women? Crumbs.
Elgin Baylor, whose game took flight,
Now passes into that good night.
NFL adds one game to sked.
Smell of money goes to its head.
Second Quarter
Opening day but no at-bats
When COVID scraps the Mets at Nats.
Atlanta stripped of All-Star Game,
With Georgia's voting law to blame.
Gonzaga gasps, comes up for air
On Jalen Suggs' half-court prayer.
Stanford women make curtain call,
Beat Arizona, Pac-12 ball.
Next night, the Baylor Bears shift gears.
Zags' perfect season disappears.
Matsuyama, the Masters man,
Sets major milestone for Japan.
No-hitters, once rare Beaujolais,
Are now served up most every day.
Rich Euro clubs conspire, bolt.
Rogue league shot down as fans revolt.
Medina Spirit, Churchill Downs;
Bob Baffert, seven Derby crowns.
Failed drug test puts the win in doubt

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And Churchill Downs kicks Baffert out.
Happy birthday! Let it be sung:
Mays is 90, forever young.
No Baffert, here's how Preakness goes:
Rombauer wins, Medina shows.
Canelo brutal and unbowed
At Cowboys' home with record crowd.
Games greenlighted by IOC
Even if COVID's running free.
Mickelson takes the PGA.
Oh, he believes in yesterday.
Fans swarm fairway, forbidding scene
As Lefty, Koepka walk toward green.
Castroneves still gets it done
At 46, four Indys won.
French Open comes, Osaka goes
And speaks of pain that no one knows,
The mental anguish she can't shake --
It's simply time to take a break.
Jon Rahm nears Memorial rout --
A COVID test then knocks him out.
Nadal loses on French red clay!
(Moons explode across Milky Way.)
Djokovic dodges five-set jam,
Tsitsipas falls -- halfway to Slam.
No test or virus undermines
Rahm's Open title, Torrey Pines.
Can college athletes play for pay?
Supreme Court rules, resounding yea.
Nassib comes out, his "great weight" lifts,
Barrier falls, pro football shifts.
Major League Baseball's had enough,
Cracks down on pitchers' sticky stuff.
Antetokounmpo hurts his knee.
Connor McDavid, MVP.
Third Quarter
Hardly baseball's finest hour --
What to do with Trevor Bauer?
Dan Snyder hit with hefty fine
For workplace deemed best fit for swine.
Again, the Lightning win it all.
No Stanley Cup for Montreal.
Another twist, Olympic plans:
No roaring crowds; in fact, no fans.
Raise a glass, a dry martini --
Novak knocks off Berrettini.
Twentieth Slam, Wimbledon spree.
His Grand Slam quest? He's 3 for 3.
Euros: Italy. Down go Brits,

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Pelted with racist online hits.
Shohei Ohtani, arm and bat,
The All-Star Game his habitat.
Morikawa, his game's got clout,
Wins British Open first time out.
Tour de France, it's two in a row:
Tadej Pogacar runs this show.
Milwaukee Bucks now live the dream,
Their crown last won when with Kareem.
Giannis shifts to higher gear,
Suns go in six -- best "Fear the Deer."
In Cleveland, after hot debate,
The Guardians step to the plate.
At last, the Tokyo Games begin
Much to the public's great chagrin.
Cauldron's lit by Osaka's hands
Before near empty, ghostlike stands.
All eyes soon turn to Simone Biles,
Her tribulations and her trials,
Not least the "twisties," so we learned,
Where up from down can't be discerned.
Still, bright lights burn, and we behold:
Caeleb Dressel, his haul of gold;
Thompson-Herah, double sprint queen;
Allyson Felix, evergreen;
Karsten Warholm, eye-popping race;
Sunisa Lee, resplendent grace.
Then Texas, Oklahoma flee
And fatten the fat SEC.
Scherzer to Dodgers, deadline day.
Westbrook's home with James in LA.
Jays regain a sense of order,
Flocking home north of the border.
Lawyers, money, tears and remorse --
Barcelona's Messi divorce.
Baseball goes to where myths are born:
"Field of Dreams," with plenty of corn.
Pacquiao loses and now leans
Toward run to lead the Philippines.
Saints sent packing, hurricane strike.
Pats tell Cam Newton: Take a hike.
U.S. Open, much to savor.
Novak looks to stand with Laver.
His final, though, best to forget.
Daniil Medvedev just says "nyet."
In Congress, gymnasts testify --
Ignored, betrayed by FBI.
Philly longs for an elixir
For Ben Simmons, brooding Sixer.

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Ryder Cup rout, United States:
Stricker's young team rules Whistling Straits.
Fourth Quarter
Women's soccer rocked by abuse.
League leader quits, coaches cut loose.
Brady's back at his old domain.
Bucs beat New England in the rain.
Talladega, Wallace's place,
At every turn a landmark race.
Fury stops Wilder, fierce right hook.
A trilogy ends. Close the book.
Jon Gruden resigns. Coarse and vile,
His emails spewing endless bile.
Tide's big winning streak hits a wall.
Boston Marathon's run in fall.
Irving's unvaxxed -- it's "best for me" --
And barred from games in NYC.
Seattle Kraken, league's new guy.
Light streaks across Chicago Sky.
Lost in the muck most of the year,
Braves ascend to another sphere.
Rosario, Fried fuel the run.
Freddie Freeman, the favorite son.
Riley, Swanson, Jorge Soler.
'Stros fall in six; Braves walk on air.
Then Aaron Rodgers theorized
His "research" finds he's "immunized."
Rams sniff the big prize, seize the day,
Sign Von Miller and OBJ.
Kyle Larson, once without a car,
Now NASCAR's champ and transformed star.
College basketball's underway --
A long goodbye for Duke's Coach K.
Tennis shaken amid great fears --
Chinese star Peng Shuai disappears.
WTA shows some spine.
The IOC? Craven, supine.
An MVP, ain't that the truth,
Ohtani likened to Babe Ruth.
Staples Center stripped of its name --
Cryptocurrency stakes its claim.
Suns surge with reborn Golden State.
Packers, Patriots, percolate.
Why are Kelly, Notre Dame through?
Ninety-five million, LSU.
Lee Elder stood among golf's greats,
Rattling Augusta's creaky gates.
Time's up for baseball's CBA,
With Scherzer, Seager making hay.
Player lockout. Here's where things stand:

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A sport shuts down in no-man's land.
Cincinnati grabs playoff ride,
As do Michigan, Georgia, Tide.
A long wait ends with much acclaim --
Gil Hodges makes the Hall of Fame.
Death on a California track:
Medina Spirit, heart attack.
Beijing under a microscope.
Winter Games ride slippery slope.
U.S. tells China's autocrats:
We will not send our diplomats!
MLS Cup, what'll it be?
First crown for NYCFC.
Bryce Young extends Tide's Heisman run.
Family golf for Woods & Son.
Basketball stands on guard with thee:
Stephen Curry, king of the 3.
Team and coach a dumpster fire,
Jags get rid of Urban Meyer.
Now, with caution, we eye the door.
Omicron's surging. What's in store?
Still, we'll toast and lower the ball
(New Year's protocol, after all),
Eyes ahead and the mandate clear:
Better things for a better year.

Airlines cancel flights due to COVID staffing shortages

By DAVID McHUGH and TALI ARBEL Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Airlines canceled hundreds of flights as the omicron variant jumbled schedules and drew down staffing levels at some carriers during the busy holiday travel season.

Delta Air Lines and United Airlines said they canceled flights because of staff shortages tied to the omicron variant. Delta canceled 145 flights on Friday and 111 for Christmas Day, according to FlightAware. (Other factors, such as weather, are also causing cancellations.) United called off 175 flights on Friday and 69 on Saturday.

Not all airlines said COVID was disrupting their travel schedules. American Airlines said it had "nothing to report," while Southwest Airlines said "things are running smoothly." JetBlue did not respond to a request for comment.

Flight delays and cancellations tied to staffing shortages have been a regular problem for the U.S. airline industry this year. Airlines encouraged workers to quit in 2020, when air travel collapsed, and were caught short-staffed this year as travel recovered.

"The nationwide spike in omicron cases this week has had a direct impact on our flight crews and the people who run our operation," United said in a statement. "As a result, we've unfortunately had to cancel some flights and are notifying impacted customers in advance of them coming to the airport."

Delta said it canceled flights Friday because of the impact of omicron and possibility of bad weather after it had "exhausted all options and resources — including rerouting and substitutions of aircraft and crews to cover scheduled flying."

The airlines both said they were trying to rebook passengers.

While some travelers canceled holiday plans because of rising case numbers, many others kept to their vacations during some of the year's busiest travel days. The Transportation Security Administration said it

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expects to screen nearly 30 million people from Dec. 20 through Jan. 3, compared with nearly 44 million during the last holiday season before the pandemic.

Germany-based Lufthansa said Friday that it was canceling a dozen long-haul transatlantic flights over the Christmas holiday period because of a "massive rise" in sick leave among pilots. The cancellations on flights to Houston, Boston and Washington come despite a "large buffer" of additional staff for the period. The airline says it couldn't speculate on whether COVID-19 infections or quarantines were responsible because it was not informed about the sort of illness. Passengers were booked on other flights.

According to FlightAware, there are nearly 3,400 canceled flights on Friday and Saturday, with at least half of the cancellations by Chinese airlines. About 20% of affected flights — 745 — were to, from or within the U.S. This is a small fraction of global flights. FlightAware says it has tracked more than 120,000 arrivals in the past 24 hours.

Coronavirus infections fueled by the new variant have also squeezed staffing at hospitals, police departments, supermarkets and other critical operations that have struggled to maintain a full contingent of front-line workers.

To ease staffing shortages, countries including Spain and the U.K. have reduced the length of COVID-19 quarantines by letting people return to work sooner after testing positive or being exposed to the virus.

Delta CEO Ed Bastian was among those who have called on the Biden administration to take similar steps or risk further disruptions in air travel. On Thursday, the U.S. shortened COVID-19 isolation rules for health care workers only.

McHugh reported from Frankfurt, Germany.

Russian court slaps Google, Meta with massive fines

By ULIANA PAVLOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — A Moscow court on Friday slapped Google with a nearly \$100 million fine and also fined Facebook's parent company Meta \$27 million over their failure to delete content banned by local law, as Russia seeks to step up pressure on technology giants.

The Tagansky District Court ruled that Google repeatedly neglected to remove the banned content, and ordered the company to pay an administrative fine of about 7.2 billion rubles (about \$98.4 million).

Google said it would study the court documents before deciding on its next steps.

Later Friday, the court also slapped a fine of nearly 2 billion rubles (\$27.2 million) on Meta for failure to remove banned content.

Russian courts had previously imposed smaller fines on Google, Facebook and Twitter this year, and Friday's rulings marked the first time the size of the fine was calculated based on revenue.

Russian state communications watchdog Roskomnadzor said Google and Meta were specifically accused of violating the ban on distributing content that promotes extremist ideology, insults religious beliefs and encourages dangerous behavior by minors, among other things.

The agency said that Facebook and Instagram have failed to remove 2,000 items despite the courts' requests to do so, while Google has failed to delete 2,600 such items.

It warned that they may face more revenue-based fines for failure to delete the banned content.

Russian authorities have steadily ramped up pressure on social media platforms, accusing them of failing to purge content related to drug abuse, weapons and explosives and extremist views.

Earlier this year, authorities criticized tech companies for not deleting announcements about unsanctioned protests in support of jailed Kremlin critic Alexei Navalny.

Russian authorities also have demanded that foreign tech giants store the personal data of Russian citizens on servers in Russia, threatening them with fines or possible bans if they fail to comply.

Alexander Khinshtein, head of the committee on information policies in the lower house of Russian parliament, said the massive fine should send a clear message to all IT giants.

He added that Russian law envisages other forms of punishment for failure to comply with court orders,

including slowing down traffic and complete blocking.

San Francisco board OKs mayor's emergency order over opioids

By JANIE HAR Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The Board of Supervisors approved an emergency order to tackle the opioid epidemic in San Francisco's troubled Tenderloin neighborhood, despite reservations by some that the declaration will be used by the mayor to criminalize people who are homeless, addicted to drugs or both.

The vote shortly after midnight on Friday was 8-2, following a marathon 10 hours of debate and public comment. The public health emergency declaration authorizes the Department of Emergency Management to re-allocate city staff and bypass contracting and permitting regulations to set up a new temporary center where people can access expanded drug treatment and counseling.

Advocates for the homeless and substance users urged supervisors to reject the emergency order because Mayor London Breed has also pledged to flood the district with police to halt crime, which some residents want. The mayor also said some drug users may wind up in jail unless they accept services, although drug possession is a misdemeanor crime and rarely enforced.

The board ultimately approved the declaration, calling the abundance of cheap fentanyl a crisis. More people in San Francisco died of overdose last year than of COVID-19.

"I know that this is an incredibly painful, traumatic and emotional conversation," said Matt Haney, the supervisor who represents the neighborhood, before the vote. He said he hopes the city will bring all of its "innovation, unyielding compassion and relentless determination" to confront the crisis.

Several supervisors raised objections, although only Board President Shamann Walton and Dean Preston voted no. They decried the lack of details and dearth of available treatment beds, and said that over-policing would victimize African Americans and the homeless.

Walton, the only African American person on the board, said he wished more attention would be paid to homicides in his district, which includes the traditionally Black neighborhoods of Bayview and Hunters Point.

The Tenderloin includes museums, the main public library and government offices, including City Hall. But it's also teeming with people who are homeless or marginally housed, a high concentration of drug dealers and people consuming drugs in broad view.

The order itself does not call for increased police and police Chief Bill Scott assured supervisors that officers have no intention of locking up people just because they are addicted to drugs. Still, he said police can't simply ignore what's happening in a neighborhood where children are scared to go outside and people are injecting poisonous drugs.

"We're out there to help," Scott said. "We're not out there to turn a blind eye to people killing themselves on the street."

In announcing the emergency declaration last week, the mayor said it was time to be "less tolerant of all the bull— that has destroyed our city." On social media this week, she said people openly using drugs will be given treatment and other service options.

"But if they refuse, we're not going to allow them to continue using on the street," she said on social media this week. "The families in the neighborhood deserve better."

Breed has committed to opening a supervised drug consumption site as well as a drug sobering center, and said the emergency management department will lead the response much like it coordinated efforts to address the pandemic. The department will, in part, streamline emergency medical calls, disrupt drug dealing and use, and make sure streets stay clean.

Deaths attributable to overdoses have increased more than 200% in San Francisco since 2018, and last year, more than 700 people died from drug overdoses in the city, more than the number who died from COVID-19, according to the proclamation.

Nearly 600 people have died of a drug overdose this year, through November, with nearly half of the deaths occurring in the Tenderloin and in the neighboring South of Market district, says the proclamation. These areas make up 7% of San Francisco's population.

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Politically liberal cities across the U.S. are grappling with crime in the wake of the 2020 murder of George Floyd, when their elected leaders pledged ways to reduce friction between police and vulnerable communities of color, particularly African Americans such as Floyd.

San Francisco DA Chesa Boudin joined the city's public defender earlier this week to denounce the mayor's plan, saying that jailing people struggling with addiction, mental health issues and homelessness would not work. They want her to use the money on adding more treatment beds, shelters, job training and other social services.

"What we currently see in the Tenderloin didn't happen overnight and stems from years of massive disinvestment and displacement," said Jeannette Zanipatin, California director at the Drug Policy Alliance. The emergency order will last 90 days.

Biden, first lady visit hospitalized kids on Christmas Eve

By ALEXANDRA JAFFE and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden brought some Christmas Eve cheer to hospitalized children who aren't well enough to go home for holidays.

It's longstanding tradition for first ladies to visit Children's National Hospital at Christmastime, but Joe Biden's visit on Friday was a surprise. It marked the first time that a sitting president had joined the fun, the White House said.

The Bidens are set to help a group of children making lanterns as part of a winter craft project. Jill Biden will also sit by the Christmas tree and read "Olaf's Night Before Christmas" to the kids. Video of her reading will also be shown in patient rooms throughout the hospital.

The Walt Disney Co. provided copies of the book for each patient so they can follow along with the first lady, the White House said. Each book includes a White House bookmark designed by her office.

The annual tradition of a hospital visit by the first lady dates to Bess Truman, who served in the role from 1945-1953.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 24, the 358th day of 2021. There are seven days left in the year. This is Christmas Eve.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 24, 1943, President Franklin D. Roosevelt appointed Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower supreme commander of Allied forces in Europe as part of Operation Overlord.

On this date:

In 1524, Portuguese navigator Vasco da Gama — who had discovered a sea route around Africa to India — died in Cochin, India.

In 1809, legendary American frontiersman Christopher "Kit" Carson was born in Madison County, Kentucky.

In 1814, the United States and Britain signed the Treaty of Ghent, which ended the War of 1812 following ratification by both the British Parliament and the U.S. Senate.

In 1851, fire devastated the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., destroying about 35,000 volumes.

In 1865, several veterans of the Confederate Army formed a private social club in Pulaski, Tennessee, that was the original version of the Ku Klux Klan.

In 1906, Canadian physicist Reginald A. Fessenden became the first person to transmit the human voice (his own) as well as music over radio, from Brant Rock, Massachusetts.

In 1913, 73 people, most of them children, died in a crush of panic after a false cry of "Fire!" during a Christmas party for striking miners and their families at the Italian Hall in Calumet, Michigan.

In 1968, the Apollo 8 astronauts, orbiting the moon, read passages from the Old Testament Book of

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Genesis during a Christmas Eve telecast.

In 1980, Americans remembered the U.S. hostages in Iran by burning candles or shining lights for 417 seconds — one second for each day of captivity.

In 1992, President Bush pardoned former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger and five others in the Iran-Contra scandal.

In 1993, the Rev. Norman Vincent Peale, who blended Christian and psychiatric principles into a message of “positive thinking,” died in Pawling, New York, at age 95.

In 2013, Britain’s Queen Elizabeth II granted a posthumous pardon to code-breaker Alan Turing, who was convicted of homosexual behavior in the 1950s.

Ten years ago: In a setback, Republican presidential hopefuls Newt Gingrich and Texas Gov. Rick Perry failed to qualify for Virginia’s Super Tuesday primary ballot by falling short of the 10,000 signatures required. Troops commanded by relatives of Yemen’s outgoing president, Ali Abdullah Saleh (AH’-lee ahb-DUH’-luh sah-LEH’), attacked a crowd of more than 100,000 peaceful protesters, killing at least nine and driving Saleh to promise to leave the country.

Five years ago: President-elect Donald Trump said he would dissolve his charitable foundation before taking office to avoid conflicts of interest; the Democratic Party said that wasn’t enough and called for the businessman to put his assets in a blind trust. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused President Barack Obama of a “shameful ambush” at the United Nations and said he was looking forward to working with his “friend” Donald Trump; Netanyahu’s comments came a day after the U.S. broke with past practice and allowed the Security Council to condemn Israeli settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem.

One year ago: California became the first state to record 2 million confirmed coronavirus cases. Bethlehem ushered in Christmas Eve with a stream of joyous marching bands and the triumphant arrival of the top Catholic clergyman in the Holy Land, but few people were there to greet them as the pandemic and a strict lockdown dampened celebrations. Just a week before the deadline, Britain and the European Union struck a free-trade deal that would avert economic chaos on New Year’s and bring a measure of certainty for businesses after years of Brexit turmoil. President Donald Trump completed a round of pardons for more than two dozen people, including former campaign chairman Paul Manafort and Charles Kushner, the father of his son-in-law, in the latest wave of clemency to benefit longtime associates and supporters.

Today’s Birthdays: Dr. Anthony Fauci is 81. Recording company executive Mike Curb is 77. Actor Sharon Farrell is 75. Former U.S. Attorney General Jeff Sessions is 75. Actor Grand L. Bush is 66. Actor Clarence Gilyard is 66. Actor Stephanie Hodge is 65. The former president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai (HAH’-mihd KAHR’-zeye), is 64. Rock musician Ian Burden (The Human League) is 64. Actor Anil Kapoor (ah-NEEL’ kuh-POOR’) is 62. Actor Eva Tamargo is 61. Actor Wade Williams is 60. Rock singer Mary Ramsey (10,000 Maniacs) is 58. Actor Mark Valley is 57. Actor Diedrich Bader is 55. Actor Amaury Nolasco is 51. Singer Ricky Martin is 50. Author Stephenie Meyer is 48. TV personality Ryan Seacrest (TV: “Live With Kelly & Ryan”) is 47. Actor Michael Raymond-James is 44. Actor Austin Stowell is 37. Actor Sofia Black-D’Elia is 30. Rock singer Louis Tomlinson (One Direction) is 30.