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UpComing Events

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



Today on GDILIVE.COM

Girls Basketball at Webster. There is a C game that starts at 11 a.m. followed by the JV and varsity. GDILIVE.COM will be doing the JV and Varsity games.

Skating Rink has ice

The Groton Skating Rink had another 43,000 gallons of water put on it yesterday. Most of the ice is in good condition. There are a couple of areas that are shabby will need to be avoided. The ice will remain off limits today but should be ready for skating tomorrow, weather permitting.

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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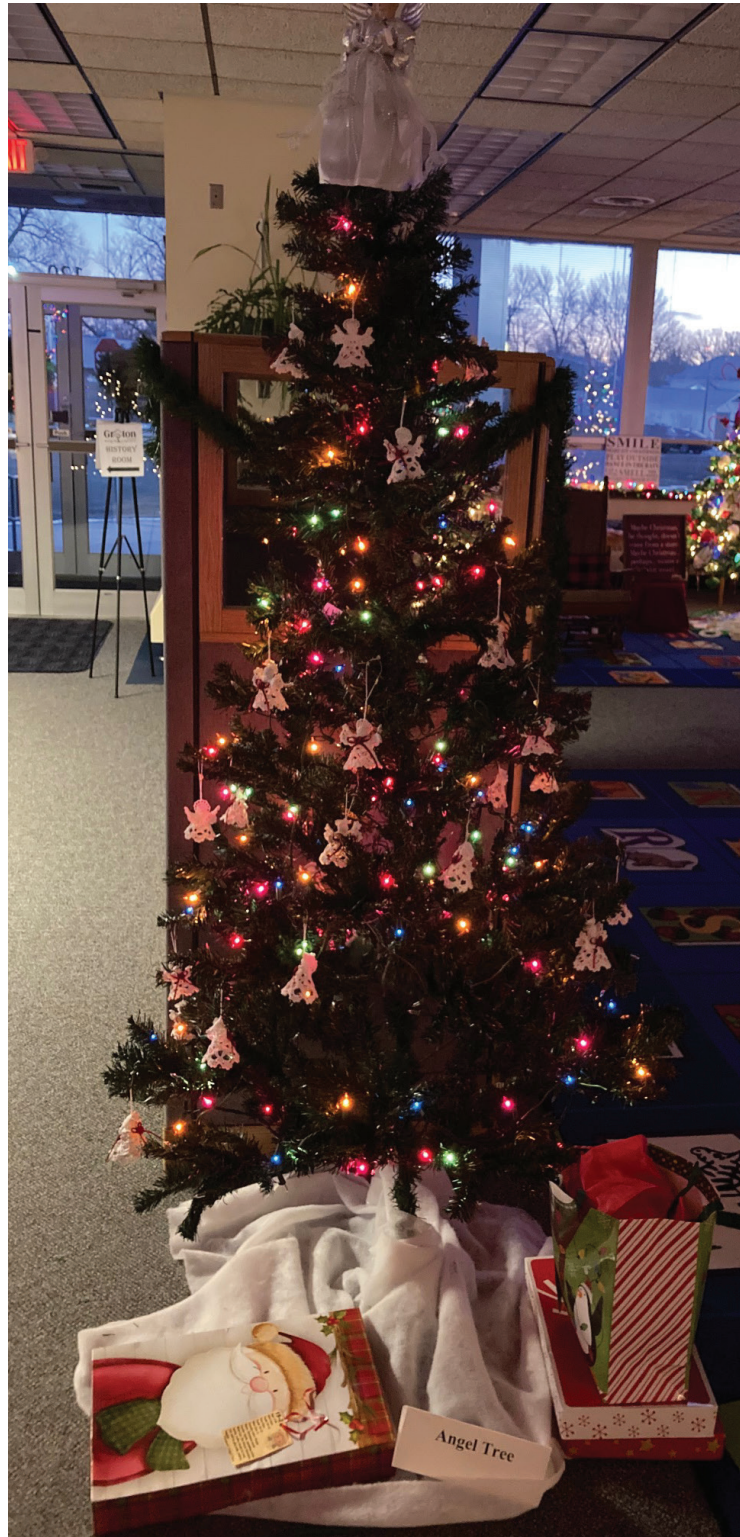
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The new city hall has been adorned with many Christmas Trees decorated by area businesses. This one was decorated by Pumpkin Fest.

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The new city hall has been adorned with many Christmas Trees decorated by area businesses. This one was decorated by Angel Tree.

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Ehresmann, Bisbee and Krueger place at Webster Invite

Three Groton Area wrestlers placed at the Webster Invitational meet held Thursday. Christian Ehresmann placed first, Cole Bibee placed second and Lane Krueger placed third. Groton Area placed sixth in a field of 12 teams at the tournament.

G106: Liza Krueger (0-0)

113: Porter Johnson (5-9) scored 4.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 5-9 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Brayden Burmeister (Pipestone) 10-2 won by fall over Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 5-9 (Fall 1:17)

Cons. Round 2 - Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 5-9 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Round 3 - Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 5-9 won by fall over Tyler Erickson (Garretson) 1-10 (Fall 0:20)

Cons. Semi - Taylor Merkel (Clark/Willow Lake) 10-8 won by fall over Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 5-9 (Fall 3:47)

126: Isaiah Scepaniak (2-10)

Quarterfinal - Gavin Kloos (Deuel) 12-7 won by fall over Isaiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 2-10 (Fall 0:11)

Cons. Round 1 - Isaiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 2-10 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Semi - Bryce Hawkinson (Britton/Hecla) 13-2 won by fall over Isaiah Scepaniak (Groton Area) 2-10 (Fall 1:20)

132: Pierce Kettering (11-8) scored 1.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 11-8 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Jaxon Quail (Deuel) 18-4 won by decision over Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 11-8 (Dec 9-4)

Cons. Round 2 - Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 11-8 won by decision over Ben Suther (Britton/Hecla) 1-2 (Dec 7-0)

Cons. Round 3 - Gage Baumgarn (Webster Area) 7-11 won by decision over Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 11-8 (Dec 8-7)

138: Nick Morris (1-6)

Champ. Round 1 - Braxton Rozeboom (Garretson) 6-5 won by fall over Nick Morris (Groton Area) 1-6 (Fall 1:30)

Cons. Round 1 - Nick Morris (Groton Area) 1-6 received a bye () (Bye)

Cons. Round 2 - CJ Fitzsimmons (Deuel) 3-11 won by fall over Nick Morris (Groton Area) 1-6 (Fall 4:48)

145: Christian Ehresmann (10-2) placed 1st and scored 23.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 10-2 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 10-2 won by fall over Remmington Ford (Mobridge/Pollock) 4-4 (Fall 3:24)

Semifinal - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 10-2 won by decision over Hunter Abraham (Garretson) 4-1 (Dec 10-3)

1st Place Match - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 10-2 won by major decision over Elliot Bratland (Clark/Willow Lake) 13-7 (MD 13-5)

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152: Korbin Kucker (7-10) scored 6.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 7-10 received a bye () (Bye)
Quarterfinal - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 7-10 won by fall over Bode Bruns (Pipestone) 4-8 (Fall 1:33)
Semifinal - Gunnar Kvistad (Clark/Willow Lake) 14-2 won by decision over Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 7-10 (Dec 5-3)
Cons. Semi - Josh Long (Sisseton) 7-7 won by fall over Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 7-10 (Fall 0:58)

160: Cole Bisbee (13-6) placed 2nd and scored 21.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 13-6 won by fall over Adam Hulscher (Garretson) 5-7 (Fall 3:43)
Quarterfinal - Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 13-6 won by fall over Reed VanWormer (Deuel) 0-2 (Fall 1:15)
Semifinal - Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 13-6 won by major decision over Connor Glines (Britton/Hecla) 2-2 (MD 11-2)
1st Place Match - Russell Sheets (Sioux Valley) 17-3 won by fall over Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 13-6 (Fall 2:00)

220: Lane Krueger (11-3) placed 3rd and scored 16.0 team points.

Quarterfinal - Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 11-3 won by fall over Tucker Hardy (Britton/Hecla) 0-2 (Fall 1:54)
Semifinal - Caleb McGregor (Webster Area) 9-1 won by decision over Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 11-3 (Dec 1-0)
Cons. Semi - Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 11-3 won by fall over Noah Adelman (Border West) 2-4 (Fall 2:14)
3rd Place Match - Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 11-3 won by fall over Owen VandeWeerd (Sioux Valley) 12-12 (Fall 0:58)

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#500 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

Probably no one else here is quite as blown away as I am that we've visited here 500 times as of today. When I started this I didn't know I was starting a thing and I could never have anticipated I'd still be doing it 500 posts and most of two years later. I don't have much to say about all that, so I'll just link that first one here, reminding you that it didn't get numbered or labeled a "Covid-19 Update" until later when it became evident there was going to be more than the occasional post and this would go on for more than a few weeks. Back then I had no idea. Anyhow, for those who are interested and without further commentary, here it is, my Update #1 posted February 26, 2020: <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3386973427985706>.

For the present, at midday today we have serious trouble. We crossed the 53 million case threshold with 53,657,706 cases since this pandemic began; that's faster than we've ever added a new million. Here's the history:

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

July 31 – 35 million – 15 days
August 11 – 36 million – 11 days
August 17 – 37 million – 6 days
August 23 – 38 million – 6 days
August 30 – 39 million – 7 days
September 5 – 40 million – 6 days
September 12 – 41 million – 7 days
September 18 – 42 million – 6 days
September 27 – 43 million – 9 days
October 6 – 44 million – 9 days
October 18 – 45 million – 12 days
November 1 – 46 million – 14 days
November 13 – 47 million – 12 days
November 24 – 48 million – 11 days
December 4 – 49 million – 10 days
December 13 – 50 million – 9 days
December 20 – 51 million – 7 days
December 25 – 52 million – 5 days
December 28 – 53 million – 3 days

Our seven-day new-case average broke a record set just Tuesday and is now up to 301,472 cases. Worse, the single-day reporting record has been 300,777 since January 8, and we broke that Tuesday by adding 380,751 cases and shattered that again yesterday by adding an additional 488,844 new cases. Think about this: The growth in daily new cases from Tuesday to Wednesday was 188,000 cases—that's the increase; the actual number of cases dwarfs this. I have to admit when the experts started talking about how bad things were going to get I thought they might have been catastrophizing a bit; I guess I'm not a skeptic any more. New cases are up by 153 percent over two weeks, and

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the growth is still gathering steam.

We are seeing Christmas effects by now, and everyone expects New Year's gatherings to provide another bump to the numbers. With what looks to be a shorter incubation period, these effects are coming in closer to events than they have with prior variants of this virus. Dr. Ashish Jha, dean of Brown University School of Public Health, told CNN, "January is going to be a really, really hard month. And people should just brace themselves for a month where lots of people are going to get infected."

Dr. Jonathan Reiner, CNN medical analyst told the network we could see "half a million cases a day—easy—sometime over the next week to 10 days." That looks pretty plausible to me; we're nearly there now. Those who are vaccinated and boosted will, for the most part, be OK, but some unvaccinated people are in line for severe disease. Jha added, "A lot of people who have not gotten a vaccine are going to end up getting pretty sick, and it's going to be pretty disruptive." The hope is that numbers will begin to drop in February and March, returning us to some semblance of normal in the spring. I guess we'll see. It would help if folks would get vaccinated and boosted, but I think we've run dry on hopes in that regard, especially for initial vaccination. I can't think of another thing to say to persuade people. It would also help if they started to wear high-quality masks, but my hopes there are equally slim. I think we're just going to have to power through this because the folks who haven't cared to take precautions are not about to begin now. Sigh.

The hottest of hot spots in the nation right now is the District of Columbia where they are seeing 291 daily new cases per 100,000 residents, nearly 12 times the number to be classified as unchecked spread and a nearly 800 percent increase over two weeks—this is not a typo. Test positivity rates, the percentage of tests done that come back positive, have soared. Many factors are contributing to this wild surge: a relatively younger population in an environment where 20- to 49-year-olds are the folks who drive transmission, an increased likelihood of in-person work, and more households containing young children and socializing outside the home. The city is distributing test kits at several locations and has brought back a previously-abandoned mask mandate and a vaccination mandate for restaurants, bars, gyms, music venues, and meeting spaces. I hope it helps.

Maryland and Virginia are close behind, both breaking records for new-case numbers this week with Maryland at twice its previous peak from January. Some counties in Virginia have reported four-fold increases in case numbers over the past two weeks, and those reports miss home tests that are never reported, so certainly underreport the true number. Despite high vaccination rates, this is tearing through the communities, mostly in the still-unvaccinated, but also catching up vaccinated people. Remember that when transmission rates are out of control, no one is really safe; that's what we're seeing now. Testing kits have become short in supply, so there are likely even more cases not being identified. When they are available, a whole lot of positive tests are never reported and don't show up in the official numbers, so things are certainly much worse than the official numbers indicate.

Hospitalizations are up to 75,477, a good jump since we last talked. We're beginning to see some sharp increases in hospitalization numbers. Michigan, Maine, Vermont, and New Hampshire had record numbers this month, higher than during last winter's surge. Some others are near last winter's peaks: Indiana, Ohio, the District of Columbia, and Delaware. This also pertains to children's hospitalizations which have continued to increase since we last talked. New York City pediatric Covid-19 admissions have now increased five-fold in December, District of Columbia admissions have doubled, and overall pediatric hospitalizations across the country have climbed by 35 percent in only a week. Indiana, Kentucky, Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and Massachusetts have been joined by Georgia in activating National Guard personnel to assist in hospitals and testing sites. In addition to help deployed to some of these states, FEMA has also

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sent employees to Arizona, Wisconsin, Indiana, and Pennsylvania. Even so, hospitalizations as a proportion of new cases have dropped from 12.3 percent of cases with earlier variants to 4.5 percent of cases with Omicron. The number of patients who need oxygen while in the hospital has been cut in half, as has the length of stay. So while the burden on hospitals is still growing toward crisis proportions, the overall severity of cases is declining.

And deaths are still pretty level at 1207. This is not much changed since last week. While this looks like a good sign, we need to get a little deeper into the Omicron thing before we can feel too confident we understand it. Total deaths sit at 821,302 in the US.

We have revisions in CDC estimates of the Omicron variant's prevalence. Last week, they were reporting 73 percent of cases nationwide represented Omicron; but now after a downward revision, we're looking at something more like 59 percent. Turns out that 73 percent was not a firm number; I think reporting on this pandemic is a little like trying to catch your shadow: We are still not doing enough sequencing, so overreporting from some jurisdictions accompanied by underreporting from others is going to cause inaccuracies. We should note at this time that the 59 percent is an estimate too, subject to future revision. It's most difficult to nail down certainty in a fast-moving situation, and this one is fast-moving if anything is. We'll get more certain as the data accumulate. The great difficulty here is knowing things like which monoclonal antibody therapies to use given the Regeneron and Lilly therapies are effective against the Delta variant, but useless against Omicron. They're too expensive to give willy-nilly when we don't know whether they're going to work, but we also can't sequence every person's positive test. The monoclonal antibody therapy that does work with Omicron, made by GlaxoSmithKline and Vir Biotechnology, Incorporated, is sotrovimab, and it is in critically short supply at the moment.

There may be a silver lining to this Omicron cloud. I want to emphasize it's early times yet, but there are some indications from work done by the South Africa Health Institute and published on Tuesday that people who've been infected with Omicron are resistant to Delta infection in the future. So if Omicron outcompetes Delta and also causes less severe infections—something we're working on, but which appears to be true—then it could be that, once we're through the massive strain on the health care system imposed by the huge case numbers occasioned by Omicron, we might find ourselves in a place where fewer hospitalizations and deaths are the norm. Supposing Omicron pushes Delta out, it may do us a favor. There will be a cost, of course, in lives lost to enormous numbers of sick people burdening the system beyond its capacity to help; but in the longer run, we may be better off. It's hard to know what to wish for here. Either way we lose precious lives; I guess it's a question which lives those are.

As data come in, we are seeing many indications that healthy people who have been vaccinated and boosted are unlikely to develop severe infections from the Omicron variant. According to data from the UK, there was a 15 to 20 percent reduction in hospitalizations with Omicron compared with delta, and this comports with data from other countries, including the US. Data from South Africa tracks with this. Other UK studies found a 60 to 70 percent reduction in hospitalization with Omicron, and data from Houston Methodist hospital system has the reduction at 70 percent. Whatever the final number turns out to be, it is becoming evident that hospitalization rates will decrease with this variant. We're still not sure what this tells us about the new variant, but the trend is clear: If you've been vaccinated and boosted, you're likely going to come out of this OK. On the other hand, we still expect hospitals to be swamped with twice or three times the Covid-19 patient loads we're seeing today so that, if you need hospitalization for some other reason, you could die waiting for a bed; so there's that.

We have data from two studies now that indicate the incubation period for Omicron variant infections may be shorter than for earlier variants—as short as 72 hours compared with four to six days for Delta and

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older variants. One study by the CDC was of a household in Nebraska where one resident had returned from Nigeria infected and passed the virus to five others in the household. There was also a study in Norway of a cluster associated with a Christmas party which indicated three days is the likely incubation.

I think it's important to note in the midst of all the news coming in that, while this new variant appears to be causing less severe disease, we have a new phenomenon that merits our attention: The proportion of deaths it causes among young people and White people is increasing, that is, it is responsible for a growing share of deaths in these groups. That means this virus is far from being in its newest incarnation. As old people have constituted an enormous share of the vaccinated population and the virus seeks out the unvaccinated, this is a trend we might see growing. I mentioned this a week or so back, but if you're young and healthy, you do not want to ignore the trend here. You are not bulletproof, and this virus can hurt you even if you're basically healthy and young. This is not a practice run.

Covid-19-related travel disruptions have continued into this week, compounded in places by weather. As of early Tuesday morning, over 2000 of the day's flights had been cancelled worldwide with nearly 1300 of those domestic US flights or international flights traveling to or from the US. There were an additional more than 2000 US-associated flights delayed. This follows up over 1500 cancelations and 5000 delays on Sunday and more than 3000 cancelations on Monday in the US. Wednesday was better with just 900 US flights canceled. This sector of the economy has had a brutal couple of years; we can hope they get back on level ground when this wave has passed.

There is very exciting news on the vaccine front: a new vaccine developed at Baylor University and the Texas Children's Hospital Center for Vaccine Development. One of the developers is someone whose name you've undoubtedly read here or in the news as he has been quoted repeatedly on the subject of vaccines throughout the past couple of years, Dr. Peter Hotez, dean of the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor. Named Corbevax or BioE COVID-19, this is a protein subunit vaccine; it presents your immune system with a piece of the coronavirus's proteins, in this case the receptor-binding domain (RBD) of the spike (S) protein. Yeast cells are bioengineered using recombinant technology to produce the protein in culture. It carries two adjuvants, substances to increase the immunogenicity of the vaccine: aluminum hydroxide and something called CpG. Aluminum hydroxide (alum) is an old adjuvant that has been used for many years to enhance and prolong immunologic stimulus, and CpG is a short piece of synthetic unmethylated DNA that stimulates the immune system too.

Phase 3 clinical trials involving more than 3000 participants show greater than 80 percent efficacy in preventing symptomatic disease. This is an established vaccine platform with a proven safety record used in many vaccines before this pandemic and is relatively easy to produce, even in low-resource countries. Further it is inexpensive to make at around \$3 per dose. The developers are licensing their technology on a nonprofit basis; it has already been licensed to companies in India, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Botswana. Hotez said there were "no patents, no strings attached, in fact, we use our modest funding to help in the co-development." In other words, these folks had a potential goldmine on their hands and simply gave it away to the world.

The vaccine has received emergency authorization in India, and a manufacturer there, Biological E., already has 150 million doses ready to ship. They expect to reach production of 100 million doses a month by March. This is very important news for all of us. We've talked and talked about the fact that unchecked transmission is simply tragedy in the making and an opportunity for the virus to continue to mutate into more variants and also about how important it is as a humanitarian matter as well as a practical one to get the rest of the world protected. As I've said many times, no one is really safe until all of us are safe. This is a huge step in that direction.

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Here's some news we didn't need: It could be rapid tests are less sensitive in detecting the Omicron variant than they have been for Delta. The FDA currently lists two tests they are recommending not be used to detect Omicron (which means they shouldn't be used any time these days); these are Meridian Bioscience's Revogene SARS-CoV-2 and Applied DNA Science Linea's COVID-19 Assay Kit. These designations are based on preliminary data with more work to come. Other tests are in testing and may have diminished sensitivity, but they are still considered reliable. You can keep up-to-date on this matter at the FDA's website: <https://www.fda.gov/medical-devices/coronavirus-covid-19-and-medical-devices/sars-cov-2-viral-mutations-impact-covid-19-tests#omicronvariantimpact>. Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the CDC, told CNN that if you're using the tests "serially," that is, in sequence, they're still pretty good at spotting infection; so consider doing two tests a few days apart. And if you feel symptoms, assume you are positive. This is nothing to mess with.

If you have children, you may be wondering where we are on vaccines for them. It appears, from recent comments of Dr. Walensky in the same interview on CNN that we're a few weeks away from boosters for the 12 to 15 age group. They're waiting for more data, but expect it relatively soon. I'll keep you posted on progress. Younger children from 5 to 11 aren't going to be six months past their initial vaccination series for quite some time, so we can wait on data for them. The data for initial vaccination in the under-5 group is a ways off yet, likely a couple of months at a minimum. I will recommend that, if you have a child eligible for vaccination, you seriously consider getting that done. These vaccines have demonstrated they are remarkably safe and effective in children, and while the risk in children for serious consequences of an infection is small, if it's your kid who ends up on a vent, the size of the population-wide risk won't matter much to you.

I am hearing there is a lot of confusion around the revised CDC isolation and quarantine guidelines, so here's a nice summary provided by CNN. This entire guide quoted directly and is not my work.

For people who test positive for Covid-19:

- Stay home and isolate for five days, regardless of whether you have symptoms. For symptomatic people, Day 1 is the first full day after symptoms developed.
- If you have no symptoms OR if symptoms are resolving after five days, you can leave isolation but should wear a mask around others — even at home — for five more days.
- If you have a fever — even a low fever that is going down — you should continue to isolate until your temperature is normal.
- There's no need to test out of isolation after five days; tests can remain positive for months after Covid-19 infection, although you are no longer infectious.

For people exposed to Covid-19:

These are based on what studies show about how and when people are likely to infect others.

If you are boosted, have received your first two Pfizer or Moderna doses in the past six months or your single J&J dose in the past two months:

- No need to quarantine at home after exposure.
- Always wear a mask around others for 10 days.
- Test if you develop symptoms, or five days after exposure. People can be infected even without symptoms.
- If you test positive, you should begin to follow isolation guidelines.

If you are unvaccinated, or are eligible for a booster and haven't received one:

- Quarantine at home for five days, and continue to wear a mask around others for five more days to be sure you don't infect someone else.
- Test if you develop symptoms or five days after exposure.

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- If you test positive, you should begin to follow isolation guidelines.
(This ends the quote from CNN.)

While I wouldn't consider this data, until we have more information here's a compilation of impressions from physicians who treat Covid-19 patients in hospitals these days. The information comes from multiple physicians, and the quotes below are from Dr. Joseph Varon, chief of critical care services and the Covid-19 unit at Houston's United Memorial Medical Center, who spoke with NBC.

- If you're vaccinated and boosted, you may have a sore throat, a lot of fatigue and muscle pain—what seems like cold symptoms—and you are highly unlikely to require admission. You will likely be “almost back to normal” within several days.

- If you're vaccinated, but not boosted, you tend to be sicker, feeling bad with more coughing, more fever, and more fatigue, but not generally requiring hospitalization. You may “still feel sick after a week, a week and a half or so.”

- If you're not vaccinated, you tend to come in coughing, unable to speak a sentence, and short of breath with a high fever, dehydration, and “a larger burden of disease” in the lungs, that is, pneumonia, often severe.

Generally speaking, these doctors are not seeing people who are vaccinated or vaccinated and boosted checking into hospitals at all. With the exception of folks whose immune systems don't respond well to vaccination, vaccinated people are faring pretty darned well with Omicron. Dr. Craig Spencer, director of global health in emergency medicine at New York-Presbyterian/Columbia University Medical Center, added in an interview with NBC, “We've known that there are multiple presentations of this disease, that hasn't changed. What has changed is that we know that those who are vaccinated are significantly less likely to end up seeing me in the hospital and needing to be admitted. That's for certain.” And for those who have underlying medical conditions or are of advanced age, the risks for severe disease are very real when they have not been vaccinated.

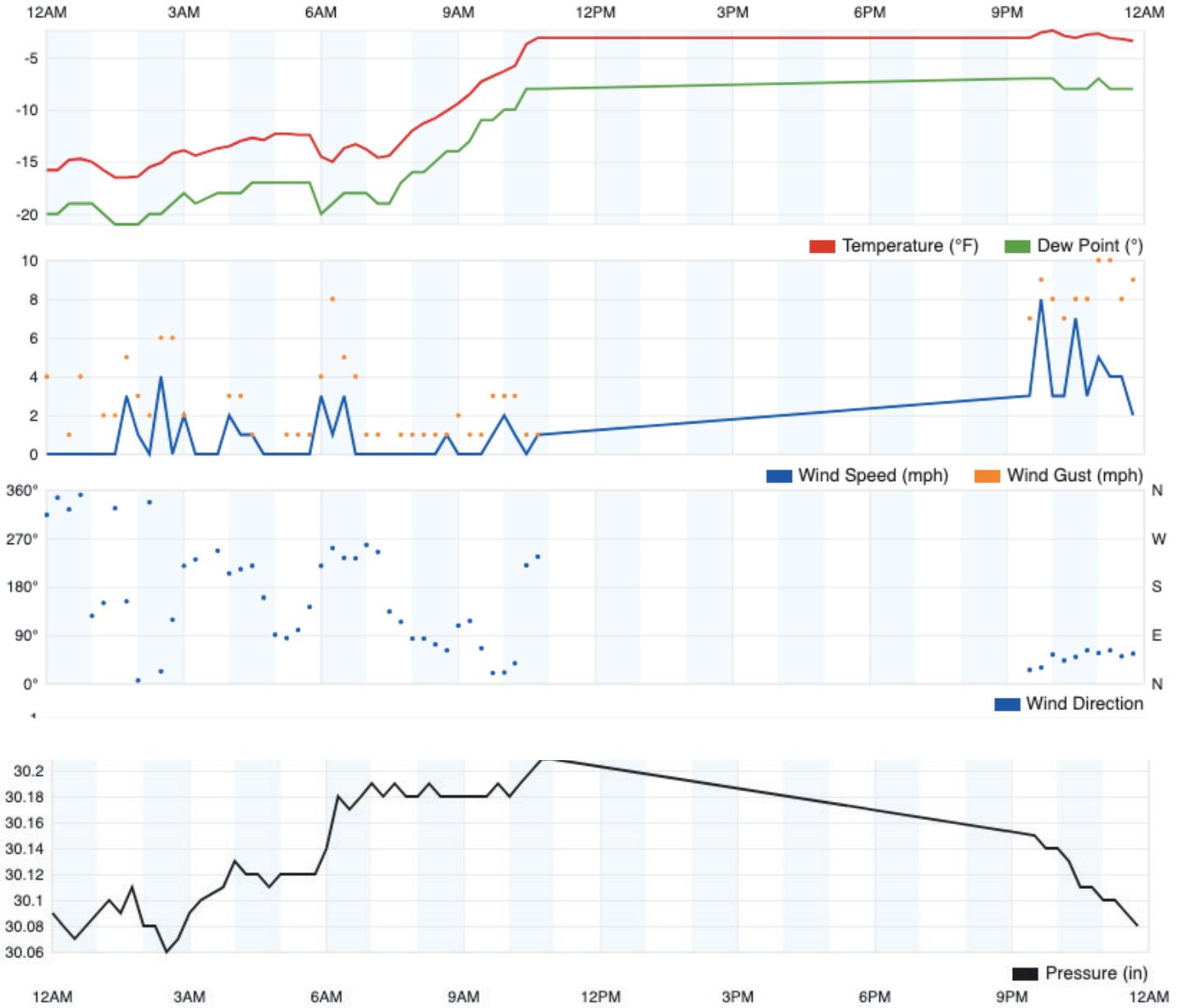
On the animal infection front, the Audobon Zoo in New Orleans reports half of their lions have been infected with SARS-CoV-2. The other lions are being tested. None show serious symptoms at this time.

And that's the news for 2021. Barring a catastrophic news story, we won't be talking again this year. Before you know it, we'll be celebrating our second anniversary together, and unlike feelings on your average wedding anniversary, we can all hope this is over soon. Please be careful and stay well. I'll be back in January. Happy new year!

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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<p>Winter Weath...</p> <p>Today</p>  <p>100%</p> <p>Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow</p> <p>High: 7 °F ↓</p>	<p>Wind Chill Warning</p> <p>Tonight</p>  <p>Mostly Cloudy</p> <p>Low: -17 °F</p>	<p>New Year's Day</p>  <p>Cold</p> <p>High: -6 °F</p>	<p>Saturday Night</p>  <p>Mostly Clear</p> <p>Low: -16 °F</p>	<p>Sunday</p>  <p>Sunny</p> <p>High: 14 °F</p>
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Current Winter Headlines in Effect

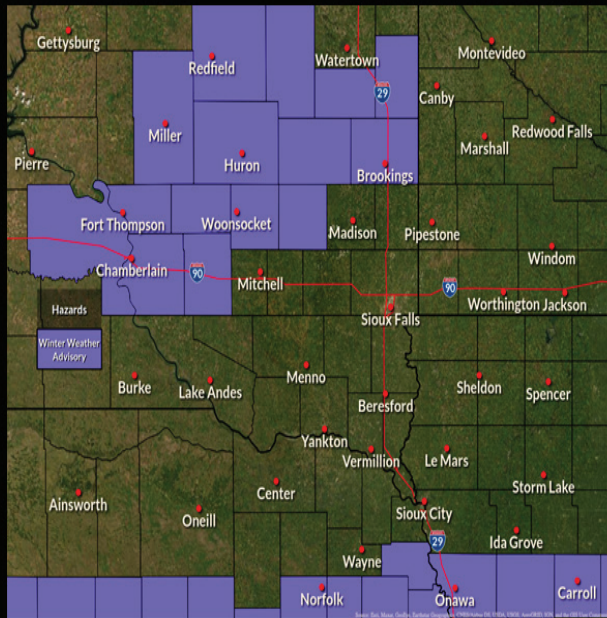
Valid for: Friday, 12/31/2021 through Sunday, 1/2/2022

Weather Forecast Office
Sioux Falls, SD

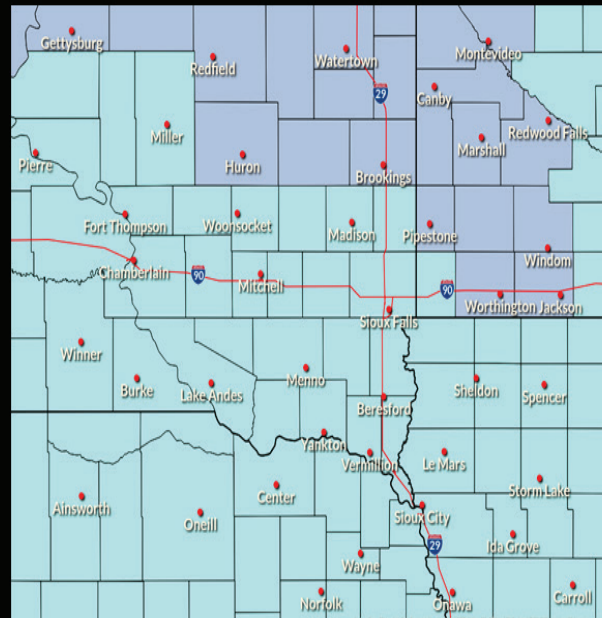
Issued December 31, 2021 4:52 AM CDT



Winter Weather Advisories



Wind Chill Headlines



Winter Weather Advisory Timelines:

- Northern Advisory: Fri 6 AM – Fri 2 PM
- Southern Advisory: Sat 3 AM – Sun 12 AM

Wind Chill Headlines Start This Evening and Continue Into Saturday Afternoon

Wind Chill Advisory

Wind Chill Warning

f NWSSioux Falls

weather.gov/fsd

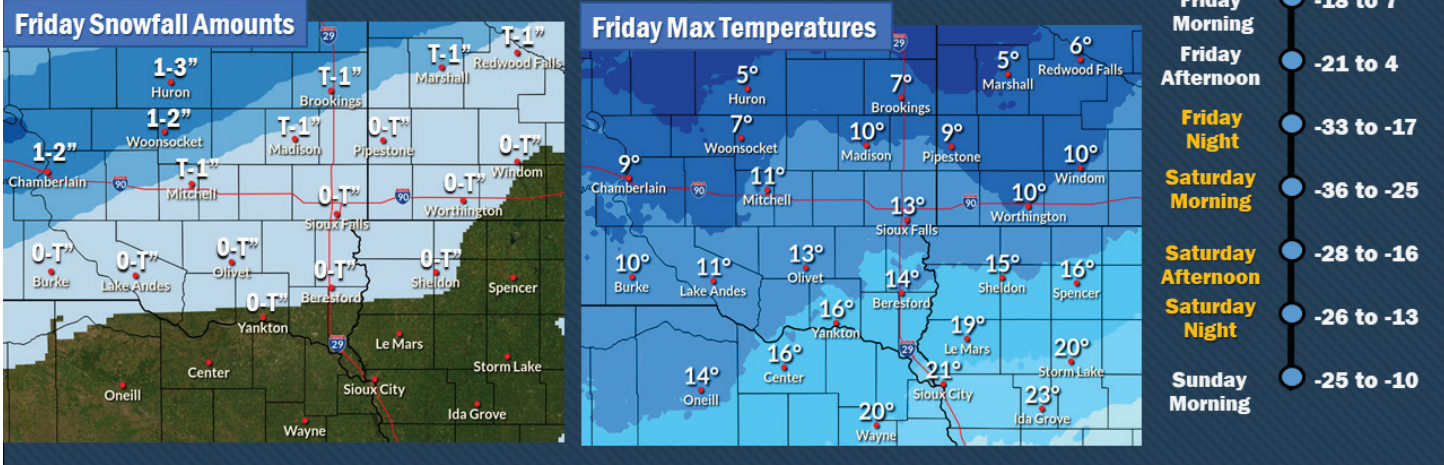
Published on: 12/31/2021 at 4:52AM

A narrow corridor of accumulating snow is expected to develop this morning roughly from Chamberlain to Huron to Watertown, with localized amounts of 2 to 4 inches of snow accumulation are possible. Northerly winds gusting to around 30 mph may also result in the potential for blowing snow. A second winter weather advisory has been issued across central Nebraska and Iowa for Saturday, for the potential for 3 inches of snow. Wind Chill Advisories and Warnings for Friday evening into Saturday afternoon remain unchanged.

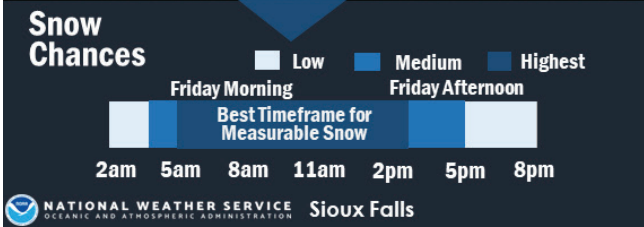
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Snow and Becoming Colder



Friday Morning	-18 to 7
Friday Afternoon	-21 to 4
Friday Night	-33 to -17
Saturday Morning	-36 to -25
Saturday Afternoon	-28 to -16
Saturday Night	-26 to -13
Sunday Morning	-25 to -10



- Key Points:**
- Snow will develop and continue through the morning and early afternoon hours. Best focus along highway 14 corridor.
 - North winds gusting to 20 - 30 mph may result in *blowing snow*.
 - Dangerous wind chills move in this evening.

NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION Sioux Falls

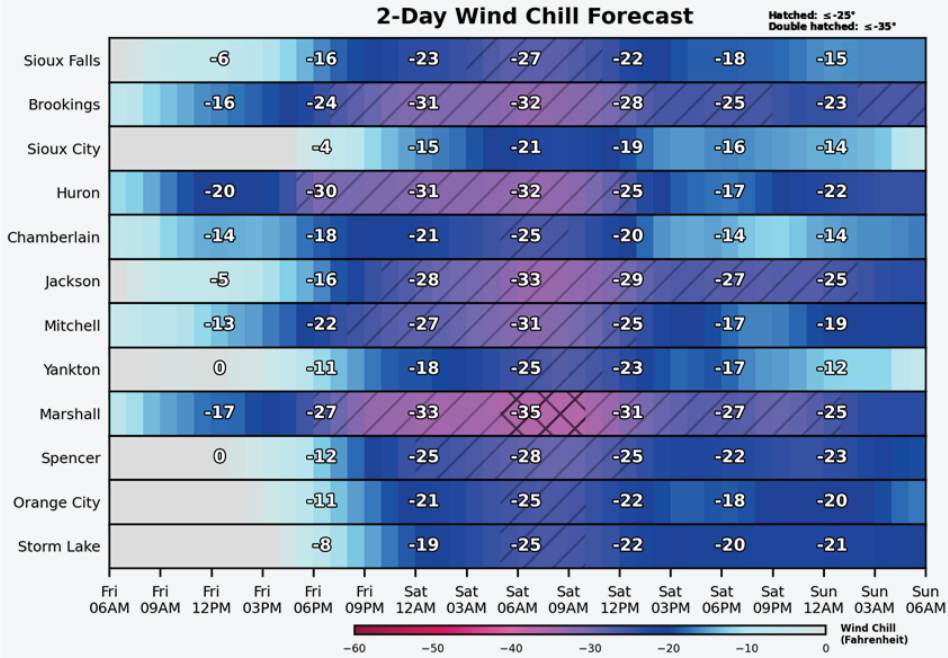
Published on: 12/31/2021 at 3:48AM

Light to moderate snow will develop this morning, with best focus occurring along the Highway 14 corridor. Gusts as strong as 30 mph may result in blowing snow, so be prepared for periods of lowered visibilities if you will be out travelling. Cold air continues to pour into the region, leading to a bitterly cold forecast ahead with dangerous wind chills to start off the new year. Another system passes by to our south Saturday, bringing light snow (up to an inch) to areas along the Highway 20 corridor.

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Cold Wind Chills Ahead



Wind Chill Values are Sensitive to Wind Speeds and Temperatures, Expect Slight Variations.

Published on: 12/31/2021 at 5:47AM

Precautions to Take With the Cold Temps



LIMIT
OUTDOOR TIME



WEAR
MITTENS/GLOVES



ALWAYS WEAR
A HAT



DRESS IN
LAYERS



KNOW THE SIGNS OF
ILLNESS



KEEP PETS
IN MIND

Today will already feel quite fresh outside, with conditions turning even colder later this afternoon! Dangerous wind chills begin to blanket the region by the early evening hours, so be sure to bundle up before heading outside for any festivities this evening.

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Today in Weather History

2010: An area of low pressure moved across the Northern Plains on New Year's Eve bringing widespread heavy snowfall along with blizzard conditions. Bitter cold northwest winds of 25 to 40 mph combined with additional snowfall of 6 to 10 inches brought reduced visibility to near zero across much of the region. This storm was the second blizzard in two days across the area. The blizzard conditions continued into early New Year's Day. Both Interstates 29 and 90 were closed from the 31st until Sunday, January 2nd. There were several stranded motorists along Highway 83 with five people being rescued. The total snowfall amounts from the two storms ranged from 6 to 15 inches across the region.

The two-day snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Eagle Butte; 7 inches at Doland; 8 inches at Mobridge and Gann Valley; 9 inches at Castlewood; 10 inches at Murdo, Clark, Ipswich, Kennebec, and Watertown and 11 inches at Clear Lake and Bryant. Locations with a foot or more of snow included 12 inches at Aberdeen, Gettysburg, Highmore, Milbank, Mission Ridge, and Bowdle; 13 inches at Eureka, Pierre, Onida, and Blunt; 14 inches at Mellette, Sisseton, Victor, and Roscoe with 15 inches at Britton, Webster, and Redfield. The snowfall began between 6 am and noon CST on the 31st and ended between 4 am and 11 am CST on January 1st.

1876: A heavy snowstorm hit southern Arkansas, with amounts well over 20 inches in places. 28 inches was reported near Warren, and 24–28 inches was reported at Arkansas City.

1882: Downtown San Francisco saw 3.5 inches of snow.

1890: According to the National Meteorological Library and Archive from the United Kingdom, during December 1890, Westminster, England saw zero hours of sunshine.

1933: During the last week of December, a series of winter storms pounded the mountainside with 12 inches of rain near Los Angeles. More rain occurred on New Year's Eve, including 4.86 inches in downtown Los Angeles. The 4.86 inches is currently the fourth most rainfall to occur in one day in downtown Los Angeles since 1877. Around midnight, hillsides in at least three mountain locations collapsed sending millions of tons of mud and debris into the Crescenta Valley neighborhoods below. Crescenta Valley is a few miles north of Los Angeles. This mudslide destroyed more than 400 homes. Following the disaster, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the County of Los Angeles built a flood control system of catch basins, and concrete storm drains, designed to prevent a repeat of the 1934 disaster.

1967: The kickoff temperature for the NFL Championship Game between the Dallas Cowboys and the Green Bay Packers was -13°F with a wind chill of -36°F. This game is known as the "Ice Bowl." Click [HERE](#) for more information from NWS Green Bay.

2000: The "Snow Bowl" was played between Mississippi St and Texas A&M at Independence Stadium in Shreveport, Louisiana. Snow began about a half hour before kickoff and didn't stop until well after the bowl game.

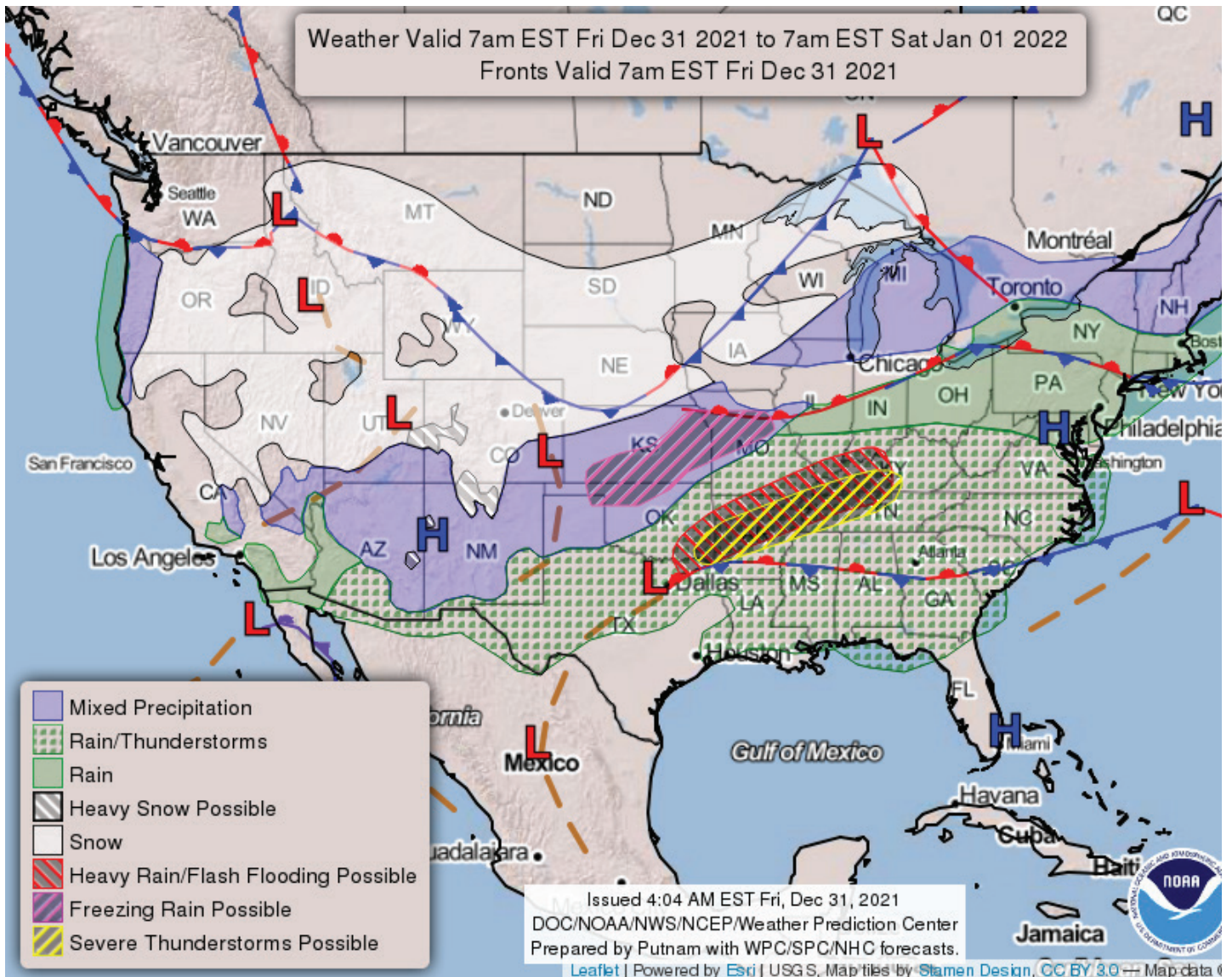
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 5.8 °F at 6:30 AM
Low Temp: -6.3 °F at 9:00 AM
Wind: 10 mph at Midnight PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 47° in 1999
Record Low: -39° in 1967
Average High: 24°F
Average Low: 4°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.61
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.52
Average Precip to date: 21.82
Precip Year to Date: 20.08
Sunset Tonight: 5:00:47 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10:29 AM



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LOOKING FOR GOD IN 2022

"You chart the path ahead of me and tell me when to stop and rest.

"Every moment you know where I am." Psalm 139:3

"The Lord says, "I will guide you along the best pathway for your life. I will advise you and watch over you." Psalm 32:8

"Because of Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for He chose us from the beginning and all things happen just as He decided years ago." Ephesians 1:11

"The Lord will work out His plans for my life – for Your faithful love, O Lord, endures forever. Don't abandon me, for You made me!" Psalm 138:8

"Seek His will in all you do and He will direct your paths." Proverbs 3:6

Prayer: Grant us wisdom, give us faith, increase our trust, and watch over us each day, Father, as we seek Your plan for our lives. May we follow You always. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scriptures For Today: - Psalm 139:3; Psalm 32:8; Ephesians 1:11; Psalm 138:8; Proverbs 3:6

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2021 Community Events

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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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News from the  Associated Press

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 56, Watertown 41
Brandon Valley 67, Thunder Basin, Wyo. 66, OT
Corsica/Stickney 74, Bridgewater-Emery 72, 2OT
Enderlin, N.D. 71, Canton 46
Hanson 52, Irene-Wakonda 49
Harding County 59, Edgemont 20
Hot Springs 71, Spearfish 63
Ipswich 68, Wall 35
Kadoka Area 76, Dupree 28
Lemmon 57, Hettinger/Scranton, N.D. 44
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 65, Tea Area 64
Sturgis Brown 64, Lead-Deadwood 14
Wakpala 68, Solen, N.D. 62
Waubay/Summit 61, Wilmot 37
White River 58, Aberdeen Christian 48
Winner 56, Parkston 51
Huron Holiday Classic=
Burke 57, Wessington Springs 46
Clark/Willow Lake 53, Lower Brule 52
Elkton-Lake Benton 68, Redfield 31
Faulkton 68, Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 47
James Valley Christian 90, McIntosh 56
Langford 63, Iroquois 30

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Dakota Christian 73, Marty Indian 34
Edgemont 49, Harding County 33
Flandreau 62, Dell Rapids 30
Florence/Henry 54, Milbank 32
Gayville-Volin 62, Bon Homme 50
Hanson 47, Irene-Wakonda 38
Harrisburg 43, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 33
Hettinger/Scranton, N.D. 49, Lemmon 33
Jones County 53, Burke 35
Kadoka Area 41, Northwestern 39
Parkston 45, Winner 36
Platte-Geddes 59, Canistota 32
Spearfish 41, Hot Springs 21
St. Thomas More 51, Rapid City Christian 24
Sturgis Brown 61, Lead-Deadwood 31
Watertown 53, Aberdeen Central 39
Waubay/Summit 30, Wilmot 26
West Central 45, Sioux Falls Jefferson 42

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Big Bo Classic=
Dupree 55, Ipswich 41
Wolsey-Wessington 56, Potter County 39
Hoop City Classic=
Brandon Valley 67, Thunder Basin, Wyo. 66, OT
Viborg-Hurley 48, Gregory 44
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Colome vs. Philip, ppd.
Solen, N.D. vs. McLaughlin, ccd.

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

Scheierman lifts S. Dakota St. over North Dakota St. 90-86

FARGO, N.D. (AP) — Baylor Scheierman tied a season-high 22 points and South Dakota State beat North Dakota State 90-86 on Thursday night.

Luke Appel added 20 points for the Jackrabbits (12-4, 3-0 Summit League), Douglas Wilson scored 14 and Matt Mims 13.

Sam Griesel scored 25 points for the Bison (9-5, 1-1), whose four-game winning streak came to an end. Rocky Kreuser added 17 points and Grant Nelson 15.

State records highest number of active COVID cases in year

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota has recorded the highest number of active COVID-19 cases in more than a year.

The Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported state health officials reported 8,323 active cases on Thursday, the most since Dec. 21, 2020, when the state had 8,373 active cases. That was the last time the state had seen more than 8,000 active cases until Thursday.

COVID-19 patents occupied 240 hospital beds on Thursday, with 74 in intensive care and 52 on ventilators.

Another 381 people received a first vaccine dose. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 61 percent of the state's eligible population is now fully vaccinated.

Joint committee to start state budget hearings next week

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — It's budget time in Pierre.

KELO-TV reported Wednesday that the Legislature's Joint Committee on Appropriations plans to start a series of four hearings on the state budget next week.

The committee plans to meet with the state Department of Human Services on Tuesday, the Board of Regents on Wednesday, the Department of Corrections on Thursday and the Department of Social Services on Jan. 10.

The rest of the committee's January schedule is packed with additional hearings with more than 30 bureaus, departments and constitutional offices.

Gov. Kristi Noem has requested \$4.6 billion for 2023.

Regulators OK new plan for tearing down wind turbines

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — Regulators in North Dakota have signed off on a new plan to tear down a wind farm.

The Bismarck Tribune reported Wednesday that the Public Service Commission voted 2-1 to approve a new plan to remove 61 turbines on the North Dakota side of the Tatanka Wind Farm. The farm straddles the border between North Dakota and South Dakota.

Tatanka wants to make cuts in the turbine towers and pull them to the ground with a cable. The company

originally wanted to use a crawler crane to take down the structures, but says the cable method would cost about \$5.5 million less.

Commissioner Randy Christmann cast the dissenting vote, saying he was worried about environmental damage when the turbines come down. Tatanka officials argued in filings that moving the crawler crane and its pads would result in more ground disturbance and potential crop loss than the cable plan.

Commissioner Brian Kroshus said there's no clear plan for dismantling wind farms because so few have come down across the country and when the private sector promotes a better way to do things it's a "win-win across the board."

Wildfires burn hundreds of homes in Colorado, thousands flee

By PATTY NIEBERG, BRADY McCOMBS and COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press/Report for America
DENVER (AP) — Tens of thousands of Coloradans driven from their neighborhoods by wind-whipped wildfires anxiously waited to learn what was left standing of their lives Friday after the flames burned an estimated 580 homes, a hotel and a shopping center.

At least one first responder and six other people were injured in the blazes that erupted outside Denver on Thursday morning, unusually late in the year, following an extremely dry fall and amid a winter nearly devoid of snow so far.

Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle, who gave the early damage estimate, said there could be more injuries — and also deaths — because of the intensity of the fires, propelled by winds that gusted up to 105 mph (169 kph).

"This is the kind of fire we can't fight head-on," Pelle said. "We actually had deputy sheriffs and firefighters in areas that had to pull out because they just got overrun."

Mike Guanella and his family were relaxing at their home in the town of Superior and looking forward to celebrating a belated Christmas later in the day when reports of a nearby grass fire quickly gave way to an order to leave immediately.

Instead of opening presents, Guanella and his wife, their three children and three dogs were staying a friend's house in Denver, hoping their house was still standing.

"Those presents are still under the tree right now — we hope," he said.

By first light Friday, the towering flames that had lit up the night sky were gone, leaving smoldering homes and charred trees and fields. The winds had died down, and light snow was in the forecast, raising hopes it could prevent flare-ups.

The neighboring towns of Louisville and Superior, situated about 20 miles (32 kilometers) northwest of Denver and home to a combined 34,000 people, were ordered evacuated ahead of the fires, which cast a smoky, orange haze over the landscape.

The two towns are filled with middle- and upper-middle-class subdivisions with shopping centers, parks and schools. The area is between Denver and Boulder, home to the University of Colorado.

Residents evacuated fairly calmly and in orderly fashion, but the winding streets quickly became clogged. It sometimes took cars as long as 45 minutes to advance a half-mile.

Small fires cropped up here and there in surprising places — on the grass in a median or in a dumpster in the middle of a parking lot — as gusts caused the flames to jump. Shifting winds caused the skies to turn from clear to smoky and then back again as sirens wailed.

Leah Angstman and her husband were returning to their Louisville home from Denver International Airport after being away for the holidays. They recounted leaving clear blue skies and instantly entering clouds of brown and yellow smoke.

"The wind rocked the bus so hard that I thought the bus would tip," she said.

The visibility was so poor the bus had to pull over. They waited a half-hour until a transit authority van escorted the bus to a turnaround on the highway.

"The sky was dark, dark brown, and the dirt was blowing in swirls across the sidewalk like snakes," she said.

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Vignesh Kasinath, a professor of biochemistry at the University of Colorado, evacuated from a neighborhood in Superior with his wife and her parents.

"It's only because I am active on Twitter I came to know about this," said Kasinath, who said he did not receive an evacuation notice from authorities.

The first fire erupted just before 10:30 a.m. and was "attacked pretty quickly and laid down later in the day" with no structures lost, the sheriff said. A second blaze, reported just after 11 a.m., ballooned and spread rapidly, Pelle said. It covered at least 2.5 square miles (6.5 square kilometers).

Some of the several blazes in the area were sparked by downed power lines, authorities said.

Scientists say climate change is making weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive.

Colorado's Front Range, where most of the state's population lives, had an extremely dry and mild fall, and winter has been mostly dry so far. Denver set a record for consecutive days without snow before it got a small storm on Dec. 10, its last snowfall before the wildfires broke out.

Ninety percent of Boulder County is in severe or extreme drought, and it hasn't seen substantial rainfall since mid-summer.

"With any snow on the ground, this absolutely would not have happened in the way that it did," said snow hydrologist Keith Musselman.

Guanella said he heard from a firefighter friend that his home was still standing Thursday night. But he could only wait and see.

"You're just waiting to hear if your favorite restaurant is still standing, if the schools that your kids go to are still standing," he said. "You're just waiting to get some clarity."

New laws take effect across US on abortion, policing, taxes

By WILSON RING Associated Press

Minimum wage increases, animal protections, police accountability, cutting and increasing taxes are all part of a series of new laws taking effect across the country on Saturday, the first day of 2022.

Some of the laws such as abortion restrictions in New Hampshire or police reform measures passed in Illinois, Oregon and North Carolina address some of the most contentious issues of our time.

Others, such as a Maine law passed in the aftermath of a September 2019 explosion that killed a firefighter and injured a number of others, are more narrowly focused and were passed to remedy specific situations.

The Connecticut Parentage Act allows unmarried, same-sex or nonbiological parents to establish parenting rights through a simple form that gives parents legal capabilities immediately after a child is born.

In Kansas, people will be allowed to buy specialized license plates featuring the "Don't Tread on Me" and coiled snake symbol featured on what's known as the Gadsen flag. Critics suggested that the Gadsen flag has become a racist symbol that has been adopted by some far-right groups.

Here is a rundown of some of the new laws taking effect Saturday across the country:

ABORTION

In New Hampshire, abortion will be prohibited after 24 weeks of gestation, with exceptions for the mother's life or physical health.

Democrats have already drafted legislation seeking to repeal the new restrictions. Some also want to include the right to make reproductive medical decisions a constitutional right.

The new law in New Hampshire comes as the U.S. Supreme Court is considering a case that could severely erode abortion rights that have stood for half a century. Republican lawmakers across the country are ready to further restrict or ban abortions outright while Democratic-led ones are seeking to ensure access to abortion in their state law.

ANIMAL WELFARE

Come Saturday California will have the nation's toughest living space standards for breeding pigs.

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Industry lawsuits failed to block the measure that is the result of a 2018 ballot initiative failed, but grocers and restauranteurs are now suing to force a 28-month delay. Critics including some lawmakers of both parties have called for putting off enforcement until 2024 for fear prices will rise and jobs will be lost.

California is allowing the continued sale of pork processed under the old rules, which proponents say should blunt any shortage and price surge.

Maryland will join a number of states with a new law that will prohibit the sale of any new cosmetic product if it contains ingredients that were tested on animals.

In Vermont, a new law outlaws the trade in parts or products from a number of exotic animals, including elephants, giraffes, sea turtles, endangered sharks, whales and certain primates.

The law includes exemptions for law enforcement, educational or scientific uses. The law also allows for the trade in antiques that contain small amounts of the animal product or is a fixed component of a firearm; knife; or a legally acquired, small musical instrument.

DRUG LAW CHANGES

Recreational marijuana will become legal in Montana. State voters approved the change in a November 2020 initiative.

Under the new law, only businesses that had been providing medical marijuana prior to Nov. 3, 2020, are eligible to grow, manufacture and sell adult-use marijuana, concentrates and edibles through June 30, 2023.

A new Mississippi law eliminates the requirement for a prescription to buy decongestants that contain ephedrine or pseudoephedrine. Under the new law, the medicine will be available behind the counter of pharmacies, and pharmacists will be required to keep track of how much is sold to one person.

Like many other states, Mississippi mandated a prescription years ago because drug enforcement agents said medications with ephedrine or pseudoephedrine were being used as an ingredient in crystal methamphetamine. Some consumers complained that nonprescription decongestants were not strong enough.

MINIMUM WAGE

California will become the first state to require a \$15-an-hour minimum wage for businesses with more than 25 employees. A number of other locations across the country have already reached the \$15 threshold.

More than 20 other states are also increasing their minimum wages to amounts of less than \$15. A handful of states have no state-level minimum wage law, meaning they rely on the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour.

PHYSICAL DISCRIMINATION

In both Illinois and Oregon, new laws take effect that ban discrimination based on physical characteristics, such as hairstyle.

In Oregon, the bill known unofficially as the "Crown Act" will ban discrimination based on "physical characteristics that are historically associated with race," including hair styles such as braids, locs and twists.

In Illinois, the legislation is known as the Jett Hawkins Law after Gus "Jett" Hawkins, a Black student who at age 4 was told to take out his braids because the hairstyle violated the dress code at his Chicago school.

His mother, Ida Nelson, began an awareness campaign after the incident, saying stigmatizing children's hair can negatively affect their educational development. She called the it "monumental" when the bill was signed last summer by Democratic Gov. J.B. Pritzker.

POLICE REFORM

Spurred by the racial reckoning following the murder of George Floyd and other Black people killed by police, a number of states passed new criminal justice laws in 2021 — the first full year of state legislative sessions after Floyd's death.

An Illinois law standardizes certification of police officers by the Illinois Law Enforcement Training and Standards Board and allows for decertifying officers for repeated errant or unethical behavior, instead of

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only when they're convicted of a crime.

In North Carolina, law enforcement recruits now must receive psychological screenings by a licensed psychologist to determine their suitability for the job before they can work as an officer or deputy. A previous mandate didn't apply to everyone.

In Oregon, a new law requires a police officer who witnesses another officer engaging in misconduct or a violation of the state's minimum moral fitness standards to report it to a supervisor within 72 hours. A police agency must complete an investigation within three months and report findings of misconduct that rises above minor violations to the state.

TAXES

In Georgia, a new law increases the amount people can earn before they start paying state taxes. The tax cut will save individual tax filers up to \$43 a year, and married couples filing jointly up to \$63.

Georgia teachers who agree to work in certain rural or low-performing schools could get up to \$3,000 a year off their state income taxes for five years.

In Oklahoma, the top individual income tax rate is dropping from 5% to 4.75%. Lawmakers also slashed the corporate income tax rate from 6% to 4%.

"I've pledged to make Oklahoma a top 10 state for business and making our business taxes among the lowest in the nation is another tool that will help us continue to recruit and retain companies," Oklahoma's Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt said after signing the bills.

In New Mexico, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham and the state's Democrat-led Legislature added a new 2.75% surtax on health insurance premiums.

The tax increase will be used in large part to underwrite health-exchange insurance offerings for low- and moderate-income individuals along with employees at small businesses, starting in 2023.

Party-goers urged not to travel across UK as omicron surges

By SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Officials have warned revellers in Scotland and Wales to think twice before travelling to England to ring in the new year, highlighting how the four parts of the U.K. were again taking starkly different approaches to coronavirus restrictions amid record-high infections and soaring hospitalizations.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has resisted tightening restrictions in England despite the rapid spread of the highly transmissible omicron variant, instead focusing on frequent self-testing and an expanded vaccine booster program to control the spread of infections.

Meanwhile Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which set their own public health rules, imposed new restrictions this week that closed all nightclubs and limited social gatherings. Bars and pubs have had to return to table service only. In Edinburgh, which traditionally hosts one of Europe's largest New Year's Eve parties, people have been urged to stay at home.

While no formal travel ban is in place to stop Scottish party-goers from making their way to England on Friday, Scotland's deputy leader John Swinney said travelling would be the "wrong course of action."

Opinions have been divided on whether Johnson's Conservative government was taking a risky gamble in not enforcing tougher coronavirus measures in England as the omicron variant drove infections to record high numbers.

About one in 25 people in England — or about 2 million people — had COVID-19 in the week before Christmas, the Office of National Statistics estimated Friday. That figure jumped to 1 in 15 in London, the capital, the body estimated.

Figures released Thursday showed the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 in the U.K. jumped to 11,898, up 44% from a week earlier. Confirmed new daily cases hit a record of 189,213 on Thursday, and the government reported 332 deaths, the highest figure since March.

While the data is patchy due to delays in reporting over the holidays, the figures suggest there have not been large numbers of seriously ill patients.

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"Although the numbers are going up and going up increasingly rapidly, the absence of large numbers of seriously ill older people is providing significant reassurance," Chris Hopson, the head of NHS Providers, told The Times.

But immunologist and government scientific adviser Peter Openshaw warned that while U.K. hospitals haven't yet reached the "threshold" of being overwhelmed, "it looks like that will be reached quite quickly."

Johnson has urged people to take a rapid coronavirus test before going out and meeting with others on Friday, or to celebrate outdoors if possible. While firework displays have been cancelled in London for the second year in a row, many parties were going ahead and many revellers were still expected to turn out in the capital later in the day.

Some believe Johnson's strategy is risky and that large crowds gathering indoors for New Year's Eve will likely lead to a further rise in infections.

"It is quite risky, given the fact we're now approaching 200,000 cases per day -- there is a high rate of infection in the community," Dr. Azeem Majeed, head of primary care and public health at Imperial College London, told Times Radio.

Putin wishes Russians happier new year, hails their strength

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Friday wished Russians positive changes in the new year, hailing their solidarity and strength in the face of tough challenges like the coronavirus pandemic.

In a televised address broadcast just before midnight in each of Russia's 11 time zones, Putin said the nation of nearly 146 million has faced "colossal challenges but has learned to live in those harsh conditions and solve difficult tasks thanks to our solidarity."

"We have continued to battle the dangerous pandemic that has engulfed all continents and isn't retreating yet," Putin said. "The treacherous disease has claimed tens of thousands of lives. I would like to express words of sincere support to all those who lost their dear ones."

Russia's state coronavirus task force has registered a total of about 10.5 million confirmed infections and 308,860 deaths, but the state statistics agency that uses broader criteria in its tallying system has reported nearly 626,000 virus-linked deaths in Russia since the start of the pandemic.

Russia has seen a drop in contagion in recent weeks with new daily infections currently just above 20,000 after peaking at more than 40,000 in early November. The government so far has reported only about 100 infections with the new omicron variant, but it is bracing up for a new wave of contagion after the holidays.

Just 51% of Russians have been fully vaccinated, and the government has sought to speed up the uptake, claiming that Russia's Sputnik V vaccine and other domestically designed shots offer a good protection from the omicron variant.

Authorities across Russia have restricted access to museums, theaters and concerts allowing only those who have been vaccinated or tested negative, but restaurants, clubs and cinemas have remained accessible for all in most regions. Moscow and other big cities planned to mark the New Year with fireworks and shopping malls were brimming with customers on a holiday buying spree.

"We are all united by the hope for positive changes in the future," Putin said, adding that raising living standards is the main goal that would "help make Russia even stronger."

Putin's address to the nation was broadcast hours after his phone call with U.S. President Joe Biden that focused on next month's talks to discuss Moscow's demand for Western security guarantees amid a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine.

Biden reaffirmed the U.S. threat of new sanctions against Russia in case of an escalation or invasion, to which Putin responded with a warning of his own that such a U.S. move could lead to a complete rupture of ties between the nations.

"We have firmly and consistently defended our national interests, the security of the country and its citizens," Putin said.

Russian authorities have tightened controls over the domestic political scene this year, with Putin's main

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political foe Alexei Navalny handed a 2 1/2 year prison sentence, his organizations outlawed as "extremist" and scores of media outlets, civil society groups and activists branded "foreign agents," a pejorative label implying additional government scrutiny.

Earlier this week, Russia's court capped a year of crackdown by shutting the country's oldest and most prominent human rights group in a move that drew an international outrage.

Putin, 69, who has been in power for more than two decades — longer than any other Kremlin leader since Soviet dictator Josef Stalin — is entitled to seek two more six-year terms and remain in power until 2036. He has said he would decide later whether to run again in 2024.

New Year's Eve muted by omicron; many hoping for better 2022

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — Good riddance to 2021. Let 2022 bring fresh hope.

That was a common sentiment as people around the world began welcoming in the new year.

In many places, New Year's Eve celebrations were muted or canceled for the second straight year due to a surge of coronavirus infections, this time driven by the highly contagious omicron variant.

Even before omicron hit, many people were happy to say goodbye to a second grinding year of the pandemic.

But so far, at least, the omicron surge hasn't resulted in the same levels of hospitalizations and deaths as previous outbreaks — especially among vaccinated people — offering a glimmer of hope for 2022.

Australia went ahead with its celebrations despite an explosion in virus cases. Thousands of fireworks lit up the sky over Sydney's Harbor Bridge and Opera House at midnight in a spectacular display.

Hours before the celebrations began, Australian health authorities reported a record 32,000 new virus cases, many of them in Sydney. Because of the surge, crowds were far smaller than in pre-pandemic years, when as many as 1 million revelers would crowd inner Sydney.

Neighboring New Zealand had earlier opted for a more low-key approach, replacing its fireworks show in Auckland with a lights display projected onto landmarks including the Sky Tower and Harbor Bridge.

While there hasn't yet been any community spread of omicron in New Zealand, authorities still wanted to discourage crowds gathering.

Because of where the international date line sits, countries in Asia and the Pacific region are among the first to usher in each new year.

In Japan, writer Naoki Matsuzawa said he would spend the next few days cooking and delivering food to the elderly because some stores would be closed. He said vaccinations had made people less anxious about the pandemic, despite the new variant.

"A numbness has set in, and we are no longer overly afraid," said Matsuzawa, who lives in Yokohama, southwest of Tokyo. "Some of us are starting to take for granted that it won't happen to me."

Like many other people, Matsuzawa hopes that life will improve in 2022.

"I hope the restrictions can disappear," he said.

Across Japan, many people planned to take new year trips to spend time with their families. On New Year's Eve, people thronged temples and shrines, most of them wearing masks.

Some appeared to be shrugging off virus fears, however, by dining and drinking raucously in downtown Tokyo and flocking to shops, celebrating not only the holidays but a sense of exhilaration over being freed from recent virus restrictions.

In South Korea's capital, Seoul, the annual New Year's Eve bell-ringing ceremony was canceled for the second straight year due to a surge in cases.

Officials said a pre-recorded video of this year's bell-ringing ceremony would instead be broadcast online and on television. The ceremony had previously drawn tens of thousands of people. Last year's cancellation was the first since the ceremony began in 1953.

South Korean authorities also planned to close many beaches and other tourist attractions along the east coast, which usually swarm with people hoping to catch the year's first sunrise. On Friday, South Korea

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said it will extend tough distancing rules for another two weeks.

In India, millions of people were planning to ring in the new year from their homes, with nighttime curfews and other restrictions taking the fizz out of celebrations in large cities including New Delhi and Mumbai.

Authorities have imposed restrictions to keep revelers away from restaurants, hotels, beaches and bars amid a surge in cases fueled by omicron.

But some places, including Goa, a tourist paradise, and Hyderabad, an information technology hub, have been spared from night curfews thanks to smaller numbers of infections, although other restrictions still apply.

Many Indonesians were also forgoing their usual festivities for a quieter evening at home, after the government banned many New Year's Eve celebrations. In Jakarta, fireworks displays, parades and other large gatherings were prohibited, while restaurants and malls were allowed to remain open but with curfews imposed.

Vietnam also canceled fireworks shows and celebrations. In Hanoi, authorities closed off central streets, while in Ho Chi Minh City, audiences were banned from watching live countdown performances, which instead were to be shown on social media.

In Hong Kong, about 3,000 people planned to attend a New Year's Eve concert featuring local celebrities including boy band Mirror. The concert will be the first big New Year's Eve event held since 2018, after events were canceled in 2019 due to political strife and last year because of the pandemic.

In mainland China, the Shanghai government canceled events including an annual light show along the Huangpu River in the city center that usually draws hundreds of thousands of spectators.

There were no plans for public festivities in Beijing, where popular temples have been closed or had limited access since mid-December. The government has called on people to avoid leaving the Chinese capital if possible and requires tests for travelers arriving from areas where there are infections.

Popular temples in the eastern Chinese cities of Nanjing, Hangzhou and other major cities canceled traditional New Year's Eve "lucky bell-ringing" ceremonies and asked the public to stay away.

But in Thailand, authorities were allowing New Year's Eve parties and fireworks displays to continue, albeit with strict safety measures. They were hoping to slow the spread of the omicron variant while also softening the blow to the country's battered tourism sector. New Year's Eve prayers, which are usually held in Buddhist temples around Thailand, will be held online instead.

In the Philippines, a powerful typhoon two weeks ago wiped out basic necessities for tens of thousands of people ahead of New Year's Eve. More than 400 were killed by Typhoon Rai and at least 82 remain missing. Half a million homes were damaged or destroyed.

Leahmer Singson, a 17-year-old mother, lost her home to a fire last month, and then the typhoon blew away her temporary wooden shack in Cebu city. She will welcome the new year with her husband, who works in a glass and aluminum factory, and her 1-year-old baby in a ramshackle tent in a coastal clearing where hundreds of other families erected small tents from debris, rice sacks and tarpaulins to shield themselves from the rain and sun.

Asked what she wants for the new year, Singson had a simple wish: "I hope we won't get sick."

Live updates: Pakistan reaches goal to vaccinate 70 million

By The Associated Press undefined

ISLAMABAD -- Pakistan's planning minister says his country has achieved a goal of fully vaccinating 70 million people by the end of 2021.

The announcement Friday comes as Pakistan has recently stepped up its vaccination campaign as the new omicron variant spreads.

Planning Minister Asad Umar took to Twitter to thank the health workers who worked to meet the goal.

Since last year, Pakistan has administered 155 million COVID-19 vaccine doses, fully vaccinating over 70 million in the South Asian nation of about 220 million people. It brings the vaccination rate to 44%.

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Pakistan so far has mostly relied on Chinese vaccines, though it also has received millions of doses of vaccines under the COVAX scheme.

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

- US children hospitalized with COVID in record numbers
- U.S. health officials press nursing home workers to get booster shots
- New COVID-19 cases in US soar to highest levels on record
- Do at-home COVID-19 tests detect the omicron variant?
- Canadian provinces adopt restrictions amid daily case records

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

HERE'S WHAT ELSE IS HAPPENING TODAY:

VATICAN CITY — Pope Francis cancelled his New Year's Eve tradition of visiting the life-sized Nativity scene set up in St. Peter's Square to discourage large crowds from forming.

Meanwhile, major Italian cities scrapped their traditional Dec. 31 open-air concerts as Italy battles a record-setting surge in coronavirus cases.

Francis is going ahead with his traditional Dec. 31 vespers service inside the basilica and will celebrate New Year's Day Mass as scheduled.

The Vatican has largely followed Italy's lead in imposing restrictions on crowds. Many Italian cities are opting for streamed concerts or theatrical productions where access by the public can be controlled to check for health passes.

In addition, the city of Naples banned the use of fireworks outright in a bid to keep crowds from forming in a city known for its explosive Dec. 31 festivities.

HONG KONG — Hong Kong has confirmed the first cases of community transmission of the omicron variant of COVID-19, tied to an airline crew member who had returned from the United States and lunched at a restaurant two days later.

Two other people eating at the Moon Palace restaurant on Monday were infected. One was the father of the Cathay Pacific crew member and the other was a construction worker dining 10 meters (30 feet) away.

Health Secretary Sophia Chan said at a news conference Friday that city leader Carrie Lam had expressed her strong dissatisfaction to the airline's chairman and its CEO that some staff had violated a 3-day self-isolation rule after their return. The health secretary called their actions "irresponsible."

Cathay Pacific said in a statement that five crew members had tested positive for omicron recently, and some had not followed regulations. It apologized and said they would be disciplined.

Hong Kong has recorded 81 omicron cases. The others were among people who had arrived from overseas.

SYDNEY — New coronavirus infections soared again in Australia on Friday to a record of more than 32,000, just days after surpassing 10,000 for the first time.

Experts say the explosion is being driven by the highly contagious omicron variant and a recent relaxation of restrictions in Sydney and other areas.

More than 15,000 of the new cases were reported in Sydney. Another 5,000 cases came from elsewhere in New South Wales state, while almost 6,000 were confirmed in Victoria state, home to Australia's second largest city, Melbourne.

While hospitalizations and deaths have been increasing from the surge, so far they haven't reached comparative levels seen in previous outbreaks. And many cities are planning to go ahead with New Year's Eve celebrations, including the famous fireworks display from the Sydney Harbor Bridge and Sydney Opera House.

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JERUSALEM — Israel has begun delivering a fourth vaccine dose for people most vulnerable to coronavirus, becoming one of the first countries to do so as it prepares for a wave of infections driven by the omicron variant.

Israel, which led a world beating vaccination program in 2020, will administer a fourth dose of the vaccine to individuals with weakened immune systems along with elderly residents and employees in care homes.

The rollout of the fourth dose began at Israel's Sheba Medical Center Friday morning and was administered to heart and lung transplant patients.

The country is currently experiencing a new wave of infections fueled by the transmissible omicron variant. There were 4,085 new cases recorded on Thursday, the highest daily count of infections Israel has seen since late September.

In response, Israel introduced new restrictions late Thursday in a bid to curb rising infection rates ahead of new year's eve celebrations. These include a Green Pass, given to fully vaccinated individuals or those who have recently recovered from coronavirus, for outdoor events of more than 100 people and mandatory mask-wearing in outdoor events of more than 50 people.

Israel, a country of 9.3 million people, has reported 8,243 deaths from the coronavirus since the start of the pandemic. Most of its population — more than 6.5 million people — has received at least one dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, and more than 4.2 million Israelis have received two doses and a booster.

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea says it'll extend the toughest social distancing rules for another two weeks to try to lower critical cases and guard against the omicron variant.

The government said Friday the current restrictions such as a four-person limit on private gatherings and a 9 p.m. curfew on restaurants and cafes will continue until Jan. 16.

Health Minister Kwon Deok-cheol says South Korea's daily caseload has recently dropped to the 5,000s from the previous 8,000s thanks to the current distancing guidelines enforced two weeks ago.

But he says the number of critically or seriously ill patients remains above 1,000. Kwon says the omicron variant also continues to spread throughout South Korea and that it's difficult to prevent it from becoming the dominant strain in South Korea.

On Friday, South Korea added 4,875 new COVID-19 cases, pushing the national tally to 630,838. Health authorities said they've also confirmed 269 new cases of the omicron variant, taking the country's total to 894.

NEW YORK — A coronavirus surge has upended plans to hold a major nuclear treaty conference at the United Nations next month, with participants agreeing Thursday to postpone the meeting days before its scheduled start.

After nearly two years of pandemic delays, delegations from around the world were due to converge Tuesday on U.N. headquarters to take stock of the 1970 Non-Proliferation Treaty, a pillar of nuclear arms control.

But organizers are now penciling in an Aug. 1 start date, according to an email Thursday from the U.N. disarmament office to entities involved. The conference was initially scheduled for spring 2020.

As coronavirus cases spike again in the U.N.'s host city of New York and a growing number of staffers are sick or or quarantined, the world body told the conference leader Monday that it couldn't accommodate a big gathering now.

The NPT is the world's most widely ratified nuclear arms control agreement, with 191 participating countries. Nations without atomic weapons committed not to acquire them and to allow verification that nuclear energy programs weren't morphing into weaponry. Countries that had nukes when the treaty was signed — the United States, Russia, Britain, France and China -- agreed to move toward eliminating them.

TORONTO — Quebec is reimposing a nighttime curfew beginning New Year's Eve, and Ontario has delayed the resumption of school by two days as several Canadian provinces report new highs for COVID-19

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infections.

Quebec Premier Francois Legault says the curfew will be in effect 10 p.m. to 5 a.m. as of Friday night and will run for an indefinite period.

Quebec imposed a pandemic-related nightly curfew last Jan. 9 and did not lift the measure until May 28. It has been the only Canadian province to order a curfew over the coronavirus.

In Ontario, classes had been scheduled to resume Monday but that has been pushed back to Wednesday. Officials say that will give schools time to provide N95 masks to staff and deploy more HEPA filter units.

HONOLULU — Hawaii set an all-time record for new coronavirus cases on Thursday as the state of about 1.5 million people reported nearly 3,500 new infections.

The daily total of new cases reported by health officials was 3,484, topping the record of 2,205 cases set the day after Christmas. The state was averaging just over 100 new cases a day at the beginning of the month.

The latest surge came about two weeks after the first omicron variant case was confirmed in Hawaii.

Honolulu Mayor Rick Blangiardi said there would be no new restrictions on Oahu over the New Year holiday. He said people should take personal responsibility to curb the disease.

SANTA FE, N.M. — New Mexico is running short of free at-home rapid tests to detect COVID-19 infections as the state struggles with the spread of the omicron variant of the coronavirus.

The company that runs the state's program said Thursday that the state's supply of tests was overstretched. The announcement came hours after Democratic Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham wrote that residents could "order a testing kit today."

By afternoon "all available tests have been shipped" and Vault Health was offering paid testing instead. The state reported an additional 2,209 cases of COVID-19 on Thursday and 26 additional deaths.

NEW ORLEANS -- Louisiana is setting records for new COVID-19 diagnoses, and the state's omicron variant surge is just beginning, Gov. John Bel Edwards said Thursday.

Thursday's 24-hour total of 12,467 new cases was more than a third above Wednesday's 9,378, Edwards said during a news conference livestreamed on Zoom.

He said the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Wednesday's figure was itself a state record, topping 7,548 set in August, during the delta variant surge.

Edwards says the number of people hospitalized with the virus has risen 268% since Dec. 17, to 762.

The governor said he would not mandate masks unless such an order is needed to keep hospitals from being overwhelmed. But he said people should heed masking recommendations from both the CDC and the state Department of Health.

Wearing a mask is a minor inconvenience "compared to being in a hospital struggling to get oxygen or watching a loved one struggling to get oxygen," he said.

He and other state and hospital officials around south and central Louisiana repeatedly urged everyone to take precautions such as getting vaccinations and booster shots.

JACKSON, Miss. — Mississippi's Supreme Court chief justice issued an emergency order Thursday allowing judges to postpone jury trials through mid-January because of the recent surge in COVID-19 cases.

Mississippi Supreme Court Chief Justice Mike Randolph's order also allows courts to use teleconferencing, videoconferencing and electronic filing to limit in-person contact in courts. Felony plea, felony sentencing and probation violation hearings can be conducted remotely.

The order is an extension of safety regulations that were already in place. Emergency Administrative Order 25 is the fourth emergency order issued by the chief justice since August which allows judges to postpone jury trials.

In his most recent order, Randolph cited the recent uptick in cases — especially the highly contagious

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omicron variant.

As of Dec. 14, there were 575 new COVID-19 confirmed infections in Mississippi. Approximately two weeks later, the number of confirmed cases increased more than eightfold, to 4,885 cases, Randolph said.

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — With a new and more infectious coronavirus variant sweeping California, attorneys representing inmates say violations of health orders by prison staff risk a repeat of the outbreaks that killed dozens in the first year of the pandemic.

The most recent statistics show large percentages of employees who are required to be tested twice weekly aren't doing so, and most face no consequences.

Corrections officials say they are updating those figures but have not yet provided new data.

Officials are temporarily shutting down admissions to Wasco State Prison in the San Joaquin Valley where there have been more than 150 new infections in the past two weeks. Starting Monday, officials say inmates statewide must be fully vaccinated to have in-person or family visits, unless they have approved religious or medical exemptions.

The actions come as new cases soar across California and state models predict a gradual increase in hospitalizations and intensive care admissions over the next month.

SEATTLE — A Seattle-area medical system says it will soon limit COVID-19 testing appointments at its community testing sites because of an "astronomically high" positivity rate.

The Seattle Times reports UW Medicine said Thursday appointments will be limited to only those with symptoms or known exposures. Of UW Medicine's 12 community testing sites, nine will soon start limiting appointments. Three will close temporarily.

The positivity rate is measuring more than 40% at some South King County testing sites and the high rate is slowing scientists' ability to parse out which samples are actually positive.

Behind the wait for a verdict at Maxwell jury deliberations

By TOM HAYS and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Ghislaine Maxwell sex trafficking trial was a four-week winding road featuring sordid testimony by four women who accused the British socialite of grooming their teenage selves for abuse at the hands of financier Jeffrey Epstein. The defense maintained the abuse could have been real, but Maxwell wasn't part of it.

It all came to a climax earlier this week with a guilty verdict in federal court in Manhattan, delivered after five full days of jury deliberations.

The jurors' identities were kept secret. Still, there were clues in the record about who they were and hints about how they reached a decision that hung in the balance for five days amid a surge in COVID-19 cases in New York City that threatened to derail the trial.

Here are some reflections on the players involved and how the deliberations unfolded:

THE JURORS

They were six men and six women from varying educational and career backgrounds who survived a selection process by showing they had no preconceived notions about the case.

None had much interest in or imprint on social media. One juror, asked what she does for fun, answered: "I love to clean."

Some of their jobs foreshadowed the aptitude they displayed for the laborious, tedious procession toward a solution: bank trader's assistant, city clerical worker, government contract specialist, life science company vice president, home health aide, health plan project manager.

Identified only by numbers, they seemed attentive throughout the trial. Once deliberations began, they sent notes with occasional questions and requested transcripts of most of the trial's key testimony, never once hinting at a deadlock.

"Our deliberations are moving along and we are making progress," they informed the judge Tuesday in

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a matter-of-fact note presaging the next day's verdict.

THE JUDGE

After a decade on the bench, U.S. District Judge Alison J. Nathan had landed her biggest case yet with Ghislaine Maxwell.

During the trial, Nathan learned she was being appointed to the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Manhattan, a promotion that forced her to suspend the trial for three days while she went to Washington to answer questions from the senators considering her confirmation.

In making rulings, Nathan seemed confidently decisive and mostly immovable once she had arrived at a conclusion. Nobody knew that better than Maxwell, who watched Nathan deny her bail requests, again and again.

But during the deliberations, the judge acknowledged that it was the jury that was in charge. She accepted their wishes around work hours even if it went against her own instructions, noting that they were "not shy to indicate" what they wanted.

THE RACE AGAINST COVID

Nathan did not hide her anxiety from the jury over the possibility that a coronavirus outbreak among jurors could force a mistrial. During the first week of deliberations, she invited jurors to meet a third day before the Christmas holiday. They declined.

By Monday, she had stepped up the pressure, asking them to stay an extra hour each night — again declined.

She revealed her worries to lawyers Tuesday, telling them her request was "because we are seeing an astronomical spike" in New York City's coronavirus cases, fueled by the omicron variant. She kept her fears from the jury after defense lawyers worried it would unduly pressure them to reach a verdict.

By Wednesday, she was ready to step up pressure even further, telling jurors they would work on New Year's Eve, New Year's Day and even Sunday if they hadn't reached a verdict. Later that day, Nathan, breathing heavily, took the bench at 4:58 p.m. to announce there was a verdict.

MAXWELL'S LAST DAY

The last day of the trial started well for Maxwell.

A jury that had already deliberated for four full days sent the judge an early morning note saying it wanted the transcripts of testimony from a half-dozen witnesses. Jurors also wanted that of an expert who threw shade at the veracity of the memories of Maxwell's accusers.

Was it a signal they were undecided and that an acquittal or hung jury was still in the cards?

As the judge sorted matters out with the jury outside of the courtroom, a buoyant Maxwell appeared to think so. Her eyes beaming above her face mask, she deliberately turned her chair at the defense table in the direction of two courtroom sketch artists and struck a pose for them.

Deliberations went forward. The jury went silent. No more notes for hours.

But at the end of the day a last note finally came.

"We have a verdict," the judge said as the courtroom went silent.

A defense team that had engaged in constant public displays of affection with Maxwell sat completely still with her as the verdict was read. On most days, she had hugged her lawyers coming and going from the courtroom.

This time, there were no hugs.

Germany shuts down half of its 6 remaining nuclear plants

By FRANK JORDANS Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany on Friday is shutting down half of the six nuclear plants it still has in operation, a year before the country draws the final curtain on its decades-long use of atomic power.

The decision to phase out nuclear power and shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy was first taken by the center-left government of Gerhard Schroeder in 2002.

His successor, Angela Merkel, reversed her decision to extend the lifetime of Germany's nuclear plants

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in the wake of the 2011 Fukushima disaster in Japan and set 2022 as the final deadline for shutting them down.

The three reactors now being shuttered were first powered up in the mid-1980s. Together they provided electricity to millions of German households for almost four decades.

One of the plants — Brokdorf, located about 40 kilometers (25 miles) northwest of Hamburg on the Elbe River — became a particular focus of anti-nuclear protests that were fueled by the 1986 Chernobyl catastrophe in the Soviet Union.

The other two plants are Grohnde, about 40 kilometers south of Hannover, and Grundremmingen, 80 kilometers west of Munich.

Some in Germany have called for the decision on ending the use of nuclear power to be reconsidered because the power plants already in operation produce relatively little carbon dioxide. Advocates of atomic energy argue that it can help Germany meet its climate targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions.

But the German government said this week that decommissioning all nuclear plants next year and then phasing out the use of coal by 2030 won't affect the country's energy security or its goal of making Europe's biggest economy "climate neutral" by 2045.

"By massively increasing renewable energy and accelerating the expansion of the electricity grid we can show that this is possible in Germany," Economy and Climate Minister Robert Habeck said.

Several of Germany's neighbors have already ended nuclear power or announced plans to do so, but others are sticking with the technology. This has prompted concerns of a nuclear rift in Europe, with France planning to build new reactors and Germany opting for natural gas as a "bridge" until enough renewable power is available, and both sides arguing their preferred source of energy be classed as sustainable.

Germany's remaining three nuclear plants — Emsland, Isar and Neckarwestheim — will be powered down by the end of 2022.

While some jobs will be lost, utility company RWE said more than two-thirds of the 600 workers at its Gundremmingen nuclear power station will continue to be involved in post-shutdown operations through to the 2030s. Germany's nuclear power companies will receive almost \$3 billion for the early shutdown of their plants.

Environment Minister Steffi Lemke has dismissed suggestions that a new generation of nuclear power plants might prompt Germany to change course yet again.

"Nuclear power plants remain high-risk facilities that produce highly radioactive atomic waste," she told the Funke media group this week.

A final decision has yet to be taken about where to store tens of thousands of tons of nuclear waste produced in German power plants. Experts say some material will remain dangerously radioactive for 35,000 generations.

'A moral giant': South Africans pay their respects to Tutu

By ANDREW MELDRUM Associated Press

CAPE TOWN, South Africa (AP) — South Africans of all walks of life are paying their respects to Desmond Tutu, the Nobel Peace Prize-winning Anglican archbishop whose plain pine casket is on view Friday in St. George's Anglican Cathedral in Cape Town.

"He was a moral giant. He was a moral and spiritual giant loved and revered for fighting for equality for all people," said the Rev. Michael Lapsley, on the steps of the historic stone cathedral after Tutu's coffin was carried in amid music, incense and prayers.

Anglican clergy — women and men, Black and white, young and old — lined the street to honor the cortege carrying Tutu's body to the church. Members of the Tutu family accompanied the casket into the cathedral.

People began filing through the lofty cathedral to light candles and view the small, simple coffin with rope handles which Tutu had said he wanted to avoid any ostentation or lavish expenditure. Many sat in the pews to pray and reflect on Tutu's life.

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More than 2,000 people visited the cathedral on the first day of viewing on Thursday. A requiem mass for Tutu will be held on New Year's Day before he is cremated and his remains placed in a columbarium in the cathedral.

"His work did not stop with the end of apartheid," Lapsley said, in reference to South Africa's regime of racial oppression which Tutu prominently opposed and which ended in 1994 when South Africa held democratic elections.

"Archbishop Tutu bravely championed the equality of all people. He transformed the church by bringing women into the clergy. He championed the LGBTQ community for whom he is a hero all over the world," said Lapsley, Canon of Healing at the cathedral.

An anti-apartheid activist priest whose hands and one eye were blown off by a letter bomb sent by South African agents in 1994, Lapsley said Tutu helped him find reconciliation and a new role in the church.

One of the first women priests ordained by Tutu, the Rev. Wilma Jakobsen, said Tutu radically changed South Africa's Anglican church.

"The face of the church has changed. It has women priests and women in positions of leadership. It has people of all colors. Our church welcomes LGBTQ people. That's all thanks to the leadership of Archbishop Tutu," said Jakobsen, who served as Tutu's personal chaplain when he was archbishop.

At the height of apartheid, Tutu mixed all races in the church, said Jakobsen.

"I was intentionally placed in Mitchells Plain and other white priests were intentionally put in Black communities. And Black priests were intentionally placed in white communities," said Jakobsen. "Archbishop Tutu did not wait for approval to do that, he just did it. It was a direct challenge to the apartheid regime."

After the viewing Friday, Tutu's body will remain alone in the cathedral, "a place that he loved," according to a statement from Archbishop of Cape Town Thabo Makgoba.

The cathedral, the Anglican church's oldest in southern Africa, dating back to 1847, shows the changes encouraged by Tutu. The Crypt Memory and Witness Center has public education programs to encourage healing and social justice.

The graceful stone structure built by British colonialists beneath Cape Town's soaring Table Mountain was converted by Tutu into a center of anti-apartheid activity. When the apartheid regime banned political gatherings, Tutu held meetings in the cathedral where participants bowed their heads ostensibly in prayer and heard political speeches. Nelson Mandela called it the "People's Cathedral."

With her gray hair pulled back in a ponytail tinged with purple, and wearing a brightly colored rainbow mask," the Rev. Maria Claassen said she was paying homage to Tutu.

"He was a very humble man but to sit in the same room with him, you could feel the strength of his presence, of his convictions," said Claassen, an Anglican priest in Cape Town's Durbanville area. "He inspired us and now we celebrate his life."

Parents selling children shows desperation of Afghanistan

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

SHEDAI CAMP, Afghanistan (AP) — In a sprawling settlement of mud brick huts in western Afghanistan housing people displaced by drought and war, a woman is fighting to save her daughter.

Aziz Gul's husband sold the 10-year-old girl into marriage without telling his wife, taking a down-payment so he could feed his family of five children. Without that money, he told her, they would all starve. He had to sacrifice one to save the rest.

Many of Afghanistan's growing number of destitute people are making desperate decisions such as these as their nation spirals into a vortex of poverty.

The aid-dependent country's economy was already teetering when the Taliban seized power in mid-August amid a chaotic withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops. The international community froze Afghanistan's assets abroad and halted all funding, unwilling to work with a Taliban government given its reputation for brutality during its previous rule 20 years ago.

The consequences have been devastating for a country battered by four decades of war, a punishing

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drought and the coronavirus pandemic. Legions of state employees, including doctors, haven't been paid in months. Malnutrition and poverty stalk the most vulnerable, and aid groups say more than half the population faces acute food shortages.

"Day by day, the situation is deteriorating in this country, and especially children are suffering," said Asuntha Charles, national director of the World Vision aid organization in Afghanistan, which runs a health clinic for displaced people just outside the western city of Herat.

"Today I have been heartbroken to see that the families are willing to sell their children to feed other family members," Charles said. "So it's the right time for the humanitarian community to stand up and stay with the people of Afghanistan."

Arranging marriages for very young girls is a frequent practice throughout the region. The groom's family - often distant relatives - pays money to seal the deal, and the child usually stays with her own parents until she is at least around 15 or 16. Yet with many unable to afford even basic food, some say they'd allow prospective grooms to take very young girls or are even trying to sell their sons.

But Gul, unusually in this deeply patriarchal, male-dominated society, is resisting. Married off herself at 15, she says she would kill herself if her daughter, Qandi Gul, is forcibly taken away.

Gul remembers well the moment she found out her husband had sold Qandi. For around two months, the family had been able to eat. Eventually, she asked her husband where the money came from, and he told her.

"My heart stopped beating. I wished I could have died at that time, but maybe God didn't want me to die," Gul said. Qandi sat close to her mother, her hazel eyes peering shyly from beneath her sky-blue headscarf. "Each time I remember that night...I die and come back to life. It was so difficult."

She asked her husband why he did it.

"He said he wanted to sell one and save the others. 'You all would have died this way,' (he said.) I told him, 'Dying was much better than what you have done.'"

Gul rallied her community, telling her brother and village elders that her husband had sold her child behind her back. They supported her, and with their help she secured a "divorce" for her child, but only on condition she repays the 100,000 afghanis (about \$1,000) that her husband received.

It's money she doesn't have. Her husband fled, possibly fearing Gul might denounce him to the authorities. The Taliban government recently announced a ban on forcing women into marriage or using women and girls as exchange tokens to settle disputes.

The family of the prospective groom, a man of around 21 or 22, has already tried several times to claim the girl, she says. She is not sure how long she can fend them off.

"I am just so desperate. If I can't provide money to pay these people and can't keep my daughter by my side, I have said that I will kill myself," Gul said. "But then I think about the other children. What will happen to them? Who will feed them?" Her eldest is 12, her youngest - her sixth - just two months.

Now alone, Gul leaves the children with her elderly mother while she goes to work in people's homes. Her 12-year-old son works picking saffron after school. It's barely enough to keep them fed, and the saffron season is short, only a few weeks in the fall.

"We don't have anything," Gul said.

In another part of the same camp, father-of-four Hamid Abdullah was also selling his young daughters into arranged marriages, desperate for money to treat his chronically ill wife, pregnant with their fifth child.

Abdullah borrowed money to pay for his wife's treatments and can't pay it back, he said. So three years ago, he received a down-payment for his eldest daughter Hoshran, now 7, in an arranged marriage to an 18-year-old in their native Badghis province. He's now looking for someone to buy his second daughter, 6-year-old Nazia.

"We don't have food to eat," Abdullah explained, adding he also had to buy medicine for his wife, who soon would need more treatment. "She needs another surgery, I don't have one afghani to pay for the doctor."

The family that bought Hoshran is waiting until she is older before the full amount is settled, he explained.

But he needs money now for food and treatments, so he is trying to arrange a marriage for Nazia for

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about 20,000-30,000 afghani (\$200-\$300).

"What should we do? We have to do it, we have no other option," said his wife, Bibi Jan. "When we made the decision, it was like someone had taken away a body part from me."

In the neighboring province of Badghis, another displaced family is considering selling their son, 8-year-old Salahuddin.

His mother, Guldasta, said that after days with nothing to eat, she told her husband to take the boy to the bazaar and sell him to bring food for the others.

"I don't want to sell my son, but I have to," the 35-year-old said. "No mother can do this to her child, but when you have no other choice, you have to make a decision against your will."

Salahuddin blinked and looked on silently. Surrounded by some of his seven brothers and sisters, his lip quivered slightly.

His father, Shakir, who is blind in one eye and has kidney problems, said the children had been crying for days from hunger. Twice, he said, he decided to take the boy to the bazaar and twice he faltered, unable to go through with it. "But now I think I have no other choice than to sell him."

Buying of boys is believed to be less common than girls, and when it does take place, it appears to be cases of infant boys bought by families who don't have any sons. In her despair, Guldasta thought perhaps such a family would want an 8-year-old.

The desperation of millions is clear as more and more people face hunger. By the end of the year, some 3.2 million children under 5 years old are expected to suffer from acute malnutrition, according to the U.N.

Nazia is one of them. The 4-year-old lay listlessly in her mother's arms after visiting the World Vision health clinic.

Two years ago, Nazia was a plump toddler, her mother Fatima said. Now, her emaciated limbs are just skin covering bone. Her little heart beats visibly beneath her ribcage.

"The prices are high. Flour is expensive, cooking oil is expensive, everything is expensive," Fatima said. "All day she is asking me to give her meat, yogurt and fruit. We don't have anything, and we don't have money to buy it for her."

Charles, World Vision's national director for Afghanistan, said humanitarian aid funds are desperately needed.

"I'm happy to see the pledges are made," she said. But the pledges "shouldn't stay as promises, they have to be seen as reality on the ground."

Parents selling children shows desperation of Afghanistan

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

SHEDAI CAMP, Afghanistan (AP) — In a sprawling settlement of mud brick huts in western Afghanistan housing people displaced by drought and war, a woman is fighting to save her daughter.

Aziz Gul's husband sold their 10-year-old into marriage without telling his wife, taking a down-payment so he could feed his family of five children. Otherwise, he told her, they would all starve. He had to sacrifice one to save the rest.

Many of Afghanistan's growing number of destitute people are making such desperate decisions as their nation spirals into a vortex of poverty.

Afghanistan's aid-dependent economy was already teetering when the Taliban seized power in mid-August amid a chaotic withdrawal of U.S. and NATO troops. The international community froze Afghanistan's assets abroad and halted funding, unwilling to work with a Taliban government given its reputation for brutality during its previous rule 20 years ago.

The consequences have been devastating for a country battered by war, drought and the coronavirus pandemic. State employees haven't been paid in months. Malnutrition stalks the most vulnerable, and aid groups say more than half the population faces acute food shortages.

"Day by day, the situation is deteriorating in this country, and especially children are suffering," said Asuntha Charles, national director of the World Vision aid organization in Afghanistan, which runs a health

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clinic for displaced people near the western city of Herat. "Today I have been heartbroken to see that the families are willing to sell their children to feed other family members."

Arranging marriages for very young girls is common in the region. The groom's family pays money to seal the deal, and the child usually stays with her parents until she is at least around 15. Yet with many unable to afford even basic food, some say they'd allow prospective grooms to take very young girls or are even trying to sell their sons.

Gul, unusually in this deeply patriarchal, male-dominated society, is resisting. Married off herself at 15, she says she would kill herself if her daughter, Qandi Gul, is taken away.

When her husband told her he had sold Qandi, "my heart stopped beating. I wished I could have died at that time, but maybe God didn't want me to die," Gul said, with Qandi by her side peering shyly from beneath her sky-blue headscarf. "Each time I remember that night...I die and come back to life."

Her husband told her he sold one to save the others, saying they all would have died otherwise.

"Dying was much better than what you have done," she said she told him.

Gul rallied her brother and village elders and with their help secured a "divorce" for Qandi, on condition she repays the 100,000 afghanis (about \$1,000) her husband received. It's money she doesn't have.

Her husband fled, possibly fearing Gul might denounce him to authorities. The Taliban government recently banned forced marriages.

Gul says she isn't sure how long she can fend off the family of the prospective groom, a man of around 21.

"I am just so desperate. If I can't provide money to pay these people and can't keep my daughter by my side, I have said that I will kill myself," she said. "But then I think about the other children. What will happen to them? Who will feed them?" Her eldest is 12, her youngest - her sixth - just two months.

In another part of the camp, father-of-four Hamid Abdullah was also selling his young daughters into arranged marriages, desperate for money to treat his chronically ill wife, pregnant with their fifth child.

He can't repay money he borrowed to fund his wife's treatments, he said. So three years ago, he received a down-payment for his eldest daughter Hoshran, now 7, in an arranged marriage to a now 18-year-old.

The family who bought Hoshran are waiting until she is older before settling the full amount and taking her. But Abdullah needs money now, so he is trying to arrange a marriage for his second daughter, 6-year-old Nazia, for about 20,000-30,000 afghanis (\$200-\$300).

"We don't have food to eat," and he can't pay his wife's doctor, he said.

His wife, Bibi Jan, said they had no other option but it was a difficult decision. "When we made the decision, it was like someone had taken a body part from me."

In neighboring Badghis province, another displaced family is considering selling their son, 8-year-old Salahuddin.

His mother, Guldasta, said that after days with nothing to eat, she told her husband to take Salahuddin to the bazaar and sell him to bring food for the others.

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The desperation of millions is clear as more and more people face hunger, with some 3.2 million children under 5 years old facing acute malnutrition, according to the U.N.

Charles, World Vision's national director for Afghanistan, said humanitarian aid funds are desperately needed.

"I'm happy to see the pledges are made," she said. But the pledges "shouldn't stay as promises, they

have to be seen as reality on the ground.”

A tense exchange highlights unsettled part of Tutu’s legacy

By CHRISTOPHER TORCHIA Associated Press

Desmond Tutu was begging for an apology. Not from a leader of South Africa’s former racist white government, but from a fellow titan of the anti-apartheid struggle.

“I beg you, I beg you, I beg you, please,” Tutu implored Winnie Madikizela-Mandela at a 1997 hearing of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that he chaired during its mission to expose the abuses of apartheid. The subject before the panel was Madikizela-Mandela’s links to a gang known as the Mandela United Football Club, whose vigilantism and involvement in murder, kidnapping and assaults appalled the local community and other senior leaders of the resistance to white rule.

“You are a great person, and you don’t know how your greatness would be enhanced if you were to say: ‘Sorry, things went wrong. Forgive me.’”

“I beg you,” Tutu said one more time, looking straight at the woman he had earlier described as an “incredible inspiration” to those who resisted white domination.

The anguished encounter still rankles some Black South Africans who think Tutu mistreated Madikizela-Mandela. She later called it a stunt, lashing out at the former Cape Town archbishop and Nobel laureate in a documentary that aired shortly before her 2018 death.

It’s a reminder that even Tutu — eulogized globally this week after his death on Dec. 26 as the conscience of South Africa and often the world — struggled to navigate the anger and recrimination ripping through a wounded nation.

It also speaks to perhaps the most unsettled part of Tutu’s stellar legacy, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. It solicited searing testimonials of violence from both victims and perpetrators as a way to heal the country after apartheid ended in 1994, holding out the possibility of amnesty for those who confessed to human rights violations and showed remorse.

But its work was never fully completed. Many felt there was minimal accountability and the promised healing never materialized.

“South Africa’s younger generation, the post-’94 generation, has criticized Tutu’s work on the commission, saying he was a sell-out and not tough enough. But that is not fair,” said William Gumede, who was on the commission staff and is now chairman of Democracy Works Foundation, a nonprofit group that promotes democracy in southern Africa.

The commission was a part of a “negotiated compromise,” and Tutu was not responsible for its “limited remit,” Gumede said. In fact, he said, successive African National Congress governments did not adequately carry out its recommendations and have failed to effectively tackle the country’s entrenched problems, including gaping inequality.

The commission epitomized Tutu’s unrelenting vision that truth, wherever it lies, delivers freedom. That saying sorry, forgiving without forgetting and choosing reconciliation over retribution are the hard, best way forward. He hoped the abusers and the abused could give something of themselves by this process, and in doing so, get something in return.

Yet the commission left people on both sides of the conflict dissatisfied, Tutu acknowledged in the panel’s 1998 report to President Nelson Mandela, Madikizela-Mandela’s ex-husband. The couple divorced in 1996 after nearly 40 years of marriage, most of which Mandela spent in apartheid prisons.

“There were those who believed that we should follow the post-World War II example of putting those guilty of gross violations of human rights on trial as the allies did at Nuremberg,” Tutu wrote. “In South Africa, where we had a military stalemate, that was clearly an impossible option.”

Forgetting the past wasn’t viable either, he wrote. Tutu referred to Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman’s “Death and the Maiden,” in which a woman seeks a confession from her rapist in order to restore “her dignity and her identity.”

The commission saw its work only as a starting point on the long road to Tutu’s vaunted “rainbow nation.”

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It suggested some cases be referred for prosecution, but the effort fizzled. A reparations initiative fell flat.

Then there was Madikizela-Mandela, who was harassed, jailed and banished to a remote area by white-led security forces. Often a figure of scandal and controversy, she was considered by supporters to be a real revolutionary — the “mother of the nation” — who wouldn’t, in their view, “sell out” to a reconciliation policy that let most of apartheid’s enforcers avoid punishment.

Over nine days of grueling hearings in 1997, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission questioned Madikizela-Mandela, then a member of parliament, about the gang. She offered a general apology — “I am saying it is true, things went horribly wrong” — but denied specific allegations against her. The commission later found her “politically and morally accountable” for human rights violations.

In the documentary “Winnie,” by filmmaker Pascale Lamche, Madikizela-Mandela said that she had been “seething with rage” at the hearings.

“To this day, I ask God to forgive me for not forgiving him,” she said, referring to Tutu. “I wasn’t going to say sorry as if I had been responsible for apartheid. I mean, how dare ... really?”

Two historical figures, allied in the same struggle but seemingly adversaries after it.

“In the 1980s, Winnie and Tutu were the two biggest leaders of the anti-apartheid movement,” Gumede said. “It was a violent time and Winnie was in the thick of the campaign to make the townships ungovernable. And that was through violence. Tutu, on the other hand, was always a man of non-violence.”

Revelers await return to NYC’s Times Square to usher in 2022

By BOBBY CAINA CALVAN and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York City readied to embrace the new year — and bid good riddance to another pandemic-marred 12 months — as it prepared to revive its annual New Year’s Eve celebration in Times Square.

It did so as an uneasy nation tries to muster optimism that the worst days of the pandemic are now behind it — even as public health officials cautioned Friday against unbridled celebrations amid surging COVID infections from the omicron variant.

The city said it would limit the number of people it lets into Times Square to witness a 6-ton ball, encrusted with nearly 2,700 Waterford crystals, descend above a crowd of about 15,000 in-person spectators — far fewer than the many tens of thousands of revelers who usually descend on the world-famous square to bask in the lights, hoopla and shower of confetti during the nation’s marquee New Year’s Eve event.

“We are very excited to welcome back visitors to Times Square this New Year’s Eve,” said Tom Harris, the president of the Times Square Alliance. “Our goal is to have a safe and responsible event for the world to see.”

The annual ball drop takes place Friday, as the clock ticks into midnight and ushers in the new year, an occasion usually commemorated with Champagne, clinking pints, joyous embraces and hopes for better times ahead.

But 2022 begins just as the year prior began — with the pandemic clouding an already uncertain future.

Doubts swirled whether the city would have to cancel this year’s bash, as the city posted record numbers of COVID cases in the days leading to it, even as some cities like Atlanta had decided to cancel their own celebrations.

Last year’s ball drop was closed to the public because of the outbreak.

COVID-19 cases in the U.S. have soared to their highest levels on record at over 265,000 per day on average. New York City reported a record number of new, confirmed cases — more than 39,590 — on Tuesday, according to New York state figures.

But Mayor Bill de Blasio, who will relinquish oversight of the nation’s most populous city at the stroke of midnight, said the festivities at Times Square would “show the world that New York City is fighting our way through this.”

Officials said those attending the spectacle would have to wear masks and show proof of vaccination. Organizers had initially hoped that more than 50,000 revelers would be able to join in, but plans were

dramatically scaled back because of widespread infections.

Rap artist and actor LL Cool J was supposed to be among the performers taking the stage in Times Square Friday night, but announced he would pull out of the event because he had tested positive for COVID.

New York City's incoming mayor, Eric Adams, is scheduled to take his oath in Times Square soon after the ball drop. He expressed hope Thursday that 2022 would be "a new beginning of our resiliency."

It was a sentiment shared by ordinary people.

College students and sisters Mary and Vanessa Anyakwo were guardedly optimistic, too, as they took in Times Square on an outing from their home in suburban Elmsford, New York.

"I feel a lot more hopeful than I was last year because I think we have a lot more facilities" to handle the pandemic, said Mary, 20.

Vanessa, 22, pointed to the crowds. "By this time last year," she said, "I didn't think it would be like this."

Paolo Brügger, a banker from Zurich, Switzerland, reflected on a world fed-up with having to endure wave after wave of the virus a year after 2021 dawned with hopes bottled up in vaccine vials.

His optimism was tempered by the world's new reality that the pandemic would linger into the new year.

"A lot of people are asking themselves now, 'Is this going to be like this every year — when we get into the cold season, we have a new variant, and we are back to square one?'" said Brügger, 55.

Still, he was "extremely optimistic" about 2022, partly because vaccines and new therapies against COVID-19 and partly, he said with a chuckle, "because it can't be worse than the last two years."

Biden talks sanctions, Putin warns of rupture over Ukraine

By AAMER MADHANI and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President Joe Biden has warned Russia's Vladimir Putin that the U.S. could impose new sanctions against Russia if it takes further military action against Ukraine, while Putin responded that such a U.S. move could lead to a complete rupture of ties between the nations.

The two leaders spoke frankly for nearly an hour Thursday amid growing alarm over Russia's troop buildup near Ukraine, a crisis that has deepened as the Kremlin has stiffened its insistence on border security guarantees and test-fired hypersonic missiles to underscore its demands.

Further U.S. sanctions "would be a colossal mistake that would entail grave consequences," said Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov, who briefed reporters in Moscow after the Biden-Putin phone conversation. He added that Putin told Biden that Russia would act as the U.S. would if offensive weapons were deployed near American borders.

White House officials offered a far more muted post-call readout, suggesting the leaders agreed there are areas where the two sides can make meaningful progress but also differences that might be impossible to resolve.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden "urged Russia to de-escalate tensions with Ukraine" and "made clear that the United States and its allies and partners will respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine."

Putin requested the call, the second between the leaders this month, ahead of scheduled talks between senior U.S. and Russian officials Jan. 9 and 10 in Geneva. The Geneva talks will be followed by a meeting of the Russia-NATO Council on Jan. 12 and negotiations at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in Vienna on Jan. 13.

White House officials said Thursday's call lasted 50 minutes, ending after midnight in Moscow.

Biden told Putin the two powers now face "two paths": diplomacy or American deterrence through sanctions, according to a senior administration official. Biden said the route taken, according to the official who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity, will "depend on Russia's actions in the period ahead."

Russia has made clear it wants a written commitment that Ukraine will never be allowed to join NATO and that the alliance's military equipment will not be positioned in former Soviet states, demands that the Biden administration has rejected.

Biden told Putin a diplomatic path remains open even as the Russians have moved an estimated 100,000

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troops toward Ukraine and Kremlin officials have turned up the volume on their demands for new guarantees from the U.S. and NATO.

White House officials said Biden made clear that the U.S. stands ready to exact substantial economic pain through sanctions should Putin decide to take military action in Ukraine.

Putin reacted strongly.

He "noted that it would be a mistake that our ancestors would see as a grave error. A lot of mistakes have been made over the past 30 years, and we would better avoid more such mistakes in this situation," Ushakov said.

Russia's demands are to be discussed during the talks in Geneva, but it remains unclear what, if anything, Biden would be willing to offer Putin in exchange for defusing the crisis.

Draft security documents Moscow submitted demand that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The U.S. and its allies have refused to offer Russia the kind of guarantees on Ukraine that Putin wants, citing NATO's principle that membership is open to any qualifying country. They agreed, however, to hold talks with Russia to discuss its concerns.

The security proposal by Moscow has raised the question of whether Putin is making unrealistic demands in the expectation of a Western rejection that would give him a pretext to invade.

Steven Pifer, who served as U.S. ambassador to Ukraine in the Clinton administration, said the Biden administration could engage on some elements of Russia's draft document if Moscow is serious about talks.

Meanwhile, key NATO members have made clear there is no appetite for expanding the alliance in the near future. The U.S. and allies could also be receptive to language in the Russians' draft document calling for establishing new consultative mechanisms, such as the NATO-Russia Council and a hotline between NATO and Russia.

"The draft treaty's proposed bar on any NATO military activity in Ukraine, eastern Europe, the Caucasus, or Central Asia is an overreach, but some measures to limit military exercises and activities on a reciprocal basis might be possible," Pifer, who is now a senior fellow at Brookings Institution, wrote in an analysis for the Washington think tank.

Biden and Putin, who met in Geneva in June to discuss an array of tensions in the U.S.-Russia relationship, are not expected to take part in the January talks.

Last week, Russia test-fired Zircon hypersonic missiles, a move Russian officials said was meant to help make Russia's push for security guarantees "more convincing." The test was the first time Zircon missiles were launched in a salvo, indicating the completion of tests before the new missile enters service with the Russian navy next year and arms its cruisers, frigates and submarines.

U.S. intelligence earlier this month determined that Russian planning was underway for a possible military offensive that could begin as soon as early 2022, but that Putin had yet to determine whether to move forward with it.

Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's Security and Defense Council, said Thursday his country believes there is no immediate threat of a major Russian invasion.

"Our experts say that the Russian Federation just physically can't mount a big invasion of our territory," Danilov said. "There is a time period needed for preparations."

The U.S. military has flown surveillance flights in Ukrainian airspace this week, including a flight Thursday by an Air Force E-8C JSTARS aircraft, according to Chuck Pritchard, a spokesman for U.S. European Command. That plane is equipped to provide intelligence on ground forces.

Russia has denied any intention of launching an invasion and, in turn, has accused Ukraine of hatching plans to try to reclaim control of territories held by Moscow-backed rebels by force. Ukraine has rejected the claim.

At the same time, Putin has warned that Moscow will have to take "adequate military-technical measures" if the West continues its "aggressive" course "on the threshold of our home."

Last month, Putin voiced concern that NATO could potentially use the Ukrainian territory for the deploy-

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ment of missiles that would be capable of reaching Moscow in just five minutes and said that Zircon would give Russia a comparable capability.

As Biden prepared for the talks with Putin, the administration also sought to highlight its commitment to Ukraine and drive home that Washington is committed to the "principle of nothing about you without you" in shaping policy that affects European allies. Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke Wednesday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Past military incursions by Putin loom large.

In 2014, Russian troops marched into the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea and seized the territory from Ukraine. Russia's annexation of Crimea was one of the darker moments for President Barack Obama on the international stage.

The U.S.-Russia relationship was badly damaged near the end of President George W. Bush's administration after Russia's 2008 invasion of its neighbor Georgia after Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered his troops into the breakaway region of South Ossetia.

Biden, who is spending the week in his home state of Delaware, spoke to Putin from his home near Wilmington. The White House distributed a photo of the president speaking to the Russian leader from a desk lined with family photos.

Colorado wildfires burn hundreds of homes, force evacuations

By PATTY NIEBERG Associated Press/Report for America

DENVER (AP) — An estimated 580 homes, a hotel and a shopping center have burned and tens of thousands of people were evacuated in wind-fueled wildfires outside Denver, officials said Thursday evening.

At least one first responder and six others were injured, though Boulder County Sheriff Joe Pelle acknowledged there could be more injuries and deaths could be possible due to the intensity of fires that quickly swept across the region as winds gusted up to 105 mph (169 kph).

The first fire erupted just before 10:30 a.m. and was "attacked pretty quickly and laid down later in the day and is currently being monitored" with no structures lost, Pelle said.

A second wildfire, reported just after 11 a.m., "ballooned and spread rapidly east," Pelle said. The blaze spans 2.5 square miles (6.5 square kilometers) and has engulfed parts of the area in smoky, orangish skies and sent residents scrambling to get to safety.

The activity of the fires, which are burning unusually late into the winter season, will depend on how the winds behave overnight and could determine when crews are able to go in and begin assessing the damage and searching for any victims.

"This is the kind of fire we can't fight head on," Pelle said. "We actually had deputy sheriffs and firefighters in areas that had to pull out because they just got overrun," he added.

Evacuations have been ordered for the city of Louisville, home to about 21,000 people, and Superior, which has another 13,000 residents.

The neighboring towns are roughly 20 miles (32 kilometers) northwest of Denver in an area filled with middle and upper-middle class subdivisions surrounded by shopping centers, parks and schools. The area is in between Denver and Boulder, a foothills college town home to the University of Colorado.

Residents evacuated fairly calmly and orderly, but the winding streets in the suburban subdivisions quickly became clogged as people tried to get out. It sometimes took cars as long as 45 minutes to advance about a half mile (less than a kilometer).

Small fires cropped up here and there in surprising places — on the grass in a median or in a dumpster in the middle of a parking lot — as wind gusts caused the fire to jump and spread. Shifting winds caused the skies to turn from clear to smoky and then back again as emergency sirens blared nearby.

Some of the several blazes in the area Thursday were sparked by downed power lines.

Six people who were injured in the fires were being treated at UCHHealth Broomfield Hospital, spokesperson Kelli Christensen said. A nearby portion of U.S. Highway 36 also was shut down.

Colorado's Front Range, where most of the state's population lives, had an extremely dry and mild fall, and winter so far has continued to be mostly dry. Denver set a record for most consecutive days without

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snow before it got a small storm on Dec. 10. It hasn't snowed since, though snow was expected in the region Friday.

One video captured by a bystander outside a Superior Costco store showed an apocalyptic scene with winds whipping through barren trees in the parking lot surrounded by gray skies, a hazy sun and small fires scattered across the ground.

Leah Angstman and her husband saw similar dark skies while returning to their Louisville home from Denver International Airport after being away for the holidays. As they were sitting on the bus going toward Boulder, Angstman recalled instantly leaving clear blue skies and entering clouds of brown and yellow smoke.

"The wind rocked the bus so hard that I thought the bus would tip," she wrote in a message to The Associated Press.

The visibility was so poor that the bus had to pull over and they waited a half-hour until a regional transit authority van escorted them to a turnaround on the highway. There she saw four separate fires burning in bushes across the freeway, she said.

"The sky was dark, dark brown, and the dirt was blowing in swirls across the sidewalk like snakes," she said.

Angstman later ended up evacuating, getting in a car with her husband and driving northeast without knowing where they would end up.

Vignesh Kasinath, an assistant professor of biochemistry at the University of Colorado in Boulder, evacuated from a neighborhood in Superior with his wife and her parents. Kasinath said the family was overwhelmed because of the sudden evacuation warning and anxious from the chaos while trying to leave.

"It's only because I am active on Twitter I came to know about this," said Kasinath, who said he did not receive an official evacuation notice from authorities.

The fires prompted Gov. Jared Polis to declare a state of a emergency, allowing the state to access disaster emergency funds.

The evacuations come as climate change is making weather more extreme and wildfires more frequent and destructive, scientists say. A historic drought and heat waves have made wildfires harder to fight in the U.S. West.

Ninety percent of Boulder County is in severe or extreme drought, and hasn't seen substantial rainfall since mid-summer.

"With any snow on the ground, this absolutely would not have happened in the way that it did," said snow hydrologist Keith Musselman, who was at home when the fire broke out not far away.

Musselman said this severe fire risk can be expected in September and October following a dry summer, but the lack of any precipitation – snow or rain – this late in the season is highly unusual.

The National Weather Service predicts up to a foot of snow could fall tomorrow in Boulder, and that moisture would bring substantial relief, Musselman said.

Colorado governor slashes trucker's prison term to 10 years

By COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Colorado Gov. Jared Polis on Thursday shortened the prison sentence of a truck driver convicted in a deadly crash to 10 years, drastically reducing his original 110-year term that drew widespread outrage.

The decision on Rogel Aguilera-Mederos' sentence was among several year-end commutations and pardons issued by Polis.

The move comes days after a judge scheduled a hearing for next month to reconsider the sentence at the request of the district attorney, who planned to ask that it be reduced to 20 to 30 years.

Around 5 million people signed an online petition seeking clemency for Aguilera-Mederos, who was convicted of vehicular homicide and other charges in the explosive 2019 pileup that killed four people.

Aguilera-Mederos testified that he was hauling lumber when the brakes on his semitrailer failed as he was descending a steep grade of Interstate 70 in the Rocky Mountain foothills. His truck plowed into

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vehicles that had slowed because of another wreck, setting off a chain-reaction crash and a fireball that consumed vehicles and melted parts of the highway.

Judge Bruce Jones imposed the 110-year sentence on Dec. 13 after finding it was the mandatory minimum term set forth under state law, noting it would not have been his choice.

Prosecutors had argued that as Aguilera-Mederos' truck barreled down from the mountains, he could have used a runaway ramp alongside the interstate that is designed to safely stop vehicles that have lost their brakes.

District Attorney Alexis King said Thursday she was disappointed with the governor's decision. She said it was premature and went against the wishes of the surviving victims and families who lost loved ones, who wanted to have the judge who oversaw the trial determine the appropriate sentence.

"We are meeting with the victims and their loved ones this evening to support them in navigating this unprecedented action and to ensure they are treated with fairness, dignity, and respect during this difficult time," she said in a statement.

The crash killed 24-year-old Miguel Angel Lamas Arellano, 67-year-old William Bailey, 61-year-old Doyle Harrison and 69-year-old Stanley Politano.

In a letter to Aguilera-Mederos explaining his decision, Polis said that while he was not blameless in the crash, the 110-year sentence was disproportionate when compared with inmates who committed intentional, premeditated or violent crimes.

The governor said the case would hopefully spur a discussion about sentencing laws, but he noted any future changes would not help Aguilera-Mederos.

"There is an urgency to remedy this unjust sentence and restore confidence in the uniformity and fairness of our criminal justice system, and consequently I have chosen to commute your sentence now," Polis wrote.

Biden talks sanctions, Putin warns of rupture over Ukraine

By AAMER MADHANI and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

WILMINGTON, Del. (AP) — President Joe Biden warned Russia's Vladimir Putin on Thursday that the U.S. could impose new sanctions against Russia if it takes further military action against Ukraine, while Putin responded that such a U.S. move could lead to a complete rupture of ties between the nations.

The two leaders spoke frankly for nearly an hour amid growing alarm over Russia's troop buildup near Ukraine, a crisis that has deepened as the Kremlin has stiffened its insistence on border security guarantees and test-fired hypersonic missiles to underscore its demands.

Further U.S. sanctions "would be a colossal mistake that would entail grave consequences," said Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov, who briefed reporters in Moscow after the Biden-Putin phone conversation. He added that Putin told Biden that Russia would act as the U.S. would if offensive weapons were deployed near American borders.

White House officials offered a far more muted post-call readout, suggesting the leaders agreed there are areas where the two sides can make meaningful progress but also differences that might be impossible to resolve.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Biden "urged Russia to de-escalate tensions with Ukraine" and "made clear that the United States and its allies and partners will respond decisively if Russia further invades Ukraine."

Putin requested the call, the second between the leaders this month, ahead of scheduled talks between senior U.S. and Russian officials Jan. 9 and 10 in Geneva. The Geneva talks will be followed by a meeting of the Russia-NATO Council on Jan. 12 and negotiations at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe in Vienna on Jan. 13.

White House officials said Thursday's call lasted 50 minutes, ending after midnight in Moscow.

Biden told Putin the two powers now face "two paths": diplomacy or American deterrence through sanctions, according to a senior administration official. Biden said the route taken, according to the official who

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briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity, will "depend on Russia's actions in the period ahead."

Russia has made clear it wants a written commitment that Ukraine will never be allowed to join NATO and that the alliance's military equipment will not be positioned in former Soviet states, demands that the Biden administration has rejected.

Biden told Putin a diplomatic path remains open even as the Russians have moved an estimated 100,000 troops toward Ukraine and Kremlin officials have turned up the volume on their demands for new guarantees from the U.S. and NATO.

White House officials said Biden made clear that the U.S. stands ready to exact substantial economic pain through sanctions should Putin decide to take military action in Ukraine.

Putin reacted strongly.

He "noted that it would be a mistake that our ancestors would see as a grave error. A lot of mistakes have been made over the past 30 years, and we would better avoid more such mistakes in this situation," Ushakov said.

Russia's demands are to be discussed during the talks in Geneva, but it remains unclear what, if anything, Biden would be willing to offer Putin in exchange for defusing the crisis.

Draft security documents Moscow submitted demand that NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe.

The U.S. and its allies have refused to offer Russia the kind of guarantees on Ukraine that Putin wants, citing NATO's principle that membership is open to any qualifying country. They agreed, however, to hold talks with Russia to discuss its concerns.

The security proposal by Moscow has raised the question of whether Putin is making unrealistic demands in the expectation of a Western rejection that would give him a pretext to invade.

Steven Pifer, who served as U.S. ambassador to Ukraine in the Clinton administration, said the Biden administration could engage on some elements of Russia's draft document if Moscow is serious about talks.

Meanwhile, key NATO members have made clear there is no appetite for expanding the alliance in the near future. The U.S. and allies could also be receptive to language in the Russians' draft document calling for establishing new consultative mechanisms, such as the NATO-Russia Council and a hotline between NATO and Russia.

"The draft treaty's proposed bar on any NATO military activity in Ukraine, eastern Europe, the Caucasus, or Central Asia is an overreach, but some measures to limit military exercises and activities on a reciprocal basis might be possible," Pifer, who is now a senior fellow at Brookings Institution, wrote in an analysis for the Washington think tank.

Biden and Putin, who met in Geneva in June to discuss an array of tensions in the U.S.-Russia relationship, are not expected to take part in the January talks.

Last week, Russia test-fired Zircon hypersonic missiles, a move Russian officials said was meant to help make Russia's push for security guarantees "more convincing." The test was the first time Zircon missiles were launched in a salvo, indicating the completion of tests before the new missile enters service with the Russian navy next year and arms its cruisers, frigates and submarines.

U.S. intelligence earlier this month determined that Russian planning was underway for a possible military offensive that could begin as soon as early 2022, but that Putin had yet to determine whether to move forward with it.

Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's Security and Defense Council, said Thursday his country believes there is no immediate threat of a major Russian invasion.

"Our experts say that the Russian Federation just physically can't mount a big invasion of our territory," Danilov said. "There is a time period needed for preparations."

The U.S. military has flown surveillance flights in Ukrainian airspace this week, including a flight Thursday by an Air Force E-8C JSTARS aircraft, according to Chuck Pritchard, a spokesman for U.S. European Command. That plane is equipped to provide intelligence on ground forces.

Russia has denied any intention of launching an invasion and, in turn, has accused Ukraine of hatching

plans to try to reclaim control of territories held by Moscow-backed rebels by force. Ukraine has rejected the claim.

At the same time, Putin has warned that Moscow will have to take "adequate military-technical measures" if the West continues its "aggressive" course "on the threshold of our home."

Last month, Putin voiced concern that NATO could potentially use the Ukrainian territory for the deployment of missiles that would be capable of reaching Moscow in just five minutes and said that Zircon would give Russia a comparable capability.

As Biden prepared for the talks with Putin, the administration also sought to highlight its commitment to Ukraine and drive home that Washington is committed to the "principle of nothing about you without you" in shaping policy that affects European allies. Secretary of State Antony Blinken spoke Wednesday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Past military incursions by Putin loom large.

In 2014, Russian troops marched into the Black Sea peninsula of Crimea and seized the territory from Ukraine. Russia's annexation of Crimea was one of the darker moments for President Barack Obama on the international stage.

The U.S.-Russia relationship was badly damaged near the end of President George W. Bush's administration after Russia's 2008 invasion of its neighbor Georgia after Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered his troops into the breakaway region of South Ossetia.

Biden, who is spending the week in his home state of Delaware, spoke to Putin from his home near Wilmington. The White House distributed a photo of the president speaking to the Russian leader from a desk lined with family photos.

What's next for Ghislaine Maxwell after guilty verdict?

By MALLIKA SEN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — With Wednesday's guilty verdict in the sex-trafficking trial of Ghislaine Maxwell, here's a look at what the once high-flying Jeffrey Epstein confidante was accused of and what's next for her:

WHO WERE GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S ACCUSERS?

The prosecution hinged on the accusations of four women — Annie Farmer and the pseudonymous Jane, Kate and Carolyn — who say they were teenagers when Maxwell and Epstein sexually exploited them in the 1990s and early 2000s.

ON WHAT CHARGES WAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL CONVICTED?

The trial focused on six counts:

1. conspiracy to entice minors to travel to engage in illegal sex acts
2. enticement of a minor to travel to engage in illegal sex acts
3. conspiracy to transport minors with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity
4. transportation of a minor with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity
5. sex trafficking conspiracy
6. sex trafficking of a minor

She was convicted on all charges except the second count, despite her lawyers' assertions she was just a patsy.

WHY WAS SHE ACQUITTED ON ONE COUNT?

Without public statements from the jurors, who have yet to come forward, it's impossible to say for sure. But the second count, enticement of a minor to travel to engage in illegal sex acts, was perhaps the most ambiguous of the charges levied. Maxwell was accused of having "enticed" Jane to New York City, arranging flights and offering gifts, knowing that Epstein would abuse her. During deliberations, the jury seemed to be hung up on this count, asking for the definition of "enticement" in a note.

HOW EXACTLY DO YOU PRONOUNCE 'GHISLAINE'?

Hard "g," silent "s." Think "ghee," like the clarified butter. If it helps, the cover of the New York Post — run by Rupert Murdoch, a rival of Maxwell's late media baron father — the day after the verdict: "GHILTY!"

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HOW MUCH PRISON TIME DOES GHISLAINE MAXWELL FACE?

The most serious count on which the 60-year-old was convicted carries up to 40 years in prison. The count on which she acquitted was fairly minor, carrying a five-year maximum.

SO WHAT'S NEXT FOR GHISLAINE MAXWELL?

She needs to be sentenced, but a date has yet to be set. A family statement the night of the verdict said an appeal had already been started. And she faces another trial, on two counts of perjury that were spun off from her indictment.

WHY IS GHISLAINE MAXWELL CHARGED WITH PERJURY?

Those counts are based on her answers during 2016 depositions in a since-settled lawsuit brought by accuser Virginia Giuffre. She's accused of lying by saying "I don't know what you're talking about" in response to a question about whether Epstein had a "scheme to recruit underage girls for sexual massages." She's also accused of lying by saying she didn't recall whether there were sex toys or devices at Epstein's Florida home and by saying she wasn't aware Epstein was having sex with anyone but her. Her lawyers argued those depositions shouldn't be used at the criminal trial because of a court-approved agreement her answers would stay confidential.

WHAT WAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL UP TO BEFORE HER ARREST?

Maxwell was arrested in July 2020 — almost a year after Epstein killed himself in jail while awaiting trial. After Epstein's death, she withdrew from public activities like running an oceans charity. Her whereabouts became a subject of public speculation. Was that her eating a burger and reading a book on CIA operatives in Southern California? Was she living in Britain or Paris or maybe even Massachusetts? Prosecutors say she went into hiding in New Hampshire — where she was eventually arrested — in a million-dollar home where she kept her cellphone wrapped in foil.

SO HAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL BEEN IN JAIL THIS WHOLE TIME?

Yes, despite multiple requests for bail, Maxwell was deemed a flight risk and has spent well over a year lodged in a federal lockup in Brooklyn. Her attorneys and family have lambasted jail conditions as punitive and inhospitable to Maxwell's ability to mount a proper defense. Her attorney asked immediately after the conviction was announced that Maxwell be given a COVID-19 booster shot because infection rates in her jail were rising dramatically. Once she's sentenced, she will be moved to a federal prison.

HOW LONG DID THE TRIAL TAKE?

A month. Testimony started Nov. 29; we had a verdict Dec. 29. The whole trial was initially projected to last six weeks, but the witness lists for both sides were dramatically truncated without explanation. The jury took five full days to decide the case.

WHY DIDN'T GHISLAINE MAXWELL TESTIFY?

She told the judge — not without some defiance — that she had no need to testify, as the prosecution had failed to adequately prove their case. The tactic didn't work out for her, but it's not an unusual one: High-profile defendants rarely put themselves on the stand, as it opens them up to a lot more scrutiny.

WHAT EXACTLY WAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH JEFFREY EPSTEIN?

They were romantically involved, but at some point — the timeline is unclear — she says she transitioned to being more of an employee, running his household (Epstein had homes all over the place: Palm Beach, Florida; New Mexico; Manhattan; a private island in the U.S. Virgin Islands; Paris). Prosecutors introduced records showing Epstein had paid Maxwell more than \$20 million through the years and accused her of functioning as Epstein's madam, procuring underage girls to satisfy him sexually.

HOW IS PRINCE ANDREW INVOLVED IN ALL OF THIS?

He's not. Not exactly, at least, but Maxwell's conviction isn't good news for the embattled British royal. Giuffre is suing Andrew, saying he sexually abused her when she was 17. She says Maxwell facilitated her meetings with Andrew, who has denied the account. These accusations were left out of this trial, though Andrew's name did come up in testimony: a pilot of Epstein's private jet, dubbed the "Lolita Express" by the news media, testified he had flown Andrew and an accuser confirmed she told the FBI she had flown with the prince, as well.

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WHO IS GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S HUSBAND?

A mystery man! She was living with him when she was arrested in New Hampshire, but court documents have not made his name public. He did support her bail attempts, but was never spotted at the trial. She had transferred most of her assets to him, but has also told officials they're in the process of divorcing.

IS ANYONE ON GHISLAINE MAXWELL'S SIDE?

Her family is sticking by her. Her sister Isabel attended each day of proceedings, often joined by other siblings, and her family issued a strong statement of support for their sister after the verdict. Ghislaine is notably the baby of the family and said to have been the favorite of her father, Robert Maxwell, who died falling off a yacht named for her.

HOW HAS GHISLAINE MAXWELL BEEN SPENDING HER TIME IN JAIL?

According to a website set up by her family, Maxwell has been working through a pile of books. Her reading list runs the gamut of criminal-justice related books like the award-winning "Just Mercy" by Bryan Stevenson to "Licensed to Lie: Exposing Corruption in the Department Justice" by Sidney Powell, a conspiracy theorist and former lawyer for President Donald Trump. She's also been making her way through Philip Pullman's "His Dark Materials" fantasy series and popular book club fiction pick "Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine," by Gail Honeyman.

CDC warns against cruises, regardless of vaccination status

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention warned people on Thursday not to go on cruises, regardless of their vaccination status, because of onboard outbreaks fueled by the omicron variant.

The CDC said it has more than 90 cruise ships under investigation or observation as a result of COVID-19 cases. The agency did not disclose the number of infections.

"The virus that causes COVID-19 spreads easily between people in close quarters on board ships, and the chance of getting COVID-19 on cruise ships is very high," even if people are fully vaccinated and have received a booster, the CDC said.

The Cruise Lines International Association said it was disappointed with the new recommendations, saying the industry was singled out despite the fact it follows stricter health protocols than other travel sectors.

The decision "is particularly perplexing considering that cases identified on cruise ships consistently make up a very slim minority of the total population onboard," a statement said. "The majority of those cases are asymptomatic or mild in nature, posing little to no burden on medical resources onboard or onshore."

In March 2020, as the coronavirus took hold in the U.S., the CDC put a halt to all cruises for what turned out to be 15 months. Last June, it allowed ships to resume sailing under new strict new conditions.

In August, as the delta variant surged, the agency warned people who are at risk of severe illness despite being vaccinated not to go on cruises.

The CDC on Thursday also recommended that passengers get tested and quarantine for five days after docking, regardless of their vaccination status and even if they have no symptoms.

Omicron has sent cases skyrocketing to unprecedented levels across the U.S., including Florida, the hub of the nation's cruise industry. The state set another record this week for new daily cases, with more than 58,000 recorded Wednesday.

U.S. cruise lines have not announced any plans to halt trips, though vessels have been denied entry at some foreign ports.

Carnival Corp.'s spokesman Roger Frizzell said in an email after the CDC recommendation that the company had no planned changes.

"Our enhanced health and safety protocols have proven to be effective time and time again over the past year," he said.

Before the CDC announcement, Royal Caribbean Group said in a statement that omicron is leading to passenger cancellations and changes to itineraries, but it is causing "significantly less severe symptoms

than earlier variants.”

The company said that since cruising restarted in U.S. waters last spring, 1.1 million guests had traveled with its cruise lines and 1,745 people had tested positive for COVID-19, or about 0.16%.

It said that 41 people required hospitalization, and that no passengers hit with omicron had been taken to the hospital.

“We don’t like to see even one case, but our experience is a fraction of the comparable statistics of virtually any other comparable location or industry. Few businesses are subject to such intense scrutiny, regulation and disclosure requirements by so many authorities,” said Richard Fain, CEO of Royal Caribbean.

Most cruise lines require adult passengers to show proof of vaccination against COVID-19. Ships are allowed to relax measures such as mask use if at least 95% of passengers and 95% of crew are fully vaccinated.

Iris Krysty, 76, of Hamburg, New Jersey, and her husband are supposed to leave on a 10-day Caribbean cruise Jan. 19. This latest CDC warning leaves travelers like them in an unfair bind, she said. Krysty was told Thursday they can only get a refund if they test positive before the trip. So, they will go to avoid losing thousands of dollars — a decision their daughter and son-in-law are not happy with.

“I know they’re upset about us going but that’s a lot of money for us to lose,” Krysty said. “As far as we know, we’re going and hope we’ll be OK.”

Janine Calfo, 55, of Salt Lake City, put off a four-day Carnival cruise from Long Beach, California, to Ensenada, Mexico, earlier this month when she got a breakthrough case of COVID-19 three days before departure. She rebooked the cruise for February and is still set on going.

“This is my own personal opinion, but it looks like the omicron is going to be a quick burn,” said Calfo, who is asthmatic and plans to get the booster in a couple of weeks. “My cruise is over 40 days away.”

She added, though: “I think I will plan on getting travel insurance this time.”

US children hospitalized with COVID in record numbers

By MARTHA BELLISLE and TERRY TANG Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — The omicron-fueled surge that is sending COVID-19 cases rocketing in the U.S. is putting children in the hospital in record numbers, and experts lament that most of the youngsters are not vaccinated.

“It’s just so heartbreaking,” said Dr. Paul Offit, an infectious-disease expert at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia. “It was hard enough last year, but now you know that you have a way to prevent all this.”

During the week of Dec. 22-28, an average of 378 children 17 and under were admitted per day to hospitals with the coronavirus, a 66% increase from the week before, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported Thursday.

The previous high over the course of the pandemic was in early September, when child hospitalizations averaged 342 per day, the CDC said.

On a more hopeful note, children continue to represent a small percentage of those being hospitalized with COVID-19: An average of nearly 10,200 people of all ages were admitted per day during the same week in December. And many doctors say the youngsters seem less sick than those who came in during the delta surge over the summer.

Two months after vaccinations were approved for 5- to 11-year-olds, about 14% are fully protected, CDC data shows. The rate is higher for 12- to 17-year-olds, at about 53%.

A study released Thursday by the CDC confirmed that serious side effects from the Pfizer vaccine in children ages 5 to 11 are rare. The findings were based on approximately 8 million doses dispensed to youngsters in that age group.

Dr. Albert Ko, professor of epidemiology and infectious diseases at the Yale School of Public Health, noted that the low vaccination rate is, in part, a matter of timing: Younger children were not approved for the vaccine until November, and many are only now coming up on their second dose.

Offit said none of the vaccine-eligible children receiving care at his hospital about a week ago had been

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vaccinated, even though two-thirds had underlying conditions that put them at risk — either chronic lung disease or, more commonly, obesity. Only one was under the vaccination age of 5.

The scenes are heart-rending.

"They're struggling to breathe, coughing, coughing, coughing," Offit said. "A handful were sent to the ICU to be sedated. We put the attachment down their throat that's attached to a ventilator, and the parents are crying."

None of the parents or siblings was vaccinated either, he said.

The next four to six weeks are going to be rough, he said: "This is a virus that thrives in the winter."

Aria Shapiro, 6, spent her 12th day Thursday at Phoenix Children's Hospital. She tested positive for COVID-19 after getting her first dose of the vaccine Dec. 17.

Aria, who is considered "medically fragile" because she has epilepsy, suffered prolonged seizures in the hospital, and a breathing tube had to be put down her throat at one point, though she has since improved.

"We lived our life in for two years to prevent her from getting COVID, finally went for the vax, and the one thing that we didn't want to happen happened," said her mother, Sarah Shapiro. "It wasn't enough time for her body to build antibodies. She did end up getting COVID."

Overall, new COVID-19 cases in Americans of all ages have skyrocketed to the highest levels on record: an average of 300,000 per day, or 2 1/2 times the figure just two weeks ago. The highly contagious omicron accounted for 59% of new cases last week, according to the CDC.

Still, there are early indications that the variant causes milder illness than previous versions, and that the combination of the vaccine and the booster seems to protect people from its worst effects.

In California, 80 COVID-19-infected children were admitted to the hospital during the week of Dec. 20-26, compared with 50 in the last week of November, health officials said.

Seattle Children's also reported a bump in the number of children admitted over the past week. And while they are less seriously ill than those hospitalized over the summer, Dr. John McGuire cautioned that it is early in the omicron wave, and the full effects will become apparent over the next several weeks.

New York health authorities have also sounded the alarm.

The number of children admitted to the hospital per week in New York City with COVID-19 went from 22 to 109 between Dec. 5 and Dec. 24. Across all of New York state, it went from 70 to 184. Overall, almost 5,000 people in New York were in the hospital with COVID-19.

"A fourfold increase makes everybody jump with concern, but it's a small percentage," Ko said of the New York City figures. "Children have a low risk of being hospitalized, but those who do are unvaccinated."

Dr. Al Sacchetti, chief of emergency services at Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center in Camden, New Jersey, likewise said vaccinated children are handling the omicron outbreak extremely well.

"It makes a big difference in how these kids tolerate the disease, particularly if the child's got some medical issues," he said.

COVID-19 deaths have proved rare among children over the course of the pandemic. As of last week, 721 in the U.S. had died of the disease, according to data reported to the American Academy of Pediatrics. The overall U.S. death toll is more than 800,000.

Almost 199,000 child COVID-19 cases were reported during the week of Dec. 16-23, the pediatrics group said. That was about 20% of the more than 950,000 total cases recorded that week.

While many of these children will recover at home, they may have contact with others who are at much greater risk, said Dr. Jason Terk, a pediatrician in North Texas. He cared for a 10-year-old boy with COVID-19 who managed the disease well, but his father got sick and died, he said.

"The death of a parent is devastating, but the toxic stress for a young person in this situation is difficult to measure," he said.

EXPLAINER: Why are so many flights being canceled?

By TALI ARBEL and PAUL WISEMAN Associated Press

The forces that have scrambled thousands of flights since Christmas Eve could ease in January, but that's

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cold comfort to the millions of flyers with New Year's plans.

And if 2021 has taught us anything, it's that 2022 will likely be just as unpredictable.

Here's a look at what has mucked up flights for thousands of people this holiday season, and what could happen over the next few weeks.

WHAT HAPPENED?

Airlines weren't spared from the spread of the omicron variant, which knocked out flight crews at airlines that had already reduced the size of their workforces following the collapse of air travel in 2020.

The wave of omicron infections arrived at the same time that crowds began to pack airports for holiday travel. Then the Pacific Northwest and other areas were slammed with cold and heavy snowstorms.

The convergence of all three forced airlines to cancel thousands of flights starting on Christmas Eve. As of Thursday afternoon, about 7,800 flights departing from, going to, or within the U.S. have been scratched, according to flight-tracking firm FlightAware. More than 1,100 of those were on Thursday.

The U.S. was not alone. There have been thousands of cancellations abroad. European and Australian airlines report the same logistical issues dealing with COVID-19 and flight crews. Chinese airlines have made up a large percentage of cancellations.

To put that in perspective, most flights were OK. There are nearly 70,000 flights a day, globally, said aviation data provider Cirium.

WHEN MIGHT THINGS IMPROVE?

U.S. health officials this week halved guidance to five days of quarantine for asymptomatic Americans who catch the coronavirus. Airline industry experts say that will alleviate the staffing issues that have forced airlines to scratch flights — but the flight attendants unions say they're wary of the change and its effect on worker health. Yet cases of omicron, the fast-spreading variant of the COVID-19 virus, continue to rise. And that isn't the only problem.

It could take up to a week for airlines to fully recover from lingering bad weather, said Jim Hetzel, an expert on airline operations at Cirium.

Getting past the holiday rush will also help. January and February are the year's slowest travel months after the New Year's rush, said Willis Orlando, senior flight expert at Scott's Cheap Flights. "There should be a lot more room for airline to cut routes, reassign pilots and have staff in reserve."

Some airlines have also recognized that the confluence of the holiday rush, omicron and bad weather make it impossible to continue with current schedules.

JetBlue said Wednesday that it was reducing its schedule through mid-January in hopes of giving customers more time to make alternate plans rather than suffer last-minute cancellations — although still more cancellations remain likely.

"We sincerely apologize for the inconvenience that these schedule changes bring," said spokesperson Derek Dombrowski. He said crew members are volunteering to work extra hours and managers are pitching in where they're trained to do so.

Alaska Airlines urged flyers who could to reschedule for after Jan. 2, as it was reducing Seattle departures and more cancellations and delays were expected this week. Delta and United spokespeople said they could not predict when operations would normalize.

WAS THIS SPATE OF CANCELLATIONS UNUSUAL?

Inclement weather is a sporadic but constant threat to travel in winter. A 2021 rebound in travel, when airlines didn't have enough staff to keep up with demand, led to heavy cancellations and delays earlier this year.

Southwest Airlines struggled in summer and fall because of delays and cancellations, which it blamed on computer problems, staffing shortages and bad weather. American canceled over 1,000 flights over Halloween weekend because of staffing shortages. Delta canceled dozens of flights around Easter this year because of staffing problems.

COULD THE AIRLINES HAVE DONE ANYTHING TO PREVENT THIS?

Omicron was a shock to the system and its speed broadsided just about everyone, airlines included.

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"This is kind of an extreme circumstance," said Hetzel, the operations expert at Cirium.

Some airlines were hit harder than others simply because of where they tend to operate. Southwest and American had lower geographic exposure to the areas of the U.S. where weather was awful, and less of its staff is based in areas where COVID-19 cases are surging, said Raymond James analyst Savanthi Syth.

Labor groups, however, say more could have been done, like offering extra pay to flight attendants during the holiday earlier on. The Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, which represents 50,000 workers at 17 airlines including United, Alaska, Frontier and Spirit, said Delta started offering on Christmas Eve but should have done it sooner. The union that represents American's flight attendants said it probably helped that the airline recalled staffers who were on leave. In a November memo, the chief operating officer at American noted that nearly 1,800 flight attendants returned from leave in November, and 800 would return in December, along with 600 new hires.

Syth, of Raymond James, did an analysis of which airlines she thought were more at risk of operational problems during the holiday season, which drives most of the fourth quarter's profitability for airlines. She found that airlines that were conservative with scheduling were hit as well as those that were aggressive.

"This leads me to believe that this has more to do with the uniqueness of omicron-variant and the greater impact it is having in the Northeast currently than a failure on the part of airlines to prepare," Syth said.

The airlines were more prepared for the holidays than they were for hail and thunderstorms that snarled travel earlier this year, said Charles Leocha, president and founder of the consumer advocacy group Travelers United.

"It's a far cry from the episodes we were facing in the summer and autumn when we had airlines that were out of whack for two or three days," Leocha said. "It's been a really good effort. The airlines have paid more money to keep people on reserve and they're paying more money to keep people flying."

Airlines have been hiring. The U.S. Department of Transportation says that as of October, U.S. passenger airlines employed more than 400,000 full-time workers, but that's about 9% fewer than they employed two years ago.

Even critics say airlines this year were at the mercy of the pandemic.

"Airlines should have planned better and the (Transportation Department) should have monitored airline capacity and required ready reserves of equipment and personnel given the large federal subsidies since 2020," said Paul Hudson, president of the advocacy group FlyersRights.org. "But the omicron variant high infection rate is primarily to blame in the holiday season disruptions."

WHAT SHOULD TRAVELERS DO IF AIRLINES CANCEL THEIR FLIGHTS?

If your flight is cancelled, most airlines will put you on the next available plane to your destination free of charge. "They will figure a way to get you there. You don't have to pay anything extra," Leocha said.

If you cancel your trip instead of taking an alternative flight, you are entitled to your money back, even if you had nonrefundable tickets. When they cancel flights, airlines tend to push customers toward vouchers for future flights instead of offering a full refund. Orlando, of Scott's Cheap Flights, urged travelers to remember their right to get their money back. "Airlines make it very easy to allow them to keep your money," he said.

You also can ask the airline to transfer your ticket to another airline, but it is are not obligated to do so. Likewise, airlines are not required to reimburse you for hotel rooms, cabs or other expenses.

Israel approves 4th vaccine dose for most vulnerable

By AUDREY HOROWITZ Associated Press

TEL AVIV (AP) — Israel has approved a fourth vaccine dose for people most vulnerable to COVID-19, an official said Thursday, becoming one of the first countries to do so as it braces for a wave of infections fueled by the omicron variant.

Nachman Ash, the director general of the Health Ministry, announced the decision at a press conference, saying the doses would initially be given to those with weakened immune systems.

"We will continue to track the data on a daily basis and we will see if we need to broaden this recom-

mentation to more of the population," he said.

The Sheba Medical Center later said it would begin administering the fourth dose to heart transplant patients early on Friday. Israel launched trials of the fourth dose at the center earlier this week, administering it to some 150 medical personnel who had gotten a booster in August.

Israel was among the first countries to roll out Pfizer's coronavirus vaccine a year ago and began rolling out boosters last summer. But it still saw a wave of infections blamed on the delta variant, and officials have warned of another driven by the fast-spreading omicron.

Around two-thirds of Israel's population of nearly 9.5 million have received at least one dose of the vaccine, and some 4.2 million Israelis have received all three doses, according to the latest Health Ministry figures.

"Israel will lead the way in administering a fourth vaccine (dose) to the Israeli people," Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said in a statement. "Israel's strategy for overcoming omicron is clear: The greater the wave, the greater the protection we will need to overcome it."

Earlier Thursday, Israel received its first shipment of pills that treat the worst effects of the virus.

It's among of the first countries to receive Pfizer's Paxlovid, a pill that can be taken at home to ward off the most severe symptoms of the coronavirus. All the previously authorized drugs require an IV or injection.

Israeli media reported that the first shipment consists of 20,000 doses, with more expected as Pfizer ramps up production.

Israel currently has more than 22,000 active patients, including more than 90 who are seriously ill. At least 8,243 people have died from COVID-19 in Israel since the start of the pandemic.

Last week, Chile announced that it would start offering a fourth dose in February. Chile has reported almost 86% of its population fully vaccinated, making it the country with the highest level of immunization against the coronavirus in Latin America.

Nursing home workers are urged to get boosters as cases soar

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Federal health officials on Thursday pressed nursing home workers to get their booster shots amid a spike in COVID-19 cases among staffers and a concerning lag in booster vaccination for residents and staff.

The omicron variant "is lightning fast, and we can't afford another COVID-19 surge in nursing homes," Health and Human Services Secretary Xavier Becerra said in a livestreamed appeal to the industry. "You know that. I know that. Higher numbers of COVID cases would likely once again have a devastating impact on our loved ones ... and we know we just have to work doubly hard to keep them safe."

Nursing homes are a testing ground for President Joe Biden's assertion that the United States is much better prepared to handle a surging virus than it was last winter. Although residents are a tiny proportion of the population, they represent a disproportionate share of Americans who have died in the coronavirus pandemic. Earlier this year the advent of vaccines brought the virus under control in nursing homes and allowed them to reopen to visitors. But that return to normalcy could be in jeopardy as omicron pushes COVID-19 cases to new highs for the nation.

Cases among nursing home staffers jumped to 10,353 for the week ending Dec. 27, a rise of nearly 80% from the previous week, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Staff deaths increased to 58, tripling from the previous week. Among residents, who are more heavily vaccinated, cases went up slightly and the data showed no increase in deaths.

With medical experts advising that a booster shot is critical to defend against omicron, Becerra said only 57% of nursing home residents and 25% of staff and have gotten boosters. That's clearly behind a booster rate of nearly 66% among people age 65 or older and about 45% for adults of all ages, according to statistics from the White House.

"We've got to change that," Becerra said.

The administration is urging some 1,400 federally funded community health centers across the land to partner with local nursing homes in a renewed vaccination campaign.

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Nursing home workers were supposed to be fully vaccinated by Jan. 4 under an earlier order issued by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which required staff at health care facilities that receive government money to get their shots. That directive got ensnared in litigation and the Supreme Court has set a special session next week to hear arguments on it, along with the much broader Biden administration vaccine mandate for workers at larger companies of all kinds. Together the orders would affect about 100 million employees.

"Once again nursing homes are really the ground zero," said Harvard health policy professor David Grabowski, who has tracked the impact of the pandemic on residents and staff. "How well we do in combating this virus can often be discerned by just looking at the nursing homes."

Grabowski said the Biden administration is right to raise the alarm now. "We see this time and time again: When staff (infection) rates go up, resident rates go up," he explained. Staffers unwittingly bring in the virus from surrounding communities, a common trigger for nursing home outbreaks.

Vaccines enabled nursing homes to weather the delta variant surge earlier this year, and timely booster shots should go a long way toward blocking omicron. "The more vaccines and boosters we have, the more lives we are going to save over the course of the winter," Grabowski said.

But some states are already seeing trouble.

COVID-19 outbreaks in Mississippi nursing homes have almost doubled in the past week, and officials say that indicates the state is probably heading into another major surge of virus cases and hospitalizations.

There were 63 outbreaks in Mississippi nursing homes Monday, about twice the number reported last week, state epidemiologist Dr. Paul Byers wrote in a midweek memo to Mississippi hospitals and health care providers.

Along with other data, that points to "very rapid growth of COVID-19 infection and transmission...we have now entered our 5th wave of COVID-19 in the state," Byers wrote.

One of the major nursing home industry groups is backing the administration's push on boosters.

The American Health Care Association said in a statement it's asking members to "double down on their efforts to get as many residents and staff fully vaccinated and boosted as soon as possible."

Maxwell verdict bodes ill for Prince Andrew's civil case

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prince Andrew wasn't on trial in the Ghislaine Maxwell sex trafficking case, but her conviction is bad news for the man who is ninth in line to the British throne.

With the conclusion of the Maxwell case, attention will now turn to a U.S. civil suit in which the plaintiff alleges Maxwell and long-time boyfriend Jeffrey Epstein took her to London, New York and the U.S. Virgin Islands to have sex with Andrew when she was underage.

Andrew denies the allegations, but Wednesday's verdict shows that at least one American jury was willing to believe the young women trafficked by Epstein and Maxwell in a criminal case, where the standard of proof is higher than in civil cases.

"To the extent there's overlap of evidence with respect to Prince Andrew's case, it certainly doesn't bode well," said Bradley Simon, a former U.S. federal prosecutor who now works as a defense attorney in complex civil cases. "But, as I said, every case hinges on its own specific facts and the judges will always instruct the jury on that."

Maxwell was convicted Wednesday of sex trafficking and conspiracy charges after a monthlong trial in New York.

While U.S. criminal cases must be proved beyond a reasonable doubt, civil defendants can be ordered to pay financial damages if they are found responsible based on a preponderance of the evidence.

The verdict is problematic for Andrew because he has long been friends with Maxwell, daughter of the late rags-to-riches media tycoon Robert Maxwell. Even after Epstein was charged with sex crimes, Andrew failed to distance himself from her.

Those links have already diminished the prince's standing.

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Andrew was forced to give up his duties as a working member of the royal family after a disastrous 2019 interview with the BBC that only increased public concern about his ties to Epstein and Maxwell. The prince was widely criticized for his explanation of why he maintained contact with Epstein after the financier was accused of sexual misconduct and for failing to show empathy for Epstein's victims.

Although the Maxwell trial didn't offer any sensational new allegations about Andrew, it once again reminds people about the sordid allegations and weakens his standing with the public, said Chris Scott of Slateford, a London law firm that specializes in reputational issues.

"It just adds credibility to the accounts of people," Scott told The Associated Press. "You have a criminal court finding now in the U.S. supporting that there was the trafficking going on. In a sense, it becomes much harder for people to run the angle that this is all made up when you do have that credibility building up. So I think that that will be very problematic for him."

The civil suit against Andrew was filed last August by Virginia Giuffre, who says she was 17 when she was flown to London to have sex with Andrew at Maxwell's house in Belgravia, an upscale neighborhood that is home to many foreign embassies and wealthy expatriates. Other encounters with Andrew occurred at Epstein's homes in Manhattan and the U.S. Virgin Islands, according to her lawsuit.

Giuffre, who wasn't part of the criminal case, has described Maxwell as a "Mary Poppins" figure who made young girls feel comfortable as they were lured into Epstein's web.

It was at Maxwell's home in London that a photo of Andrew with his arm around Giuffre's waist is alleged to have been taken — an image that has long been central to Giuffre's allegations. In the BBC interview, Andrew suggested the image had been faked.

"I have no recollection of ever meeting this lady," he said. "None whatsoever."

Given the high stakes for Andrew, one question surrounding the civil suit is whether it will ever get to trial. Gloria Allred, who represents a number of Epstein's victims, told the BBC she expects the prince's attorneys to file a series of procedural challenges to try to derail the case.

This strategy has already been on display.

Andrew initially denied that he had been legally served with court papers notifying him of the lawsuit. Then in October, his lawyers asked Judge Lewis A. Kaplan to throw out the suit, saying the prince never sexually abused Giuffre and that they believed she sued Andrew "to achieve another payday at his expense and at the expense of those closest to him." Last week, they mounted another challenge, arguing that Giuffre's lawsuit should be thrown out because she no longer lives in the U.S.

Andrew met Maxwell while she was studying history at the University of Oxford in the early 1980s.

Like her formidable and well-connected father, Ghislaine Maxwell became a master networker, building a long list of contacts in the world of wealth and power in which she grew up.

After graduating, she worked for the family publishing empire in a variety of roles. In 1991, at the age of 29, she became her father's U.S. emissary after he bought the New York Daily News amid efforts to compete with fellow media tycoon — and New York Post owner — Rupert Murdoch.

Robert Maxwell died later that year when he fell off his yacht — the Lady Ghislaine — in the Canary Islands, an event some saw as an accident and others a suicide. Investors soon discovered that his wealth was an illusion: Maxwell had diverted hundreds of millions of pounds from his companies' pension funds to prop up his publishing empire.

Soon after her father's death, Ghislaine Maxwell was photographed sitting next to Epstein during a memorial event at the Plaza Hotel in Manhattan.

Maxwell brought star power to her relationship with Epstein, and the two were soon attending parties with the likes of Bill Clinton and Donald Trump. Andrew would later invite Maxwell and Epstein to Windsor Castle and Sandringham, Queen Elizabeth II's country estate.

Ian Maxwell said Thursday that the family still believes his sister is innocent and will support efforts to appeal her conviction.

"We are very disappointed with the verdict," the family said in a statement on Wednesday. "We have already started the appeal tonight, and we believe that she will ultimately be vindicated."

Andrew has in recent years sought to distance himself from Epstein, who killed himself in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges.

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Andrew told the BBC that he saw Epstein a maximum three times a year and sometimes stayed at one of his homes when he was in the U.S.

The prince said he stopped meeting with Epstein in 2006 after he became aware of a sexual abuse investigation that eventually led to the financier serving 13 months in jail. Andrew said he had one last meeting with Epstein in December 2010 to tell him they couldn't remain in contact.

"It would be a considerable stretch to say that he was a very, very close friend," Andrew said.

Do at-home COVID-19 tests detect the omicron variant?

By CARLA K. JOHNSON AP Medical Writer

Do at-home COVID-19 tests detect the omicron variant?

Yes, but U.S. health officials say early data suggests they may be less sensitive at picking it up.

Government recommendations for using at-home tests haven't changed. People should continue to use them when a quick result is important.

"The bottom line is the tests still detect COVID-19 whether it is delta or alpha or omicron," says Dr. Emily Volk, president of the College of American Pathologists.

Government scientists have been checking to make sure the rapid tests still work as each new variant comes along. And this week, the Food and Drug Administration said preliminary research indicates they detect omicron, but may have reduced sensitivity. The agency noted it's still studying how the tests perform with the variant, which was first detected in late November.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert, said the FDA wanted to be "totally transparent" by noting the sensitivity might come down a bit, but that the tests remain important.

There are many good uses for at-home tests, Volk says. Combined with vaccination, they can make you more comfortable about gathering with family and friends.

If you've been exposed to a person who tested positive but you don't have symptoms, a rapid test five days later can give a good indication of whether you caught the virus. It can also help if you're not sure whether your runny nose or sore throat is COVID-19.

But consider the context when looking at results. If you feel sick after going out to a nightclub in an area with high infection rates, for example, you should look at a negative result from an at-home test with a little more skepticism, Volk says.

Following up with a PCR test is a good idea, she says. Those tests are more accurate and are done at testing sites and hospitals.

Vivaldi opera gets premiere in Ferrara nearly 300 years late

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — The Catholic Church and the northern Italian city of Ferrara made their peace Thursday with Antonio Vivaldi nearly 300 years after the city's archbishop effectively canceled the staging of one of his operas, sending the famed Baroque composer into debt for his final years in exile.

Ferrara Archbishop Giancarlo Perego attended the ceremony opening Vivaldi's "Il Farnace" at the city's public theater, a decision hailed by the theater's artistic director as a "marvelous gesture" that helps heal the past and highlight one of Vivaldi's lesser-known works.

"We want to restore to Vivaldi what was taken from him here in Ferrara," Marcello Corvino told The Associated Press ahead of the premiere of "Il Farnace," which tells the story of the tragic dynasty of King Pharnaces II.

According to historians, in the late 1730s, Ferrara Cardinal Tommaso Ruffo banned Vivaldi from the city because Vivaldi, an ordained Catholic priest, had stopped celebrating Mass and was said to be in a relationship with one of his singers, Anna Giro. The decision effectively meant the cancellation of the scheduled 1739 Carnival production of Vivaldi's "Il Farnace," which had already enjoyed success in Italy and beyond.

In reality, Vivaldi didn't celebrate Mass because he had long suffered from respiratory problems, and his

relationship with Giro was like that of any of a composer with his lead singer, while Giro also served as something of a nursemaid to the sickly composer.

The cancellation proved financially disastrous for Vivaldi, Corvino said, since he had paid for the production himself ahead of time and was already experiencing a period of decline as his instrumental works had fallen out of favor.

Vivaldi went into debt and died in 1741 in Vienna. Only after his manuscripts were rediscovered did he earn posthumous fame for "The Four Seasons" and other concertos.

Massimo Faggioli, a Ferrara-born church historian and theologian, said Vivaldi like other artists of his era had enjoyed much more artistic freedom in his native Venice than in places like Ferrara, which had been part of the papal states and under the authority of the pope.

"Vivaldi got away with a lot of things in his life, but at a certain point he couldn't avoid the Vatican controlled or church controlled culture," Faggioli said.

Federico Maria Sardelli, a Vivaldi expert who is conducting the opera, said that after Cardinal Ruffo prohibited the Venetian composer from entering Ferrara, Vivaldi initially tried to score the production from afar. He wrote down explicit stage directions as well as expressive and interpretative notations that he normally would have given his singers in person.

Those notations remain in the manuscript prepared for the Ferrara production, which was never staged. Those notations provided guidance for the opera opening Thursday for a two-night run, Sardelli said.

"We have this treasure, this score, which is a mirror of Vivaldi's process," he said. "He wrote incredible things that no Baroque composer ever wrote in a score because they would say it in person. We have the fortune of having the voice of Vivaldi written down on this score."

At a conference Thursday at the theater before the premiere, Sardelli gave the current Ferrara archbishop, Perego, a bound copy of the score.

"With this gesture, we want to heal a fracture that needed to be healed," Sardelli said.

Perego, for his part, accepted the score and admitted that Cardinal Ruffo had taken a decision against Vivaldi that was based on rumor rather than fact. He noted that even Vivaldi's parish priest had attested to the "morality" of the priest-composer in a letter to Ruffo and that Giro was known to be a woman of "virtue and faith."

While insisting Ruffo had merely sought to promote "public morality," Perego said the lesson of Vivaldi, "Il Farnace" and Ferrara was one that Pope Francis often makes: "The tongue kills more than the sword."

States diverge on police reforms after George Floyd killing

By COLLEEN SLEVIN Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Maryland repealed its half-century-old Law Enforcement Officers Bill of Rights. Washington state reformed use-of-force policies and created a new agency to investigate when officers use deadly force. And California overcame objections from police unions to make sure officers fired in one jurisdiction couldn't be hired in another.

Those are some of the far-reaching policing changes passed this year in response to the 2020 killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. But the first full year of state legislative sessions since his death sparked a summer of racial justice protests produced a far more mixed response in the rest of the country.

A number of states implemented incremental reforms, such as banning chokeholds or tightening rules around use of body cameras, while several Republican-led states responded by granting police even greater authority and passing laws that cracked down on protesters.

The state action on both sides of the debate came as Congress failed to implement policing reforms aimed at boosting officer accountability. The George Floyd Justice in Policing Act passed the U.S. House without a single Republican vote and then collapsed in the evenly divided Senate.

Jim Pasco, executive director of the Fraternal Order of Police, which represents more than 356,000 law enforcement officers, said he thinks it's still possible for Congress to pass police reform, but perhaps only after another deadly case captures the nation's attention.

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"Sadly, the only thing we know for sure, it will be a tragedy that will precipitate change," Pasco said. He said the trend of states passing their own policing measures depending on their politics is creating more divisions in an already fractured country.

Partisan leanings were in play in Maryland, which 50 years ago became the first state to pass an officers' bill of rights that provided job protections in the police disciplinary process, measures that eventually spread to about 20 other states. This year, it became the first to repeal those rights after lawmakers in the Democratic-controlled General Assembly overrode the veto of Republican Gov. Larry Hogan.

They replaced the bill of rights with new procedures that give civilians a role in police discipline. Democratic lawmakers also united to pass other reforms over Hogan's objections or without his signature, including expanding public access to police disciplinary records and creating a unit in the state attorney general's office to investigate police-involved deaths.

"Other states can use this legislation as a blueprint for creating meaningful police reform," said Rashawn Ray, a senior fellow at The Brookings Institute.

In Washington state, an ambitious series of reforms will ban police from using chokeholds and no-knock warrants, create a new state agency to investigate police use of deadly force and change the threshold for when officers can use force. Some law enforcement officials have said they are not clear about what they're required to do, which has led to discrepancies about how to respond to certain situations.

California created a statewide certification system for officers, in part to prevent police fired in one jurisdiction from getting a job somewhere else. The bill stalled in the legislature last year and struggled to gain support again this year in the face of opposition from police unions. It passed after it was amended to allow for the option of an officer's license being suspended as a lesser punishment and to include other safeguards.

"This is not an anti-police bill. This is an accountability bill," said Democratic state Assemblywoman Akilah Weber, who carried the legislation in that chamber. "Without any accountability, we lose the integrity of the badge, and the bond with the community is broken."

California also required the state attorney general's office to investigate all fatal shootings by police of unarmed civilians, specified when officers have a duty to intervene to prevent or report excessive force, and increased the minimum age to become a police officer from 18 to 21.

The state reform bills passed in 2021 are important because they help promote accountability for police, which can shift officer behavior as long as the changes are enforced, said Puneet Cheema, manager of the Justice in Public Safety Project at the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund.

To try to prevent violent encounters with the police in the first place, she said governments need to limit what police are asked to do — such as whether or not they should respond to people experiencing a mental health crisis or make certain traffic stops.

"That is a longer-term shift that will lead to the broadest changes in police violence and the role that police play in people's lives," Cheema said.

Even some states with divided governments were able to agree on certain reforms.

In Kentucky, Gov. Andy Beshear, a Democrat, signed a partial ban on no-knock warrants approved by the Legislature, where Republicans hold veto-proof supermajorities. The bill was passed after months of demonstrations over the fatal shooting of Breonna Taylor in her Louisville home during a botched police raid last year. It permits no-knock warrants if there is "clear and convincing evidence" that the crime being investigated "would qualify a person, if convicted, as a violent offender."

Many protesters and some Democratic lawmakers had sought a full ban, but the law does prevent cities and towns from banning the warrants completely.

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper, a Democrat, signed a bill passed by the Republican-led legislature that creates a public database where anyone can check whether an officer's certification has been suspended or revoked. It also creates another confidential database showing cases in which an officer kills or seriously injures someone that is only accessible to law enforcement agencies.

In Louisiana, the Democratic governor and lawmakers in the Republican-controlled Legislature placed new restrictions on the use of chokeholds and no-knock warrants, required detailed policies for body camera

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and dash camera use, boosted law enforcement agencies' minority recruitment efforts and required anti-bias training. They also agreed to require suspension or revocation of a police officer's state certification if the officer committed misconduct.

Some states controlled fully by Republicans moved in the opposition direction and expanded the rights of police officers or cracked down on protesters.

In Iowa, Republican Gov. Kim Reynolds introduced measures at the start of this year's legislative session to ban racial profiling by police and establish a system to track racial data for police stops. But lawmakers dropped those sections of her proposal and instead passed the Back the Blue Act, which Reynolds signed in June. The law makes it harder to sue and win monetary damages from police accused of misconduct, made rioting a felony and provides legal protection from lawsuits for the driver of a vehicle who might strike a protester.

Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt signed a bill that increased penalties for blocking roadways and granting immunity to drivers who kill or injure rioters. It was prompted by an incident in Tulsa last year in which the driver of a pickup truck drove through a crowd gathered on an interstate as part of a protest against Floyd's killing.

In Ohio, people attending a rally who are accused of violating an anti-riot law could be targeted with a provision normally used against terrorist activity under proposed GOP legislation. Florida also passed a law cracking down on violent protests that had been championed by Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis, but a federal judge has blocked it from taking effect, calling the law "vague and overbroad."

Juror: Kim Potter made mistake but was still responsible

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A member of the jury that convicted Minnesota police officer Kim Potter of manslaughter in the killing of Daunte Wright says jurors felt she made an honest mistake when she drew her firearm instead of her stun gun, but that she was still responsible for his death.

The juror spoke with KARE-TV reporter Lou Raguse on the condition of anonymity due to what the station described as the "public animosity" surrounding the case. It published the story Wednesday.

The juror said no one felt Potter was a racist or meant to kill Wright, but that doesn't mean she was above the law.

"I don't want to speak for all the jurors, but I think we believed she was a good person and even believed she was a good cop," the juror said. "No one felt she was intentional in this. It's ludicrous that some people are assuming we thought she was a racist. That never came up or anything like that. We felt like she was a good person, we felt she made a mistake, and that a mistake does not absolve you from the fact she did commit a crime.

"Being a good person doesn't mean you're above the law. I don't think anyone felt she wanted to kill anybody that day. ... This was just a tragedy all the way around."

Potter shot and killed the 20-year-old Wright in April as he tried to drive away from a traffic stop in Brooklyn Center, a Minneapolis suburb.

Potter, a 26-year veteran on the city's police department, said she meant to use her stun gun on Wright but didn't realize she had actually drawn and fired her pistol. Wright was Black and the shooting happened as another white officer, Derek Chauvin, was standing trial in nearby Minneapolis for the killing of George Floyd. It set off waves of angry protests in Brooklyn Center.

Potter, 49, resigned from the police department two days after the shooting. Prosecutors charged her with first- and second-degree manslaughter. Wright took the stand at her trial, saying she was sorry the incident happened and the traffic stop "just went chaotic."

The jury deliberated for 27 hours over four days before convicting her of both counts on Dec. 23. She faces close to seven years in prison under Minnesota's sentencing guidelines, though prosecutors have said they would seek a longer term.

The juror told KARE-TV's Raguse that jurors didn't feel Potter lied on the stand and instead felt she was fighting for her life. But the jury generally thought that Potter should have known she was holding a pistol

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and not a stun gun given her years of police experience. The juror said a turning point in deliberations came when jurors handled Potter's stun gun and pistol and felt the differences.

"The gun was about twice as heavy, and the two weapons had several differences in how they are unholstered and fired," the juror said. "The Taser kind of feels like a mouse click whereas the (pistol's) trigger has some trigger draw weight."

The juror said Potter's attorneys seemed disorganized. The juror rejected their argument that Wright caused his own death by resisting.

"We did talk about Daunte's actions, but we as a jury did a really good job of separating his actions from Kim Potter's actions," the juror said. "Daunte's actions clearly had consequences. So did Kim Potter's."

The juror said that at times deliberations grew heated and discussions went in circles. Almost every juror cried at some point.

"Once we came to final verdict . . . we still had to wait an hour and a half until it was read," the juror said. "So that last hour and a half, I was finally allowing myself to think of the consequences of this tragedy. Obviously we had been thinking about what this meant for Daunte Wright's family, but now I started to think about what this meant for Kim Potter's family."

Final goodbye: Recalling influential people who died in 2021

By BERNARD McGHEE Associated Press

They both carved out sterling reputations as military and political leaders over years of public service. But both also saw their legacies tarnished by their actions in the long, bloody war in Iraq.

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell and former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld are among the many noteworthy people who died in 2021.

Powell, who died in October, was a trailblazing soldier and diplomat. He rose to the rank of four-star general in the Army before becoming the first Black chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And under former President George W. Bush, he became the nation's first Black secretary of state.

Rumsfeld, who died in June, had a storied career in government under four U.S. presidents and was seen as a visionary of a modern military.

Rumsfeld was secretary of defense and shouldered some of the blame as Iraq sank into chaos after the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime. In the leadup to the war, Powell cited faulty information during a United Nations Security Council address while claiming Hussein had secretly stashed weapons of mass destruction.

Others political figures the world said goodbye to this year include former U.S. Vice President Walter F. Mondale, former South African President F.W. de Klerk, former Sen. Bob Dole, former South Korean President Roh Tae-woo, talk radio host Rush Limbaugh, former Delaware Gov. Ruth Ann Minner, former Danish Prime Minister Poul Schluter and Iranian ambassadors Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour and Ardeshir Zahedi.

Also among those who died this year was a man who held the title of baseball's home run king for years. Hank Aaron, who died in January, endured racist threats on his path to breaking Babe Ruth's record and is still considered one of the game's greatest players.

Other sports figures who died in 2021 include Los Angeles Dodgers Manager Tommy Lasorda, college football coach Bobby Bowden, Olympic swimmer Clara Lamore Walker, NBA players Paul Westphal and Elgin Baylor, auto racer Bobby Unser, golfer Lee Elder, track and field star Milkha Singh and boxer Leon Spinks.

Among the entertainers who died this year was a children's author whose books were enjoyed by millions around the world. Beverly Cleary, who died in March, channeled memories from her youth in Oregon to create beloved characters such as Ramona Quimby, her sister Beatrice "Beezus" Quimby and Henry Huggins.

Others from the world of arts and entertainment who died this year include actors Cicely Tyson, Ed Asner, Cloris Leachman, Christopher Plummer, Olympia Dukakis, Ned Beatty, Jane Powell, Sonny Chiba, Gavin MacLeod, George Segal, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Johnny Briggs and Dustin Diamond; magician Siegfried Fischbacher; Bollywood star Dilip Kumar; Rolling Stones drummer Charlie Watts; theater songwriter Ste-

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phen Sondheim; ballerina and actress Carla Fracci; rappers DMX and Biz Markie; artist Arturo Di Modica; telenovela writer Delia Fiallo; authors Anne Rice, Eric Carle, Joan Didion, bell hooks and Norton Juster; reggae musician Bunny Wailer; comedians Norm Macdonald and Paul Mooney; singers Pervis Staples and Sabah Fakhri; ZZ Top bassist Dusty Hill; and filmmaker Richard Donner.

Here is a roll call of some influential figures who died in 2021 (cause of death cited for younger people, if available):

JANUARY

George Whitmore, 89. A member of the first team of climbers to scale El Capitan in Yosemite National Park and a conservationist who devoted his life to protecting the Sierra Nevada. Jan. 1.

Paul Westphal, 70. A Hall of Fame NBA player who won a championship with the Boston Celtics in 1974 and later coached in the league and in college. Jan. 2.

Brian Urquhart, 101. The British diplomat was an early leader of the United Nations and played a central role in developing the U.N. practice of peacekeeping. Jan. 2.

Gerry Marsden, 78. The lead singer of the 1960s British group Gerry and the Pacemakers that had such hits as "Ferry Cross the Mersey" and the song that became the anthem of Liverpool Football Club, "You'll Never Walk Alone." Jan. 3.

Eric Jerome Dickey, 59. The bestselling novelist who blended crime, romance and eroticism in "Sister, Sister," "Waking With Enemies" and dozens of other stories about contemporary Black life. Jan. 3. Cancer.

Tanya Roberts, 65. She captivated James Bond in "A View to a Kill" and appeared in the sitcom "That '70s Show." Jan. 4.

Tommy Lasorda, 93. The fiery baseball Hall of Fame manager who guided the Los Angeles Dodgers to two World Series titles and later became an ambassador for the sport he loved. Jan. 7.

Meredith C. Anding Jr., 79. A member of the "Tougaloo Nine," who famously participated in a library "read-in" in segregated Mississippi about 60 years ago. Jan. 8.

Sheldon Adelson, 87. He rose from a modest start as the son of an immigrant taxi driver to become a billionaire Republican powerbroker with a casino empire and influence on international politics. Jan. 11.

Siegfried Fischbacher, 81. He was the surviving member of the magic duo Siegfried & Roy who entertained millions with illusions using rare animals. Jan. 13. Pancreatic cancer.

Phil Spector, 81. The eccentric and revolutionary music producer who transformed rock music with his "Wall of Sound" method and who later was convicted of murder. Jan. 16.

Hank Aaron, 86. He endured racist threats with stoic dignity during his pursuit of Babe Ruth's home run record and gracefully left his mark as one of baseball's greatest all-around players. Jan. 22.

Larry King, 87. The suspenders-sporting everyman whose broadcast interviews with world leaders, movie stars and ordinary people helped define American conversation for a half-century. Jan. 23.

Walter Bernstein, 101. The screenwriter was among the last survivors of Hollywood's anti-Communist blacklist whose Oscar-nominated script for "The Front" drew upon his years of being unable to work under his own name. Jan. 23.

Sifis Valyrakis, 77. A former minister and resistance fighter against Greece's 1967-74 military dictatorship who twice made daring escapes. Jan. 24.

Carlos Holmes Trujillo, 69. As Colombia's defense minister, he was one of the country's most recognized conservative politicians. Jan. 26. Complications of COVID-19.

Cloris Leachman, 94. An Oscar-winner for her portrayal of a lonely housewife in "The Last Picture Show" and a comedic delight as the fearsome Frau Blücher in "Young Frankenstein" and self-absorbed neighbor Phyllis on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." Jan. 27.

Cicely Tyson, 96. The pioneering Black actor who gained an Oscar nomination for her role as the sharecropper's wife in "Sounder," won a Tony Award in 2013 at age 88 and touched TV viewers' hearts in "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman." Jan. 28.

Paul J. Crutzen, 87. A Dutch scientist who won the Nobel Prize for chemistry for his work understanding

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the ozone hole and is credited with coining the term Anthropocene to describe the geological era shaped by mankind. Jan. 28.

John Chaney, 89. One of the nation's leading basketball coaches and a commanding figure during a Hall of Fame career at Temple. Jan. 29.

Hilton Valentine, 77. He was the founding guitarist of the English rock and roll band The Animals who is credited with coming up with one of the most famous opening riffs of the 1960s in "The House of the Rising Sun." Jan. 29.

Sophie, 34. She was the Grammy-nominated Scottish disc jockey, producer and recording artist who had worked with the likes of Madonna and Charli XCX. Jan. 30. Accidental fall.

Abraham J. Twerski, 90. An esteemed Hassidic rabbi and acclaimed psychiatrist who championed treatment for substance abuse and authored over 80 books on subjects both spiritual and scientific. Jan. 31.

FEBRUARY

Dustin Diamond, 44. An actor best known for playing Screech on the hit '90s sitcom "Saved by the Bell." Feb. 1. Cancer.

Jack Palladino, 76. The flamboyant private investigator whose clients ranged from presidents and corporate whistleblowers to celebrities, Hollywood moguls and sometimes suspected drug traffickers. Feb. 1. Injuries suffered in an attack.

Rennie Davis, 80. He was one of the "Chicago Seven" activists who was tried for organizing an anti-Vietnam War protest outside the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago in which thousands clashed with police. Feb. 2. Lymphoma.

Millie Hughes-Fulford, 75. A trailblazing astronaut and scientist who became the first female payload specialist to fly in space for NASA. Feb. 2.

Tony Trabert, 90. A five-time Grand Slam singles champion and former No. 1 player who went on to successful careers as a Davis Cup captain, broadcaster and executive. Feb. 3.

Jim Weatherly, 77. The Hall of Fame songwriter who wrote "Midnight Train to Georgia" and other hits for Gladys Knight, Glen Campbell and Ray Price. Feb. 3.

Christopher Plummer, 91. The dashing award-winning actor who played Captain von Trapp in the film "The Sound of Music" and at 82 became the oldest Academy Award acting winner in history. Feb. 5.

Leon Spinks, 67. He won Olympic gold and then shocked the boxing world by beating Muhammad Ali to win the heavyweight title in only his eighth pro fight. Feb. 5.

George P. Shultz, 100. The former secretary of state was a titan of American academia, business and diplomacy who spent most of the 1980s trying to improve Cold War relations with the Soviet Union and forging a course for peace in the Middle East. Feb. 6.

Mary Wilson, 76. The longest-reigning original Supreme. Feb. 8.

Marty Schottenheimer, 77. He won 200 regular-season games with four NFL teams thanks to his "Martyball" brand of smash-mouth football but regularly fell short in the playoffs. Feb. 8.

Chick Corea, 79. He was a towering jazz pianist with a staggering 23 Grammy Awards who pushed the boundaries of the genre and worked alongside Miles Davis and Herbie Hancock. Feb. 9. Cancer.

Larry Flynt, 78. He turned his raunchy Hustler magazine into an empire while fighting numerous First Amendment court battles. Feb. 10.

Johnny Pacheco, 85. A salsa idol who was a co-founder of Fania Records, Eddie Palmieri's bandmate and backer of music stars such as Rubén Bladés, Willie Colón and Celia Cruz. Feb. 15.

Bernard Lown, 99. A Massachusetts cardiologist who invented the first reliable heart defibrillator and later co-founded an anti-nuclear war group that was awarded a Nobel Peace Prize. Feb. 16.

Rush Limbaugh, 70. The talk radio host who ripped into liberals and laid waste to political correctness with a merry brand of malice that made him one of the most powerful voices on the American right. Feb. 17.

Arturo Di Modica, 80. The artist who sculpted Charging Bull, the bronze statue in New York which became an iconic symbol of Wall Street. Feb. 19.

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Ahmed Zaki Yamani, 90. A long-serving oil minister in Saudi Arabia who led the kingdom through the 1973 oil crisis, the nationalization its state energy company and once found himself held hostage by the assassin Carlos the Jackal. Feb. 23.

Michael Somare, 84. A pivotal figure in Papua New Guinea's independence and the South Pacific island nation's first prime minister. Feb. 26.

Kenneth C. Kelly, 92. A Black electronics engineer whose antenna designs contributed to the race to the moon, made satellite TV and radio possible and helped NASA communicate with Mars rovers and search for extraterrestrials. Feb. 27.

Johnny Briggs, 85. A British actor best known for his role as businessman Mike Baldwin in the long-running TV soap opera "Coronation Street." Feb. 28.

MARCH

Vernon Jordan, 85. He rose from humble beginnings in the segregated South to become a champion of civil rights before reinventing himself as a Washington insider and corporate influencer. March 1.

Bunny Wailer, 73. A reggae luminary who was the last surviving founding member of the legendary group The Wailers. March 2.

Carla Wallenda, 85. A member of "The Flying Wallendas" high-wire act and the last surviving child of the famed troupe's founder. March 6.

Lou Ottens, 94. The Dutch inventor of the cassette tape, the medium of choice for millions of bedroom mix tapes. March 6.

Sister Janice McLaughlin, 79. A Maryknoll Sisters nun who was jailed and later deported by white minority-ruled Rhodesia for exposing human rights abuses. March 7.

Norton Juster, 91. The celebrated children's author who fashioned a world of adventure and punning punditry in the million-selling classic "The Phantom Tollbooth." March 8.

Roger Mudd, 93. The longtime political correspondent and anchor for NBC and CBS who once stumped Sen. Edward Kennedy by simply asking why he wanted to be president. March 9.

James Levine, 77. The conductor ruled over the Metropolitan Opera for more than four decades before being eased aside when his health declined and then was fired for sexual improprieties. March 9.

Luis Palau, 86. An evangelical pastor who was born in Argentina and went on to work with Billy Graham before establishing his own powerhouse international ministry. March 11.

Ronald DeFeo, 69. The man convicted of slaughtering his parents and four siblings in a home that later inspired the "The Amityville Horror" book and movies. March 12.

King Goodwill Zwelithini, 72. The traditional leader of South Africa's Zulu nation, he reigned for more than 50 years, making him the longest-serving Zulu monarch. March 12.

Yaphet Kotto, 81. The commanding actor who brought tough magnetism and stately gravitas to films including the James Bond movie "Live and Let Die" and "Alien." March 15.

Elsa Peretti, 80. She went from Halston model and Studio 54 regular in the 1960s and '70s to one of the world's most famous jewelry designers with timeless, fluid Tiffany & Co. collections. March 18.

Elgin Baylor, 86. The Lakers' 11-time NBA All-Star who soared through the 1960s with a high-scoring style of basketball that became the model for the modern player. March 22.

George Segal, 87. The banjo player turned actor who was nominated for an Oscar for 1966's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" and worked into his late 80s on the ABC sitcom "The Goldbergs." March 23. Complications from bypass surgery.

Jessica Walter, 80. Her roles as a scheming matriarch in TV's "Arrested Development" and a stalker in "Play Misty for Me" were in line with a career that drew on her astringent screen presence. March 24.

Beverly Cleary, 104. The celebrated children's author whose memories of her Oregon childhood were shared with millions through the likes of Ramona and Beezus Quimby and Henry Huggins. March 25.

Larry McMurtry, 84. The prolific and popular author who took readers back to the old American West in his Pulitzer Prize-winning "Lonesome Dove" and returned them to modern-day landscapes in works such

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as his emotional "Terms of Endearment." March 25.

Bill Brock, 90. A former senator from Tennessee whose long career in Washington included a key role in rebuilding the Republican Party after the Watergate scandal. March 25.

Bobby Brown, 96. An infielder who played on five World Series champions with the New York Yankees and later became a cardiologist and president of the American League. March 25.

G. Gordon Liddy, 90. A mastermind of the Watergate burglary and a radio talk show host after emerging from prison. March 30.

APRIL

Clara Lamore Walker, 94. She swam for the U.S. at the 1948 Olympic Games in London, won three national championships, and later in life set hundreds of national and world swimming records in several masters age groups. April 2.

Sugako Hashida, 95. She was a renowned Japanese scriptwriter best known for the internationally popular TV drama series "Oshin." April 4.

Hans Kueng, 93. A Roman Catholic theologian who was an early colleague and friend of the future Pope Benedict XVI but later fell foul of the Vatican for challenging church doctrine and became a vocal critic of the pontiff. April 6.

Anne Beatts, 74. A groundbreaking comedy writer with a taste for sweetness and the macabre who was on the original staff of "Saturday Night Live" and later created the cult sitcom "Square Pegs." April 7.

John Naisbitt, 92. The author whose 1982 bestselling book "Megatrends" was published in dozens of countries. April 8.

Prince Philip, 99. The irascible and tough-minded husband of Queen Elizabeth II who spent more than seven decades supporting his wife in a role that both defined and constricted his life. April 9.

DMX, 50. The iconic hip-hop artist behind the songs "Ruff Ryders' Anthem" and "Party Up (Up in Here)" whose distinctively gruff voice and thoughtful messages in his rhymes made him one of rap's biggest stars. April 9.

Bernard Madoff, 82. The infamous architect of an epic securities swindle that burned thousands of investors, outfoxed regulators and earned him a 150-year prison term. April 14.

Charles "Chuck" Geschke, 81. The co-founder of the major software company Adobe Inc. who helped develop Portable Document Format technology, or PDFs. April 16.

Walter F. Mondale, 93. The former U.S. vice president was a liberal icon who lost one of the most lopsided presidential elections after bluntly telling voters to expect a tax increase if he won. April 19.

Jim Steinman, 73. The Grammy-winning composer who wrote Meat Loaf's best-selling "Bat Out Of Hell" debut album as well as hits for Celine Dion, Air Supply and Bonnie Tyler. April 19. Kidney failure.

Shock G, 57. He blended whimsical wordplay with reverence for '70s funk as leader of the off-kilter Bay Area hip-hop group Digital Underground. April 22.

Christa Ludwig, 93. The mezzo-soprano was a renowned interpreter of Wagner, Mozart and Strauss who starred on the world's great stages for four decades. April 24.

Michael Collins, 90. An Apollo 11 astronaut who orbited the moon alone while Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin made their historic first steps on the lunar surface. April 28. Cancer.

Jason Matthews, 69. An award-winning spy novelist who drew upon his long career in espionage and his admiration for John le Carre among others in crafting his popular "Red Sparrow" thrillers. April 28. Corticobasal degeneration.

Eli Broad, 87. The billionaire philanthropist, contemporary art collector and entrepreneur who co-founded homebuilding pioneer Kaufman and Broad Inc. and launched financial services giant SunAmerica Inc. April 30.

MAY

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Olympia Dukakis, 89. The veteran stage and screen actor whose flair for maternal roles helped her win an Oscar as Cher's mother in the romantic comedy "Moonstruck." May 1.

Bobby Unser, 87. A beloved three-time winner of the Indianapolis 500 and part of the only pair of brothers to capture "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing." May 2.

Jacques d'Amboise, 86. Grew up on the streets of upper Manhattan to become one of the world's premier classical dancers at New York City Ballet and spent the last four and a half decades providing free dance classes to city youth. May 2.

Lloyd Price, 88. The singer-songwriter was an early rock 'n' roll star and enduring maverick whose hits included such up-tempo favorites as "Lawdy Miss Clawdy," "Personality" and the semi-forbidden "Stagger Lee." May 3.

Paulo Gustavo, 42. A popular comedian whose character Dona Herminia dealt with everyday family and LGBTQ issues in some of Brazil's biggest-box office movies and television shows. May 4. COVID-19.

Mohammed Ashraf Sehrai, 78. A prominent politician in Kashmir who challenged India's rule over the disputed region for decades. May 5. Died while in police custody.

Pervis Staples, 85. His tenor voice complimented his father's and sisters' in the legendary gospel group The Staple Singers. May 6.

Norman Lloyd, 106. His role as kindly Dr. Daniel Auschlander on TV's "St. Elsewhere" was a single chapter in a distinguished stage and screen career. May 11.

Charles Grodin, 86. The actor and writer who scored as a caddish newlywed in "The Heartbreak Kid" and later had roles ranging from Robert De Niro's counterpart in the comic thriller "Midnight Run" to the bedeviled father in the "Beethoven" comedies. May 18. Bone marrow cancer.

Paul Mooney, 79. A boundary-pushing comedian who was Richard Pryor's longtime writing partner and whose sage, incisive musings on racism and American life made him a revered figure in stand-up. May 19. Heart attack.

Lee Evans, 74. The record-setting sprinter who wore a black beret in a sign of protest at the 1968 Olympics then went onto a life of humanitarian work in support of social justice. May 19.

Alix Dobkin, 80. The lesbian singer and feminist activist who appeared in an iconic and recently resurgent 1975 photo wearing a T-shirt that read "The Future is Female." May 19. Brain aneurysm and stroke.

Yuan Longping, 90. A Chinese scientist who developed higher-yield rice varieties that helped feed people around the world. May 22.

Max Mosley, 81. Shook off the stigma of his family's links to fascism to become international motorsport's top administrator and later made a stand as a privacy campaigner in response to tabloid stories about his sex life. May 23.

Eric Carle, 91. A beloved children's author and illustrator whose classic "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" and other works gave millions of kids some of their earliest and most cherished literary memories. May 23.

John Warner, 94. He served for 30 years in the U.S. Senate and was a longtime military expert who became famous as the sixth man to walk down the aisle with movie star Elizabeth Taylor. May 25.

Lois Ehlert, 86. Her cut-and-paste shapes and vibrant hues in books including "Chicka Chicka Boom Boom" put her among the most popular illustrators of books for preschoolers of the late 20th century. May 25.

Kay Lahusen, 91. A pioneering gay rights activist who chronicled the movement's earliest days through her photography and writing. May 26.

Carla Fracci, 84. An Italian cultural icon and former La Scala prima ballerina renowned for romantic roles alongside such greats as Rudolf Nureyev and Mikhail Baryshnikov. May 27.

Poul Schluter, 92. Denmark's prime minister for over a decade who negotiated exemptions for his country to a key European Union treaty after Danes rejected the initial text in a referendum. May 27.

B.J. Thomas, 78. The Grammy-winning singer who enjoyed success on the pop, country and gospel charts with such hits as "I Just Can't Help Believing," "Raindrops Keep Fallin' On My Head" and "Hooked on a Feeling." May 29.

Gavin MacLeod, 90. The veteran supporting actor who achieved fame as sardonic TV news writer Murray Slaughter on "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and stardom playing cheerful Capt. Stubing on "The Love

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Boat." May 29.

JUNE

F. Lee Bailey, 87. The celebrity attorney who defended O.J. Simpson, Patricia Hearst and the alleged Boston Strangler, but whose legal career halted when he was disbarred in two states. June 3.

John Patterson, 99. A former Alabama governor who entered politics as a reformer after his father's assassination but was criticized for failing to protect the Freedom Riders from angry white mobs. June 4.

Clarence Williams III, 81. Played the cool undercover cop Linc Hayes on the counterculture series "The Mod Squad" and Prince's father in "Purple Rain." June 4.

David Dushman, 98. The last surviving Soviet soldier involved in the liberation of the Nazi death camp at Auschwitz. June 5.

Chief Leonard Crow Dog, 78. A renowned spiritual leader and Native American rights activist who fought for sovereignty, language preservation and religious freedom. June 6.

Ali Akbar Mohtashamipour, 74. A Shiite cleric who as Iran's ambassador to Syria helped found the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah and lost his right hand to a book bombing reportedly carried out by Israel. June 7. COVID-19.

Ned Beatty, 83. The Oscar-nominated character actor who in half a century of American movies, including "Deliverance," "Network" and "Superman," was a booming, indelible presence in even the smallest parts. June 13.

Yang Huaiding, 71. A former factory worker known as "China's First Shareholder" after he amassed a fortune trading in the country's infant financial markets starting in the 1980s. June 13.

Enrique Bolaños Geyer, 93. The former Nicaraguan president was a businessman who led the country from 2002 to 2007, saw his predecessor and old running mate locked up for corruption and pushed for the country's economic development. June 14.

Jack B. Weinstein, 99. A former federal judge who earned a reputation as a tireless legal maverick while overseeing a series of landmark class-action lawsuits and sensational mob cases in New York City like that of the "Mafia Cops." June 15.

Frank Bonner, 79. He played a brash salesman with an affection for polyester plaid suits on the TV comedy "WKRP in Cincinnati." June 16. Complications of Lewy body dementia.

Consuewella Dotson Africa, 67. A longtime member of the Black organization MOVE and mother of two children killed in the 1985 bombing of the group's home in Philadelphia. June 16.

Merle Smith Jr., 76. The first Black cadet to graduate from the Coast Guard Academy. June 16. Complications from Parkinson's disease and COVID-19.

Kenneth Kaunda, 97. Zambia's founding president and a champion of African nationalism who spearheaded the fights to end white minority rule across southern Africa. June 17.

Milkha Singh, 91. One of India's first sport superstars and ace sprinter who overcame a childhood tragedy to become the country's most celebrated athlete. June 18. Complications from COVID-19.

Mike Gravel, 91. A former U.S. senator from Alaska who read the Pentagon Papers into the Congressional Record and confronted Barack Obama about nuclear weapons during a later presidential run. June 26.

Greg "Da Bull" Noll, 84. He became a surfing legend by combining a gregarious, outsized personality with the courage and skill to ride bigger, more powerful waves than anyone had ever attempted. June 28.

Donald Rumsfeld, 88. The two-time defense secretary and one-time presidential candidate whose reputation as a skilled bureaucrat and visionary of a modern U.S. military was unraveled by the long and costly Iraq war. June 29.

Delia Fiallo, 96. She was considered the mother of Latin America's telenovelas and wrote dozens of the popular television soap operas. June 29.

JULY:

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William H. Regnery II, 80. The heir to a family publishing fortune who was known for his quiet but influential support of extreme right-wing causes in the United States. July 2.

Raffaella Carra', 78. One of Italian television's most beloved entertainers for decades and affectionately nicknamed the "queen of Italian TV." July 5.

Richard Donner, 91. The filmmaker who helped create the modern superhero blockbuster with 1978's "Superman" and mastered the buddy comedy with the "Lethal Weapon" franchise. July 5.

Father Stan Swamy, 84. A jailed Jesuit priest and longtime Indian tribal rights activist. July 5.

Dilip Kumar, 98. Bollywood icon hailed as the "Tragedy King" and one of Hindi cinema's greatest actors. July 7.

Jovenel Moïse, 53. The Haitian president was a former banana producer and political neophyte who ruled for more than four years as the country grew increasingly unstable. July 7. Assassinated at his home.

Edwin Washington Edwards, 93. The high-living, quick-witted four-term governor who reshaped Louisiana's oil revenues and dominated the state's politics for decades, a run all but overshadowed by scandal and eight years in federal prison. July 12.

Kurt Westergaard, 86. A Danish cartoonist whose image of the Prophet Muhammad wearing a bomb as a turban was at the center of widespread anti-Danish anger in the Muslim world in the mid-2000s. July 14.

Gloria Richardson, 99. An influential civil rights pioneer whose determination not to back down while protesting racial inequality was captured in a photograph as she pushed away the bayonet of a National Guardsman. July 15.

Biz Markie, 57. A hip-hop staple known for his beatboxing prowess, turntable mastery and the 1989 classic "Just a Friend." July 16.

Floyd Cooper, 65. An award-winning illustrator and author of children's books whose mission to offer candid and positive images of Black history included subjects ranging from Frederick Douglass to Venus and Serena Williams. July 16.

Tolis Voskopoulos, 80. A popular Greek folk singer, songwriter and actor whose career spanned more than six decades. July 19.

Phyllis Gould, 99. One of the millions of women who worked in defense plants in World War II and who later relentlessly fought for recognition of those "Rosie the Riveters." July 20. Complications of a stroke.

Gloria Ratti, 90. A champion of women's running who rose from a finish line volunteer at the Boston Marathon to vice president of the race's organizing body. July 24.

Robert Parris Moses, 86. A civil rights activist who was shot at and endured beatings and jail while leading Black voter registration drives in the American South during the 1960s and later helped improve minority education in math. July 25.

Mike Enzi, 77. The retired U.S. senator and Wyoming Republican was known as a consensus-builder in an increasingly polarized Washington. July 26. Died after breaking his neck in a bicycle accident.

Joey Jordison, 46. A founding member of Slipknot, who drummed for the influential metal band in its most popular period and helped write many of its best-known songs. July 26.

Dusty Hill, 72. The long-bearded bassist for the Texas blues rock trio ZZ Top. July 28.

Ron Popeil, 86. The quintessential TV pitchman and inventor known to generations of viewers for hawking products including the Veg-O-Matic, the Pocket Fisherman, Mr. Microphone and the Showtime Rotisserie and BBQ. July 28.

Richard "Dick" Lamm, 85. A former Colorado Democratic governor who successfully fought to stop the 1976 Winter Olympics from being held in Colorado even though they had been awarded to the state. July 29.

Carl Levin, 87. A powerful voice on military issues in Washington and a staunch supporter of the auto industry back home in Michigan during his tenure in the U.S. Senate. July 29.

AUGUST:

The Rev. Leonid Kishkovsky, 78. He came to the United States as a childhood refugee from war-torn Poland and later became a leader in cross-church cooperation and the first Eastern Orthodox president

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of the National Council of Churches. Aug. 3. Heart attack.

Richard Trumka, 72. The powerful president of the AFL-CIO who rose from the coal mines of Pennsylvania to preside over one of the largest labor organizations in the world. Aug. 5.

Donald Kagan, 89. A prominent classical scholar, contentious defender of traditional education and architect of neo-conservative foreign policy. Aug. 6.

Markie Post, 70. She played the public defender in the 1980s sitcom "Night Court" and was a regular presence on television for four decades. Aug. 7.

Dennis "Dee Tee" Thomas, 70. A founding member of the long-running soul-funk band Kool & the Gang known for such hits as "Celebration" and "Get Down On It." Aug. 7.

Bobby Bowden, 91. The folksy Hall of Fame coach who built Florida State into an unprecedented college football dynasty. Aug. 8.

Walter Yetnikoff, 87. The rampaging head of CBS Records who presided over blockbuster releases by Michael Jackson, Billy Joel and many others and otherwise devoted his life to a self-catered feast of "schmoozing, shmingling and bingling." Aug. 9.

Maki Kaji, 69. The creator of the popular numbers puzzle Sudoku whose life's work was spreading the joy of puzzles. Aug. 10.

Gino Strada, 73. An Italian surgeon who co-founded the humanitarian group Emergency to provide medical care for civilian victims of war and poverty in many countries, and was a fierce critic of the U.S.-led invasion of Afghanistan. Aug. 13.

Nanci Griffith, 68. The Grammy-winning folk singer-songwriter from Texas whose literary songs like "Love at the Five and Dime" celebrated the South. Aug. 13.

James Hormel, 88. The first openly gay U.S. ambassador and a philanthropist who funded organizations to fight AIDS and promote human rights. Aug. 13.

Sonny Chiba, 82. The Japanese actor who wowed the world with his martial arts skills in more than 100 films. Aug. 19.

James W. Loewen, 79. His million-selling "Lies My Teacher Told Me" books challenged traditional ideas and knowledge on everything from Thanksgiving to the Iraq War. Aug. 19.

Tom T. Hall, 85. The singer-songwriter who composed "Harper Valley P.T.A." and sang about life's simple joys as country music's consummate blue collar bard. Aug. 20.

Don Everly, 84. He was one-half of the pioneering Everly Brothers whose harmonizing country rock hits affected a generation of rock 'n' roll music. Aug. 21.

Charlie Watts, 80. The self-effacing Rolling Stones drummer who helped anchor one of rock's greatest rhythm sections and used his "day job" to support his enduring love of jazz. Aug. 24.

Hissene Habre, 79. Chad's former dictator, he was the first former head of state to be convicted of crimes against humanity by an African court after his government was accused of killing 40,000 people. Aug. 24.

Akis Tsochadzopoulos, 82. A once prominent Greek socialist politician who held nearly a dozen ministerial positions over two decades but later fell from grace, was convicted and imprisoned in one of Greece's highest profile corruption trials. Aug. 27.

Ed Asner, 91. The burly and prolific character actor who became a star in middle age as the gruff but lovable newsman Lou Grant, first in the hit comedy "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and later in the drama "Lou Grant." Aug. 29.

Michael Constantine, 94. An Emmy Award-winning character actor who reached worldwide fame playing the Windex bottle-toting father of the bride in the 2002 film "My Big Fat Greek Wedding." Aug. 31.

SEPTEMBER

Syed Ali Geelani, 91. An icon of disputed Kashmir's resistance against Indian rule and a top separatist leader who became the emblem of the region's defiance against New Delhi. Sept. 1.

Mikis Theodorakis, 96. The beloved Greek composer whose rousing music and life of political defiance won acclaim abroad and inspired millions at home. Sept. 2.

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George M. Strickler Jr., 80. A civil rights attorney who fought to desegregate Southern schools in the 1960s and was pushed out of his University of Mississippi teaching job amid uproar over his work on behalf of Black clients. Sept. 2.

Grand Ayatollah Sayyed Mohammed Saeed al-Hakim, 85. One of Iraq's most senior and influential Muslim Shiite clerics. Sept. 3.

Willard Scott, 87. The beloved weatherman who charmed viewers of NBC's "Today" show with his self-deprecating humor and cheerful personality. Sept. 4.

Jean-Paul Belmondo, 88. Star of the iconic French New Wave film "Breathless," whose crooked boxer's nose and rakish grin went on to make him one of the country's most recognizable leading men. Sept. 6.

Sunil Perera, 68. A singer and musician who entertained generations of Sri Lankans with captivating songs, but won their minds and hearts with his outspoken comments against social injustice, corruption, racism and suppression of democracy. Sept. 6. Complications from COVID—19.

Elizabeth Ireland McCann, 90. A Tony Award-winning producer who helped mount an astounding array of hits on Broadway and in London, including "The Elephant Man," "Morning's at Seven," "Amadeus," "The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby" and "Copenhagen." Sept. 9. Cancer.

Abimael Guzmán, 86. The leader of the brutal Shining Path insurgency in Peru who was captured in 1992. Sept. 11.

The Rev. Cho Yong-gi, 85. His founding of South Korea's biggest church was a symbol of the postwar growth of Christianity in the country before that achievement was tainted by corruption and other scandals. Sept. 14.

Norm Macdonald, 61. A comedian and former "Saturday Night Live" writer and performer who was "Weekend Update" host when Bill Clinton and O.J. Simpson provided comic fodder during the 1990s. Sept. 14.

Jane Powell, 92. The bright-eyed, operatic-voiced star of Hollywood's golden age musicals who sang with Howard Keel in "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers" and danced with Fred Astaire in "Royal Wedding." Sept. 16.

Abdelaziz Bouteflika, 84. A former Algerian president who fought for independence from France, reconciled his conflict-ravaged nation and was then ousted amid pro-democracy protests in 2019 after two decades in power. Sept. 17.

George Holliday, 61. The Los Angeles plumber who shot grainy video of four white police officers beating Black motorist Rodney King in 1991. Sept. 19. Complications of COVID-19.

Hussein Tantawi, 85. The Egyptian general who took charge of the country when longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak was forced to step down amid the 2011 Arab Spring uprising. Sept. 21.

Melvin Van Peebles, 89. The groundbreaking filmmaker, playwright and musician whose work ushered in the "blaxploitation" wave of the 1970s and influenced filmmakers long after. Sept. 21.

Theoneste Bagosora, 80. A former Rwandan army colonel regarded as the architect of the 1994 genocide in which more than 800,000 ethnic Tutsi and Hutus who tried to protect them were killed. Sept. 25.

George Frayne, 77. As leader of Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen, he enjoyed a cult following in the 1970s with such party and concert favorites as "Hot Rod Lincoln" and "Smoke! Smoke! Smoke! (That Cigarette)." Sept. 26.

Bobby Zarem, 84. A tireless, relentless entertainment publicist, with a client list that read like a Who's Who of a certain era: Cher, Diana Ross, Dustin Hoffman, Kevin Costner, Michael Douglas, Ann-Margret, Al Pacino, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and more. Sept. 26.

Michael Renzi, 80. During a storied musical career, he worked with Peggy Lee, Mel Tormé, Lena Horne and some of the other biggest names in jazz and pop, and for years was also the musical director of "Sesame Street." Sept. 29.

OCTOBER

Umar Sharif, 66. One of Pakistan's most beloved comedians. Oct. 2.

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Todd Akin, 74. A conservative Missouri Republican whose comment that women's bodies have a way of avoiding pregnancies in cases of "legitimate rape" sunk his bid for the U.S. Senate and became a cautionary tale for other GOP candidates. Oct. 3.

Bernard Tapie, 78. A flamboyant businessman who was beloved by sports fans for leading French soccer club Marseille to glory but also dogged by legal battles and corruption investigations. Oct. 3.

Lars Vilks, 75. A Swedish artist who had lived under police protection since making a sketch of the Prophet Muhammad with a dog's body in 2007. Oct. 3. Killed in a car crash along with two police bodyguards.

Alan Kalter, 78. The quirky, red-headed announcer for David Letterman for two decades who frequently appeared in the show's comedy bits. Oct. 4.

Abolhassan Banisadr, 88. Iran's first president after the country's 1979 Islamic Revolution who fled Tehran after being impeached for challenging the growing power of clerics as the nation became a theocracy. Oct. 9.

Abdul Qadeer Khan, 85. A controversial figure known as the father of Pakistan's nuclear bomb. Oct. 10.

Megan Rice, 91. A nun and Catholic peace activist who spent two years in federal prison while in her 80s after breaking into a government security complex to protest nuclear weapons. Oct. 10.

Eddie Jaku, 101. A Holocaust survivor who published his best-selling memoir, "The Happiest Man on Earth." Oct. 12.

Hubert Germain, 101. The last of an elite group of decorated French Resistance fighters who helped liberate France from Nazi control in World War II. Oct. 12.

Ronnie Tutt, 83. A legendary drummer who spent years playing alongside Elvis Presley and teamed up with other superstars ranging from Johnny Cash to Stevie Nicks. Oct. 16.

Betty Lynn, 95. The film and television actor who was best known for her role as Barney Fife's sweetheart Thelma Lou on "The Andy Griffith Show." Oct. 16.

Colin Powell, 84. The trailblazing soldier and diplomat whose sterling reputation of service to Republican and Democratic presidents was stained by his faulty claims to justify the 2003 U.S. war in Iraq. Oct. 18.

Jerry Pinkney, 81. A prize-winning children's book illustrator known for his richly textured images of Black life, fables and fairy tales in works ranging from "The Lion and the Mouse" to "The Sunday Outing." Oct. 20.

Peter Scolari, 66. A versatile character actor whose television roles included a yuppie producer on "Newhart" and a closeted dad on "Girls" and who was on Broadway with longtime friend Tom Hanks in "Lucky Guy." Oct. 22.

Sunao Tsuboi, 96. A survivor of the Hiroshima atomic bombing who made opposing nuclear weapons the message of his life, including in a meeting with President Barack Obama in 2016. Oct. 24.

Roh Tae-woo, 88. The former South Korean president was a major player in a 1979 coup who later became president in a landmark democratic election before ending his tumultuous political career in prison. Oct. 26.

Mort Sahl, 94. A satirist who helped revolutionize stand-up comedy during the Cold War with his running commentary on politicians and current events and became a favorite of a new, restive generation of Americans. Oct. 26.

A. Linwood Holton Jr., 98. Virginia's first Republican governor since Reconstruction and a crusader against racial discrimination. Oct. 28.

NOVEMBER

Aaron T. Beck, 100. A groundbreaking psychotherapist regarded as the father of cognitive therapy. Nov. 1.

Sabah Fakhri, 88. One of the Arab world's most famous singers, he entertained generations with traditional songs and preserved nearly extinct forms of Arabic music. Nov. 2.

Ruth Ann Minner, 86. A sharecropper's daughter who became the only woman to serve as Delaware's governor. Nov. 4.

Marília Mendonça, 26. She was one of Brazil's most popular singers and a Latin Grammy winner. Nov. 5. Airplane crash.

Dean Stockwell, 85. A top Hollywood child actor who gained new success in middle age in the sci-fi series

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"Quantum Leap" and in a string of indelible performances in film, including David Lynch's "Blue Velvet," Wim Wenders' "Paris, Texas" and Jonathan Demme's "Married to the Mob." Nov. 7.

Max Cleland, 79. He lost three limbs to a hand grenade in Vietnam and later became a groundbreaking Veterans Administration chief and U.S. senator from Georgia until an attack ad questioning his patriotism derailed his reelection. Nov. 9. Congestive heart failure.

Jakucho Setouchi, 99. A Buddhist nun and one of Japan's best-known authors famous for novels depicting passionate women and her translation of "The Tale of Genji," a 1,000-year-old classic, into modern language. Nov. 9.

Jerry Douglas, 88. He played handsome family patriarch John Abbott on "The Young and the Restless" for more than 30 years. Nov. 9.

F.W. de Klerk, 85. He shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Nelson Mandela and as South Africa's last apartheid president oversaw the end of the country's white minority rule. Nov. 11.

William Sterling Cary, 94. A pioneering minister and civil rights activist who was the first Black person in prominent church leadership roles, including president of the National Council of Churches. Nov. 14.

Ardeshir Zahedi, 93. Iran's flamboyant ambassador to the United States during the rule of the shah who charmed both Hollywood stars and politicians with his lavish parties until the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Nov. 18.

Chun Doo-hwan, 90. A former South Korean military strongman who seized power in a 1979 coup and brutally crushed pro-democracy protests before going to prison for misdeeds while in office. Nov. 23.

Stephen Sondheim, 91. The songwriter who reshaped the American musical theater in the second half of the 20th century with his intelligent, intricately rhymed lyrics, his use of evocative melodies and his willingness to tackle unusual subjects. Nov. 26.

Phil Saviano, 69. A clergy sex abuse survivor and whistleblower who played a pivotal role in exposing decades of predatory assaults by Roman Catholic priests in the United States. Nov. 28.

Lee Elder, 87. He broke down racial barriers as the first Black golfer to play in the Masters and paved the way for Tiger Woods and others to follow. Nov. 28.

Virgil Abloh, 41. A leading designer whose groundbreaking fusions of streetwear and high couture made him one of the most celebrated tastemakers in fashion and beyond. Nov. 28. Cancer.

David Gulpilil, 68. Australia's most acclaimed Indigenous actor. Nov. 29.

Arlene Dahl, 96. The actor whose charm and striking red hair shone in such Technicolor movies of the 1950s as "Journey to the Center of the Earth" and "Three Little Words." Nov. 29.

DECEMBER

Antony Sher, 72. One of the most acclaimed Shakespearean actors of his generation. Dec. 2.

Bob Dole, 98. He overcame disabling war wounds to become a sharp-tongued Senate leader, a Republican presidential candidate and then a symbol of his dwindling generation of World War II veterans. Dec. 5.

Lina Wertmüller, 93. Italy's provocative filmmaker whose mix of sex and politics in "Swept Away" and "Seven Beauties" made her the first woman nominated for an Academy Award for directing. Dec. 9.

Al Unser, 82. One of only four drivers to win the Indianapolis 500 a record four times. Dec. 9.

Michael Nesmith, 78. The singer-songwriter, author, actor-director and entrepreneur who will likely be best remembered as the wool-hatted, guitar-strumming member of the made-for-television rock band The Monkees. Dec. 10.

Anne Rice, 80. The novelist whose lush, best-selling gothic tales, including "Interview With the Vampire," reinvented the blood-drinking immortals as tragic antiheroes. Dec. 11.

Vicente Fernández, 81. An iconic and beloved singer of regional Mexican music who was awarded three Grammys and nine Latin Grammys and inspired a new generation of performers, including his son, Alejandro Fernández. Dec. 12.

bell hooks, 69. The groundbreaking author, educator and activist whose explorations of how race, gender,

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economics and politics intertwined helped shape academic and popular debates over the past 40 years. Dec. 15.

Eve Babitz, 78. The Hollywood bard, muse and reveler who with warmth and candor chronicled the excesses of her native world in the 1960s and 1970s and became a cult figure to generations of readers. Dec. 17. Complications from Huntington's disease.

Johnny Isakson, 76. An affable Georgia Republican politician who rose from the ranks of the state legislature to become a U.S. senator known as an effective behind-the-scenes consensus builder. Dec. 19.

Joan Didion, 87. The revered author and essayist whose social and personal commentary in such classics as "The White Album" and "The Year of Magical Thinking" made her a clear-eyed critic of turbulent times. Dec. 23.

Desmond Tutu, 90. South Africa's Nobel Peace Prize-winning icon, an uncompromising foe of apartheid and a modern-day activist for racial justice and LGBT rights. Dec. 26.

Sarah Weddington, 76. A Texas lawyer who as a 26-year-old successfully argued the landmark abortion rights case Roe v. Wade before the U.S. Supreme Court. Dec. 26.

Edward O. Wilson, 92. The pioneering Harvard biologist who advanced the provocative theory that human behavior such as war and altruism has a genetic basis and warned against the decline of ecosystems. Dec. 26.

John Madden, 85. The Hall of Fame coach turned broadcaster whose exuberant calls combined with simple explanations provided a weekly soundtrack to NFL games for three decades. Dec. 28.

Harry Reid, 82. The former U.S. Senate majority leader from Nevada, widely acknowledged as one of toughest dealmakers in Congress. Dec. 28. Pancreatic cancer.

Ex-Afghan president says had no choice but to flee Kabul

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Afghanistan's former president said he had no choice but to abruptly leave Kabul as the Taliban closed in and denied an agreement was in the works for a peaceful takeover, disputing the accounts of former Afghan and U.S. officials.

Former President Ashraf Ghani said in a BBC interview that aired Thursday that an adviser gave him just minutes to decide to abandon the capital, Kabul. He also denied widespread accusations that he left Afghanistan with millions in stolen money.

Ghani's sudden and secret departure Aug. 15 left the city rudderless as U.S. and NATO forces were in the final stages of their chaotic withdrawal from the country after 20 years.

"On the morning of that day, I had no inkling that by late afternoon I would be leaving," Ghani told BBC radio.

His remarks conflicted with other accounts.

Former President Hamid Karzai told The Associated Press in an interview earlier this month that Ghani's departure scuttled the opportunity for government negotiators, including himself and peace council chairman Abdullah Abdullah, to reach an 11th-hour agreement with the Taliban, who had committed to staying outside the capital.

After calling the government defense minister Bismillah Khan, the interior minister and police chief and discovering all had fled the capital, Karzai said he invited the Taliban into Kabul "to protect the population so that the country, the city doesn't fall into chaos and the unwanted elements who would probably loot the country, loot shops."

But Ghani in his radio interview with British Gen. Sir Nick Carter, former chief of defense staff, said he fled "to prevent the destruction of Kabul," claiming two rival Taliban factions were bearing down on the city and were ready to enter and wage a bitter battle for control. There was no evidence upon the Taliban entry of the rival factions Ghani referred to.

The insurgents, who in the days prior to the push into Kabul had swept over much of the country as Afghan government forces melted away or surrendered, quickly took control of the palace. According to

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humanitarian aid workers, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they wanted to speak privately and who were there at the time, the Taliban moved to protect their compounds.

Still, the Taliban takeover was met with widespread fear and a deep longing by many to flee their desperately poor homeland despite billions of international money over the 20 years the U.S.-backed governments had been in power.

In the BBC interview, Ghani denied widespread accusations that he left Afghanistan with a cache of stolen money. The U.S. Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction John Sopko has been tasked with investigating those allegations.

Successive Afghan governments, as well as independent foreign and Afghan contractors, have been accused of widespread corruption, with dozens of reports by Sopko documenting the most egregious incidents. Washington has spent \$146 billion on reconstruction in Afghanistan since the overthrow in 2001 of the Taliban, who had harbored al-Qaida and its leader, Osama bin Laden. Yet even before the insurgents returned in August, the poverty level in Afghanistan was at 54%.

Earlier this week, Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, an investigative reporting organization with 150 journalists in more than 30 countries, listed Ghani among the world's most corrupt leaders. Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenko was named the most corrupt, with Ghani, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz among the finalists for the title of most corrupt.

After being told by his national security adviser Hamdullah Mohib that his personal protection force was not capable of defending him, Ghani said he decided to leave. Mohib, who "was literally terrified," gave him just two minutes to decide whether to leave, Ghani said, insisting he was not sure where he would be taken even after he was on the helicopter getting ready to take off.

Ghani did not address the rapid and swift collapse of the Afghan military in the weeks leading up to the Taliban takeover, but he did blame an agreement the United States had signed with the Taliban in 2020 for the eventual collapse of his government. That agreement laid out conditions for the final withdrawal of the remaining U.S. and NATO forces ending America's longest war. It also provided for the release of 5,000 Taliban prisoners, which Ghani said strengthened the insurgent force.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Dec. 31, the 365th and final day of 2021.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 31, 2019, the health commission in the central Chinese city of Wuhan announced that experts were investigating an outbreak of respiratory illness and that most of the victims had visited a seafood market in the city; the statement said 27 people had become ill with a strain of viral pneumonia and that seven were in serious condition.

On this date:

In 1775, during the Revolutionary War, the British repulsed an attack by Continental Army generals Richard Montgomery and Benedict Arnold at Quebec; Montgomery was killed.

In 1862, President Abraham Lincoln signed an enabling act paving the way for Virginia's western counties to become the state of West Virginia, which took place in June 1863.

In 1879, Thomas Edison first publicly demonstrated his electric incandescent light by illuminating some 40 bulbs at his laboratory in Menlo Park, New Jersey.

In 1904, New York's Times Square saw its first New Year's Eve celebration, with an estimated 200,000 people in attendance.

In 1946, President Harry S. Truman officially proclaimed the end of hostilities in World War II.

In 1972, Major League baseball player Roberto Clemente, 38, was killed when a plane he chartered and was traveling on to bring relief supplies to earthquake-devastated Nicaragua crashed shortly after takeoff

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from Puerto Rico.

In 1974, private U.S. citizens were allowed to buy and own gold for the first time in more than 40 years. In 1978, Taiwanese diplomats struck their colors for the final time from the embassy flagpole in Washington, D.C., marking the end of diplomatic relations with the United States.

In 1985, singer Rick Nelson, 45, and six other people were killed when fire broke out aboard a DC-3 that was taking the group to a New Year's Eve performance in Dallas.

In 1986, 97 people were killed when fire broke out in the Dupont Plaza Hotel in San Juan, Puerto Rico. (Three hotel workers later pleaded guilty in connection with the blaze.)

In 1999, Russian President Boris Yeltsin announced his resignation (he was succeeded by Vladimir Putin).

In 2010, tornadoes fueled by unusually warm air pummeled the South and Midwest, killing a total of eight people in Arkansas and Missouri.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama signed a wide-ranging defense bill into law despite having "serious reservations" about provisions that regulated the detention, interrogation and prosecution of suspected terrorists. A NASA probe fired its engine and slipped into orbit around the moon in the first of two back-to-back arrivals over the New Year's weekend.

Five years ago: Mariah Carey ushered in 2017 with a botched performance on "Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve with Ryan Seacrest" on ABC; Carey blamed the show's producers for technical difficulties, while Dick Clark Productions called Carey's claims "absurd." Actor William Christopher, best known for playing Father Francis Mulcahy on the TV series "M.A.S.H.," died in Pasadena, California, at age 84.

One year ago: Around the world on New Year's Eve, pandemic restrictions on open air gatherings saw people turning to virtual celebrations or made-for-TV fireworks displays. In New York's Times Square, the ball dropped as always, but police fenced off the site to prevent crowds from gathering. Authorities arrested a suburban Milwaukee pharmacist suspected of deliberately ruining hundreds of doses of coronavirus vaccine by removing them from refrigeration. (Steven Brandenburg, an admitted conspiracy theorist who believed vaccines were the product of the devil, would be sentenced to three years in prison.) Britain completed its economic break from the European Union. Stocks ended the year at record highs, even after a breathtaking nosedive in the markets in the spring as the coronavirus took hold. Former U.S. attorney general and Pennsylvania Gov. Dick Thornburgh died at a retirement community near Pittsburgh; he was 88.

Today's Birthdays: TV producer George Schlatter is 92. Actor Sir Anthony Hopkins is 84. Actor Tim Considine (TV: "My Three Sons") is 81. Actor Sarah Miles is 80. Actor Barbara Carrera is 80. Rock musician Andy Summers is 79. Actor Sir Ben Kingsley is 78. Producer-director Taylor Hackford is 77. Fashion designer Diane von Furstenberg is 75. Actor Tim Matheson is 74. Pop singer Burton Cummings is 74. Actor Joe Dallesandro is 73. Rock musician Tom Hamilton (Aerosmith) is 70. Actor James Remar is 68. Actor Bebe Neuwirth is 63. Actor Val Kilmer is 62. Singer Paul Westerberg is 62. Actor Don Diamont is 59. Rock musician Ric Ivanisevich (Oleander) is 59. Rock musician Scott Ian (Anthrax) is 58. Actor Gong Li is 56. Author Nicholas Sparks is 56. Actor Lance Reddick is 52. Pop singer Joe McIntyre is 49. Rock musician Mikko Siren (Apocalyptica) is 46. Donald Trump Jr. is 44. Rapper PSY (Park Jae-sang) is 44. Rock musician Bob Bryar is 42. Rock musician Jason Sechrist (Portugal. The Man) is 42. Actor Ricky Whittle is 42. Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., is 42. Actor/singer Erich Bergen is 36. DJ/vocalist Drew Taggart (The Chainsmokers) is 32. U.S. Olympic beach volleyball gold medalist Alix Klineman is 32. U.S. Olympic gold medal gymnast Gabby Douglas is 26.