

Groton Daily Independent

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"It is never too late to be what you might have been."

-George Eliot



UpComing Events

Saturday, Jan. 8

CANCELLED: Groton Robotics Tournament
Penguin Classic Debate on-line
Girls Basketball Classic at Redfield. Groton Area vs. Platte-Geddes at 3:30

Monday, Jan. 10

Boys' Basketball hosts Webster Area. C game starts at 5 p.m. with JV and Varsity to follow.
7 p.m.: School Board Meeting

Tuesday, Jan. 11

5 p.m.: 7th/8th grade basketball game with Wau-bay-Summit at Waubay. Single game so they may play extra quarters.

6 p.m.: Girls' Basketball hosts Aberdeen Christian. JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

Thursday, Jan. 13

Boys' Basketball at Aberdeen Roncalli. at Elementary Gym: 7th grade game at 4 p.m., 8th grade game at 5 p.m. at Roncalli High School: C game at 5 p.m. followed by junior varsity and varsity.

Friday, Jan. 14

Silver Bowl Debate at Sioux Falls
No School - Faculty In-Service at Warner School

Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

Saturday: James Marx Funeral, 10:30 a.m.; GBB vs. Platte-Geddes at Redfield Classic, 3:30 p.m.

Correction

In Thursday's wrestling team scores, Groton Area defeated Webster Area, 42-24.

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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Sisseton girls edge Groton Area in overtime

Sisseton pulled out a 57-52 overtime win over Groton Area in girls basketball action played Friday in the Groton Area Arena.

Sisseton held a 16-8 lead after the first quarter and a 27-21 lead at half time. The Tigers rallied to take a 28-27 lead and the lead changed hands three more times before the Redmen would settle in with a 40-38 lead after the third quarter. Groton Area held a 49-47 with 1:26 left in the fourth quarter. Hannah Leverson would make an inside shot with 15 seconds left to tie the game at 49, sending the game into overtime.

Sisseton would score first in the overtime and the Tigers tied the game at 51, but Sisseton would take advantage of four Groton Area turnovers in the overtime and went on for the win.

Gracie Traphagen had another double-double night with 21 points, 16 rebounds, one assist and two steals. Jerica Locke had seven points, one rebound and one assist. Sydney Leicht had six points, three rebounds, one assist and one steal. Allyssa Locke had five points, two rebounds, three assists and one steal. Aspen Johnson had four points, four rebounds, two assists and four steals. Kennedy Hansen had four points and one rebound. Alyssa Thaler had two points, three rebounds, two assists, one block and one steal. Brooke Gengerke had two points and two assists. Jaedyn Penning had one point and two rebounds.

Groton Area made 10 of 23 field goals for 43 percent, five of 18 in three-pointers for 28 percent, made 17 of 27 free throws for 63 percent, had 32 rebounds, 23 turnovers, 12 assists, nine steals, one block shot and 12 team fouls with Allyssa Locke fouling out.

Hannah Leversen led the Redmen with 21 points followed by Emmalee Nielsen with 12, Hailey Nelson 10, Tara Nelson eight, and adding two points apiece were Veronica Rice, Ruby Rice and Krista Langager. Sisseton made 20 of 51 field goals for 39 percent, six of eight free throws for 75 percent, had 11 turnovers and 20 team fouls.

Sisseton made nine three-pointers while Groton Area made five.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Bary Keith at Harr Motors, John Sieh Agency, Groton Ford, Dacotah Bank and Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 26-25. Sisseton held a 9-2 lead after the first quarter, a 14-7 lead at half time, and a 23-16 lead at the end of the third quarter. The Tigers chipped away at the lead in the fourth quarter and took its first lead with 3:34 left in the game at 24-23. Kennedy Hansen propelled the Tigers with six fourth quarter points and the Tigers were four of five from the line in the final period.

Brooklyn Hansen led the Tigers with seven points while Kennedy Hansen and Jerica Locke each had six, Elizabeth Fliehs had five and Jaedyn Penning had two points.

Krista Langager led Sisseton with 13 points while Ruby Rice had five, Rylie Huff had three and Jourdes Chance and Linnea Silk each had two points.

The game was broadcast on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Tami and Rich Zimney.

The Tigers took command of the second half won the C game, 37-19. The game was tied at nine after the first period and the Tigers held a 15-13 lead at half time. Groton Area outscored Sisseton, 13-3, in the third period to take a 28-16 lead at the break.

Faith Traphagen and Brooklyn Hansen each had nine points, Laila Roberts eight, Talli Wright and Mia Crank each had three, Kayla Lehr and Emily Clark each had two points and Elizabeth Fliehs added a free throw.

Bella Donnel led Sisseton with four points while Kennedy Hansen, Harley Richards and Isabelle Herrick each had three points and Lauryn Wegener, Andra Hanson and Elliot Hortness each had two points.

The game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Kent and Darcy Muller.

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Roe and Fillipi Lead Wolves Past Wildcats

Wayne, Neb. – The Northern State women’s basketball team led wire-to-wire on Friday night as they snapped a four game losing streak and defeated Wayne State 64-53. The Wolves defense held the Wildcats to a season low 16 made field goals and 25 percent shooting from the field.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 64, WSC 53

Records: NSU 7-7 (4-5 NSIC), WSC 7-6 (4-5 NSIC)

Attendance: 590

HOW IT HAPPENED

- Lexi Roe knocked down her 100th career 3-pointer when she hit a shot from the right wing and gave the Wolves an early 4-0 lead over the Wildcats
- Northern State got off to a hot start shooting the ball, shooting 72.7 percent from the field (8-11), 100 percent from 3-point range (2-2), and 83.3 percent from the free throw line (5-6) in the first quarter while jumping out to a 23-9 lead
- The Wolves took a 32-28 lead into the halftime break, however Logan Hughes knocked down two 3-pointers and Lauren Zacharias added another to help give the Wildcats a 19-9 advantage in the second quarter
- Both teams struggled to shoot the ball in the third quarter as Northern State shot 16.7 percent and Wayne State shot 20 percent from the field, but the Wolves used nine made free throws in the period to maintain a four point lead entering the final ten minutes
- A quick 6-0 run with free throws by Brynn Alfson followed with layups by Rianna Fillipi and Laurie Rogers to open the fourth quarter pushed the Northern lead out to double digits at 51-41
- The Wolves went 11-14 from the free throw line in the fourth quarter to seal the victory, and the defense held the Wildcats to 11.1 percent shooting from the field (2-18) in the period
- Northern State improved to 7-0 when leading at halftime this season
- Northern held a 48-30 advantage in rebounding, it was the third time this season that they have held a plus 18 advantage on the glass
- Rogers grabbed a career high 13 rebounds and added seven blocks, it was her fourth game this season with five or more blocks in a game
- Roe scored a season high 24 points and brought her career total to 997 points
- In her first career start, Alfson notched career highs in points (10) and rebounds (8)

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Lexi Roe: 24 points, 5 rebounds

Rianna Fillipi: 15 points, 8 rebounds, 6 assists, 4 steals, 2 blocks

Brynn Alfson: 10 points, 8 rebounds

Laurie Rogers: 7 points, 13 rebounds, 7 blocks

UP NEXT

The Northern State women’s basketball team will complete their weekend road trip this afternoon as they travel to Sioux Falls to face Augustana. The Wolves and Vikings will tip-off at 5:30 p.m. at the Sanford Pentagon.

Wayne State Pulls Away From Northern Men in Friday Loss

Wayne, Neb. – The Northern State University men's basketball team fell to Wayne State College on the road Friday evening. The Wolves struggled with efficiency, shooting under 40.0% from the floor.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 53, WSC 69

Records: NSU 10-7 (4-5 NSIC), WSC 8-6 (5-3 NSIC)

Attendance: 611

HOW IT HAPPENED

- NSU recorded 24 points in the first and 29 in the second, while WSC notched 33 and 36 respectively
- The Wolves shot 39.2% from the floor, 26.9% from beyond the arc, and 54.5% from the foul line in the game
- They recorded 32 rebounds, 12 assists, seven steals, seven 3-pointers, and two blocks
- Northern recorded 26 points in the paint, 13 points off turnovers, six points off the bench, and a game high 13 second chance points
- Two Wolves tallied double digit points in the loss, as the Wildcats saw three double figure scorers

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

- Jordan Belka: 20 points, 57.1 FG%, 4 rebounds
- Sam Masten: 11 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists
- Cole Bergan: 7 assists, 4 rebounds, 3 points

UP NEXT

Northern State takes on Augustana today at 3:30 p.m. from the Sanford Pentagon. The Wolves then return home on January 14 and 15, facing Southwest Minnesota State and Sioux Falls.

Department of Health Makes an Additional One Million Free COVID-19 Tests Available to State Residents

PIERRE, S.D. – Today, the South Dakota Department of Health (DOH) announced it has procured one million Flowflex® COVID-19 Antigen home tests. These tests will be made available, free of charge, to residents that want one. These tests are in addition to the Vault Health® tests kits that have been available for over a year through the Department's website.

"In light of the recent COVID-19 surge throughout the country, the State of South Dakota and Department of Health decided it was time to do even more," said Joan Adam, Interim Health Secretary. "This additional testing option will bolster our testing capacity and help slow the spread of the virus in our communities."

These antigen rapid tests can be done at home in as little as 15 minutes, and users follow a provided step-by-step instruction guide to complete testing. These antigen tests are reliable, and if you receive a positive result, you do not need confirmation through your healthcare provider. We encourage residents that receive a positive result to follow CDC isolation guidance.

Flowflex tests will arrive in SD on Thursday of next week and will be made available statewide through testing partners across the state. The DOH will also publish a list of locations where residents can pick up a test on its website and social media channels.

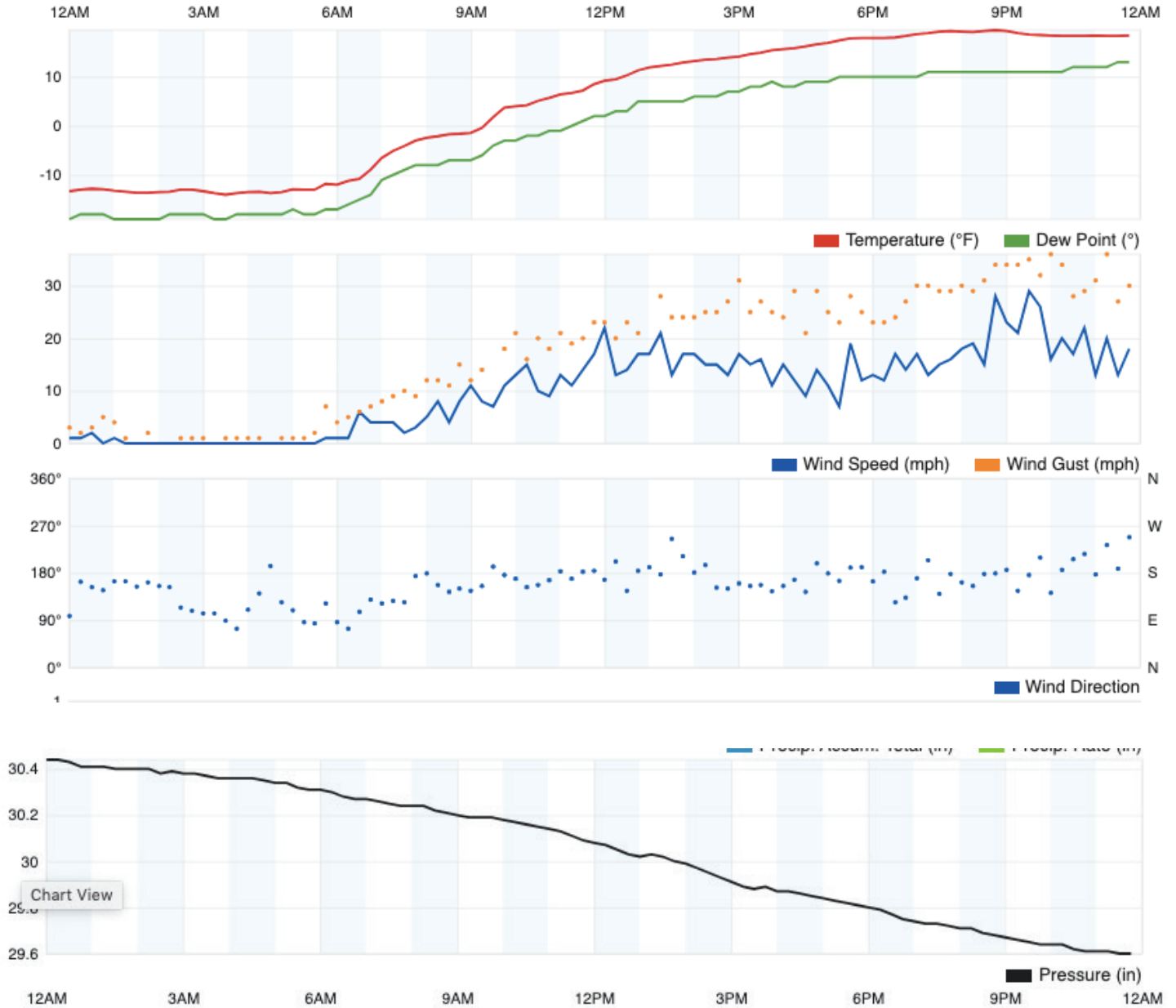
Until the new tests are available, DOH encourages all residents to continue using Vault or access other commercially available over-the-counter COVID-19 tests. As a reminder, Vault tests are of PCR laboratory quality, and results can be used by those who are wishing to travel internationally and/or must show proof of a negative test.

For more information and the latest resources, visit doh.sd.gov/covid/.

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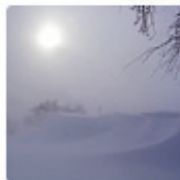
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Patchy
Blowing Snow
and Blustery

High: 27 °F ↓

Tonight



Mostly Clear

Low: -9 °F

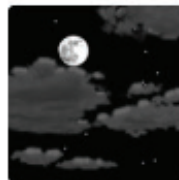
Sunday



Cold

High: 9 °F

Sunday
Night



Partly Cloudy

Low: -8 °F

Monday



Cold

High: 6 °F

NWS ABERDEEN



JANUARY 8

Warm EARLY Today



BREEZY

25 to 39°

Sunday



3 to 30°

Monday



0 to 25°

Tuesday



25 to 43°

Daybreak

Wind Chills -10 to -30°

-5 to -25°

5 to -15°

COLD SUNDAY & MONDAY!

Cooler air will be moving in this afternoon, with falling temperatures on breezy northwesterly winds. Patchy blowing snow will linger over portions of northern South Dakota and west central Minnesota. Highs Sunday and Monday will be much lower, ranging from the single digits over far northeastern South Dakota and west central Minnesota, to the 20s across portions of central South Dakota. Expect warmer air to return Tuesday through the rest of the work week! In fact, temperatures will likely be 10 to 15 degrees above normal for this time of year Tuesday through Thursday.

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Today in Weather History

January 8, 2010: Arctic high pressure combined with strong northwest winds resulted in extreme wind chills from -35 to nearly 50 degrees below zero across central and northeast South Dakota. Some of the lowest wind chills included -40 in Aberdeen; -41 in Watertown; -42 in Highmore; -43 in Leola and Faulkton; -44 in Eagle Butte, Herreid, and Gettysburg; and -47 in Bowdle. Several record lows were also tied or broken during the morning hours of the 8th, including -22 degrees NW of Gann Valley and Victor; -23 degrees at Pierre and Sisseton; -24 degrees at Roscoe; and -34 degrees at Pollock.

1953 - A severe icestorm in the northeastern U.S. produced up to four inches of ice in Pennsylvania, and two to three inches in southeastern New York State. In southern New England the ice coated a layer of snow up to 20 inches deep. The storm resulted in 31 deaths and 2.5 million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1973 - A severe icestorm struck Atlanta GA. The storm paralyzed the city closing schools and businesses, and damage from the storm was estimated at 25 million dollars. One to four inches of ice coated northern Georgia leaving 300,000 persons without electricity for up to a week. Between 7 PM and 9 PM on the 7th, 2.27 inches (liquid content) of freezing rain, sleet and snow coated Atlanta, as the temperature hovered at 32 degrees. (7th-8th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A winter storm moving out of the Southern Rockies into the Central Plains Region produced 14 inches of snow at Red River NM, and 17 inches in the Wolf Creek ski area of Colorado. Wichita KS was blanketed with seven inches of snow. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A winter storm spread heavy snow across the northeastern U.S., with up to ten inches reported in southern New Jersey. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - Strong northwesterly winds and bitterly cold temperatures prevailed in the north central U.S. Winds in the Great Lakes Region gusted to 58 mph at Chicago IL, and reached 63 mph at Niagara Falls NY. Squalls in western New York State produced 20 inches of snow at Barnes Corners and Lowville. Snow squalls in Upper Michigan produced 26 inches around Keweenaw. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - High winds plagued the northwestern U.S., with the state of Oregon hardest hit. Two persons were killed in Oregon, and nine others were injured, and the high winds downed fifty-five million board feet of timber, valued at more than twenty million dollars. Winds gusted to 90 mph near Pinehurst ID, and wind gusts reached 96 mph at Stevenson WA. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2019: An unusual January tornado impacted Cortland, Ohio, during the mid-morning hours. The EF-1 tornado developed northeast of Champion Township in Trumbull County and moved east. The tornado brought down numerous trees and wires along the 4.5-mile path.

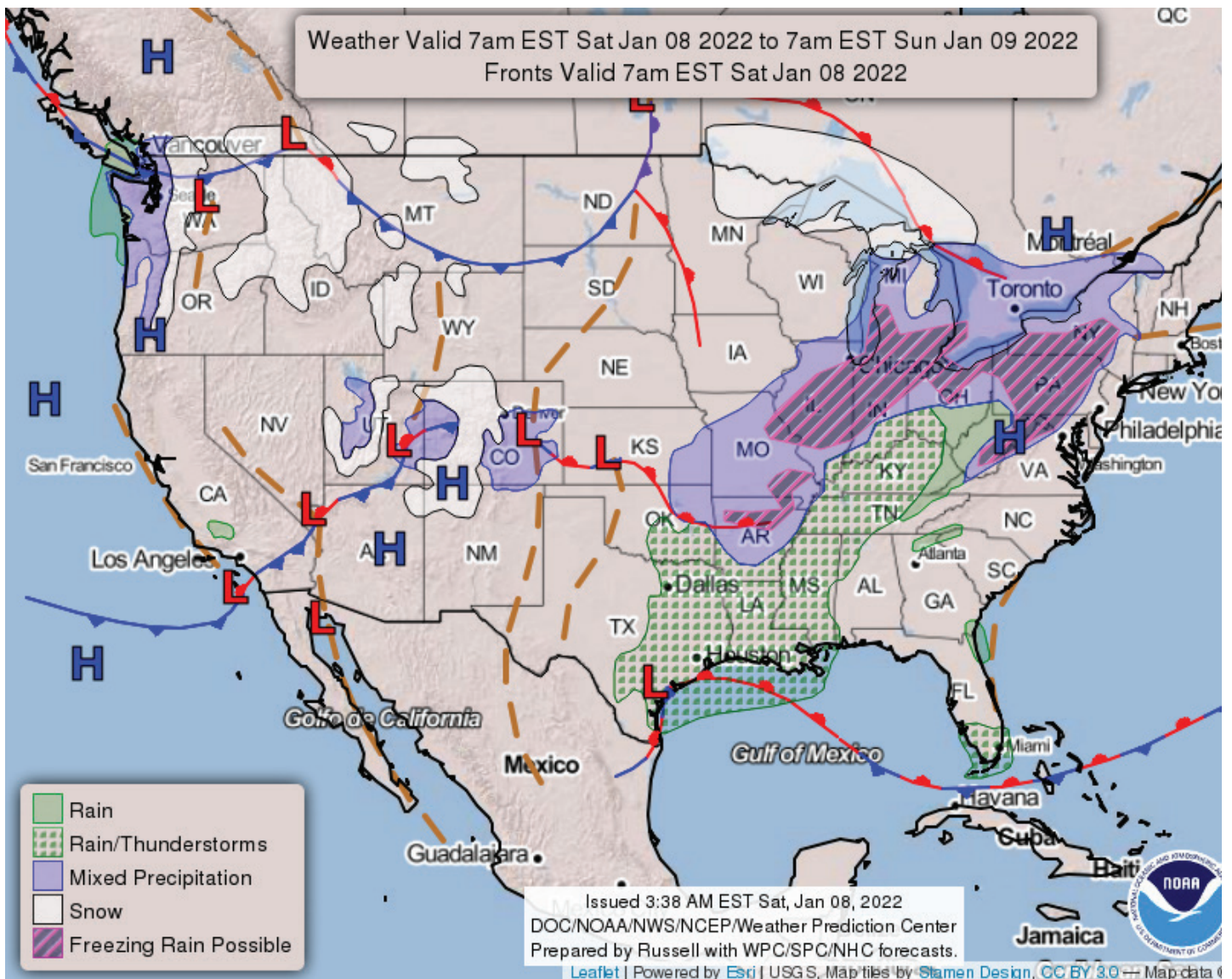
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 20 °F at 8:40 PM
Low Temp: -14 °F at 3:29 AM
Wind: 36 mph at 9:57 PM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 55 in 1963
Record Low: -33° in 1912
Average High: 23°F
Average Low: 2°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.17
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00
Average Precip to date: 0.17
Precip Year to Date: 0.00
Sunset Tonight: 5:08:51 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09:15 AM



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THE NEED FOR GOD'S HELP

Years ago, while living in California, I was walking through the aisles of a grocery store when suddenly the shelves began to shake. Items fell to the floor, the lights went out, and people began to push and shove. A man standing near me shouted, "God, if I ever need Your help, it's right now. Please save me!"

David must have felt that way as he faced a large and well-trained army waiting for him in a heavily fortified city. His heart must have been filled with fear - and rightly so. The city was situated among rugged hills and was almost inaccessible. He knew the enemy was waiting for him, prepared and seemingly invincible. So, he too called on God. "Who will bring me to the fortified city? Who will lead me to Edom?"

Realizing the greatness of his enemy and his need for help he prayed, "Give us aid against the enemy, for the help of man is worthless."

All of us face our "Edom." It may be in the form of a dreaded disease, and there are no more options. It may be the dissolution of a marriage, and children will be left with feelings of fear and wonder. It may be the loss of a loved one and feelings of grief that haunt us night and day. It may be the loss of a child to addiction. It may be the result of an accident that leaves a spouse paralyzed. It may be the confinement of a prison cell with little hope for freedom.

We all face our "Edom." However, we can all pray with David, "With God we will gain the victory, and He will trample down our enemies." No enemy can escape God.

Prayer: Too often we look to human help which is insufficient. Give us faith and fortitude, Father, to look to You for victory through Christ our Savior and Lord. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: -My heart, O God, is steadfast; I will sing and make music with all my soul. Psalm 108:1

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2021 Community Events

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

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

Subscription Form

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News from the Associated Press

Supporters of Black Hills Mining Museum seek new space

By WENDY PITLICK Black Hills Pioneer

LEAD, S.D. (AP) — For 35 years, an old grocery store that took 17,000 volunteer hours to convert into a gold mine of history has served the community well. But members of the Black Hills Mining Museum are making their case for a new building.

Black Hills Mining Museum board members recently hosted a community meeting to discuss the importance of the museum in preserving Lead's history and the history of mining, as well as to talk about their need for a new facility, and preliminary plans that have been drawn up for two new buildings — one on Main Street and one at Gold Run Park.

Homestake served as the deepest gold mine in the western hemisphere for 125 years before shutting down in 2001. During its operation, the mining company produced 41 million troy ounces of gold, which would have been 900 ounces of gold every day. Black Hills Mining Museum New Facilities Coordinator Gordon Phillips said by today's gold prices, that would be \$1.6 million a day, the Black Hills Pioneer reported.

"That's pretty significant," he said. "So when I talk about why the Black Hills Mining Museum matters, it's because we have a trove of irreplaceable community treasures."

The museum, he explained, serves to tell that history of the Homestake Mining Company, as well as to tell the story of Lead and other mining practices around the Black Hills. It also contains irreplaceable and highly valuable artifacts and records from the area, which many people use for research. Phillips said the museum consistently receives five-star ratings from such travel companies as AAA and TripAdvisor, and in 2014 the S.D. Legislature designated it as the official mining museum of the state.

"This mining museum is the gold mine of Lead," said board president Mike Stahl.

Phillips reported that nearly every week someone comes into the museum with a new relic or record for historical safe keeping. Recently, he said a woman donated 20 maps of Lawrence County early drainage descriptions from 1896, and that's just one example of donations that come in regularly.

But all those items need to be kept in a temperature-controlled, dust-free, archival space, in order to be properly preserved, Phillips said. The Black Hills Mining Museum does not currently have such a space, and that is one of the many reasons for a new building.

"Pieces of clothing and paper have to be stored in a proper environment, otherwise over time they disintegrate," he said.

Other reasons for a new building, Phillips said, include making the museum fully ADA accessible with an elevator. Parking is also a major issue, since the Black Hills Mining Museum does not have ample parking for bus tours, RV and travel trailers, or handicapped spaces. Additional storage for the museum's growing collection is also needed, he said.

"We could spend a good amount of change toward fixing this building and still fall short of these goals," Phillips said of the current facility.

In an effort to develop preliminary plans for a new building, Phillips reached out to Tim Palone, an architect in Oklahoma City. Phillips, who met Palone while his family was vacationing in the Black Hills, said the architect offered to create the preliminary plans at no cost. Palone explained that the proposed facility would have two levels. The main level would be flush with the parking lot, allowing handicap accessibility. It would include a greeting area, the public museum, a café area with gold panning, restrooms and a dedicated space for the underground mining simulation tours. Additional conference rooms and office areas would also be included. An elevator and stairs would lead to a second level, where the museum would store its archive materials for research, as well as support areas for staff and more storage.

"The design and intent is to represent the heritage and history of this community while providing a functional and efficient space that meets the needs of the museum," he said. "This is a concept. This is the start of a discussion. This isn't representative of a final design. We also feel the design could add a

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gateway effect as you enter Lead, and draw visitors into the museum.”

A new city building that is proposed to be located where the existing museum and the library are currently located, is another reason the Black Hills Mining Museum is looking for a new space. Phillips, who also serves on the city comprehensive plan and the planning and zoning board, said he reached out to Dream Designs, of Rapid City, to fulfill what has long been a dream for the city — a new library.

Mike Stanley of Dream Designs presented plans that the company has proposed to build a brand-new building that would replace the existing mining museum and library space. The new building would include a two-level parking garage that would be accessible from Julius Street. An elevator from the parking garage into the main building, as well as a grand staircase connecting Julius Street to Main. The new library, he said would be located on one level, on the Julius Street side of the building, with windows, ample space and ADA accessibility. Three commercial suites and a plaza area would be on the Main Street side of the building, on the main level. On the upper level, Stanley said the company proposes about 14 apartments or condominiums.

Stanley said the new building would be designed to complement the Homestake Opera House.

There have been no official city plans to move forward with that project, and it is still in discussion phases with city officials.

Though the plans presented remain conceptual, Phillips asked the community to pull together to help make the new museum a reality. Combined individuals typically give more funds than corporations, and so he asked the community to consider becoming members of the Black Hills Mining Museum by providing donations. He also said there are opportunities for the community to help in other ways, including volunteering and raising awareness about the project.

“While it’s easy to think others will have to give big, don’t discount what you can do,” he said. “There were 17,000 volunteer man hours to put the original museum together. We really aren’t going to be able to move forward until we know we have community support, corporate support, grants, etc. It’s also important to pass the word. The more people who hear about this and learn what we’re thinking about, it helps us identify people who can help.”

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

07-29-43-56-57, Mega Ball: 6, Megaplier: 3

(seven, twenty-nine, forty-three, fifty-six, fifty-seven; Mega Ball: six; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$278 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$20 million

Friday’s Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Alliance, Neb. 50, Oelrichs 33

Bridgewater-Emery 72, Freeman 28

Burke 54, Centerville 49

Canton 61, Elkton-Lake Benton 55

Chadron, Neb. 46, Belle Fourche 42

DeSmet 82, Arlington 53

Dell Rapids St. Mary 53, Estelline/Hendricks 47

Deubrook 71, Lake Preston 44

Deuel 84, Redfield 61

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Ethan 62, Wessington Springs 55
Faulkton 69, Hitchcock-Tulare 31
Flandreau 55, Garretson 34
Florence/Henry 42, Wilmot 40
Gayville-Volin 42, Irene-Wakonda 40
Hill City 59, Edgemont 41
Langford 52, Herreid/Selby Area 47
Little Wound 69, Todd County 64
McCook Central/Montrose 57, Baltic 40
Menno 56, Alcester-Hudson 54, OT
Mitchell 69, Yankton 55
New Underwood 57, Lead-Deadwood 32
Northwestern 68, Britton-Hecla 42
Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 70, Colman-Egan 40
Philip 56, Jones County 39
Rapid City Christian 43, Dickinson, N.D. 38
Sioux Falls Jefferson 71, Rapid City Central 42
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 60, Watertown 49
Sioux Falls Roosevelt 51, Rapid City Stevens 29
Sioux Valley 62, Chester 39
Tea Area 63, Madison 61
Vermillion 68, Parkston 49
Warner 64, North Central Co-Op 39
Waubay/Summit 50, Great Plains Lutheran 36
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Brookings vs. Brandon Valley, ppd.

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=
Alcester-Hudson 40, Menno 29
Beresford 52, McCook Central/Montrose 40
Bowman County, N.D. 58, Faith 45
Brandon Valley 62, Brookings 43
Canton 65, Elkton-Lake Benton 47
Centerville 48, Burke 35
Chadron, Neb. 41, Belle Fourche 36
Clark/Willow Lake 54, Milbank 41
Dakota Valley 71, Viborg-Hurley 55
Deubrook 58, Lake Preston 27
Deuel 45, Redfield 36
Ethan 62, Wessington Springs 51
Gayville-Volin 42, Irene-Wakonda 40
Great Plains Lutheran 45, Waubay/Summit 41
Herreid/Selby Area 58, Langford 23
Highmore-Harrold 54, Sully Buttes 50, OT
Iroquois/Doland 42, Sunshine Bible Academy 26
New Underwood 36, Lead-Deadwood 9
Newell 59, Wall 49
Parkston 43, Vermillion 37
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Sioux Falls O’Gorman 61, Watertown 33
Sisseton 57, Groton Area 52, OT
Wagner 59, Bon Homme 24
Warner 64, North Central Co-Op 31
Yankton 56, Mitchell 53, OT

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

Forest service burning debris in Black Hills

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — The U.S. Forest Service has started burning piles of forest debris in the Black Hills.

The Rapid City Journal reported Friday that workers plan to burn the debris for the next several weeks. Drivers on Interstate 90 could see heavy smoke near the Spearfish area this week.

The Forest Service burned piles from campground projects at the Spearfish Work Center on Jan. 3 and Jan. 4.

Chris Zoller, fire management officer for the Black Hills northern zone, said the burn piles will be covered with snow and help prepare the landscape for planting in the spring. Burns also are planned in the southern and central Black Hills.

Man found guilty in Menards kidnapping case in South Dakota

WATERTOWN, S.D. (AP) — The man accused of trying to kidnap a child while he was working at the Menards in Watertown has been convicted by a jury.

Peter Groenhoff, 39, of Canby, Minnesota was found guilty of second-degree kidnapping Thursday, KSFY-TV reported.

The charges stem from an incident in May of 2018. Prosecutors say Groenhoff was working at Menards when he picked up a 4-year-old child and quickly walked away from the youngster’s family. The child’s father pursued Groenhoff and told him to stop, but Groenhoff continued on until he was caught in the employee break room. Police arrived and arrested him.

Groenhoff testified in his own defense at his trial. The jury deliberated less than 90 minutes before delivering a guilty verdict.

“We are happy that we can finally give the victim and the family a sense of closure after all this time,” Deputy State’s Attorney Alison Bakken said.

A sentencing date has not been set. Groenhoff faces up to 15 years in prison.

South Dakota guard unit headed for year at Guantanamo Bay

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — About 110 members of the South Dakota National Guard’s police unit will soon be headed to Cuba for a year-long federal deployment.

The 235th Military Police Company, based in Rapid City and Sioux Falls, will train at Fort Bliss, Texas for several weeks before deploying overseas.

The unit will provide detention support for Joint Task Force Guantanamo, a U.S. military joint task force based at Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba.

“This is the moment we have been preparing for almost the last 16 months. We have put in a lot of time, effort and sacrifice so we could accomplish this difficult mission,” Capt. Pat Moran, the company’s commander told his soldiers during a send-off ceremony this week.

“One thing that I know about the 235th, is we are ready, we are trained, and we have the leaders and experience to handle this mission. I know that our soldiers and family will get through this next year together,” Moran said.

The unit was deployed twice to Afghanistan in 2013 and 2007, but has never served at Guantanamo. "We simply cannot say thank you enough on behalf of a grateful state and a grateful nation," U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson told the soldiers. "For those of us who have not served we cannot know the kind of cost this has on families and our citizen-soldiers, so we just have to say thank you."

Former anti-terror chief arrested over Kazakhstan protests

By JIM HEINTZ Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The former head of Kazakhstan's counterintelligence and anti-terror agency has been arrested on charges of attempted government overthrow in the wake of violent protests that the president has blamed on foreign-backed terrorists.

The arrest of Karim Masimov was announced Saturday by the National Security Committee, which Masimov headed until he was removed this week by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

Authorities say security forces killed 26 demonstrators in this week's unrest and that 18 law-enforcement officers died. More than 4,400 people have been arrested, the Interior Ministry said Saturday.

The protests in the Central Asian nation were the most widespread since Kazakhstan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

The unrest began in the country's far west as protests against a sharp rise in prices for liquefied petroleum gas that is widely used as vehicle fuel. The protests spread to the country's largest city, Almaty, where demonstrators seized and burned government buildings.

At Tokayev's request, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russia-led military alliance of six former Soviet states, authorized sending about 2,500 mostly Russian troops to Kazakhstan as peacekeepers.

Some of the force is guarding government facilities in the capital, Nur-Sultan, which "made it possible to release part of the forces of Kazakhstani law enforcement agencies and redeploy them to Almaty to participate in the counter-terrorist operation," according to a statement from Tokayev's office.

Tokayev said Friday that he had authorized security forces to shoot to kill those participating in unrest. On Saturday, there were no immediate reports of trouble in Almaty. Police dispersed a demonstration and detained people in the city of Aktau, while sporadic gunfire was heard in Kyzylorda, Russian news agency Sputnik said.

No details were given about what Masimov, the former security agency head, was alleged to have done that would constitute an attempted government overthrow. The National Security Committee, a successor to the Soviet-era KGB, is responsible for counterintelligence, the border guards service and anti-terror activities.

Although the protests began as denunciations of the near-doubling of LPG prices at the start of the year, their spread and intense violence indicate they reflected widespread dissatisfaction in the former Soviet republic run by the same party for more than 30 years.

Many demonstrators shouted "Old man out," a reference to Nursultan Nazarbayev, who was president from Kazakhstan's independence until he resigned in 2019 and anointed Tokayev as his successor.

Nazarbayev, who was given the title "ebasy," or leader of the nation, retained substantial power as head of the National Security Council. But Tokayev removed him as council head amid this week's unrest, possibly aiming at a concession to mollify protesters.

Nazarbayev remained invisible during the chaos, but on Saturday his spokesman said Nazarbayev was in the capital and "calls on everyone to rally around the president of Kazakhstan to overcome current challenges and ensure the integrity of our country."

Hate crimes trial in Arbery killing will put racism up front

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — Sentenced to life in prison for murder, the three white men who chased and killed Ahmaud Arbery will soon stand trial on federal hate crimes charges in which jurors will have to decide

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whether the slaying of the running Black man was motivated by racism.

The sentences imposed by a judge Friday in Glynn County Superior Court concluded the state of Georgia's criminal case in the slaying of 25-year-old Arbery, in which a jury returned guilty verdicts the day before Thanksgiving.

A month from now, on Feb. 7, a federal judge has scheduled jury selection to begin in the three men's second trial in U.S. District Court. And evidence of racism that state prosecutors chose not to present at the murder trial is expected to be front and center.

An indictment last year charged father and son Greg and Travis McMichael and their neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan with violating Arbery's civil rights when they pursued the running man in pickup trucks and cut off his escape from their neighborhood. Bryan recorded cellphone video of the chase's deadly end, when Travis McMichael blasted Arbery at close range with a shotgun.

The Feb. 23, 2020, killing just outside the port city of Brunswick became part of a greater national reckoning on racial injustice when the video leaked online two months later. Though an investigator testified at a pretrial court hearing that Bryan said he heard Travis McMichael utter a racist slur as Arbery lay dying in the street, state prosecutors never presented that information to the jury during the murder case.

That evidence should be key in the federal trial, where the McMichaels and Bryan are charged with targeting Arbery because he was Black.

At a hearing Friday, Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley sentenced both McMichaels to life in prison with no chance of parole. The judge sentenced Bryan to life with a possibility for parole once he's served 30 years.

Despite those severe penalties, Arbery's family said the hate crimes case remains important. At the time of his death, Arbery had enrolled at a technical college and was preparing to study to become an electrician like his uncles.

"They killed him because he was a Black man," Arbery's father, Marcus Arbery, told reporters outside the Glynn County courthouse Friday.

Lee Merritt, an attorney for Arbery's mother, said it's important for federal case to expose racist motives behind the killing because "there is an issue of race taking place in this country. It has come front and center and it needs to be discussed."

Georgia Bureau of Investigation Agent Richard Dial testified in June 2020, more than a year before the state trial, that Bryan told investigators he heard Travis McMichael say "f---ing n---er" after shooting Arbery. Attorneys for Travis McMichael have denied he made the statement.

State prosecutors and investigators never mentioned that during the murder trial. Georgia law doesn't require establishing motive to convict someone of murder. It merely requires proving a victim was killed with malice or during the commission of another felony.

Regardless, issues of race loomed large in the murder trial over Arbery's death. The McMichaels and Bryan weren't charged with crimes in the Black man's killing until the shooting video became public two month later.

"Today your son has made history, because we have people who are being held accountable for lynching a Black man in America," Benjamin Crump, a civil attorney for Arbery's family, told the slain man's parents after the sentencing hearing.

Defense attorneys during the trial contended the men pursued Arbery because they reasonably believed he had been committing burglaries in the neighborhood. Travis McMichael took the witness stand to testify that he opened fire in self-defense after Arbery ran at him and tried to grab his shotgun.

"He and Greg McMichael thought they were helping their community, thought they were helping police catch someone," said Robert Rubin, an attorney for Travis McMichael.

Defense attorneys said they planned to appeal the convictions for murder and other state crimes within 30 days.

Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley called the killing "callous" and noted that when Arbery fell bleeding in the street the McMichaels "turned their backs, to give a disturbing image, and they walked away."

Harry Reid memorial in Vegas drawing nation's top Democrats

By KEN RITTER and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

LAS VEGAS (AP) — The life of former Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who rose from childhood poverty and deprivation in Nevada to become one of the nation's most powerful elected officials, will be celebrated by two American presidents and other Democratic leaders on Saturday, a testament to his impact on some of the most consequential legislation of the 21st century.

President Joe Biden, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer are scheduled to speak during an invitation-only memorial for the longtime Senate leader who died Dec. 28 at home in Henderson, Nevada, at age 82 of complications from pancreatic cancer. Former President Barack Obama, who credits Reid for his rise to the White House, is scheduled to deliver the eulogy.

"The president believes that Harry Reid is one of the greatest leaders in Senate history," White House deputy press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Friday. "So he is traveling to pay his respects to a man who had a profound impact on this nation."

Biden served for two decades with Reid in the Senate and worked with him for eight years when Biden was vice president.

Along with Obama, Elder M. Russell Ballard, a senior apostle in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, will speak at the 2,000-seat concert hall about Reid's 60 years in the Mormon faith. Vice President Kamala Harris also will attend.

"These are not only some of the most consequential leaders of our time — they are also some of Harry's best friends," Reid's wife of 62 years, Landra Reid, said in a statement announcing plans for the Smith Center for the Performing Arts event. "Harry loved every minute of his decades working with these leaders and the incredible things they accomplished together."

Reid's daughter and four sons also are scheduled to speak.

Obama, in a letter to Reid before his death, recalled their close relationship, their different backgrounds and Reid's climb from an impoverished former gold mining town in the Mojave Desert to leadership in Congress.

"Not bad for a skinny, poor kid from Searchlight," Obama wrote. "I wouldn't have been president had it not been for your encouragement and support, and I wouldn't have got most of what I got done without your skill and determination."

Reid served for 34 years in Washington and led the Senate through a crippling recession and the Republican takeover of the House after the 2010 elections.

He muscled Obama's signature health care act through the Senate; blocked plans for a national nuclear waste repository in the Nevada desert; authored a 1986 bill that created Great Basin National Park; and was credited with helping casino company MGM Mirage get financial backing to complete a multibillion-dollar project on the Strip during the Great Recession.

Harry Mason Reid hitchhiked 40 miles (64 kilometers) to high school and was an amateur boxer before he was elected to the Nevada state Assembly at age 28. He had graduated from Utah State University and worked nights as a U.S. Capitol police officer while attending George Washington University Law School in Washington.

In 1970, at age 30, he was elected state lieutenant governor with Democratic Gov. Mike O'Callaghan. Reid was elected to the House in 1982 and the Senate in 1986.

He built a political machine in Nevada that for years helped Democrats win key elections. When he retired in 2016 after an exercise accident at home left him blind in one eye, he picked former Nevada Attorney General Catherine Cortez Masto to replace him.

Cortez Masto became the first woman from Nevada and the first Latina ever elected to the U.S. Senate.

"Most of all, you've been a good friend," Obama told Reid in his letter. "As different as we are, I think we both saw something of ourselves in each other — a couple of outsiders who had defied the odds and knew how to take a punch and cared about the little guy."

Singer-songwriter and environmentalist Carole King and Brandon Flowers, lead singer of the Las Vegas-

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based rock band The Killers, are scheduled to perform during the memorial.

"The thought of having Carole King performing in Harry's honor is a tribute truly beyond words," Landra Reid said in her statement. In addition to his daughter and sons, Reid is survived by numerous grandchildren.

Flowers, a longtime friend, shares the Reids' Latter-day Saints faith and has been a headliner at events including a Lake Tahoe Summit that Harry Reid founded in 1997 to draw attention to the ecology of the lake, and the National Clean Energy Summit that Reid helped launch in 2008 in Las Vegas.

Among other songs, Flowers was scheduled to sing the Nevada state anthem, "Home Means Nevada."

Stephen J Cloobek, a close family friend and founder and former chief executive of a Las Vegas-based timeshare company, said he sponsored a gathering Friday for several hundred former Reid congressional staffers at the Bellagio resort on the Las Vegas Strip.

Those flying to Las Vegas will arrive at the newly renamed Harry Reid International Airport. It was previously named for Pat McCarran, a former Democratic U.S. senator from Nevada who once owned the airfield and whose legacy is clouded by racism and anti-Semitism.

U.K. gov't advisers recommend against 4th vaccine dose

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — U.K. government advisers have recommended against giving a fourth dose of COVID-19 vaccine to nursing home residents and people over 80 because data shows that a third shot offers lasting protection against admission to the hospital.

For people over 65, protection against hospitalization remains at about 90% three months after the third dose, according to data compiled by the U.K. Health Security Agency.

As a result, the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunization on Friday advised the government that there was no need to offer a fourth dose, or second booster, to vulnerable people at this time. Instead, the government should focus on giving a third dose to as many people as possible to boost protection against the highly transmissible omicron variant.

"The current data show the booster dose is continuing to provide high levels of protection against severe disease, even for the most vulnerable older age groups," said Prof. Wei Shen Lim, the committee's chair. "For this reason, the committee has concluded there is no immediate need to introduce a second booster dose, though this will continue to be reviewed."

The U.K. is racing to offer booster shots to adults across the country after research showed that two doses were not enough to protect people from omicron. The variant has fueled a surge in coronavirus infections and hospitalizations.

The number of people in the U.K. hospitalized with COVID-19 rose to 18,454 on Thursday, more than double the figure two weeks earlier.

Rising staff absences at U.K. hospitals have already prompted the military to provide backup to beleaguered doctors and nurses.

More than 39,000 staff members at hospitals in England were off work for reasons related to COVID-19 on Jan. 2, up 59% from the previous week, according to NHS England.

The respected trade publication, the Health Service Journal, said staff absences across the entire National Health Service, including mental health trusts and other areas, may be as high as 120,000.

Lessons forgotten: Election rallies feed Indian virus surge

By SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

NEW DELHI (AP) — Coronavirus cases fueled by the highly transmissible omicron variant are rocketing through India, prompting the federal government and states to swiftly reintroduce a string of restrictions.

Night curfews are back. Restaurants and bars are running at half their capacity. Some states have closed schools and movie theaters. Large gatherings are to be downsized.

But India's political leaders are busy on the campaign trail ahead of crucial state polls, addressing packed rallies of tens of thousands of people, many without masks.

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The scenes are strikingly similar to last year's election season, when the delta variant ravaged the country and made India one of the world's worst-hit countries. Some political parties have begun to curtail their campaigns and halt a few rallies, but health experts worry that the lessons learned last year have already been forgotten.

"The highly transmissible omicron variant chases and catches you. But our politicians are out there to welcome it with a hug," said Dr. T. Jacob John, an Indian virologist. "I fear it is beginning to look a lot like last year."

A devastating surge of infections tore through India last year. It was partly fed by large crowds at election rallies, where politicians, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, often appeared without masks and addressed teeming crowds.

That surge left the country's health system battered, with people begging for oxygen and hospital beds. Crematoriums ran out of space. Daily deaths crossed 4,000 during the peak of the crisis, with at least 200,000 people dying between March and May, a number widely believed to be a vast undercount.

Health officials say the new surge is causing fewer deaths and many cases are asymptomatic. But they warn against taking the omicron variant too lightly, and say that numerous cases, even if milder, could still pressure the country's fragile health system.

Overall, new daily cases have increased nearly fourfold in the last week. Hospital admissions are rising and medical staff in some states have been asked to cut short their winter holidays.

Cities are experiencing a massive surge, with Mumbai, India's financial capital, surpassing its previous highest daily count. New COVID-19 cases in five states immersed in election campaigning — Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Goa and Manipur — have shot up.

On Saturday, the health ministry said more than 141,986 cases were reported in the previous 24 hours, nearly a 21% increase from the previous day.

Health experts say increased social contact at packed election rallies is feeding the virus spread.

"The transmission chains that started at the beginning of the year due to these rallies will take months to burn out," John, the virologist, said.

Over the past few weeks, Modi has addressed huge gatherings in several cities, particularly in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state which is ruled by his Bharatiya Janata Party. The party's political opponents have also hit the campaign trail, flouting health guidelines.

Earlier this week, the Congress party organized a marathon in which thousands of people ran without masks and were packed so tightly that they collapsed onto each other. The chief minister of New Delhi, Arvind Kejriwal, contracted the virus after he was seen maskless while leading political rallies in multiple states.

With health experts warning of a rapid growth in infections, and data suggesting they are spreading faster than during the peak of last year's surge, several political parties have started a course correction.

The Congress party said it is stopping political rallies in Uttar Pradesh and switching to virtual campaigning. A few other parties, including Modi's, have followed suit. It's unclear, however, whether they will cancel all future rallies.

The polls are scheduled to begin on Feb. 10 and end on March 7. Results will be declared on March 10.

On Wednesday, V.K. Paul, a doctor working with the government on its coronavirus response, said it was likely that "systems will be overwhelmed." He said restricting political activities and rallies was a decision the Election Commission needed to make.

On Saturday, the Election Commission, which had so far deflected that call by saying political parties wanted the rallies to go forward, gave in to the mounting pressure.

The commission barred all physical rallies and roadshows for one week and said a decision to impose restrictions throughout the entire campaign will be only taken after a Jan. 15 review.

S.Y. Quraishi, a former head of the commission, said campaigning could be banned or restricted for the entire period if the commission wanted to do so.

"But they lack the will," Quraishi said. "What's the point in banning rallies after the virus has already

spread through the entire country?"

John, the virologist, said officials in states with upcoming elections are being inconsistent by imposing curfews and restrictions on everyday gatherings but allowing large election rallies to be held.

"The government has once again sent out a message that politics is more important than health," he said.

Cold kills 22 stuck in cars in heavy snow at Pakistan resort

By ZARAR KHAN Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — Temperatures fell to minus 8 degrees Celsius (17.6 Fahrenheit) amid heavy snowfall at Pakistan's mountain resort town of Murree overnight, killing at least 22 people who were stuck in their vehicles, officials said Saturday.

Atiq Ahmed, an Islamabad police officer, said eight of the 22 fatalities were from the family of fellow police officer Naveed Iqbal, who also died. Most of the victims died of hypothermia, officials said.

Rescue services physician Abdur Rehman said that after evacuating all of the stranded tourists from their cars, the death toll stood at 22, including 10 men, 10 children and two women.

Interior Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed said thousands of vehicles had been pulled from the snow but more than a thousand were still stuck in the area Saturday.

Located 28 miles (45.5 kilometers) north of the capital of Islamabad, Murree is a popular winter resort that attracts well over a million tourists annually. Streets leading into the city are often blocked by snow in winter.

Ahmed, the interior minister, said more than 4 feet (1.2 meters) of snow fell in the area overnight and all incoming traffic was blocked Saturday. The minister said paramilitary troops and a special military mountain unit had been called in to help.

"Until then no vehicle or even people on foot are allowed to enter Murree except for the emergency and rescue vehicles and those bringing food for the stuck people," he said.

Umar Maqbool, a local administrator, said the heavy snowfall hampered rescue efforts during the night and even heavy equipment brought in to clear the snow got stuck initially.

Officials gave no further details about those who died in their snowed-in vehicles but said they were working on both recovery and rescue operations. Maqbool said food and blankets were distributed to the stuck tourists during the night.

Most streets leading to the area's resorts were largely cleared of snow later Saturday but some work was still being done, Maqbool said. Military troops and machines were working to clear all the streets and the military established relief camps at army run schools that provided shelter and food.

Court documents show Djokovic had COVID-19 last month

By JOHN PYE AP Sports Writer

Novak Djokovic's lawyers filed court papers Saturday in his challenge against deportation from Australia that show the tennis star tested positive for COVID-19 last month and recovered, grounds he used in applying for a medical exemption to the country's strict vaccination rules.

The No. 1-ranked Djokovic was denied entry at the Melbourne airport late Wednesday after border officials canceled his visa for failing to meet its entry requirement that all non-citizens be fully vaccinated for COVID-19.

Djokovic was given a medical exemption backed by the Victoria state government and Australian Open organizers on Jan. 1, based on information he supplied to two independent medical panels, and he was approved for a visa electronically.

But it has since emerged that the Victoria state medical exemption, allowed for people who tested positive for the coronavirus within the last six months, was deemed invalid by the federal border authorities.

Djokovic has been confined to an immigration detention hotel in Melbourne, where he's been preparing for the legal challenge against his visa cancellation in the Federal Circuit Court on Monday.

The Australian Open starts a week from Monday on Jan. 17. Djokovic is the defending champion and

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has won the Australian Open men's singles title nine times. He has 20 Grand Slam singles title, a men's record he shares with Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

The Australian Broadcasting Corp. and the Australian Associated Press reported details of the documents late Saturday, two days before the court hearing.

It showed Djokovic received a letter from Tennis Australia's chief medical officer on Dec. 30 last year "recording that he had been provided with a 'medical exemption from COVID vaccination' on the grounds that he had recently recovered from COVID."

The exemption certification said the date of the 34-year-old Serb's first positive test was Dec. 16, 2021, "and that he had not had a fever or respiratory symptoms in the past 72 hours."

On Dec. 14, Djokovic attended a Euroleague basketball game between Red Star and Barcelona in a packed sports hall in Belgrade. He was photographed hugging several players of both teams, including some who soon later tested positive.

The court submission Saturday said Djokovic received confirmation from Australia's Department of Home Affairs saying that his travel declaration had been assessed and that his responses indicated he met the requirements for quarantine-free arrival in Australia.

If he fails to have his visa cancellation overturned and gets deported, Djokovic could be barred from the country for up to three years.

In an emailed response to The Associated Press about what could transpire if Djokovic loses his legal fight, the Australian Border Force said: "A person whose visa has been canceled may be subject to a three-year exclusion period that prevents the grant of a further temporary visa."

"The exclusion period will be considered as part of any new visa application and can be waived in certain circumstances, noting each case is assessed on its own merits."

Australian Open organizers have not commented publicly since Wednesday, except to tell Australian newspapers that no players have been misled over the vaccination requirements.

Tournament director Craig Tiley has continued working in the background with Djokovic.

Tiley's video message to Australian Open staff about the tournament's "difficult time in the public arena" was published in News Corp. newspapers Saturday.

"There's been a circumstance that relates to a couple of players, Novak particularly . . . in a situation that is very difficult," Tiley said in the video. "We're a player-first event. We're working closely with Novak and his team, and others and their team, that are in this situation."

The 34-year-old Djokovic was one of two players put into detention in a hotel in Melbourne that also houses refugees and asylum seekers. A third person, reported to be an official, left the country voluntarily after border force investigations.

The other player was 38-year-old doubles player Renata Voráčová, who had already been in Australia for a week before an investigation by the border officials. She told media from the Czech Republic she'd been confined to a room and there was a guard in the corridor.

Djokovic reached out to the world for the first time in three days on Friday night, posting on social media to mark the Orthodox Christmas and thank his supporters. There's been large-scale rallies in Belgrade and small groups of supporters have gathered daily outside his detention hotel.

"Thank you to the people around the world for your continuous support," Djokovic posted on Instagram. "I can feel it and it is greatly appreciated."

After months of speculation he'd miss the tournament because of his stance on vaccination, Djokovic announced on Tuesday via social media that he'd received a medical exemption to play in the tournament.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison said that may have raised the attention of border officials.

Tiley said in his video to Australian Open staff that he couldn't speak publicly because of the ongoing legal matter, but defended his organization.

"There's a lot of finger pointing going on and a lot of blaming going on," he said in the video, "but I can assure you our team has done an unbelievable job and have done everything they possibly could according to all the instructions that they have been provided."

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So, who is at fault? Prime Minister Morrison said "rules are rules" and that incoming passengers were responsible for meeting border regulations.

Tennis Australia and the government of Victoria state, where the Australian Open is played, are blaming confusion over the precise definitions regarding grounds for medical exemptions.

Tennis Australia, which runs the tournament and organizes the logistics for more than 2,000 incoming players, staff and officials, reportedly gave incorrect interpretations to players about the acceptable grounds for an exemption. That included the interpretation that having had a coronavirus infection within the previous six months would qualify.

The federal government disagreed.

The Victoria state government mandated that all players, staff, fans and officials must be fully vaccinated for COVID-19 to enter the tournament.

The state, which approved the medical exemptions for Djokovic, said those exemptions were for access to Melbourne Park, not the border.

Bosnia's Dodik: From moderate to genocide-denying autocrat

By SABINA NIKSIC Associated Press

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina (AP) — He was once described in Washington as an anti-nationalist "breath of fresh air" in the murderous, genocide-scarred Balkan morass of ethnically divided Bosnia.

How times change.

This week Bosnian Serb political leader Milorad Dodik, now a genocide-denying secessionist, was slapped with new U.S. sanctions for alleged corruption. He responded in typical style, saying the days when the United States and other Western democracies "modeled Bosnia to their taste" are long gone.

Accusations he corruptly amassed vast wealth for himself, his relatives and associates, are "monstrous lies," Dodik claimed.

"The U.S. is a great power, but they are also big liars," he said.

Dodik maintains the West is punishing him for championing the rights of ethnic Serbs in Bosnia — a dysfunctional country of 3.3 million that's never truly recovered from a fratricidal war in the 1990s that became a byname for ethnic cleansing and genocide.

The sanctions, Dodik boasted, will just help the Serbs break free of Bosnia into the eager embrace of their "true friends" — Russia, China, the champions of illiberal democracy within the European Union, and neighboring Serbia.

The 63-year-old political science graduate first came to prominence in 1998, as a moderate reformist narrowly elected regional prime minister of Republika Srpska, one of Bosnia's two postwar administrative units. NATO-led peacekeepers surrounded key buildings held by police loyal to Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic — later convicted of wartime genocide and crimes against humanity — to ensure Dodik could take control.

Shortly after, then U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met him and "felt like a breath of fresh air had blown through the room," according to her spokesman at the time.

But in 2001, after losing a presidential election in Republika Srpska, Dodik changed course, refashioning himself as a nationalist hardliner and secessionist. He gradually gained control of all levels of Republika Srpska's government, and in 2009 managed to expel foreign judges and prosecutors from Bosnia's court system — amid reports he was under investigation for corruption and erosion of democracy.

The 1995, U.S.-brokered Dayton Peace Accords, which ended Bosnia's more than 3 1/2 years of bloodshed, established two separate governing entities — Republika Srpska and one dominated by mostly Muslim Bosniaks, over half of Bosnia's population, and Catholic Croats.

They're linked by shared, state-wide institutions, and all actions at a national level require consensus from all three ethnic groups.

In the immediate postwar years, the international community kept Bosnia on a reform course, pressuring its leaders to abandon hate speech and accept painful compromises in return for financial and

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other support. But over a decade ago the international focus shifted to other global crises. Only 600 of the 60,000 international peacekeepers deployed in 1995 now remain. Bosnia was mostly left to its own devices, exposed to the growing influence of Russia, China and Turkey, and to widespread corruption and economic decline.

Over the years, Dodik weathered countless accusations by national and international rights and media freedom groups of curbing media independence and popularizing vile rhetoric against political opponents of all ethnic stripes. He notoriously defended the 2008 approval, by a regional development bank, of a favorable \$2 million loan to a firm co-owned by his son, saying that "was better than letting (the young man) get addicted to drugs."

His family's net worth is hard to estimate, but in 2019 Dodik reported annual income and assets worth over 1.2 million euros (\$1.36 million), including an 800,000-euro villa in Serbia's capital, Belgrade. Dodik says claims about his children's wealth are maliciously overblown by his political opponents.

One of the fiercest of them, Drasko Stanivukovic, mayor of Banja Luka, Republika Srpska's biggest city, retorted that the family has stakes in at least 70 companies — including ones owned by their "relatives, friends and business associates."

Dodik regularly downplays the 1995 massacre, by Bosnian Serbs, of over 8,000 Bosniak men and boys in the eastern enclave of Srebrenica, even dismissing it as "a fabricated myth."

In recent months he has repeatedly voiced hope that Russia's President Vladimir Putin and Hungary's populist Prime Minister Viktor Orban will serve as his bulwark against the "tyranny" of Western democracies, warmly welcoming Orban's December contention that the EU's main challenge on Bosnia is "how to manage the security of a state in which 2 million Muslims live."

After serving for 15 years as Republika Srpska's president or prime minister, in the fall of 2019 Dodik was elected to Bosnia's multi-ethnic presidency that also includes a Bosniak and a Croat official.

Last summer, with tacit support from Moscow and Belgrade, Dodik spearheaded the Serb walkout from Bosnia's multi-ethnic institutions — thus blocking decision-making — to protest the international High Representative in Bosnia's move to outlaw genocide denial.

Dodik and Serb officials under his control say they will no longer respect decisions by the High Representative, a post created under the Dayton agreement with broad powers, including to impose laws or dismiss officials who undermine the fragile postwar ethnic balance.

This winter, Dodik intensified his secessionist campaign, pledging to form an exclusively Serb army, judiciary and tax system. He described Bosniaks as "second-rate people" and "treacherous converts" who sold their "original (Orthodox Christian faith) for dinner."

U.S., British, German and other western officials recently started accusing Dodik of stoking ethnic tensions to distract from his and his cronies' corrupt practices.

But Dodik says sanctions won't discourage him from "fighting for the rights of Republika Srpska." "Regardless of what they do, they cannot stop me," he said.

LeBron leads Lakers past Hawks 134-118 for 4th straight win

By GREG BEACHAM AP Sports Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — LeBron James scored 23 of his 32 points in the second half, Malik Monk added a season-high 29 and the Los Angeles Lakers held off the Atlanta Hawks 134-118 Friday night for their first four-game winning streak of the season.

Avery Bradley and Talen Horton-Tucker scored 21 points apiece for the Lakers, who have won five of six overall while remaining perfect on a five-game homestand that ends Sunday. With Anthony Davis the only major contributor still absent from their injury-plagued roster, the Lakers had a season-high 37 assists and continued to play their most cohesive basketball of their tumultuous season.

"We're getting our guys back," said James, who also had nine assists, eight rebounds, four steals and three blocked shots. "It's literally that simple. We're starting to see what we have because guys are in the lineup. Soon we're getting (Kendrick) Nunn as well, and not too long after that, AD returns. When you're

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building a team with depth and chemistry on the floor, and when too many guys are out, it's too early to gauge it."

Trae Young had 25 points and 14 assists, and John Collins scored 21 points in his return to the Hawks, who have lost five of seven amid significant coronavirus problems. Atlanta dropped to 2-3 on a six-game trip, its longest of the season.

Los Angeles led by 19 early in the fourth quarter, but Atlanta trimmed the margin to 10 before the Lakers closed it out with dramatic dunks from James and Monk, who soared through the lane for a put-back slam with 1:56 to play.

Monk scored 21 points in the first half while hitting eight of his first nine shots in his latest impressive performance for the Lakers, who signed him as a free agent in the offseason. Monk averaged 20.7 points per game in Los Angeles' previous six games starting on Christmas, showing off his quick-release jumper with multiple 3-pointers in every outing.

"What we love about him is that he can create, and he can be a finisher," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said. "He's playing really well in all ways you can offensively."

Coach Nate McMillan is still away from the Hawks under the NBA's health and safety protocols, but starters Collins and Bogdan Bogdanovic returned to uniform after clearing the protocols earlier in the week. Collins had missed the Hawks' previous five games, and Bogdanovic scored 15 points after missing the last four.

Once again, Atlanta's main problem was defense: The Hawks yielded at least 130 points for the eighth time since November and in its fourth consecutive loss.

"We've got to do a better job," Atlanta interim coach Joe Prunty said. "Because in a game like tonight, you have a guy like Malik Monk and Avery Bradley who weren't necessarily causing the problems, but they were getting the benefits. We need to be better defensively."

Young added nine rebounds to another outstanding performance despite a lower back injury that forced him to miss Atlanta's last game in Sacramento after he dropped 56 in Portland on Monday.

"I think defense is an effort thing," said Young, who broke Dominique Wilkins' franchise record by scoring at least 25 points in his 17th consecutive game. "It's not necessarily a skill too much. It's more about effort and your want, and a lot of it is game plan. Those two things to hand in hand, and I think we've got to do better on both of them. We've got to want it more."

TIP-INS

Hawks: Cameron Oliver and Gorgui Dieng remain in the NBA's health and safety protocols along with McMillan. ... Timothé Luwawu-Cabarrot played 23 scoreless minutes in his first game since his contract became guaranteed for the rest of the season.

Lakers: Austin Reaves' contract also became fully guaranteed Friday in an unsurprising decision. The rookie is a regular rotation player off LA's bench. ... James passed Alvin Robertson for 10th place on the NBA's career steals list in the second half. ... Russell Westbrook had nine points, 13 assists and 11 rebounds before fouling out just shy of his eighth triple-double of the season.

BRADLEY SUPER

Bradley scored 16 points in an outstanding first half and hit four 3-pointers in his first game since his contract with the Lakers became guaranteed for the rest of the season.

Los Angeles claimed Bradley in October after their roster had preseason injury problems, and the veteran guard surprisingly became a starter and a dependable contributor in his second stint in LA. Bradley was a contributor to the Lakers' championship team before the coronavirus pause, but he opted out of the playoff bubble and didn't get to win the title.

HUERT `EM AGAIN

Kevin Huerter, who scored 25 points and closed out the Hawks' win in Sacramento two days ago with five late points, hit four 3-pointers and scored 12 of his 16 points in the first half against the Lakers.

UP NEXT

Hawks: At Clippers on Sunday.

Lakers: Host Memphis on Sunday.

'Jeopardy!' champ hits \$1 million; talks fame, trans rights

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "Jeopardy!" champion Amy Schneider is adding to her list of bragging rights and admirers.

Already the highest-earning female contestant in the quiz show's history and the woman with the longest winning streak, on Friday she became one of only four "Jeopardy!" players to reach seven figures in regular-season winnings.

She's collected \$1.02 million in 28 victories, solidifying her 4th-place position on the list that includes Ken Jennings with \$2.5 million; James Holzhauer, \$2.46 million, and Matt Amodio, \$1.52 million.

Schneider, who's also fourth in consecutive wins, will compete again Monday.

Poised and affable on TV and in an interview with The Associated Press, she doesn't seem the gloating type. But she is tickled by the fact that she's fulfilled a prediction made by her 8th-grade classmates in Dayton, Ohio: She was voted most likely to be a "Jeopardy!" contestant, based on her geography and spelling bee prowess.

More significantly, she's the first transgender person to qualify for the show's tournament of champions. In a series of tweets last November, Schneider said she's proud to be a trans woman and wants people to know that aspect of her, adding, "but I'm a lot of other things, too!"

Schneider's "Jeopardy!" achievements have made her both an inspiration and a target for transphobic insults online — which she batted away with the same aplomb she displays on TV. Her deftness earned attention last week from Harvey Fierstein.

"I couldn't be prouder if she were my own daughter," the writer and Broadway star tweeted.

Fun fact: Schneider is proud of a podcast she did on "Downton Abbey" and invites those who are interested to listen to "hundreds of hours of content" about the PBS series.

Schneider, an engineering manager living in Oakland, California, recently talked with AP about her newfound fame, keeping her day job — but dreaming about an entertainment career — and being a voice for the trans community. Remarks have been edited for clarity and length.

AP: Are you having pinch-me moments over how well you've done on 'Jeopardy!'?

SCHNEIDER: Absolutely. Just seeing myself on TV still is almost a shock, even though I was there when it all happened. I thought I could win some games but I didn't think I would do this well. The other day, my girlfriend mentioned some famous people that had gone to her high school, and I was thinking, "I know there was somebody who went to mine." I looked it up on Wikipedia and there I was, listed under notable alumni. That was a very weird moment to see that.

AP: You've mentioned actor Laverne Cox and comedian Natasha Muse as trans women you find inspiring. Have you heard from viewers who see you as a role model?

SCHNEIDER: I have definitely heard from other trans people who have been sort of thrilled to see me out there. But one of the things that I've enjoyed the most is hearing from parents, and sometimes grandparents, of trans people, an older generation. There's a lot of fear for their loved ones who are trans, and worry that they might be limited in life. To be able to go out there and show that I can be successful in a very mainstream type of way has, I think, made a lot of them feel better about the people in their lives.

AP: Given that Cox and Muse are both performers, is that something that touches a chord in you? You've done acting, and is comedy something you're interested in?

SCHNEIDER: I've done open mics around town, just for fun and not seriously pursued it, but I've been a performer my whole life. As I was struggling with the necessity of coming out, definitely one of the fears was, 'Will I still be comfortable in public and will I still be able to perform after I transitioned?' And seeing them definitely helped with that.

AP: Is a career in entertainment your goal?

SCHNEIDER: I'm dreaming of it. I don't know exactly in what direction I would want to take that, and I don't know what opportunities will be available coming out of this (the show). But I've been working on my writing as a field I might find some opportunities in. Beyond that, I'm just sort of riding it out and kind

of seeing what may or may not come up as it goes along.

AP: Last month, after you got a Twitter shoutout on your "Jeopardy!" success from Democratic Rep. Tim Ryan of Ohio, you asked your followers in the state to consider that a vote for a Republican in this year's elections would make your life harder. How did you decide to make a statement that puts you on a different level of exposure?

SCHNEIDER: I definitely thought about it, and I don't want my social media to be a place where people are arguing about politics all the time. But at the same time, I can't ignore the fact that there's people out there threatening my brothers and sisters in the trans community. Here I have a chance to say something about it, and I can't be completely silent. I don't necessarily want to be super-activist about it and constantly banging that drum. But I can't be silent either, when I know that there's so many people in danger of real hurt and harm from political policies.

AP: You had a polite response to someone who took you to task for the tweet.

SCHNEIDER: I grew up in a Republican household and a Catholic environment, and many people I love are conservative in various ways. I know them, and I know they're not intentionally out there doing harm and that they have reasons for the positions that they hold. So I want to engage people from (across) the spectrum where that's possible. But it has to be in a condition where my right to exist is granted, otherwise we can't talk.

Marine officer blames bad information for sinking tragedy

By JULIE WATSON Associated Press

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. (AP) — A Marine Corps battalion commander testified Friday that in retrospect he would have halted the exercise that killed nine of his Marines whose amphibious assault vehicle sank off the Southern California coast but at the time he did not have accurate information to make such a decision.

Lt. Col. Michael J. Regner said his decisions were based in part on what other commanders told him, including that all the Marines had completed their swim certifications and that the aging vehicles they were in had been fixed and were ready for the mission.

He said he was also unaware that the Navy had changed plans that day and did not launch a safety boat. "Had I known that at the time, I would have said 'No we're not going to go into the ocean without a safety boat,'" Regner said.

Regner gave his account to a three-officer panel at a Board of Inquiry. That panel will issue a recommendation to the commanding general of Regner's unit as to whether the decorated officer, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, should be considered for discharge just shy of his 20-year mark and be denied retirement benefits.

However, a decision isn't expected until later this month and will follow Boards of Inquiry pending for other officers, including one scheduled for next Tuesday.

A Marine Corps investigation found that inadequate training, shabby maintenance and poor judgment by leaders led to the July 30, 2020, sinking of the amphibious assault vehicle in one of the deadliest Marine training accidents in decades.

The vehicle — a kind of seafaring tank — had 16 people aboard when it sank rapidly in 385 feet (117 meters) of water off the coast of San Clemente Island. Seven Marines were rescued as the vessel was returning to a Navy ship on a training exercise.

Regner was relieved of command of the landing team of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, shortly after the sinking. A Marine Corps statement at the time said his removal was based on a "substantial amount of information and data" and cited a loss of trust.

The government argued at Friday's hearing that while Regner is not the only one to blame for the tragedy, his "substandard" leadership set the groundwork for things to go as badly as they did.

Lt. Col. Michael McDonald said in the military's closing statement that Regner decided to risk sending his Marines who were inexperienced and had not completed their training, including how to escape the vehicles, into the ocean.

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"That was just an absolute comedy of errors," McDonald said. "This didn't come out of the blue."

Regner's attorney said the panel's task is to determine if Regner is of value to the Marine Corps and has potential for future service, which he argued his client clearly has demonstrated.

"He's never shirked his responsibilities," said Maj. Cory Carver, Regner's attorney.

Regner became emotional when he talked about how he has served his country his "entire adulthood," becoming a Marine as the United States went to war following the Sept. 11, 2001, terror attacks.

He said he has excelled throughout his career, including in the last 18 months after he was relieved from his command and assigned to another job.

"Hell I grew up in this," Regner said, wiping a tear. "My dad was a Marine. I was raised by the Marine Corps."

Regner said he was aware that 12 of the 13 amphibious assault vehicles his Marines would be using in the training had problems but that a fellow battalion commander who oversees the vehicles assured him they would be fixed before the exercise.

He said he tried to get his Marines extra training in the water and warned senior leaders that his troops had never done this type of exercise.

He said he was constrained by a number of factors including the fact that Marines had to squeeze in their preparations after being deployed to the U.S-Mexico border under the Trump administration, and then they faced restrictions due to the coronavirus pandemic that interrupted their training.

But he said he was led to believe by a company commander that all had been certified as swimmers, though two of the troops had not.

Other Marines are expected to face possible discharge. Col. Christopher J. Bronzi, who supervised Regner, was relieved of command of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit last year.

The panel was expected to review 6,000 pages of investigative reports and evidence before making its decision.

The Marines use the vehicles to transport troops and their equipment from Navy ships to land. The armored vehicles outfitted with machine guns and grenade launchers look like tanks as they roll ashore for beach attacks, with Marines pouring out of them to take up positions.

EXPLAINER: Where are the COVID-19 tests that Biden promised?

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden announced last month that the federal government will buy half a billion COVID-19 rapid test kits and distribute them free to people to use at home. But despite high public demand for tests, it will still be several more weeks before these kits are available to be shipped, White House officials said.

DOES THE GOVERNMENT HAVE THE TESTS?

Not yet. This week marked the close of an initial bidding period for test manufacturers to apply to the departments of Defense and Health and Human Services for contracts to make the tests. The first contract, worth \$51.6 million, was awarded Thursday and a second for 13.3 million tests was assigned Friday. Additional contracts will be signed in the coming weeks, officials said. All 500 million kits will not arrive at the same time. They will be delivered in batches over months.

WHEN WILL THE TEST KITS BE DELIVERED?

The federal government is expected to get delivery of the first batch of tests "over the next week or so," according to White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients. Americans will start receiving them "in the coming weeks" he added.

MY DRUGSTORE DOESN'T HAVE ANY TESTS. HOW CAN I GET A FREE KIT FROM THE GOVERNMENT?

You'll go to a new government website to request a kit, but the site won't be operating until after the first batch of test kits has been delivered to the government. "We're obviously not going to put the website up until there are tests available," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said last month.

The Postal Service will handle fulfillment and shipment of tests to Americans' doorsteps, officials said.

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WHICH HOME TEST WILL I GET?

It's unclear. But Psaki noted that the Food and Drug Administration has approved several different brands of rapid home tests that are currently on the market. While they are packaged differently and may use slightly different procedures, officials said, their mechanisms of detection and effectiveness are generally the same.

WILL I BE LIMITED TO ONE TEST OR CAN I REQUEST MULTIPLE?

To be determined. Officials are also working on policies for how frequently people can request a free test. That's expected to come with a new focus on educating Americans about best practices for when they should take a test.

WHY IS BIDEN BUYING THESE TEST KITS?

It represents an acknowledgement by the president that the administration needs to do more to increase access to COVID-19 testing, which is an important tool to help slow the spread of the coronavirus.

In cases where infected people show symptoms or not, testing is the only way to find out if they have the virus so they can avoid being out and about and potentially spreading disease.

Demand for test kits soared as the holidays neared and people grew eager to test themselves and their families before traveling and as the easily transmissible omicron variant spread rapidly in just a few weeks to become dominant strain in the U.S.

Biden's promise of 500 million test kits is in addition to the administration's earlier pledge to send 50 million rapid tests to community health centers across the country.

HOW MUCH WILL THE PROGRAM COST?

The purchase will be paid for with money from the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill Biden signed into law in March, the White House said. The exact cost will be known soon.

IS THERE ANOTHER WAY TO GET A TEST KIT FOR FREE

Starting Jan. 15, private insurers will be required to cover the cost of at-home testing, the same way they cover the cost of PCR lab tests. People will have the option of buying tests at a store or online, then seeking reimbursement from their health insurance provider. Those with public health insurance through Medicare or Medicaid, or without insurance, will be directed to the forthcoming website to order tests or to community health centers in their area offering free testing.

WILL THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM MAKE IT HARDER FOR ME TO FIND A TEST AT THE DRUGSTORE?

White House officials say the government tests are coming from new manufacturing capacity and should not interfere with existing supplies that drugstores, health clinics and state governments are relying on.

"These are additional tests," Zients said, made possible by the fact that the FDA has authorized many new ones in the last few months. "So, there's a lot more capacity for rapid tests."

Oscar winner and groundbreaking star Sidney Poitier dies

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Sidney Poitier, the groundbreaking actor and enduring inspiration who transformed how Black people were portrayed on screen, and became the first Black actor to win an Academy Award for best lead performance and the first to be a top box-office draw, has died. He was 94.

Poitier, winner of the best actor Oscar in 1964 for "Lilies of the Field," died Thursday at his home in Los Angeles, according to Latrae Rahming, the director of communications for the Prime Minister of Bahamas. His close friend and great contemporary Harry Belafonte issued a statement Friday, remembering their extraordinary times together.

"For over 80 years, Sidney and I laughed, cried and made as much mischief as we could," he wrote. "He was truly my brother and partner in trying to make this world a little better. He certainly made mine a whole lot better."

Few movie stars, Black or white, had such an influence both on and off the screen. Before Poitier, the son of Bahamian tomato farmers, no Black actor had a sustained career as a lead performer or could get a film produced based on his own star power. Before Poitier, few Black actors were permitted a break

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from the stereotypes of bug-eyed servants and grinning entertainers. Before Poitier, Hollywood filmmakers rarely even attempted to tell a Black person's story.

Messages honoring and mourning Poitier flooded social media, with Oscar winner Morgan Freeman calling him "my inspiration, my guiding light, my friend" and Oprah Winfrey praising him as a "Friend. Brother. Confidant. Wisdom teacher." Former President Barack Obama cited his achievements and how he revealed "the power of movies to bring us closer together."

Poitier's rise mirrored profound changes in the country in the 1950s and 1960s. As racial attitudes evolved during the civil rights era and segregation laws were challenged and fell, Poitier was the performer to whom a cautious industry turned for stories of progress.

He was the escaped Black convict who befriends a racist white prisoner (Tony Curtis) in "The Defiant Ones." He was the courtly office worker who falls in love with a blind white girl in "A Patch of Blue." He was the handyman in "Lilies of the Field" who builds a church for a group of nuns. In one of the great roles of the stage and screen, he was the ambitious young father whose dreams clashed with those of other family members in Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun."

Debates about diversity in Hollywood inevitably turn to the story of Poitier. With his handsome, flawless face; intense stare and disciplined style, he was for years not just the most popular Black movie star, but the only one.

"I made films when the only other Black on the lot was the shoeshine boy," he recalled in a 1988 Newsweek interview. "I was kind of the lone guy in town."

Poitier peaked in 1967 with three of the year's most notable movies: "To Sir, With Love," in which he starred as a school teacher who wins over his unruly students at a London secondary school; "In the Heat of the Night," as the determined police detective Virgil Tibbs; and in "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," as the prominent doctor who wishes to marry a young white woman he only recently met, her parents played by Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn in their final film together.

Theater owners named Poitier the No. 1 star of 1967, the first time a Black actor topped the list. In 2009 President Barack Obama, whose own steady bearing was sometimes compared to Poitier's, awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, saying that the actor "not only entertained but enlightened... revealing the power of the silver screen to bring us closer together."

His appeal brought him burdens not unlike such other historical figures as Jackie Robinson and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. He was subjected to bigotry from whites and accusations of compromise from the Black community. Poitier was held, and held himself, to standards well above his white peers. He refused to play cowards and took on characters, especially in "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," of almost divine goodness. He developed a steady, but resolved and occasionally humorous persona crystallized in his most famous line — "They call me Mr. Tibbs!" — from "In the Heat of the Night."

"All those who see unworthiness when they look at me and are given thereby to denying me value — to you I say, 'I'm not talking about being as good as you. I hereby declare myself better than you,'" he wrote in his memoir, "The Measure of a Man," published in 2000.

But even in his prime he was criticized for being out of touch. He was called an Uncle Tom and a "million-dollar shoeshine boy." In 1967, The New York Times published Black playwright Clifford Mason's essay, "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?" Mason dismissed Poitier's films as "a schizophrenic flight from historical fact" and the actor as a pawn for the "white man's sense of what's wrong with the world."

Stardom didn't shield Poitier from racism and condescension. He had a hard time finding housing in Los Angeles and was followed by the Ku Klux Klan when he visited Mississippi in 1964, not long after three civil rights workers had been murdered there. In interviews, journalists often ignored his work and asked him instead about race and current events.

"I am an artist, man, American, contemporary," he snapped during a 1967 press conference. "I am an awful lot of things, so I wish you would pay me the respect due."

Poitier was not as engaged politically as Belafonte, leading to occasional conflicts between them. But he was active in the 1963 March on Washington and other civil rights events, and as an actor defended

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himself and risked his career. He refused to sign loyalty oaths during the 1950s, when Hollywood was barring suspected Communists, and turned down roles he found offensive.

"Almost all the job opportunities were reflective of the stereotypical perception of Blacks that had infected the whole consciousness of the country," he recalled. "I came with an inability to do those things. It just wasn't in me. I had chosen to use my work as a reflection of my values."

Poitier's films were usually about personal triumphs rather than broad political themes, but the classic Poitier role, from "In the Heat of the Night" to "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," was as a Black man of such decency and composure — Poitier became synonymous with the word "dignified" — that he wins over the whites opposed to him.

"Sidney Poitier epitomized dignity and grace," Obama tweeted Friday.

His screen career faded in the late 1960s as political movements, Black and white, became more radical and movies more explicit. He acted less often, gave fewer interviews and began directing, his credits including the Richard Pryor-Gene Wilder farce "Stir Crazy," "Buck and the Preacher" (co-starring Poitier and Belafonte) and the Bill Cosby comedies "Uptown Saturday Night" and "Let's Do It Again."

In the 1980s and '90s, he appeared in the feature films "Sneakers" and "The Jackal" and several television movies, receiving an Emmy and Golden Globe nomination as future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall in "Separate But Equal" and an Emmy nomination for his portrayal of Nelson Mandela in "Mandela and De Klerk." Theatergoers were reminded of the actor through an acclaimed play that featured him in name only: John Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation," about a con artist claiming to be Poitier's son.

In recent years, a new generation learned of him through Oprah Winfrey, who chose "The Measure of a Man" for her book club. Meanwhile, he welcomed the rise of such Black stars as Denzel Washington, Will Smith and Danny Glover: "It's like the cavalry coming to relieve the troops! You have no idea how pleased I am," he said.

Poitier received numerous honorary prizes, including a lifetime achievement award from the American Film Institute and a special Academy Award in 2002, on the same night that Black performers won both best acting awards, Washington for "Training Day" and Halle Berry for "Monster's Ball."

"I'll always be chasing you, Sidney," Washington, who had earlier presented the honorary award to Poitier, said during his acceptance speech. "I'll always be following in your footsteps. There's nothing I would rather do, sir, nothing I would rather do."

Poitier had four daughters with his first wife, Juanita Hardy, and two with his second wife, actress Joanna Shimkus, who starred with him in his 1969 film "The Lost Man." Daughter Sydney Tamarii Poitier appeared on such television series as "Veronica Mars" and "Mr. Knight." Daughter Gina Poitier-Gourage died in 2018.

"He is our guiding light who lit up our lives with infinite love and wonder. His smile was healing, his hugs the warmest refuge, and his laughter was infectious. We could always turn to him for wisdom and solace and his absence feels like a giant hole in our family and our hearts," his family said in a statement. "Although he is no longer here with us in this realm, his beautiful soul will continue to guide and inspire us."

His life ended in adulation, but it began in hardship. Poitier was born prematurely, weighing just 3 pounds, in Miami, where his parents had gone to deliver tomatoes from their farm on tiny Cat Island in the Bahamas. He spent his early years on the remote island, which had a population of 1,500 and no electricity, and he quit school at 12 1/2 to help support the family. Three years later, he was sent to live with a brother in Miami; his father was concerned that the street life of Nassau was a bad influence. With \$3 in his pocket, Sidney traveled steerage on a mail-cargo ship.

"The smell in that portion of the boat was so horrendous that I spent a goodly part of the crossing heaving over the side," he told The Associated Press in 1999, adding that Miami soon educated him about racism. "I learned quite quickly that there were places I couldn't go, that I would be questioned if I wandered into various neighborhoods."

Poitier moved to Harlem and was so overwhelmed by his first winter there he enlisted in the Army, cheating on his age and swearing he was 18 when he had yet to turn 17. Assigned to a mental hospital on Long Island, Poitier was appalled at how cruelly the doctors and nurses treated the soldier patients.

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In his 1980 autobiography, "This Life," he related how he escaped the Army by feigning insanity.

Back in Harlem, he was looking in the Amsterdam News for a dishwasher job when he noticed an ad seeking actors at the American Negro Theater. He went there and was handed a script and told to go on the stage. Poitier had never seen a play in his life and could barely read. He stumbled through his lines in a thick Caribbean accent and the director marched him to the door.

"As I walked to the bus, what humiliated me was the suggestion that all he could see in me was a dishwasher. If I submitted to him, I would be aiding him in making that perception a prophetic one," Poitier later told the AP.

"I got so pissed, I said, 'I'm going to become an actor — whatever that is. I don't want to be an actor, but I've got to become one to go back there and show him that I could be more than a dishwasher.' That became my goal."

The process took months as he sounded out words from the newspaper. Poitier returned to the American Negro Theater and was again rejected. Then he made a deal: He would act as janitor for the theater in return for acting lessons. When he was released again, his fellow students urged the teachers to let him be in the class play. Another Caribbean, Belafonte, was cast in the lead. When Belafonte couldn't make a preview performance because it conflicted with his own janitorial duties, his understudy, Poitier, went on.

The audience included a Broadway producer who cast him in an all-Black version of "Lysistrata." The play lasted four nights, but rave reviews for Poitier won him an understudy job in "Anna Lucasta," and later he played the lead in the road company. In 1950, he broke through on screen in "No Way Out," playing a doctor whose patient, a white man, dies and is then harassed by the patient's bigoted brother, played by Richard Widmark.

Key early films included "Blackboard Jungle," featuring Poitier as a tough high school student (the actor was well into his 20s at the time) in a violent school; and "The Defiant Ones," which brought Poitier his first best actor nomination, and the first one for any Black male. The theme of cultural differences turned lighthearted in "Lilies of the Field," in which Poitier played a Baptist handyman who builds a chapel for a group of Roman Catholic nuns, refugees from Germany. In one memorable scene, he gives them an English lesson.

The only Black actor before Poitier to win a competitive Oscar was Hattie McDaniel, the 1939 best supporting actress for "Gone With the Wind." No one, including Poitier, thought "Lilies of the Field" his best film, but the times were right (Congress would soon pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, for which Poitier had lobbied) and the actor was favored even against such competitors as Paul Newman for "Hud" and Albert Finney for "Tom Jones." Newman was among those rooting for Poitier.

When presenter Anne Bancroft announced his victory, the audience cheered for so long that Poitier momentarily forgot his speech. "It has been a long journey to this moment," he declared.

Poitier never pretended that his Oscar was "a magic wand" for Black performers, as he observed after his victory, and he shared his critics' frustration with some of the roles he took on, confiding that his characters were sometimes so unsexual they became kind of "neuter." But he also believed himself fortunate and encouraged those who followed him.

"To the young African American filmmakers who have arrived on the playing field, I am filled with pride you are here. I am sure, like me, you have discovered it was never impossible, it was just harder," he said in 1992 as he received a lifetime achievement award from the American Film Institute. "

"Welcome, young Blacks. Those of us who go before you glance back with satisfaction and leave you with a simple trust: Be true to yourselves and be useful to the journey."

Supreme Court skeptical of Biden's workplace vaccine rule

By MARK SHERMAN and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fully vaccinated and mostly masked, the Supreme Court's conservative majority appeared skeptical Friday of the Biden administration's authority to impose a vaccine-or-testing requirement on the nation's large employers. The court seemed more open to a separate vaccine mandate for

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most health care workers.

The arguments in the two cases come at a time of spiking coronavirus cases because of the omicron variant, and the decision Friday by seven justices to wear masks for the first time while hearing arguments reflected the new phase of the pandemic.

An eighth justice, Sonia Sotomayor, a diabetic since childhood, didn't even appear in the courtroom, choosing to remain in her office at the court and take part remotely. Two lawyers, representing Ohio and Louisiana, argued by telephone after recent positive COVID-19 tests, state officials said.

But the COVID circumstances did not appear to outweigh the views of the court's six conservatives that the administration overstepped its authority in its vaccine-or-testing requirement for businesses with at least 100 employees.

"This is something the federal government has never done before," Chief Justice John Roberts said, casting doubt on the administration's argument that a half-century-established law, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, confers such broad authority.

Roberts and Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett probably hold the key to the outcome in both cases, as they have been more receptive to state-level vaccine requirements than the other three conservative justices. Barrett and Kavanaugh also had tough questions for Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar, the administration's top Supreme Court lawyer.

The court's three liberal justices suggested support for the employer rule. Justice Elena Kagan said officials have shown "quite clearly that no other policy will prevent sickness and death to anywhere like the degree that this one will." And Justice Stephen Breyer said he found it "unbelievable" that it could be in the "public interest" to put that rule on hold. He said that on Thursday there were some 750,000 new cases in the country and that hospitals are full.

Beginning Monday, unvaccinated employees in big companies are supposed to wear masks at work, unless the court blocks enforcement. But testing requirements and potential fines for employers don't kick in until February.

Legal challenges to the policies from Republican-led states and business groups are in their early stages, but the outcome at the high court probably will determine the fate of vaccine requirements affecting more than 80 million people.

Roberts, Kavanaugh and Barrett seemed to have fewer doubts about the health care vaccine mandate. Kavanaugh said it was a "very unusual situation" that hospitals and health care organizations affected by the regulation were "not here complaining" about the rule but instead support it. "What are we to make of that?" he asked.

The second regulation is a mandate that would apply to virtually all health care staff in the country. It covers health care providers that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid funding, potentially affecting 76,000 health care facilities as well as home health care providers. The rule has medical and religious exemptions.

Decisions by federal appeals courts in New Orleans and St. Louis have blocked the mandate in about half the states. The administration has said it is taking steps to enforce it in the rest.

"I think effectively what is at stake is whether these mandates are going to go into effect at all," said Sean Marotta, a Washington lawyer whose clients include the American Hospital Association. The trade group is not involved in the Supreme Court cases.

Both vaccine rules would exacerbate labor shortages and be costly to businesses, lawyer Scott Keller argued Friday on behalf of more than two dozen business groups. Without an immediate order from the court, "workers will quit right away," Keller said.

Administration lawyer Prelogar told the justices that COVID-19 "is the deadliest pandemic in American history and it poses a unique workplace danger." OSHA has estimated that its emergency regulation will save 6,500 lives and prevent 250,000 hospitalizations over six months.

Nearly 207 million Americans, 62.3% of the population, are fully vaccinated, and more than a third of those have received booster shots, including the nine justices.

Andy Slavitt, a former adviser to the Biden administration on COVID-19, said the vaccine requirements are extremely effective for 15% to 20% of Americans "who don't like to get a shot but they will and don't

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have any strenuous objection.”

The high court is weighing in on administration vaccine policies for the first time, although the justices have turned away pleas to block state-level mandates.

A conservative majority concerned about federal overreach did bring an end to a federal moratorium on evictions put in place because of the pandemic.

Both the vaccination cases came to the court on an emergency basis, and the court took the unusual step of scheduling arguments rather than just ruling on briefs submitted by the parties. Unlike in other cases the court hears, a decision from the justices could come in weeks if not days.

Because of the pandemic the justices heard the cases in a courtroom closed to the public. Only the justices, lawyers involved in the cases, court staff and journalists were allowed inside. The public could listen live, however, a change made earlier in the pandemic when the justices heard cases via telephone for nearly 19 months.

The court has been asking arguing lawyers to have negative coronavirus test results and participate remotely if they have positive tests. Ohio Solicitor General Benjamin Flowers, who was arguing against the employer rule, had tested positive for COVID-19 after Christmas, had mild symptoms and fully recovered, but a test Sunday required by the court detected the virus, a spokeswoman said. He had been vaccinated and had a booster shot.

Louisiana Solicitor General Elizabeth Murrill, who was arguing against the health care workers rule, was also arguing remotely “based upon the court’s protocol,” state Attorney General Jeff Landry said. Landry was at the court for Friday’s arguments.

It was the first time since the court returned to in-person arguments in October that lawyers were arguing remotely.

Justice Neil Gorsuch was the only justice to remain unmasked throughout the arguments, which lasted more than 3 and 1/2 hours. He sits between Barrett and Sotomayor. The court did not explain why Sotomayor didn’t take the bench.

Sidney Poitier changed movies, and changed lives

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — We go to movies not just to escape, but to discover. We might identify with the cowboy or the runaway bride or the kid who befriends a creature from another planet.

To see yourself on screen has long been another way of knowing you exist.

Sidney Poitier, who died Thursday at 94, was the rare performer who really did change lives, who embodied possibilities once absent from the movies. His impact was as profound as Method acting or digital technology, his story inseparable from the story of the country he emigrated to as a teenager.

“What emerges on the screen reminds people of something in themselves, because I’m so many different things,” he wrote in his memoir “The Measure of a Man,” published in 2000. “I’m a network of primal feelings, instinctive emotions that have been wrestled with so long they’re automatic.”

Poitier made Hollywood history, by breaking from the stereotypes of bug-eyed entertainers, and American history, by appearing in films during the 1950s and 1960s that paralleled the growth of the civil rights movement. As segregation laws were challenged and fell, Poitier was the performer to whom a cautious Hollywood turned for stories of progress, a bridge to the growing candor and variety of Black filmmaking today.

He was the escaped Black convict who befriends a racist white prisoner (Tony Curtis) in “The Defiant Ones.” He was the courtly office worker who falls in love with a blind white girl in “A Patch of Blue.” He was the handyman in “Lilies of the Field” who builds a church for a group of nuns. In one of the great roles of stage or screen, he was the ambitious young man whose dreams clashed with those of other family members in Lorraine Hansberry’s “A Raisin in the Sun.”

Poitier not only upended the kinds of movies Hollywood made, but how they were filmed. For decades, Black and white actors had been shot with similar lighting, leading to an unnatural glare in the faces of

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Black performers. On the 1967 production "In the Heat of the Night," cinematographer Haskell Wexler adjusted the lighting for Poitier so the actor's features were as clear as those of white cast members.

The long-running debate over Hollywood diversity often turns to Poitier. With his handsome, flawless face, intense stare and disciplined style, Poitier was for years not just the most popular Black movie star, but the only one; his unique appeal brought him burdens familiar to Jackie Robinson and others who broke color lines. He faced bigotry from whites and accusations of compromise from the Black community. Poitier was held, and held himself, to standards well above his white peers. He refused to play cowards or cads and took on characters, especially in "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," of almost divine goodness. He developed an even, but resolved and occasionally humorous persona crystallized in his most famous line — "They call me Mr. Tibbs!" — from "In the Heat of the Night."

"All those who see unworthiness when they look at me and are given thereby to denying me value — to you I say, 'I'm not talking about being as good as you. I hereby declare myself better than you,'" he wrote in "The Measure of a Man."

In 1964, he became the first Black performer to win the best actor Oscar, for "Lilies of the Field." He peaked in 1967 with three of the year's most notable movies: "To Sir, With Love," in which he starred as a school teacher who wins over his unruly students at a London secondary school; "In the Heat of the Night," as the determined police detective Virgil Tibbs; and in "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," as the prominent doctor who wishes to marry a young white woman he only recently met, her parents played by Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn in their final film together.

In 2009 President Barack Obama, whose own steady bearing was sometimes compared to Poitier's, awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom, saying that the actor "not only entertained but enlightened ... revealing the power of the silver screen to bring us closer together."

Poitier was not as engaged politically as his friend and contemporary Harry Belafonte, leading to occasional conflicts between them. But he was active in the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom and other civil rights events and even helped deliver tens of thousands of dollars to civil rights volunteers in Mississippi in 1964, around the same time that three workers had been murdered. He also risked his career. He refused to sign loyalty oaths during the 1950s, when Hollywood was blacklisting suspected Communists, and turned down roles he found offensive.

"Almost all the job opportunities were reflective of the stereotypical perception of Blacks that had infected the whole consciousness of the country," he later told The Associated Press. "I came with an inability to do those things. It just wasn't in me. I had chosen to use my work as a reflection of my values."

Poitier's films were usually about personal triumphs rather than broad political themes, but the classic Poitier role, from "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" to "In the Heat of the Night," seemed to mirror the drama the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. played out in real life: An eloquent and accomplished Black man — Poitier became synonymous with the word "dignified"— who confronts the whites opposed to him.

But even in his prime, his films were chastised as sentimental and out of touch. He was called an Uncle Tom and a "million-dollar shoeshine boy." In 1967, The New York Times published Black playwright Clifford Mason's essay "Why Does White America Love Sidney Poitier So?" Mason dismissed Poitier's films as "a schizophrenic flight from historical fact" and the actor as a pawn for the "white man's sense of what's wrong with the world."

James Baldwin, in his classic essay on movies "The Devil Finds Work," helped define the affinity and disillusion that Poitier inspired. He remembered watching "The Defiant Ones" at a Harlem theater and how the audience responded to the train ride at the end, when Poitier's character decided to imperil his own freedom out of loyalty to Curtis' character.

"The Harlem audience was outraged, and yelled, 'Get back on the train, you fool!'" Baldwin wrote. "And yet, even at that, recognized in Sidney's face, at the very end, as he sings 'Sewing Machine,' something noble, true, and terrible, something out of which we come."

In his memoir, Poitier wrote that he didn't have a responsibility to be "angry and defiant," even if he often felt those emotions. He noted that such historical figures as King and Nelson Mandela could never have been so forgiving had they not first "gone through much, much anger and much, much resentment

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and much, much anguish."

"When these come along, their anger, their rage, their resentment, their frustration — these feelings ultimately mature by will of their own discipline into a positive energy that can be used to fuel their positive, healthy excursions in life," he wrote.

His screen career faded in the late 1960s as political movements, Black and white, became more radical and movies more explicit. He would tell Oprah Winfrey in 2000 that his response was to go the Bahamas, fish and think. He acted less often, gave fewer interviews and began directing, his credits including the Richard Pryor-Gene Wilder farce "Stir Crazy," "Buck and the Preacher" (co-starring Poitier and Belafonte) and the comedies "Uptown Saturday Night" and "Let's Do It Again," both featuring Bill Cosby.

He continued to work in the 1980s and '90s. He appeared in the feature films "Sneakers" and "The Jackal" and several television movies, receiving an Emmy and Golden Globe nomination as future Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall in "Separate But Equal" and an Emmy nomination for his portrayal of Mandela in "Mandela and De Klerk." Theatergoers were reminded of the actor through an acclaimed play that featured him in name only: John Guare's "Six Degrees of Separation," about a con artist claiming to be Poitier's son. A Broadway adaptation of "The Measure of a Man" is in the works.

In recent years, a new generation learned of him through Winfrey, who chose "The Measure of a Man" for her book club, and through the praise of such Black stars as Denzel Washington, Will Smith and Danny Glover. Poitier's eminence was never more movingly dramatized than at the Academy Awards ceremony in 2002 when he received an honorary Oscar, preceding Washington's best actor win for "Training Day," the first time a Black person had won in that category since Poitier nearly 40 years earlier.

"I'll always be chasing you, Sidney," Washington said as he accepted his award. "I'll always be following in your footsteps."

Poitier's life ended in adulation, but began in hardship, and nearly ended days after his birth. He was born prematurely in Miami, where his parents had gone to deliver tomatoes from their farm on tiny Cat Island in the Bahamas. He spent his early years on the remote island, which had no paved roads or electricity, but was so free from racial hierarchy that only when he left did he think about the color of his skin.

"Walking on the beach, or sitting on rocks, my eyes on the horizon, aroused curiosity, stirring joy," he wrote in his 2008 book "Life Beyond Measure: Letters to My Great-Granddaughter" about his time on Cat Island.

By his late teens, he had moved to Harlem, but was so overwhelmed by his first winter there that he enlisted in the Army, cheating on his age and swearing he was 18 when he had yet to turn 17. Assigned to a mental hospital on Long Island, Poitier was appalled at how cruelly the doctors and nurses treated the soldier patients and acknowledged that he got out of the Army by pretending he was insane.

Back in Harlem in the mid-1940s, he was looking in the Amsterdam News for a dishwasher job when he noticed an ad seeking actors at the American Negro Theater. He went there and was handed a script and told to go on the stage and read from it. Poitier had never seen a play and stumbled through his lines in a thick Caribbean accent. The director sent him off.

"As I walked to the bus, what humiliated me was the suggestion that all he could see in me was a dishwasher. If I submitted to him, I would be aiding him in making that perception a prophetic one," Poitier later told the AP.

"I got so pissed, I said, 'I'm going to become an actor — whatever that is. I don't want to be an actor, but I've got to become one to go back there and show him that I could be more than a dishwasher.' That became my goal."

Poitier's now-famous cadence and diction came in part through reading and studying the voices he heard on the radio. He found an early job in a student production of "Days Of Our Youth," as the understudy to another determined young performer: Belafonte. When Belafonte didn't show up one night, Poitier stepped in and caught the attention of a Broadway director who happened to be in attendance. He was soon in a cross-country touring group — often staying in segregated hotels — and by 1950 had his first notable film role: He played a doctor in an all-white hospital in Joseph Mackiewicz drama "No Way Out."

Other early films included "Cry, the Beloved Country" and "Blackboard Jungle," featuring Poitier as a

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tough high school student, the kind of character he might have had to face down when he starred in "To Sir, With Love." By the late 1950s, he was one of the industry's leading performers — of any race. In "The Defiant Ones," co-star Tony Curtis helped Poitier make history by insisting that his name appear above the title of the movie, as a star, rare status for a Black performer at the time.

By the time he received his Oscar for "Lilies of the Field," his career and the country were well aligned. Congress was months away from passing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, banning discrimination on the basis of race, and a victory for Poitier was so desired in Hollywood that even one of his Oscar competitors, Paul Newman, was rooting for him.

When presenter Anne Bancroft announced his victory, the audience cheered for so long that Poitier was able to re-remember the speech he briefly forgot. "It has been a long journey to this moment," he declared.

Poitier never pretended that his Oscar was "a magic wand" for Black performers, as he observed after his victory, and he shared his critics' frustration with some of the roles he took on. But he also believed himself fortunate and encouraged those who followed him.

Accepting a life achievement award from the American Film Institute in 1992, he spoke to a new generation. "To the young African American filmmakers who have arrived on the playing field, I am filled with pride you are here. I am sure, like me, you have discovered it was never impossible, it was just harder.

"Welcome, young Blacks. Those of us who go before you glance back with satisfaction and leave you with a simple trust: Be true to yourselves and be useful to the journey."

EXPLAINER: Where are the COVID-19 tests that Biden promised?

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden announced last month that the federal government will buy half a billion COVID-19 rapid test kits and distribute them free to people to use at home. But despite high public demand for tests, it will still be several more weeks before these kits are available to be shipped, White House officials said.

DOES THE GOVERNMENT HAVE THE TESTS?

Not yet. This week marked the close of an initial bidding period for test manufacturers to apply to the departments of Defense and Health and Human Services for contracts to make the tests. The first contract, worth \$51.6 million, was awarded Thursday and a second for 13.3 million tests was assigned Friday. Additional contracts will be signed in the coming weeks, officials said. All 500 million kits will not arrive at the same time. They will be delivered in batches over months.

WHEN WILL THE TEST KITS BE DELIVERED?

The federal government is expected to get delivery of the first batch of tests "over the next week or so," according to White House COVID-19 coordinator Jeff Zients. Americans will start receiving them "in the coming weeks" he added.

MY DRUGSTORE DOESN'T HAVE ANY TESTS. HOW CAN I GET A FREE KIT FROM THE GOVERNMENT?

You'll go to a new government website to request a kit, but the site won't be operating until after the first batch of test kits has been delivered to the government. "We're obviously not going to put the website up until there are tests available," White House press secretary Jen Psaki said last month.

The Postal Service will handle fulfillment and shipment of tests to Americans' doorsteps, officials said.

WHICH HOME TEST WILL I GET?

It's unclear. But Psaki noted that the Food and Drug Administration has approved several different brands of rapid home tests that are currently on the market. While they are packaged differently and may use slightly different procedures, officials said, their mechanisms of detection and effectiveness are generally the same.

WILL I BE LIMITED TO ONE TEST OR CAN I REQUEST MULTIPLE?

To be determined. Officials are also working on policies for how frequently people can request a free test. That's expected to come with a new focus on educating Americans about best practices for when they should take a test.

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WHY IS BIDEN BUYING THESE TEST KITS?

It represents an acknowledgement by the president that the administration needs to do more to increase access to COVID-19 testing, which is an important tool to help slow the spread of the coronavirus.

In cases where infected people show symptoms or not, testing is the only way to find out if they have the virus so they can avoid being out and about and potentially spreading disease.

Demand for test kits soared as the holidays neared and people grew eager to test themselves and their families before traveling and as the easily transmissible omicron variant spread rapidly in just a few weeks to become dominant strain in the U.S.

Biden's promise of 500 million test kits is in addition to the administration's earlier pledge to send 50 million rapid tests to community health centers across the country.

HOW MUCH WILL THE PROGRAM COST?

The purchase will be paid for with money from the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill Biden signed into law in March, the White House said. The exact cost will be known soon.

IS THERE ANOTHER WAY TO GET A TEST KIT FOR FREE

Starting Jan. 15, private insurers will be required to cover the cost of at-home testing, the same way they cover the cost of PCR lab tests. People will have the option of buying tests at a store or online, then seeking reimbursement from their health insurance provider. Those with public health insurance through Medicare or Medicaid, or without insurance, will be directed to the forthcoming website to order tests or to community health centers in their area offering free testing.

WILL THE GOVERNMENT PROGRAM MAKE IT HARDER FOR ME TO FIND A TEST AT THE DRUGSTORE?

White House officials say the government tests are coming from new manufacturing capacity and should not interfere with existing supplies that drugstores, health clinics and state governments are relying on.

"These are additional tests," Zients said, made possible by the fact that the FDA has authorized many new ones in the last few months. "So, there's a lot more capacity for rapid tests."

Companies keep mum as vaccine mandate goes to Supreme Court

By ANNE D'INNOENZIO undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — Companies that would be affected by a Biden administration vaccine-or-testing requirement for workers have largely remained on the sidelines while the Supreme Court considers whether the rule can be enforced.

The requirement, which would apply to companies with 100 or more employees, has faced numerous court challenges and was upheld last month by a three-judge panel with the U.S. Court of Appeals. Since then, one major company — Starbucks — announced its own vaccine mandate. It said in December that all U.S. workers must be fully vaccinated by Feb. 9 or face a weekly COVID testing requirement.

Many companies, including Lowe's and Target, have publicly said they would abide by any federal vaccine mandate and were taking steps to meet it, but stopped short of coming out with their own requirement. General Motors said in an email to The Associated Press Friday that it "stands firmly in support" of COVID-19 vaccinations, and that it was reviewing the rules "with multiple internal and external stakeholders."

"GM continues to encourage employees to get vaccinated given the broad availability of safe and highly effective vaccines, which data consistently show is the best way to protect yourself and those around you," General Motors said.

The arguments before the Supreme Court come as companies of all stripes are grappling with labor shortages made more acute by the rapid spread of the highly contagious omicron variant of COVID-19. Business groups like the National Federation of Independent Businesses and National Retail Federation have slammed the requirements as onerous and could hinder companies' ability to hire workers.

Jeff Levin-Scherz, population health leader at consulting firm Willis Towers Watson, says that many companies are hesitant to make any moves because court challenges have created a lot of uncertainty. He also pointed out that 14 states have enacted legislation that limits employer vaccine mandates. That makes it hard for companies that operate in different states to create a uniform plan, he said.

Levin-Scherz also noted that some companies may not need to do their own vaccine mandates because nearly all are vaccinated; others in more rural states typically have much bigger percentage of unvaccinated workers and that would require a bigger effort.

A survey of more than 500 U.S. companies by Willis Towers Watson conducted from Nov. 12 to Nov. 18 showed that more than half of all respondents either require or plan to require COVID-19 vaccinations. That includes 18% that now require vaccinations; 32% that plan to require vaccinations only if the Biden rules take effect; and 7% that plan to mandate them regardless of the rules' status.

The survey also showed that very few employers with vaccination requirements — 3% — have reported a spike in resignations, although nearly 1 in 3 of those planning mandates are very concerned that they could contribute to employees leaving their companies. On the other hand, nearly half of employers surveyed believe that vaccine mandates could help recruit and retain employees.

In August, United Airlines became the first major airline to require employees to be vaccinated or face termination. Others followed in the fall, but withheld or dropped threats to fire anybody who didn't get the shots.

Dallas-based Southwest Airlines said on Friday that it's awaiting a final decision on the legal challenges. In the meantime, it will not enforce the Biden administration's Jan. 4 deadline for all federal contractors be vaccinated. The company notes that 93% of its workers are vaccinated against COVID-19 or have been granted an accommodation.

Walmart, the nation's largest retailer, required that all workers at its headquarters as well as its managers who travel within the U.S. be vaccinated against COVID-19 by Oct. 4 but it excluded front-line workers, who the company has said have a lower vaccination rate than management. The discounter has not offered any details about how it's taking steps to meet the federal mandate.

Last month, aerospace giant Boeing said it was suspending a company vaccination requirement for all U.S.-based employees, citing court challenges.

Judge dismisses sole criminal charge against Andrew Cuomo

By MARINA VILLENEUVE and MICHAEL HILL Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. (AP) — The only criminal charge filed over the sexual harassment allegations that drove former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo from office was dismissed Friday at prosecutors' request, clearing what had been seen as the most serious legal threat to the Democrat.

The move had been expected after Albany County prosecutors said they couldn't prove the case and intended to drop it.

Cuomo, who denied the allegation that he groped an aide in the executive mansion in 2020, didn't speak during Friday's short hearing, held with the judge sitting in an Albany courtroom and the lawyers and defendant appearing via videoconference.

Wearing a black mask, Cuomo was visible for only a few seconds when his lawyer, Rita Glavin, swiveled her camera to show him in the room.

"As the governor has said, this simply did not happen," Glavin said in a video statement after the hearing. "Today, reason and the rule of law prevailed. Not politics, rhetoric or mob mentality," she added.

During the hearing, which lasted only a few minutes and would have been even shorter if not for audio glitches, Assistant District Attorney Jennifer McCanney told the judge prosecutors had reviewed the evidence "and concluded we cannot successfully secure a conviction in this case."

Judge Holly Trexler noted district attorneys' "unfettered discretion" to decide whether to prosecute a case. "A court may not and should not interfere with discretion of a district attorney," she said.

Cuomo could still face lawsuits if his accusers choose to take him to court.

Some, including Commisso, have indicated they plan to do so. Cuomo spokesperson Rich Azzopardi bristled Friday that the former governor "will not pay one penny in attempts at civil extortion."

The local sheriff filed the misdemeanor complaint in October, two months after Cuomo resigned from office.

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Albany County District Attorney David Soares said this week that although the aide was credible, and some evidence supported her account, he believed he couldn't win a conviction.

The aide, Brittany Commisso, said Cuomo slid his hand up her blouse and grabbed her breast when they were alone in an office at the mansion.

Her testimony was among the most damning in a report released in August by Democratic state Attorney General Letitia James that concluded Cuomo sexually harassed 11 women. He said he never touched anyone inappropriately.

Cuomo resigned that month. He has called the report unfair.

Soares has said he was caught by surprise when Sheriff Craig Apple, a fellow Democrat, filed the forcible touching complaint without consulting the prosecutor's office. Soares called it "potentially defective" and moved to delay Cuomo's arraignment, originally set for November.

In a letter to Trexler on Tuesday, Soares said "statutory elements of New York law make this case impossible to prove." He added that government inquiries into Cuomo's conduct had created "technical and procedural hurdles" regarding prosecutors' obligations to disclose evidence to the defense.

Glavin on Friday called the complaint "a blatant political act," branded Apple a "rogue sheriff" and assailed Commisso, saying no jury would have found her credible.

Apple has shrugged off previous attacks by Cuomo's representatives as unfounded.

Some legal experts said Soares' decision illustrated the difficulties of prosecuting sex crime allegations. But others said he should have proceeded if he believed the accuser.

Commisso didn't respond to a request for comment, made through her lawyer Friday, but earlier this week she had blasted Soares for giving up on the case.

"My disappointing experience of re-victimization with the failure to prosecute a serial sexual abuser, no matter what degree the crime committed, yet again sadly highlights the reason victims are afraid to come forward, especially against people in power," Commisso said in a statement Tuesday to the Times Union of Albany.

The Associated Press doesn't identify people who say they have been sexually assaulted unless they decide to tell their stories publicly, as Commisso has done in interviews.

Soares, in a radio interview Friday, noted that the attorney general's inquiry didn't have the same legal requirements as a criminal case, and he said prosecutors can't be swayed by public sentiment or "passions."

"It's not for me to engage in any kind of debate with those who aren't equipped with as much information or the obligations that I have. Everyone is entitled to an opinion, but there's only one person with a burden of proof, and that's me," he told the WAMC/Northeast Public Radio network.

Two prosecutors in the New York City suburbs separately announced last month that Cuomo would not face charges for allegations involving other women who said they had been subjected to unwanted kisses or touches.

James, meanwhile, is still looking into whether Cuomo improperly used state workers and resources for his coronavirus pandemic memoir. He's also tussling with state ethics commissioners who won him to turn over \$5 million in book proceeds.

The U.S. Department of Justice in August opened a civil inquiry into sexual harassment allegations concerning Cuomo. The status of that investigation is unclear.

Arbery killers get life in prison; no parole for father, son

By RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. (AP) — Three white men convicted of murder for chasing and killing Ahmaud Arbery were sentenced to life in prison Friday, with a judge denying any chance of parole for the father and son who armed themselves and initiated the deadly pursuit of the 25-year-old Black man.

Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley said Arbery left his home for a jog and ended up running for his life for five minutes as the men chased him until they finally cornered him. The judge paused for a minute of silence to help drive home a sense of what that time must have felt like for Arbery, whose killing

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became part of a larger national reckoning on racial injustice.

"When I thought about this, I thought from a lot of different angles. I kept coming back to the terror that must have been in the mind of the young man running through Satilla Shores," he said, mentioning the neighborhood where Arbery was killed.

Greg and Travis McMichael grabbed guns and jumped in a pickup truck to chase Arbery after spotting him running in their neighborhood outside the port city of Brunswick on Feb. 23, 2020. Their neighbor, William "Roddie" Bryan joined the pursuit in his own truck and recorded cellphone video of Travis McMichael firing close-range shotgun blasts into Arbery.

"Ahmaud Arbery was then hunted down and shot, and he was killed because individuals here in this courtroom took the law into their own hands," the judge said. Walmsley ordered the McMichaels to serve life without parole and granted Bryan a chance to earn parole after serving at least 30 years in prison.

A few dozen supporters cheered Arbery's family as they exited onto the courthouse steps Friday afternoon.

"Today your son has made history, because we have people who are being held accountable for lynching a Black man in America!" said Benjamin Crump, a civil attorney representing the family.

Murder carries a mandatory sentence of life in prison under Georgia law unless prosecutors seek the death penalty, which they opted against in this case. During the sentencing hearing, Arbery's family had asked the judge to show no lenience in deciding whether to grant an eventual chance at parole.

Arbery's sister recalled his humor, describing him as a positive thinker with a big personality. She told the judge her brother had dark skin "that glistened in the sunlight," thick, curly hair and an athletic build, factors that made him a target for the men who pursued him.

"These are the qualities that made these men assume that Ahmaud was a dangerous criminal and chase him with guns drawn. To me, those qualities reflect a young man full of life and energy who looked like me and the people I loved," Jasmine Arbery said.

Arbery's mother said she suffered a personal, intense loss made worse by a trial where the defense was that her son had made bad choices that led to his death.

"This wasn't a case of mistaken identity or mistaken fact. They chose to target my son because they didn't want him in their community. They chose to treat him differently than other people who frequently visited their community," Wanda Cooper-Jones said. "And when they couldn't sufficiently scare or intimidate him, they killed him."

The sentences matched the recommendation of prosecutor Linda Dunikoski, who said all deserved the mandatory life sentence for showing "no empathy for the trapped and terrified Ahmaud Arbery."

Contending the McMichaels still believed they didn't do anything wrong, Dunikoski disclosed Friday that Greg McMichael gave Bryan's cellphone video of the shooting to an attorney, who leaked it.

"He believed it was going to exonerate him," the prosecutor said.

The McMichaels' defense attorneys argued that their clients deserved the possibility of parole because the killing was an unplanned, unintentional act. Bryan's lawyer said he showed remorse and cooperated with police, turning over the cellphone video of the shooting to help them get to the truth.

"Mr. Bryan isn't the one who brought a gun," Kevin Gough said. "He was unarmed. And I think that reflects his intentions."

Bryan is 52, raising the chances that he will spend the remainder of his life in prison even with the chance of parole after serving 30 years.

The guilty verdicts against the men handed down the day before Thanksgiving prompted a victory celebration outside the Glynn County courthouse. In addition to murder, all three men were also convicted of aggravated assault, false imprisonment and criminal attempt to commit false imprisonment. Travis and Greg McMichael were each sentenced to an additional 20 years for aggravated assault.

Defense attorneys have said they plan to appeal the convictions. They have 30 days after sentencing to file them.

Next month, the McMichaels and Bryan face a second trial, this time in U.S. District Court on federal hate crime charges. A judge has set jury selection to begin Feb. 7. Prosecutors will argue that the three

men violated Arbery's civil rights and targeted him because he was Black.

Kazakh president: Forces can shoot to kill to quell unrest

By DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Kazakhstan's president authorized security forces on Friday to shoot to kill those participating in unrest, opening the door for a dramatic escalation in a crackdown on anti-government protests that have turned violent.

The Central Asian nation this week experienced its worst street protests since gaining independence from the Soviet Union three decades ago, and dozens have been killed in the tumult. The demonstrations began over a near-doubling of prices for a type of vehicle fuel and quickly spread across the country, reflecting wider discontent with authoritarian rule.

In a televised address to the nation, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev used harsh rhetoric, referring to those involved in the turmoil as "terrorists," "bandits" and "militants" — though it was unclear what led the peaceful protests to first gather steam and then descend into violence. No protest leaders have emerged so far.

"I have given the order to law enforcement and the army to shoot to kill without warning," Tokayev said. "Those who don't surrender will be eliminated."

Concerns grew in recent days that an even broader crackdown might be coming, as internet and cell-phone service was severely disrupted and sometimes totally blocked, and several airports closed — making it difficult to know what was happening inside the country and for images of the unrest to reach the outside world.

Adding to those fears was Tokayev's request for help from a Russia-led military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, whose troops began arriving Thursday.

On Friday, Kazakhstan's Interior Ministry reported that security forces have killed 26 protesters during the unrest, which escalated sharply on Wednesday. Another 26 were wounded and more than 3,800 people have been detained. A total of 18 law enforcement officers were reported killed, and over 700 injured.

The numbers could not be independently verified, and it was not clear if more people may have died in the melee as the protests turned extremely violent, with people storming government buildings and setting them ablaze.

More skirmishes in Almaty were reported on Friday morning. Russia's state news agency Tass reported that the building occupied by the Kazakh branch of the Mir broadcaster, funded by several former Soviet states, was on fire.

In other parts of the country, the unrest appeared to be dying down. On Friday morning, news reports said the internet was partially restored in the capital, Nur-Sultan, but it remained unclear for how long. Officials also announced resuming previously halted train services.

The Almaty airport — stormed and seized earlier by the protesters — was back under the control of Kazakh law enforcement and CTSO forces, Russian Defense Ministry spokesman Maj. Gen. Igor Konashenkov said. But the facility will remain shut at least until Sunday, the Kazakh TV channel Khabar 24 reported, citing the airport's spokespeople.

Curfews remained in place in cities, and Tokayev tweeted on Friday night that "the counter-terrorist operation continues in our country," with police, the National Guard and the armed forces carrying out "large-scale and well-coordinated work" to restore "law and order."

Hours before he authorized the use of lethal force against those participating in unrest, Tokayev indicated that some measure of calm had been restored, saying "local authorities are in control of the situation."

Tokayev has vacillated between trying to mollify the protesters — including issuing a 180-day price cap on vehicle fuel and a moratorium on utility rate increases — and threatening harsh measures to quell the unrest.

As he vowed a tougher response, he called on the CSTO alliance for help. A total of 2,500 troops have arrived so far, all of them in Almaty, Kazakh media reported, citing foreign ministry officials.

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Kazakh officials have insisted that troops from the alliance, which includes several former Soviet republics, will not be fighting the demonstrators, and instead will guard government institutions. It wasn't immediately clear whether the foreign troops deployed thus far were involved in suppressing the unrest.

The involvement of CSTO forces is an indication that Kazakhstan's neighbors, particularly Russia, are concerned the turmoil could spread.

In his address to the nation, Tokayev repeated his allegations that "foreign actors" along with "independent media" helped incite the turmoil.

He offered no evidence for those claims, but such rhetoric has often been used by former Soviet nations, most prominently Russia and Belarus, which sought to suppress mass anti-government demonstrations in recent years.

Kazakhstan, which spans a territory the size of Western Europe, borders Russia and China and sits atop colossal reserves of oil, natural gas, uranium and precious metals that make it strategically and economically important — and the crisis sparked concern in many quarters.

Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president, said she was following the developments with a "great worry," while French president Emmanuel Macron called for de-escalation.

In Germany, Foreign Ministry spokesman Christofer Burger said officials were looking into the reports of Tokayev's shooting order. From Germany's point of view, "it must be said very clearly that a use of lethal force, of live ammunition against civilians can only be a very last resort, particularly if military forces are deployed."

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Washington had "questions about the nature" of what CSTO has described as a peacekeeping mission in Kazakhstan.

"It would seem to me that Kazakh authorities and governments certainly have the capacity to deal appropriately with protests, to do so in a way that respects the rights of protesters while maintaining law and order. So it's not clear why they feel the need for any outside assistance," Blinken said.

Asked about Tokayev's shoot-to-kill orders, U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric reiterated the importance of "a stop to the violence" and called for respecting "human rights and international standards while re-establishing public order."

"People demonstrating should do so peacefully," he said. "The killing of police officers and others is unacceptable. The killing of demonstrators is as well."

But China appeared to step up its support for Kazakhstan's government on Friday.

Kazakhstan is a critical component in China's "Belt and Road" overland connection to Europe and persistent unrest in the country could upend Beijing's hopes for closer trade and political relations with the continent.

Chinese President Xi Jinping expressed his condolences to Tokayev over the "large-scale riot," praising him for having "decisively taken strong measures at critical moments and quickly calming down the situation."

"As a fraternal neighbor and a long-term strategic partner, China is willing to provide necessary support within its means to Kazakhstan to help it get over this difficult period," Xi said.

Despite Kazakhstan's vast resource wealth, discontent over poor living conditions is strong. Many Kazakhs also chafe at the dominance of the ruling party, which holds more than 80% of the seats in parliament.

EXPLAINER: Kazakhstan seeks Russia-led security group's help

MOSCOW (AP) — In the face of mounting domestic unrest and apparent uncertainty over the loyalty of law enforcement and military forces, Kazakhstan's president has turned to a Russia-dominated security alliance for help.

Within hours, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, or CSTO, announced its readiness to accept the plea for assistance. By Thursday, planeloads of Russian elite airborne units were flying into Kazakhstan. Kazakh Deputy Foreign Minister Shukhrat Nuryshev said 2,500 CSTO peacekeepers would be deployed.

This marks the first time the CSTO has been engaged in an active operation.

WHAT IS THE CSTO?

The Collective Security Treaty Organization was formed in the first half of the 1990s following the collapse

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of the Soviet Union. Besides Russia, it includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

Despite its name, the bloc has at times struggled to define its exact purpose. Failure to engage in numerous security crises among its members over the years has prompted security analysts to question its viability. Last spring, two members, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, were engaged in a messy and bloody border dispute. The CSTO looked on impassively.

The bloc's focus has instead been aimed more intensely on enhancing readiness for potential spillover from Afghanistan, which shares a long border with Tajikistan. Russia has around 7,000 troops stationed in that country.

WHY DID KAZAKHSTAN SUMMON CSTO SUPPORT?

To legitimize his plea for outside military help, Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev went on television late Wednesday to say the unrest was being perpetrated by "international terrorist groups." This framing was important because the CSTO is ostensibly designed to protect member states from external aggression. It's unclear, however, which outside groups might be allegedly fomenting the trouble in Kazakhstan.

The current crisis began at the start of this week with peaceful protests over the sudden rise in car fuel prices. As large rallies began springing up across the country, and as violence broke out in Almaty, the country's commercial capital, reports emerged in some locations that law enforcement was declining to suppress the gatherings, which is the normal protocol in Kazakhstan. This has fueled speculation that Tokayev, who became president in 2019, was growing nervous over the loyalty of his security apparatus.

WHAT IS THE CSTO MISSION?

The Russian Defense Ministry says its troops are being flown into Kazakhstan on 70 Il-76 and five An-124 heavy transport aircraft. Russian military transports will also bring in the troops from Belarus, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Armenia.

Russia's component is being drawn from units in the army specially trained for rapid reaction operations: the 45th Guards Special Purpose brigade, the 98th Guards Airborne Division and the 31st Separate Guards Order. A group of troops from the 98th Guards Airborne Division was captured by Ukrainian armed forces while apparently involved in covert military operations in the war in eastern Ukraine in 2014. Russia claimed they had crossed the border by mistake.

The mission in Kazakhstan will be led by Andrei Serdyukov, 59, the overall commander of Russian Airborne Troops.

HOW DO KAZAKHS VIEW CSTO INVOLVEMENT?

The sight of Russian troops patrolling the streets of their country will provoke deeply ambivalent feelings among Kazakhs. Kazakhstan is a close and loyal ally to Moscow and feelings toward Russia are typically positive.

There is, nevertheless, intense anxiety over Russia's historically aggressive behavior toward its neighbors. The Kremlin cited alleged concerns over the oppression of ethnic Russians in Ukraine when it annexed Crimea in 2014. Kazakhstan, whose lands were conquered by the Russian Empire during the 19th century, has a large ethnic Russian population in its northern regions and nationalist politicians in Moscow routinely talk about the need to one day intervene on their behalf.

In an interview with Russian state news agency RIA Novosti, CSTO Secretary General Stanislav Zas scoffed at talk that the bloc's troops were a cover for imposing Russian authority over Kazakhstan. "There has been some gibberish about how this is an invasion or something," he said. "Well, I'm sorry, this is just completely stupid."

Tokayev will nevertheless face questions from his own people about whether his eagerness to welcome foreign troops has not diluted Kazakhstan's sovereignty. Invasion or not, the damage has been done.

HOW LONG WILL CSTO TROOPS STAY?

As long as it takes, Zas told RIA Novosti. That could mean days or even weeks. The official position is that Kazakhstan only has to say the word and CSTO troops will leave.

Russian troops have already been deployed at the airport in Almaty, where the most serious unrest has occurred. Although Nuryshev, the deputy foreign minister, said around 2,500 CSTO troops in total are being

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deployed in Kazakhstan, Russian media has reported a figure of 3,000 troops among Russia's mission alone. Kazakhstan's government said Friday that "constitutional order" had been restored all across the country, but that disturbances were still persisting in Almaty.

Biden's economic challenge: Finding workers and goods

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

President Joe Biden enters the midterm election year of 2022 determined to address what economists call a "supply" problem — there aren't enough jobseekers or goods to meet the country's needs.

This is also a political problem. The mismatch has obscured the strong growth and 3.9% unemployment rate achieved during Biden's first year, the kind of performance that would typically help the president and congressional Democrats woo voters in the midterms. It has left Biden trying to showcase his economic achievements while trying to parry Republican criticism that his policies have fueled inflation.

"This is the kind of recovery I promised and hoped for for the American people," the president said in remarks Friday. "My focus is on keeping this recovery strong and durable, notwithstanding Republican obstructionism. Because, you know, I know that even as jobs and families' incomes have recovered, families are still feeling the pinch of prices and costs."

Pessimism has overtaken Americans' views on the economy, even though the economy is objectively better than it was in 2020 right before Biden took office. The index of consumer sentiment tracked by the University of Michigan is 12.5% lower than a year ago, despite people being vaccinated and 6.4 million jobs added over the past 12 months.

Shoppers are focused on shortages of cars, bath towels and even breakfast cereal. Employers can't fill the 10.6 million jobs they're advertising, as Friday's employment report showed a mere 199,000 jobs gained in December. Prices for almost everything are rising — with forecasters expecting a 7.1% annual increase to turn up in next Wednesday's inflation report.

House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy bypassed the clear positives in the economy and blamed the administration for any shortfalls.

"President Biden has been in office for nearly a year, and our economy is still missing millions of pre-pandemic jobs, consumers are facing inflationary pressure not felt in nearly 40 years, and employers continue to struggle with a persistent labor shortage," the California lawmaker said in a statement.

As a policy and a political challenge, White House officials say they're figuring out how to increase the supply of workers and goods this year as the pandemic and supply chain issues linger. They have to do that while preserving consumer and business demand, two pillars of economic strength that are byproducts of last year's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package. The administration expects inflation to ease, yet it's unwilling to idly wait for that to happen.

The administration sees the supply factor as the only viable solution, because the alternative would be to cut government spending to reduce demand in ways that could hurt people's wellbeing and ability to spend and invest.

"We have very strong demand in this economy, and we have constrained supply," said Jared Bernstein, a member of the White House Council of Economic Advisers. "There's two ways of going after that imbalance. You can whack the demand side and essentially make people poorer, so that they don't have the resources to pursue what they want. Or, you can try to expand the supply side — that's what we're doing."

Biden announced a slew of initiatives to unclog supply chains, so that container ships can dock faster and big-rig trucks can get on the road faster with full trailers. The efforts include updating ports with money from the \$1 trillion infrastructure law, as well as executive actions to increase the number of commercial truckers and plans to increase the domestic production of computer chips.

The White House says it's already fixing the supply chain. It issued a memo reporting an uptick in store inventories and a 39% decline since November in shipping containers waiting at ports for nine days or more.

Biden has also said that his proposed investments in child care, families and health care — which are stalled in the Senate — would relieve supply constraints by making it easier for more parents to work. Yet

his arguments for the nearly \$2 trillion in spending and tax increases have failed to sway West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin, the decisive Democratic vote, who fears inflation and wants to require that families who receive the child tax credit have jobs.

At the heart of the workers shortage is also the continued threat of the pandemic. The initial wave in 2020, followed by the delta and now omicron variants have made it harder for people to return to work or train for new occupations. That's created a shortage of workers and worsened supply chain challenges and inflation.

"The virus remains the biggest issue in the economy today," said Aaron Sojourner, an economist at the University of Minnesota. "Millions of employees are missing work every week because they have COVID symptoms or they're caring for someone with symptoms, and the unvaccinated are 2.4 times more likely to miss work."

Sojourner estimated that only 39% of working-age Americans are fully vaccinated and received a booster shot. That leaves 36% who need a booster and 25% who were never fully vaccinated.

Heather Boushey, also a member of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, said the pandemic caused massive unemployment and dislocations for families and businesses. But she said the supply chain challenges have been harder to address because of their global nature and the fact that they involve some long-standing challenges that are separate from the coronavirus.

"This is not just in the United States — this a global issue," Boushey said.

Friday's employment report showed just how hard it could be to boost the number of workers seeking jobs, said Tyler Goodspeed, an economics adviser in the Trump administration who is now a fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution.

The report came out ahead of the likely impact from the omicron variant of the coronavirus, which has led to the closures of school and some businesses. Yet it showed that the percentage of people in the labor force has not increased substantially, a sign that the supply of available workers is tight even though the U.S. is still 3.6 million jobs short of pre-pandemics levels. There has also been a shortfall in business investment since the pandemic that makes it more difficult to increase supplies in the economy, Goodspeed said.

"It's tough for me to see how supply keeps pace with demand in 2022," he said.

More details emerge about teen in Michigan school shooting

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Two parents charged with their son in a Michigan school shooting failed to get their \$500,000 bond reduced Friday, as prosecutors offered new allegations about the teen's hallucinations, passion for guns and boasts about violence.

James and Jennifer Crumbley, who are charged with involuntary manslaughter in the Oxford High School shooting, ignored numerous warning signs about Ethan Crumbley and instead bought him a gun that was used to kill four students and injure others on Nov. 30, assistant prosecutor Marc Keast told a judge.

In August, Ethan made a video with a different gun and told a friend in a message that it was "time to shoot up the school — jk, jk, jk," Keast said, apparently a reference to "just kidding."

The 15-year-old was fascinated with Nazi propaganda, even keeping a Nazi coin in plain view in his bedroom and drawing Nazi symbols in a notebook that was also used to make family grocery lists, Keast said.

Earlier in 2021, Ethan told his mother in text messages that he thought "there was a demon or a ghost or someone else inside the home," the prosecutor said. "These weren't one-time messages. He would repeatedly text what he was perceiving to his mother, who sometimes would not respond for hours."

Keast said the parents failed to intervene. He also said Ethan started seeing online ads about mental health after regularly searching for information about school shootings and guns.

"They did not schedule therapy," Keast said. "Did not investigate what might be in his room, on his phone or on his (internet) browsers."

The parents are accused of making a gun accessible to Ethan and breaching their responsibility by re-

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fusing to remove him from school two hours before the shooting when counselors confronted them with his distressing drawings of violence.

"Are we done here?" Keast quoted Jennifer Crumbley as telling school officials.

Ethan Crumbley is charged as an adult with murder and other crimes.

The elder Crumbleys at times shook their heads in disagreement as Keast spoke during a court hearing held over Zoom. Judge Julie Nicholson refused to lower their bond to \$100,000, and seemed mostly swayed by arguments that the pair might flee Michigan if released from jail.

The couple had more than \$6,000 in cash and numerous phones and credit cards when they were arrested miles away in a Detroit art studio on Dec. 4, hours after charges against them were announced, Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDonald said.

Their attorneys insist the Crumbleys didn't know that a school shooting was in the works and didn't make the gun easy to find at home.

Defense lawyer Mariell Lehman said Ethan's journal, which was seized by police, says "he has to find where his dad hid the firearm."

"This statement in Ethan Crumbley's own words is contrary to the false and misleading assertions that have been made by the prosecution," Lehman said in court Friday.

Earlier, at a separate court appearance, the teen and his lawyers waived a key evidentiary hearing and moved his case directly to a trial court. Ethan is being held in jail without bond.

Defense attorney Paulette Loftin later told WWJ-AM that a plea deal was a "definite possibility," though "it's too early to jump to that phase."

Oxford High students are expected to return to school next week for the first time since the shooting but at a different building. The high school, roughly 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Detroit, could reopen during the week of Jan. 23.

US, NATO rule out halt to expansion, reject Russian demands

By MATTHEW LEE and LORNE COOK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The United States and NATO on Friday roundly rejected Russian demands that the alliance not admit new members amid growing concerns that Russia may invade Ukraine, which aspires to join the alliance.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said Russia would have no say over who should be allowed to join the bloc. And, they warned Russia of a "forceful" response to any further military intervention in Ukraine.

Their comments amounted to a complete dismissal of a key part of Russian President Vladimir Putin's demands for easing tensions with Ukraine. Putin wants NATO to halt membership plans for all countries, including Ukraine. The former Soviet republic is unlikely to join the alliance in the foreseeable future, but NATO nations won't rule it out.

Blinken and Stoltenberg spoke separately following an extraordinary virtual meeting of NATO foreign ministers. The meeting of the North Atlantic Council was the first in a series of high-level talks over the next week aimed at easing the tensions.

"We're prepared to respond forcefully to further Russian aggression, but a diplomatic solution is still possible and preferable if Russia chooses," Blinken told reporters in Washington. He categorically dismissed Russia's claim that NATO had pledged not to expand eastward following the admission of several former Soviet satellites after the end of the Cold War.

"NATO never promised not to admit new members; it could not and would not," Blinken said, accusing Putin of raising a strawman argument to distract from Russian military moves along the Ukrainian border.

"They want to draw us into a debate about NATO rather than focus on the matter at hand, which is their aggression toward Ukraine. We won't be diverted from that issue," Blinken said,

Earlier in Brussels, Stoltenberg made similar remarks as the allies prepared for the flurry of diplomatic contacts that will begin between the U.S. and Russia in Geneva on Monday and move to a NATO-Russia

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Council meeting and a pan-European meeting with Russia on Wednesday and Thursday.

"We will not compromise on core principles, including the right for every nation to decide its own path, including what kind of security arrangements it wants to be a part of," Stoltenberg said.

The NATO-Russia Council meeting will be the first in more than two years and will give NATO ambassadors the chance to discuss Putin's security proposals with Russia's envoy face to face.

Much contained in documents Moscow has made public — a draft agreement with NATO countries and the offer of a treaty between Russia and the United States — appears to be a non-starter at the 30-country military organization, despite fears that Putin might order an invasion of Ukraine.

NATO would have to agree to halt all membership plans, not just with Ukraine, and to end military exercises close to Russia's borders. In exchange, Russia would respect the international commitments it's signed up to on limiting wargames, as well as end aircraft buzzing incidents and other low-level hostilities.

Endorsing such an agreement would require NATO to reject a key part of its founding treaty. Under Article 10 of the 1949 Washington Treaty, the organization can invite in any willing European country that can contribute to security in the North Atlantic area, as well as fulfill the obligations of membership.

Blinken said Moscow was well aware that NATO would not accept the demands.

"Certainly part of (Putin's) playbook is to put out a list of absolutely non-starter demands and then to claim that the other side is not engaging and then use that as somehow justification for aggressive action," Blinken said.

Stoltenberg said the Russian military buildup that sparked the invasion worries has continued.

"We see armored units, we see artillery, we see combat-ready troops, we see electronic warfare equipment and we see a lot of different military capabilities," he said.

This buildup, combined with Russia's security demands, and its track record in Ukraine and Georgia, "sends a message that there is a real risk for a new armed conflict in Europe," Stoltenberg said.

Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and later backed a separatist rebellion in the country's east. Over more than seven years, the fighting has killed over 14,000 people and devastated Ukraine's industrial heartland, known as Donbas.

Russia denies that it has fresh plans to attack its neighbor, but Putin wants legal guarantees that would rule out NATO expansion and weapons deployments. Moscow says it expects answers to its security proposals this month.

Despite the rhetoric, Ukraine simply cannot join NATO with Crimea occupied and fighting in the Donbas because the alliance's collective security guarantee — that an attack on one ally is considered to be an attack on them all — would draw it into war if the country became a member.

Indeed, NATO's help in the event of an invasion is unlikely to involve major military muscle.

"Ukraine is a very close partner," Stoltenberg said. "We provide support to Ukraine. But Ukraine is not covered by NATO's collective defense clause because Ukraine is not a NATO member."

Blinken and Stoltenberg did say that the U.S. and NATO are willing to discuss arms control with Moscow, but that Putin cannot be permitted to impose restrictions on how the organization protects member countries close to Russia's borders like Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and Poland.

"We cannot end up in a situation where we have a kind of second-class NATO members; where NATO as an alliance is not allowed to protect them in the same way as we protect other allies," he said.

The NATO-Russia Council was set up two decades ago. But NATO ended practical cooperation with Russia through the NRC in 2014 after it annexed Crimea. Wednesday's meeting will be the first since July 2019. NATO officials say Russia has refused to take part in meetings as long as Ukraine was on the agenda.

'I can feel it': Djokovic sends thanks for the support

By JOHN PYE AP Sports Writer

The top men's tennis player in the world, Novak Djokovic, spent Orthodox Christmas in an immigration detention hotel in Australia on Friday as he sought to fend off deportation over the country's COVID-19 rules and compete in the Australian Open.

Djokovic received calls from his native Serbia, including from his parents and the president, who hoped

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to boost his spirits on the holiday.

On Instagram, he posted: "Thank you to the people around the world for your continuous support. I can feel it and it is greatly appreciated."

The 34-year-old athlete and vaccine skeptic was barred from entering the country late Wednesday when federal border authorities at the Melbourne airport rejected his medical exemption to Australia's strict COVID-19 vaccination requirements.

He has been confined to the detention hotel in Melbourne pending a court hearing on Monday, a week before the start of the tournament, where he is seeking to win his record-breaking 21st Grand Slam singles title.

During the day, Djokovic's supporters, waving banners, gathered outside the Park Hotel, used to house refugees and asylum-seekers.

A priest from the Holy Trinity Serbian Orthodox Church in Melbourne asked to visit the nine-time Australian Open champion to celebrate Orthodox Christmas but was turned down by immigration officials because the hotel is under lockdown.

"Our Christmas is rich in many customs, and it is so important that a priest visits him," the church's dean, Milorad Locard, told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. "The whole thing around this event is appalling. That he has to spend Christmas in detention ... it is unthinkable."

The Australian Border Force said Friday that after further investigations into two other people connected to the Australian Open, one voluntarily left the country and another was taken into detention pending deportation.

The Czech Embassy identified one of them as 38-year-old doubles player Renata Voráčová and said she won't play in the tournament.

Australia's COVID-19 rules say incoming travelers must have had two shots of an approved vaccine, or must have an exemption with a genuine medical reason, such as an acute condition, to avoid quarantine. All players, staff, officials and fans need to be fully vaccinated against COVID-19 to enter the tournament venue.

Djokovic flew to Australia after obtaining a medical exemption backed by the country's tennis federation and approved by the Victoria state government. The grounds for the exemption have not been disclosed. But the Australian government pronounced it invalid when he arrived.

The dispute has become a touchy topic in a city where residents spent 256 days in 2020-21 under severe restrictions on their movement. Djokovic's exemption stirred allegations the star athlete got special treatment.

While some players have sympathized with his situation, others have said getting vaccinated would have prevented any drama.

But amid the latest turn in the dispute, even some who have been critical of Djokovic in the past are now seemingly in his corner.

"Look, I definitely believe in taking action, I got vaccinated because of others and for my mum's health, but how we are handling Novak's situation is bad, really bad," Nick Kyrgios, an Australian player and outspoken critic of some of Djokovic's opinions on vaccinations, posted on Twitter. "This is one of our great champions but at the end of the day, he is human. Do better."

Australian Open tournament director Craig Tiley said earlier this week that 26 people connected with the tournament applied for medical exemptions and only a "handful" were granted. Three of those have since been challenged.

Hospitalizations skyrocket in kids too young for COVID shots

By LINDSEY TANNER and MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writers

Hospitalizations of U.S. children under 5 with COVID-19 soared in recent weeks to their highest level since the pandemic began, according to government data released Friday on the only age group not yet eligible for the vaccine.

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The worrisome trend in children too young to be vaccinated underscores the need for older kids and adults to get their shots to help protect those around them, said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Since mid-December, with the highly contagious omicron variant spreading furiously around the country, the hospitalization rate in these youngest kids has surged to more than 4 in 100,000 children, up from 2.5 per 100,000.

The rate among children ages 5 to 17 is about 1 per 100,000, according to the CDC data, which is drawn from over 250 hospitals in 14 states.

Overall, "pediatric hospitalizations are at their highest rate compared to any prior point in the pandemic," Walensky said.

She noted that just over 50% of children ages 12 to 18, and only 16% of those 5 to 11, are fully vaccinated.

The overall hospitalization rate among children and teens is still lower than that of any other age group. And they account for less than 5% of average new daily hospital admissions, according to the CDC.

As of Tuesday, the average number of under-18 patients admitted to the hospital per day with COVID-19 was 766, double the figure reported just two weeks ago.

The trend among the very youngest kids is being driven by high hospitalization rates in five states: Georgia, Connecticut, Tennessee, California and Oregon, with the steepest increases in Georgia, the CDC said.

At a briefing, Walensky said the numbers include children hospitalized because of COVID-19 and those admitted for other reasons but found to be infected.

The CDC also said the surge could be partially attributable to how COVID-19 hospitalizations in this age group are defined: a positive virus test within 14 days of hospitalization for any reason.

The severity of illness among children during the omicron wave seems lower than it was with the delta variant, said Seattle Children's Hospital critical care chief Dr. John McGuire.

"Most of the COVID+ kids in the hospital are actually not here for COVID-19 disease," McGuire said in an email. "They are here for other issues but happen to have tested positive."

The nation's top infectious-disease expert, Dr. Anthony Fauci, said earlier this week that omicron appears to cause less-severe disease across the board, but that the sheer number of infections because of its extreme contagiousness will mean that many more children will get infected, and a certain share of them will wind up in the hospital.

Fauci also said many children hospitalized with COVID-19 have other health conditions that make them more susceptible to complications from the virus. That includes obesity, diabetes and lung disease.

Fauci and Walensky have emphasized that one of the best ways to protect the youngest children is to vaccinate everyone else.

The surge in hospitalizations only heightens some parents' worries.

Emily Hojara and Eli Zilke of Sawyer, Michigan, are being extra protective of their daughter Flora, who turns 2 in May. They limit her contact with other children, and no visitors are allowed in the house unless masked, not even grandparents.

"It's been a struggle, and now with this new variant, I feel it's knocked us back," Hojara said.

"It's scary that she can't be vaccinated," she said of her daughter.

Dr. Jennifer Kusma, a pediatrician with Chicago's Lurie Children's Hospital, said she has seen increasing numbers of kids hospitalized with omicron, and while most aren't severely ill, she understands parents' worries.

"I really wish we already had that vaccine for these young kids," Kusma said. But she added that what may seem like a long wait should reassure parents that vaccine testing is not being rushed.

Many had hoped the new year might bring a vaccine for young children, but Pfizer announced last month that two doses didn't offer as much protection as hoped for in youngsters 2 to 4.

Pfizer's study has been updated to give everyone under 5 a third dose, and data is expected in early spring.

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Also on Friday, the CDC issued a report showing Pfizer shots seem to protect older children who develop a serious but rare COVID-19-linked condition that involves inflammation of multiple organs.

Among 102 kids ages 12 to 18 who were hospitalized with the condition, none who had received two Pfizer shots at least 28 days earlier needed ventilators or other advanced life support. By contrast, 40% of unvaccinated children required such treatment.

The condition, multisystem inflammatory syndrome, causes symptoms that may include persistent fever, abdominal pain and rashes. Most children recover, but 55 deaths have been reported.

A separate CDC report found that children who had COVID-19 were more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with diabetes as youngsters who had not had the virus. Scientists are investigating why but say the virus seems to attack insulin-producing cells in the pancreas.

Ethiopia grants amnesty to high-profile political detainees

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — Ethiopia's government on Friday announced an amnesty for some of the country's most high-profile political detainees, including opposition figure Jawar Mohammed and senior Tigray party officials, as Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed spoke of reconciliation for Orthodox Christmas.

"The key to lasting unity is dialogue," the government said in a statement on the amnesty. "Ethiopia will make any sacrifices to this end."

It was the most dramatic move yet by the government after the country's deadly Tigray war entered a new phase in late December, when Tigray forces retreated into their region amid a military offensive and Ethiopian forces said they would not advance further there.

The war in Africa's second most populous country has highlighted the deadly ethnic tensions posing the greatest challenge to Abiy's rule.

Ethiopia's state broadcaster, EBC, named both Jawar and opposition figure Eskinder Nega, who were detained in July 2020 following deadly unrest over the killing of popular ethnic Oromo artist Hachalu Hundessa, as those granted amnesty. Eskinder, leader of the Balderas party, left a detention center on Friday evening.

But Tuli Bayis, a lawyer for Jawar of the Oromo Federalist Congress party and others, told The Associated Press that they refused to leave the prison facility as the order for their release came late in the day.

"They have security risks, so they preferred to exit the correction facility in daytime," Tuli said, adding he was not sure why the order for their release came now. "We heard it is an amnesty, that's what we know for now."

Ethiopia's ministry of justice said the amnesty for Jawar and Nega was granted "to make the upcoming national dialogue successful and inclusive." Ethiopian lawmakers on Dec. 29 approved a bill to establish a commission for national dialogue amid international pressure for negotiations to end the war.

The state broadcaster also named several senior officials with Tigray's ruling Tigray People's Liberation Front party as being granted amnesty and said they will be released soon. They include Sebhat Nega, Kidusan Nega, Abay Woldu, Abadi Zemu, Mulu Gebregziabher and Kiros Hagos. They were arrested in late 2020 when government forces captured most of the Tigray region shortly after war erupted between Tigray forces and Ethiopian ones.

The ministry of justice said the TPLF detainees "were granted amnesty taking into consideration their age and health condition."

Friday's announcement came a day after the United States said its outgoing special envoy for the Horn of Africa, Jeffrey Feltman, met with Ethiopia's prime minister to again press for a negotiated end to the war.

United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres welcomed Friday's development and called on the parties "to build on this significant confidence-building step by agreeing a cessation of hostilities and a lasting ceasefire, as well as launching a credible and inclusive national dialogue and reconciliation process."

The U.N. chief said that following his last contact with prime minister Abiy he also looks forward "to a meaningful improvement in humanitarian access to all areas affected by the year-long conflict."

U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric said last month that an estimated 9.4 million people across Tigray and

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neighboring Amhara and Afar were "in critical need of food assistance." He warned Thursday that some U.N. agencies and aid organizations will be forced to halt operations in the Tigray region if humanitarian supplies, fuel and cash are not delivered very soon.

It's estimated that tens of thousands of people have been killed in the war that erupted in November 2020 between Ethiopian forces and the Tigray forces who once led the country. The government of Abiy, who had won the Nobel Peace Prize just a year earlier, by that point was wrestling with the challenge of various ethnic tensions growing in the wake of the prime minister's sweeping political reforms.

Those reforms have dramatically eroded with the war. Ethiopia's government has sought to restrict reporting on the conflict and detained some journalists, including a video freelancer accredited to The Associated Press, Amir Aman Kiyaro.

As omicron spreads, Europe scrambles to shore up health care

By MIKE CORDER Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — Troops have been deployed to London hospitals. Health care workers infected with COVID-19 are treating patients in France. The Netherlands is under a lockdown, and tented field hospitals have gone up in Sicily.

Nations across Europe are scrambling to prop up health systems strained by staff shortages blamed on the new, highly transmissible omicron variant of the coronavirus, which is sending a wave of infections crashing over the continent.

"Omicron means more patients to treat and fewer staff to treat them," Stephen Powis, national medical director at Britain's National Health Service, said Friday.

The World Health Organization said Thursday that a record 9.5 million COVID-19 cases were tallied globally over the last week, a 71% increase from the previous 7-day period. However, the number of weekly recorded deaths declined.

While omicron seems less severe than the delta variant it has swiftly replaced, especially among people who have been vaccinated, WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus cautioned against treating it lightly.

"Just like previous variants, omicron is hospitalizing people, and it's killing people," he said. "In fact, the tsunami of cases is so huge and quick that it is overwhelming health systems around the world."

That was evident Friday in London, where some 200 military personnel, including 40 medics, were being deployed to hospitals struggling to deliver vital care amid "exceptional" staff shortages blamed on the number of workers who are ill or isolating because of COVID-19. Next week, another 150 troops will help an ambulance service in northwest England.

On a visit to King's College Hospital London, Health Secretary Sajid Javid warned that hospital admissions were rising and that the NHS was facing a "rocky few weeks ahead."

A total of 39,142 NHS staff members at hospital trusts in England were absent for COVID-19 reasons on Jan. 2, up 59% from the previous week, according to figures released by the National Health Service in England.

The U.K. also has changed its coronavirus testing rules to reduce the amount of time people who test positive have to isolate.

Germany's leaders agreed Friday to toughen requirements for entry to restaurants and bars, and decided to shorten quarantine and self-isolation periods.

French authorities this week began allowing health care workers who are infected with the coronavirus but have few or no symptoms to keep treating patients rather than self-isolate.

France announced a staggering 332,252 daily virus cases on Wednesday, Europe's highest-ever single-day confirmed infection count.

The Netherlands has been in a strict lockdown for weeks, a move designed to ease pressure on overburdened hospitals and buy time for a slow-starting vaccination booster campaign to gather pace. Despite the lockdown, infections hit record numbers in the country this week.

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In Palermo, Sicily, auxiliary facilities were set up in front of three hospitals to relieve the pressure on emergency rooms and to allow ambulance crews to get patients into beds instead of waiting in the parking lot. Staff in white medical overalls and masks pushed gurneys from ambulances into the tents.

Tiziana Maniscalichi, director of Cervello and Civico Palermo hospitals, said most of those hospitalized with serious symptoms were not vaccinated.

"We are absolutely under pressure," Maniscalichi told The Associated Press. "There are at least 70 new cases a day to be hospitalized. We were forced to set up an additional emergency unit in a tent, because the capacity of the ordinary emergency unit was not enough."

Italy is reporting record daily new coronavirus infections, hitting 219,000 new cases on Thursday. Authorities believe the peak in this surge is still two to three weeks away.

The hospital system already is swamped in the southern Italian city of Naples.

"We risk the collapse of the national healthcare service," said the head of the local hospital doctors' association, Bruno Zuccarelli.

"We could be seeing a repeat of the scenes of October and November 2020 which were very, very dangerous," he added.

The governor of the Campania region surrounding Naples announced Friday he was planning to delay the Jan. 10 reopening of elementary and middle schools for at least two weeks since "the conditions aren't there to reopen in safety."

Italy's national association of surgical doctors urged a similar delay nationwide, but both the Italian health and education ministries have prioritized in-person schooling and have insisted that prevention measures should allow children to return to the classroom from Christmas vacation as planned.

Greece's government on Friday issued a civil mobilization order that will take effect next Wednesday and obliges some doctors in the private sector to support the state health service during an omicron-driven surge in four northern regions where state hospitals are suffering acute staffing shortages.

In the U.K., which reported nearly 180,000 new cases on Thursday alone, omicron's advance has forced many workers to stay home and prompted the government to send in the troops.

Health service leaders said the military deployment highlighted how the country is battling to stay on top of the pandemic.

"We have never known this level of staff absence before," Chaand Nagpaul, council chairman of the British Medical Association, told Sky News.

Air Commodore John Lyle told the BBC that the military remains in discussions about providing support for the NHS in other parts of the country.

Nagpaul urged action to bring down infections and better protect health care workers against the omicron variant, saying it was important that "the government doesn't just wait to ride this out, because every day people are suffering."

In Naples, doctors' leader Zuccarelli said the mutations in the virus since Italy was hammered in the first wave in 2020 means children and even babies are now being hospitalized with COVID-19.

"The virus adapts to the environment, we have to make the habitat impossible for it, and to do that you absolutely have to vaccinate," he said. "Don't be afraid to vaccinate, you must be afraid of COVID."

FDA shortens timing of Moderna booster to 5 months

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. regulators on Friday shortened the time that people who received Moderna's COVID-19 vaccine have to wait for a booster — to five months rather than six.

The two-dose Moderna vaccine is open to Americans 18 and older. The Food and Drug Administration's decision Friday means Moderna recipients are eligible for a booster after at least five months have passed since their last shot. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention agreed.

That's in line with new recommendations for recipients of the Pfizer vaccine. Initial Pfizer vaccinations are open to anyone 5 or older. But only Pfizer recipients 12 and older are eligible for boosters, and earlier this week U.S. health authorities said they can get one five months after their last shot.

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In a statement, FDA vaccine chief Dr. Peter Marks called vaccination "our best defense against COVID-19" and said a shortened wait for a booster may help as the country battles a surge of the highly contagious omicron variant.

A booster after receiving the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine already is urged two months later.

US unemployment sinks to 3.9% as many more people find jobs

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The nation's unemployment rate fell in December to a healthy 3.9% — a pandemic low — even as employers added a modest 199,000 jobs, evidence that they are struggling to fill jobs with many Americans reluctant to return to the workforce.

The drop in the jobless rate, from 4.2% in November, indicated that many more people found work last month. Indeed, despite the slight hiring gain reported by businesses, 651,000 more workers said they were employed in December compared with November.

Still, the data reported Friday by the Labor Department reflected the state of the job market in early December — before the spike in COVID-19 infections began to disrupt the economy. Economists have cautioned that job growth may slow in January and possibly February because of omicron cases, which have forced millions of newly infected workers to stay home and quarantine. The economy is still about 3.6 million jobs short of its pre-pandemic level.

For now, steady hiring is being driven by strong consumer demand that has remained resilient despite chronic supply shortages. Consumer spending and business purchases of equipment are likely propelling the economy to a robust annual growth rate of roughly 7% in the final three months of 2021. Americans' confidence in the economy rose slightly in December, according to the Conference Board, suggesting that spending was probably healthy for much of last month.

Wages also rose sharply in December, with average hourly pay jumping 4.7% compared with a year ago. That pay increase is a sign that companies are competing fiercely to fill their open jobs. A record-high wave of quitting, as many workers seek better jobs, is helping fuel pay raises.

Low unemployment and rapid wage gains, though, could further heighten inflation as companies raise prices to cover rising labor costs. Price increases have already surged to a four-decade high, prompting a sharp pivot by the Federal Reserve, from keeping rates low to support hiring to moving toward raising interest rates to combat inflation. Most economists expect the Fed to raise its benchmark short-term rate, now pegged near zero, in March and to do so two or three additional times this year.

"Companies are paying up for workers," said Neil Dutta, an economist at Renaissance Macro Research. "This is consistent with inflation well above 2%, which keeps the pressure on the Fed to raise interest rates."

Among those benefiting from the intense competition for workers is Patrick Freeman, a custodian at a furniture factory in Hickory, North Carolina. In late November, Freeman, 57, was given a permanent job after having spent two years as a temp. Freeman got the good news at a time when many of his colleagues have found other jobs elsewhere, leaving the company short-staffed.

"They've scattered," he said, referring to his fellow employees. "They're really short in a lot of areas. I'm sticking around."

Having come on board permanently, Freeman enjoyed a pay jump from \$12 to \$16 an hour. After a 60-day probation period, he will also receive health, dental, and vision benefits. And he's eligible for the company's employee stock ownership program.

Becky Frankiewicz, president of the staffing giant ManpowerGroup North America, said that many of Manpower's clients are shifting employees from temporary to permanent status, because with workers scarce, they want to "lock people up."

Frankiewicz said Manpower has calculated that because of omicron, absenteeism is running at three times its peak in 2021. Yet there has been "no slowdown in demand" for workers, she said.

More broadly through the economy, though, job growth will likely take a big hit this month from the omicron variant, which has sickened millions of Americans, forced airlines to cancel thousands of flights,

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reduced traffic at restaurants and bars, and caused some major school systems to close, potentially keeping some parents at home with children and unable to work.

That could make it even harder for companies to remain fully staffed and could slow the economy, too. Michael Pearce, an economist at Capital Economics, notes that millions of workers will likely be quarantining at home next week. For those who aren't paid — about one-fifth of the U.S. workforce lacks sick leave — their jobs won't be counted by the government. That would lower the employment gain reported by businesses for January.

Omicron has forced so many workers to call in sick, it's disrupting businesses ranging from ski resorts to airlines to hospitals. Alaska Airlines said it's cutting 10% of its flights in January because of an "unprecedented" number of employees calling in sick.

The wave of infections is also likely weighing on jobs at restaurants and bars. The number of Americans willing to eat at restaurants started to slip in late December, according to the reservations website OpenTable. Restaurant traffic was nearly at pre-pandemic levels for much of November but had fallen nearly 25% below those levels by Dec. 30, based on a weekly average of OpenTable data.

But because omicron is less virulent than previous COVID-19 variants and few states or localities have moved to limit business operations, economists say they believe its economic impact will be short-lived.

Omicron might have had some impact on December's data, with the 199,000 added jobs having fallen well short of what economists had expected. A category that includes restaurants, bars, hotels and casinos gained just 53,000 positions, down from the several hundred thousand a month that were added earlier this year.

Even with December's modest gain, 2021 was one of the best years for American workers in decades, though one that followed 2020, the job market's worst year since records began in 1939, a consequence of the pandemic recession. Companies posted a record number of open jobs last year and offered sharply higher pay to try to find and keep workers.

The number of jobs rose 4.5% in 2021, the largest such gain since 1978. That partly reflected a bounce-back from the steep losses of 2020, when the nation shed 6.2% of its jobs.

Many companies are looking past the omicron wave and still adding workers. Angie Podolak, director of human capital at Beneficial State Bank based in Oakland, California, said the company, which employs about 195 people, is enjoying strong growth in auto lending and is seeking to fill 12 jobs.

Though some of its front-line workers have called in sick, Podolak said the bank hasn't had to reduce hours or lose business because of omicron. Nor has it had to slow its recruiting efforts. Beneficial already conducts job interviews by video.

"It's really just been business as usual for us," Podolak said. "I'm knocking on wood and crossing my fingers right now. But we haven't seen a significant impact on our recruiting."

The aftermath of the pandemic has made the government's survey of company payrolls more volatile, with one month's data often followed by a sharply different trend a month or two later. On Friday, for example, November's job gain of 210,000 was revised up to 249,000, and October's gain, originally reported at 531,000, was upgraded to a strong 648,000.

December's report also reflects a divergence in two surveys that the government conducts each month. The unemployment rate is calculated from a survey of households. For last month, this survey found that 651,000 more people reported that they were employed. A separate survey of employers, called the payroll survey, reported just 199,000 added jobs.

Though the results of the two surveys typically match up over the long run, they can differ sharply in any one month.

Polish leader admits country bought powerful Israeli spyware

By VANESSA GERA Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland (AP) — Poland's most powerful politician has acknowledged that the country bought advanced spyware from the Israeli surveillance software maker NSO Group, but denied that it was being

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used to target his political opponents.

Jaroslaw Kaczynski, the leader of Poland's ruling conservative party, Law and Justice, said in an interview that the secret services in many countries are using the Pegasus software to combat crime and corruption.

Kaczynski said the use of such spyware arose in response to the growing use of encryption to mask data in transit, which defeated earlier monitoring technologies. By hacking phones, it lets authorities monitor communications, as well as real-time conversations where they are not encrypted.

"It would be bad if the Polish services did not have this type of tool," Kaczynski said in an interview to be published in the Monday edition of weekly magazine Sieci. The wPolityce.pl news portal published excerpts on Friday.

The interview follows exclusive reports by The Associated Press that Citizen Lab, a cyber watchdog group at the University of Toronto, found that three Polish government critics were hacked with NSO's Pegasus.

On Thursday, Amnesty International independently verified Citizen Lab's finding that Sen. Krzysztof Brejza was hacked multiple times in 2019 when he was running the opposition's parliamentary election campaign.

Text messages stolen from Brejza's phone were doctored and aired by state-controlled TV in Poland as part of a smear campaign in the heat of the race, which the populist ruling party went on to narrowly win.

Brejza now maintains that the election was unfair since the ruling party would have had access to his campaign's tactical thinking and plans.

The hacking revelations have rocked Poland, drawing comparisons to the 1970s Watergate scandal in the United States and eliciting calls for an investigative commission in parliament.

Kaczynski said he saw no reason to set up such a commission, and he denied that the surveillance played any role in the outcome of the 2019 election.

"There is nothing here, no fact, except the hysteria of the opposition. There is no Pegasus case, no surveillance," Kaczynski said. "No Pegasus, no services, no secretly obtained information played any role in the 2019 election campaign. They lost because they lost. They shouldn't look for such excuses today."

The other two Polish targets confirmed by Citizen Lab were Roman Giertych, a lawyer who represents opposition politicians in a number of politically sensitive cases, and Ewa Wrzosek, an independent-minded prosecutor.

When asked by the AP in December if Poland had purchased Pegasus, state security spokesman Stanislaw Zaryn would neither confirm nor deny it. However, many Kaczynski allies publicly cast doubt on suggestions of government Pegasus use.

Polish Prime Minister Mateusz Morawiecki called the Citizen Lab-AP findings "fake news" and suggested a foreign intelligence service could have done the spying — an idea dismissed by critics who said no other government would have any interest in the three Polish targets.

Deputy Defense Minister Wojciech Skurkiewicz in late December said "the Pegasus system is not in the possession of the Polish services. It is not used to track or surveil anyone in our country."

Polish media reports say Poland purchased Pegasus in 2017, using money from the so-called Justice Fund, which is meant to help the victims of crimes and to rehabilitate criminals.

According to investigations by broadcaster TVN and daily newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza, the software is used by the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau, a special service created to combat corruption in public life that is under the political control of the ruling party.

"The public money was spent on an important public purpose, related to the fight against crime and the protection of citizens," Kaczynski said.

Dozens of high-profile cases of Pegasus abuse have been uncovered since 2015, many by a global media consortium last year, showing the NSO Group malware was employed to eavesdrop on journalists, politicians, diplomats, lawyers and human rights activists from the Middle East to Mexico.

The Polish hacks are considered particularly egregious because they occurred not in a repressive autocracy but in a European Union member state.

Amnesty International's Poland director, Anna Błaszczak, alleged in a statement Friday that spying on the opposition would be consistent with the Polish government's behavior under Law and Justice. The EU has increasingly criticized Poland for judicial interference and other actions regarded as anti-democratic.

"These findings are shocking but not surprising. They raise serious concerns not only for politicians, but for the whole Poland's civil society in general, particularly given the context of the government's record of persistently subverting human rights and the rule of law," Blaszcak said.

Some say politics at play in Djokovic detention in Australia

By STEVE McMORRAN Associated Press

On the tennis court, Novak Djokovic's timing is perfect. But when the No. 1 player boarded a plane for Australia to play the first Grand Slam of the year with a COVID-19 vaccine exemption, his timing hardly could have been worse.

While he was in the air, the game apparently shifted — and he was denied entry when he landed. Some are saying politics is at play in a country seeing a virus surge and debating how best to beat it back.

Australian officials initially said Djokovic, a vocal skeptic of vaccines who has refused to say if he got the COVID-19 shot, would be given an exemption to stringent vaccine rules by state authorities and be able to participate in the Australian Open.

But when he landed, his visa was canceled by federal border officials and he's now in an immigration detention hotel while he fights the decision.

It's not clear what caused the reversal, but the news of the exemption led to an outcry that the star was receiving special treatment from Australia, which has seen some of the world's most stringent pandemic rules.

Djokovic's refusal to discuss his vaccine status or explain why his health-based exemption had been granted didn't sit well in Open host Melbourne, where 92% of the eligible population is fully vaccinated and where cases are rising.

Melbourne reported 21,728 new COVID-19 cases on Friday, in addition to six deaths and an increase in hospitalizations. By 9 a.m., 18 state-run PCR testing sites had already reached capacity and closed.

In 2020 and 2021, Melbourne residents spent 256 days under severe restrictions on movements and gatherings.

Against that backdrop, many in Australia have cheered the decision to block Djokovic's arrival.

Columnist Peter FitzSimons wondered how it could be any other way.

"The first grand slam of the year is, after all, held in one of the most locked-down cities on the planet, where the people have made extraordinary sacrifices to keep the population as healthy as possible," he wrote in the Sydney Morning Herald this week. "And he was meant to just waltz on in, be the exception to the rule, just because he could hit a ball well?"

On social media, many shared that sentiment, with one poster complaining that during the lockdowns he could not fly to Australia from Britain to attend family funerals, and so the tennis star should not be allowed in.

But some say the athlete is being made a scapegoat.

"The guy played by the rules, he got his visa, he arrives, he's a nine-time champion and whether people like it or not he's entitled to fair play," Former Australian Open tournament director and Davis Cup player Paul McNamee told the Australian Broadcasting Corp. "There's no doubt there's some disconnect between the state and the federal government."

"I hate to think politics are involved, but it feels that way," he added.

Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison, who had not initially objected to the decision of Tennis Australia and the Victoria state government to grant Djokovic an exemption, quickly embraced the move by the federal Border Force to deny him entry.

"No one is above these rules," Morrison said. "Our strong border policies have been critical to Australia having one of the lowest death rates in the world from COVID. We are continuing to be vigilant."

In recent months, Morrison's government has pivoted to a living-with-the-virus approach that includes more open borders and a lighter touch on domestic restrictions. He implemented the changes just as the highly contagious omicron variant started to take hold.

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Morrison, who is seeking re-election in March, has faced heavy criticism for the new strategy. But he points to Australia's low death rate and strong economy — both among the best in the world — as evidence he can steer the country through the crisis.

"We have no choice but to ride the wave (of omicron cases)," he said. "What's the alternative? What we must do is press on."

Morrison has also been criticized for failing to secure enough rapid antigen tests to take pressure off PCR testing sites where waiting times in some states have exceeded five hours. He has refused to make rapid tests widely available and free.

Australia's most populous state, New South Wales, has been hardest hit by the current omicron surge, which emerged after state Premier Dominic Perrottet relaxed mask mandates and other rules. Other states have been slower to relax virus-related restrictions, creating tension between Australia's states and the federal government.

The cancellation of Djokovic's visa has also rubbed many in his native Serbia, where he has long been a national hero, the wrong way. The Serbian president condemned the move and Djokovic's family voiced anger at what they portrayed as an affront to the Serbian people.

"You, famous Prime Minister (Morrison) of the faraway naturally beautiful country, are behaving according to your own principles, which have nothing to do with us and our principles," Djokovic's father Srdan told reporters. "We are humans, and you, sir, are not."

Djokovic has been left to wait out the court process at a Melbourne hotel that also houses refugees and asylum-seekers who have been transferred from Australia's off-shore detention centers. In October, a COVID-19 outbreak at the hotel infected about half of the 46 asylum-seekers then being held there.

Djokovic's brother Djordje said the tennis star had been taken "to a dirty room without any belongings." "He was treated like a criminal, while he is a healthy and decent man and a sportsman who has not endangered anyone's life and has not committed any federal or legal offence," Djordje added.

The process that led to the original decision to grant Djokovic an exemption is now under scrutiny. Tennis Australia insists the exemption was granted by an independent panel of medical experts, unaware of whose applications they were assessing.

In an email, the border force said following investigations into two other cases of people connected to the Open, "one individual has voluntarily departed Australia ... and the visa of a third individual has been canceled."

The embassy for the Czech Republic in Canberra identified 38-year-old doubles player Renata Voráčová as one of the people involved — and said she planned to leave the country as soon as possible.

EXPLAINER: What does record inflation mean for the eurozone?

By KELVIN CHAN AP Business Writer

LONDON (AP) — Inflation in the 19 countries that use the euro currency hit its highest level on record, led by surging food and energy costs, figures released Friday show.

Here's a closer look at the data:

WHAT DO THE NUMBERS SAY?

Consumer prices in the eurozone, made up of European Union economies like France and Germany, rose 5% in December compared with the previous year, according to Eurostat, the EU's statistics office.

Energy prices led the increase, jumping 26% over the past year, slightly lower than the previous month. The boost in food prices picked up steam to 3.2%, from November's 2.2% rate, and the price of goods rose at a faster pace of 2.9%.

However, price increases for services eased to 2.4%, suggesting that the omicron variant of COVID-19 crimped demand for holiday travel. After stripping out potentially volatile items such as food and energy, the eurozone's core inflation rate held steady at 2.6%.

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The latest reading smashes the record of 4.9% set in November and marks the highest level of inflation since recordkeeping for the euro currency began in 1997, two years before its actual launch.

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It means everything from food at the grocery store to shopping trips and fuel are costing more as the economic recovery from the pandemic has increased demand for energy and snarled global supply chains.

The numbers underline how inflation has emerged as one of the main issues that economic policymakers are grappling with.

It compounds pressure for the European Central Bank to act on inflation since it's kept interest rates ultra-low to stimulate an economy recovering from the depths of the pandemic. The arrival of omicron has forced a rethink of any decisions that might throttle economic growth, and analysts don't expect the European bank to raise rates until 2023.

Inflation is not just the EU's problem. Consumer prices in the U.S. have risen at their fastest pace in 39 years, and at their highest clip in more than a decade in Britain. Turkish inflation hit an eye-watering 36% last month — the highest in 19 years — and Brazil saw it accelerate to more than 10%, the fastest pace in 18 years.

WHAT DO THE EXPERTS THINK?

Some economists think inflation in the eurozone will peak soon, if it hasn't already. One big factor is natural gas prices, "which have been incredibly volatile in recent weeks and a dominant driver of the recent inflation surge," Bert Colijn, senior economist at ING Bank, said in a report.

Prices for natural gas and oil in the futures markets suggest energy inflation likely peaked and is set to ease, he said.

Now, "the question is how steep the downward trend will be," Colijn said.

He and other economists predict that core inflation will ease but stay at or above 2% this year, giving the European Central Bank some breathing room when it comes to a rate decision.

WHAT ARE OTHER COUNTRIES DOING?

Despite omicron surging and its uncertain effects on the global economy, central banks have been raising interest rates to fight soaring inflation or taking steps in that direction.

The Bank of England last month became the first central bank in a major advanced economy to raise interest rates since the pandemic began. The European Central Bank has taken a much more cautious approach but also decided to start carefully dialing back some of its stimulus efforts over the next year.

The U.S. Federal Reserve is moving faster than Europe to tighten credit as consumer prices jumped 6.8% over the past year in November.

In omicron outbreak, US governors lose appetite for mandates

By JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. (AP) — Governors took sweeping actions during earlier surges of the COVID-19 pandemic. Many closed schools and ordered businesses shut down. They issued mask mandates, vaccine requirements and even quarantines in some places for people who had traveled to out-of-state hot spots.

Not this time, even as the exponential spread of the super-contagious omicron variant shatters COVID-19 infection records. While governors are sending help to hospitals, they are displaying little appetite for widespread public orders or shutdowns.

Even Democratic governors who passed strict mandates early on are now relying more on persuasion than dictates. They largely are leaving it up to local officials to make the tough calls on decisions such as whether to limit capacity in restaurants and theaters or keep schools open.

South Carolina set a record for positive tests over the New Year's weekend and COVID-19 hospitalizations are up 67% from the week before. But Gov. Henry McMaster, a Republican, urged everyone to carry on as if everything's fine. "If you get real sick, there will be room in the hospitals," he promised this week.

"There's no need to panic. Be calm. Be happy," McMaster said. "We just had a great Christmas season. Business is booming."

McMaster has consistently urged people to get vaccinated and in the earliest days of the pandemic, he directed K-12 schools and colleges to move to distance learning. But students are back in classrooms across the state, and he continues to resist imposing any statewide business shutdowns.

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California is grappling with an astonishing spike in infections, and the state health department extended an indoor mask mandate to Feb. 15, but the state's Democratic leaders included no mechanism to enforce it. "I think a lot of people will self-enforce and do the right thing," Gov. Gavin Newsom told reporters last month.

The sentiment seems familiar to Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan. The Republican announced a 30-day state of emergency to fight the omicron variant surge, but it doesn't include the same statewide mask mandate ordered earlier in the pandemic.

"I'm not sure the people that are refusing to wear a mask are going to wear one anyway, and we don't have the ability to enforce it," Hogan said. "So we're just strongly encouraging people to wear the damn mask."

New Jersey has had the second-largest U.S. caseload during this surge, after New York, and Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy asked the legislature to renew his emergency powers so he can continue a mask mandate in schools. But renewed business shutdowns and near universal mask mandates appear to be off the table, and instead of issuing new executive orders, he's urging people to follow public health recommendations.

"Here is what we need everyone to really take to heart — the need to mask up, to get boosted, and to just practice common sense," Murphy said.

Even governors who pushed the hardest for restrictions during earlier outbreaks have settled on appealing for people to take personal responsibility. Oregon removed its mask requirement from outdoor crowds in November and hasn't reinstated it. Schools and businesses remain open, and Democratic Gov. Kate Brown has urged booster shots as the best way to combat the virus.

"Our focus right now is on making sure our most vulnerable Oregonians have access to booster shots and ensuring we are ready to support our hospital systems," the governor's spokesman, Charles Boyle, said in an email.

Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine, a Republican, was one of the first to close schools in March 2020 as the virus began spreading rapidly through the U.S. But his desire to take aggressive measures has waned, and since the summer he has focused on voluntary mask wearing and vaccinations.

"We don't have the practical ability to really put on a statewide mask order at this point," DeWine said in late December. "I don't think it's appropriate at this point. We have the vaccine. We have the tools."

Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte, while listing his accomplishments during his first year in office Tuesday, said that through previous COVID-19 surges there was little differences in case counts between states run by Republicans that tended to take fewer precautions and those run by Democrats, which generally took stronger actions.

"Heavy-handed, one-size-fits-all mandates don't work," Gianforte said.

In North Carolina, Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper is still leaving it to local governments to decide whether masks should be required in stores or government buildings rather than ordering them statewide, and encouraging but not requiring local school boards to retain mask mandates for students and staff.

Cooper has taken this tack even though the Republican-controlled legislature has lacked veto-proof majorities necessary to overturn his previous statewide COVID-19 mandates.

"We're going to have to learn how to live with it, and continue to keep our kids in school and our businesses open and all of our government operations running effectively and efficiently," Cooper said.

Pandemic fatigue among the public has led Utah Gov. Spencer Cox to suggest COVID-19 and its variants could be treated more like the flu or any other contagious disease. The focus, he said, should be on reducing the effects of the illness through vaccines and medicines, not government mandates. On Thursday, he encouraged people to wear masks as cases hit record levels and the state was running out of monoclonal antibody treatments, but stopped short of calling for new rules.

"We have lots of illnesses that spread very quickly," he said last month. "But if they're not filling up hospitals and killing people, you know, we go about our business. If they are filling up hospitals and killing people, then obviously it becomes much more concerning."

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Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Jan. 8, the eighth day of 2022. There are 357 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 8, 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson, in his State of the Union address, declared an "unconditional war on poverty in America."

On this date:

In 1815, the last major engagement of the War of 1812 came to an end as U.S. forces defeated the British in the Battle of New Orleans, not having received word of the signing of a peace treaty.

In 1867, the U.S. House of Representatives joined the Senate in overriding President Andrew Johnson's veto of the District of Columbia Suffrage Bill, giving Black men in the nation's capital the right to vote.

In 1912, the African National Congress was founded in Bloemfontein, South Africa.

In 1918, President Woodrow Wilson outlined his Fourteen Points for lasting peace after World War I. Mississippi became the first state to ratify the 18th Amendment to the Constitution, which established Prohibition.

In 1935, rock-and-roll legend Elvis Presley was born in Tupelo, Mississippi.

In 1982, American Telephone and Telegraph settled the Justice Department's antitrust lawsuit against it by agreeing to divest itself of the 22 Bell System companies.

In 1994, Tonya Harding won the ladies' U.S. Figure Skating Championship in Detroit, a day after Nancy Kerrigan dropped out because of the clubbing attack that had injured her right knee. (The U.S. Figure Skating Association later stripped Harding of the title.)

In 1998, Ramzi Yousef (RAHM'-zee YOO'-sef), the mastermind of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, was sentenced in New York to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

In 2008, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton powered to victory in New Hampshire's 2008 Democratic primary in a startling upset, defeating Sen. Barack Obama and resurrecting her bid for the White House; Sen. John McCain defeated his Republican rivals to move back into contention for the GOP nomination.

In 2011, U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., was shot and critically wounded when a gunman opened fire as the congresswoman met with constituents in Tucson; six people were killed, 12 others also injured. (Gunman Jared Lee Loughner (LAWF'-nur) was sentenced in Nov. 2012 to seven consecutive life sentences, plus 140 years.)

In 2016, Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman, the world's most-wanted drug lord, was captured for a third time in a daring raid by Mexican marines, six months after walking through a tunnel to freedom from a maximum security prison.

In 2020, Iran struck back at the United States for killing Iran's top military commander, firing missiles at two Iraqi military bases housing American troops; more than 100 U.S. service members were diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries after the attack. As Iran braced for a counterattack, the country's Revolutionary Guard shot down a Ukrainian jetliner after apparently mistaking it for a missile; all 176 people on board were killed, including 82 Iranians and more than 50 Canadians.

Ten years ago: Bells rang in Tucson, Arizona, as residents paused to remember the six people killed in the shooting rampage a year earlier that left U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords severely wounded; Giffords led a crowd in the Pledge of Allegiance during an evening vigil. Mitt Romney's Republican presidential rivals piled on the criticism during a morning debate, two days before the New Hampshire primary.

Five years ago: A Palestinian truck driver rammed his vehicle into a crowd of Israeli soldiers, killing at least four people in one of the deadliest attacks of a wave of violence lasting more than a year. (The driver was shot dead.) "La La Land" won seven Golden Globe Awards, including best motion picture, comedy or musical, while "Moonlight" was recognized as best movie drama; Meryl Streep, accepting a lifetime achievement award, criticized President-elect Donald Trump without mentioning him by name.

One year ago: President Donald Trump said he would skip President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration; Biden responded that he was just fine with that, calling it "one of the few things we have ever agreed on." Twit-

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ter said it was banning Trump from its platform, citing "risk of further incitement of violence." Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska became the first Republican senator to call for Trump's resignation. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said she had spoken to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff about preventing Trump from initiating military actions or a nuclear strike; she said the situation of "this unhinged President could not be more dangerous." Adam Johnson, accused of making off with Pelosi's lectern during the chaos at the U.S. Capitol, was arrested on a federal warrant in Florida. A video tribute to Alex Trebek closed the day's episode of "Jeopardy," the last one Trebek taped before pancreatic cancer claimed his life in November.

Today's Birthdays: Actor-comedian Larry Storch is 99. Former CBS newsman Charles Osgood is 89. Singer Shirley Bassey is 85. Game show host Bob Eubanks is 84. Country-gospel singer Cristy Lane is 82. R&B singer Jerome Anthony Gourdin (Little Anthony and the Imperials) is 81. Actor Yvette Mimieux is 80. Singer Juanita Cowart Motley (The Marvelettes) is 78. Actor Kathleen Noone is 77. Rock musician Robby Krieger (The Doors) is 76. Movie director John McTiernan is 71. Actor Harriet Sansom Harris is 67. Actor Ron Cephas Jones is 65. Former Education Secretary Betsy DeVos is 64. Singer-songwriter Ron Sexsmith is 58. Actor Michelle Forbes is 57. Actor Maria Pitillo (pih-TIHL'-loh) is 56. Singer R. Kelly is 55. Actor/producer Ami Dolenz is 53. Reggae singer Sean Paul is 49. Actor Donnell Turner is 49. Country singer Tift Merritt is 47. Actor-rock singer Jenny Lewis is 46. Actor Amber Benson is 45. Actor Scott Whyte is 44. Singer-songwriter Erin McCarley is 43. Actor Sarah Polley is 43. Actor Rachel Nichols is 42. Actor Gaby (GAB'-ee) Hoffman is 40. Rock musician Disashi Lumumbo-Kasongo (dih-SAH'-shee LUHM'-uhm-boh kuh-SAHN'-goh) (Gym Class Heroes) is 39. Actor Cynthia Erivo is 35. Actor Freddie Stroma is 35.