

# Groton Daily Independent

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## UpComing Events

**Postponed to February 7th:** Girls' Basketball hosts Aberdeen Roncalli. C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and then varsity.

### Saturday, Jan. 15

Silver Bowl Debate at Sioux Falls

Today on [GDILIVE.COM](https://www.gdilive.com): Boys Basketball Classic at Redfield. Groton Area vs. Deubrook at 7:30

10 a.m.: Junior High boys basketball jamboree in Groton with Aberdeen Christian, Britton-Hecla and Webster Area.

10 a.m.: Wrestling at Potter County (Gettysburg) Invitational.

### Monday, Jan. 17

Junior High Wrestling Invitational at Redfield

Girls basketball hosting Langford Area (JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity)

### Tuesday, Jan. 18

Wrestling Tournament at Hamlin

Junior High Boys Basketball at Mobridge. 7th at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game.

Junior High Wrestling Invitational at the Aberdeen Civic Arena, 4 p.m.

The Junior High boys basketball game in Groton scheduled for Jan. 18th is cancelled.

City Council Meeting at 7 p.m.

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



### Thursday, Jan. 20

Girls Basketball at Clark/Willow Lake. JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity.

### Friday, Jan. 21

Debate Speech Fiesta at Watertown High School  
Boys Basketball hosting Clark/Willow Lake. 7th grade at 4 p.m., 8th grade at 5 p.m., JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity game.

Wrestling Dual at Deuel High School, 6 p.m.

## Surplus Van for Sale

The Groton Area School District is accepting sealed bids for the sale of a 1994 Chevy Beauville Van with liftgate. For more information or to see the vehicle, contact Transportation Director, Damian Bahr, at 605-397-8117 or [Damian.Bahr@k12.sd.us](mailto:Damian.Bahr@k12.sd.us). Bids can be dropped off at the high school office (502 N 2nd Street, Groton, SD) or mailed to Groton Area School District PO Box 410, Groton, SD 57445. Envelopes should be marked "Van Bid." Bids will be opened on Friday, January 28 at 2:00 PM. (0112.0119)

## 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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**The steam from Poet west of Groton creates a hovering cloud over the facility.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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## Tuff Tigers grapple at Barnett Center

On Thursday, January 13th the Groton Tuff Tigers youth wrestling club dueled the Aberdeen Youth Wrestling Club in the Battle at the Barnett. It was a great night where the kids experienced wrestling in a dual format on the NSU mat under the lights before the NSU/Augustana dual.

**Front Row - Kroy Kahli, Dayton Gonsoir, Bennett Iverson, Rae Flihs, Micah Krause, Hank Flihs, and Henry Pharis.**

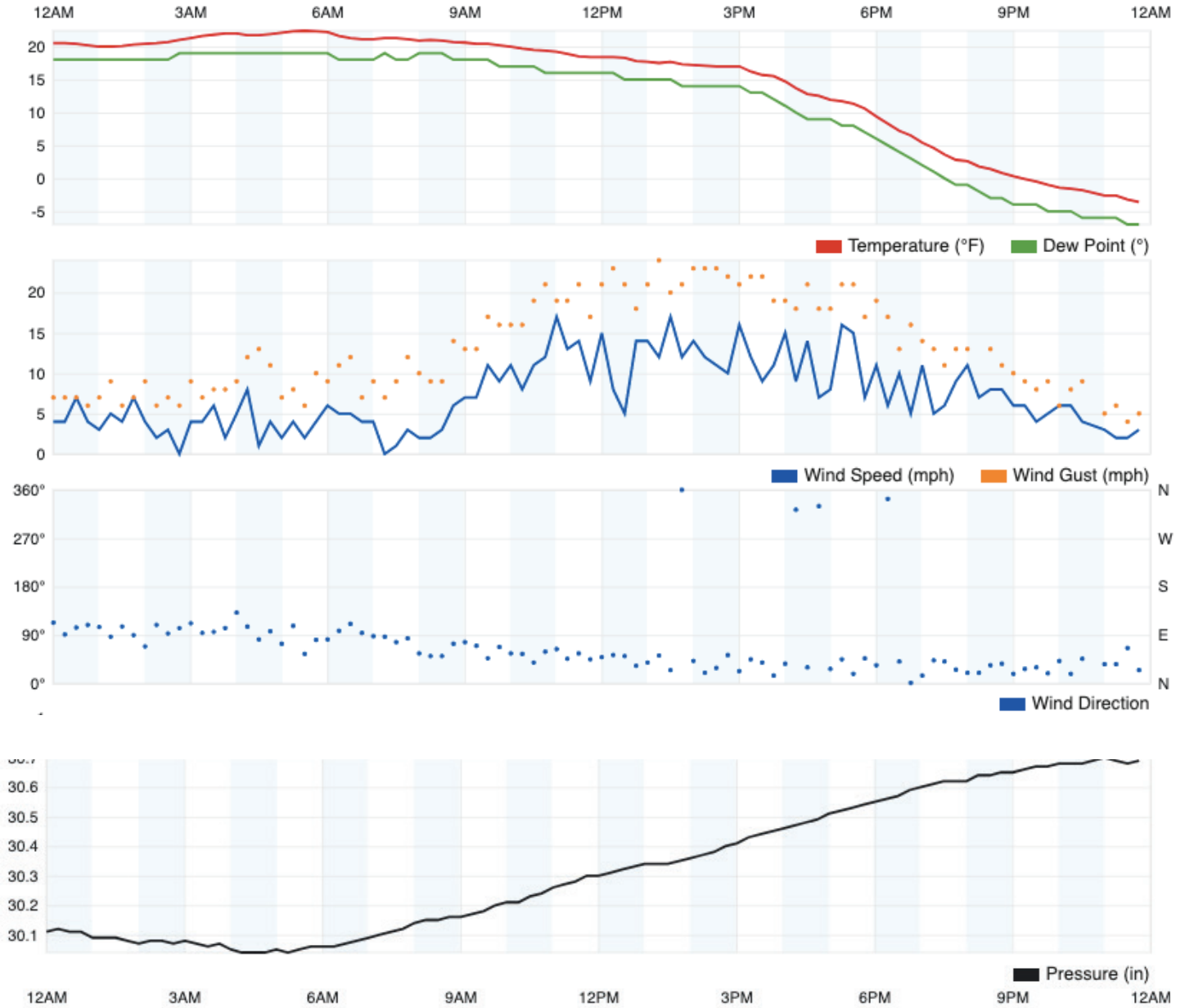
**Back Row - Coach Pat Krause, Preston Hinkelman, Keegan Kucker, Bentley Ehersmann, Hank Hill, Keenan Moody, Wyatt Hagen, Coach Chris Kucker, Kyson Kucker, Parker Zoellner.**

(Courtesy Photo)

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



# Broton Daily Independent

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Today



Mostly Sunny  
then Mostly  
Sunny and  
Breezy

High: 21 °F

Tonight



Patchy  
Blowing Snow  
and Breezy

Low: 13 °F

Sunday



Mostly Cloudy  
then Patchy  
Blowing Snow  
and Breezy

High: 36 °F

Sunday  
Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 19 °F

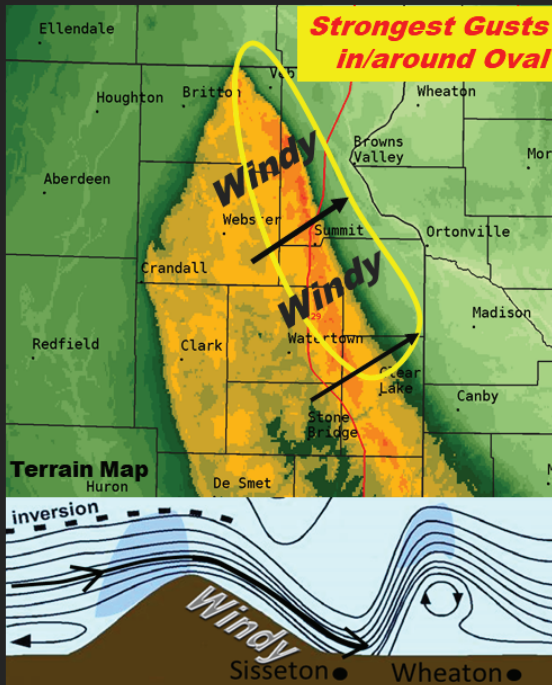
M.L.King  
Day



Mostly Cloudy

High: 29 °F

## Windy with Blowing Snow Tonight – Sunday Morning



### What/Where?

Parts of the Prairie Coteau will see areas of blowing snow. Gusts are expected to peak at **35-45 mph** - promoting the potential for blowing/drifting snow for portions of:

Marshall, Roberts, Grant, and Day counties.

### When?

Winds/Blowing Snow should develop later this evening and into the early morning hours on Sunday, or between 6 pm and 3 am.

### Impacts

Blowing snow will cause reduced visibilities, especially on the eastern ridge of the Prairie Coteau. If you have travel plans tonight, especially along I-29 near Summit, please use caution as visibilities may rapidly decrease in locations receiving blowing snow.

 NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE  
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Updated: 1/15/2022 5:21 AM

Today will feature increasing southerly winds, which could cause patchy blowing snow where recent snowfall occurred. Stronger winds are expected tonight, especially on the eastern ridge of the Prairie Coteau in northeastern South Dakota. Wind gusts of 35 to 45 mph will promote blowing and drifting snow tonight into the early morning hours on Sunday.



## Safe Snow Shoveling

- ❄️ **Take it Slow!**
- ❄️ **Push Snow, Don't "Lift" It**
- ❄️ **Lift With Your Legs**
- ❄️ **Drink Plenty of Fluids**
- ❄️ **Wear Good Boots and Gloves**
- ❄️ **Dress in Layers**
- ❄️ **Take Frequent Breaks**



**NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE**  
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

**Here's some snow shoveling safety tips.**

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## Today in Weather History

January 15, 1982: Snowfall amounts of one to four inches and powerful northwest winds of 35 to 45 mph with gusts to 60 mph caused blizzard conditions with widespread drifting across much of South Dakota and Minnesota from the early morning of the 15th to mid-afternoon on the 16th. Wind chills were lowered to 50 to 80 degrees below zero, and visibilities were near zero across most areas. One death was attributed to exposure. There were numerous weather-related accidents. Some of the major accidents included; a truck blown off Interstate 90 near Murdo, injuring the driver, a truck blown off Highway 281, turned upside down in a ditch, and a truck slamming into a bridge on Interstate 90 near Murdo. The extreme cold killed numerous fruit trees at a nursery in Watertown.

January 15, 1985: Heavy snow fell in central and south-central South Dakota from the early evening of the 15th to around noon on the 16th, with areas around Pierre receiving up to 18 inches. Generally, 5 to 10 inches fell with numerous minor traffic accidents reported. Interstate 90 had a no travel advisory in a 95-mile stretch from Kimball to Murdo until the afternoon of the 16th due to low visibility and heavy drifting. Also, many schools and businesses were closed. Some snowfall amounts included 4 inches at Kennebec, 6 inches at Murdo, and 10 inches at Pierre.

January 15, 2009: An Arctic high pressure settled in on the morning of the 15th, bringing the region's coldest temperatures in many years. The combination of a fresh and deep snowpack, clear skies, and light winds allowed temperatures to fall to record levels at many locations on the 15th. Daytime highs remained well below zero across the area. This was one of the coldest days that most areas experienced since the early 1970s. The records were broken by 1 to as much as 7 degrees.

1852: In 1852, the long, cold winter froze the Susquehanna River in Maryland to a depth of 2 to 3 feet, preventing all ferry service. Railroad officials overcame this perplexing situation by laying tracks across the ice, with trestles for either bank's inclines. During the several weeks from January 15 to February 29, approximately 1,300 cars with a total weight of 10,000 tons were hauled across the river from Havre de Grace, Maryland, to Perryville, Maryland.

1932 - Up to two inches of snow whitened the Los Angeles basin of California. The Los Angeles Civic Center reported an inch of snow, and even the beaches of Santa Monica were whitened with snow, in what proved to be a record snowstorm for Los Angeles. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1952 - A six day snowstorm was in progress in the western U.S. The storm produced 44 inches of snow at Marlette Lake NV, 52 inches at Sun Valley ID, and 149 inches at Tahoe CA, establishing single storm records for each of those three states. In addition, 24 hour snowfall totals of 22 inches at the University of Nevada, and 26 inches at Arco ID, established records for those two states. The streamliner, 'City of San Francisco' was snowbound in the Sierra Nevada Range, near Donner Summit. (David Ludlum)

1967: The Green Bay Packers beat the Kansas City Chiefs, 35-10, in Super Bowl I at the Memorial Coliseum in Los Angeles. From the weather station at the USC campus in downtown LA, the high temperature was 79 degrees, and the low was 51. There was a light west wind.

1972: In Flint, Michigan, the daytime temperature rose to only -3 degrees. This is the second coldest maximum temperature recorded in the city of Flint since 1921. Detroit's high temperature was zero.

1987 - A powerful storm over the Southern Plateau and the Southern Rockies produced 24 inches of snow at Colorado Springs CO, including 22 inches in 24 hours, a January record. High winds in the southwestern U.S. gusted to 65 mph in the Yosemite Valley of California. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - A small storm over the Atlantic Ocean produced heavy snow along the coast of North Carolina. The five inch total at Wilmington NC was their third highest for any storm in January in 117 years of records. (National Weather Summary)

1989 - A storm in the northwestern U.S. produced up to 14 inches of snow in the Cascade Mountain Range. Light snow in the north central U.S. was just enough to push the snowfall total for January at Fargo ND past their previous all-time monthly record of 30.7 inches.

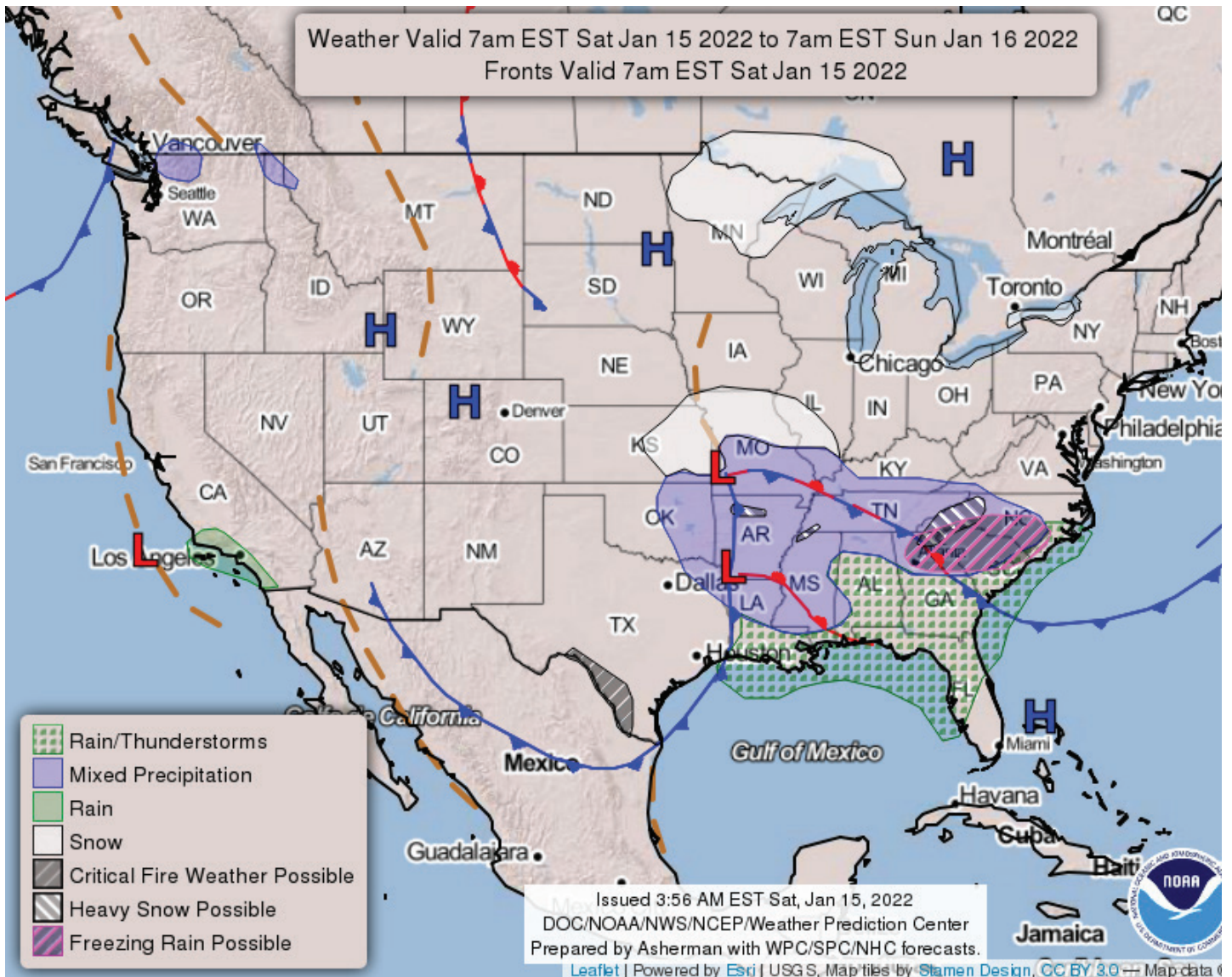
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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

**High Temp: 22 °F at 5:16 AM**  
**Low Temp: -4 °F at 11:58 PM**  
**Wind: 24 mph at 1:08 PM**  
**Precip: 3.5" of Snow. 0.43 in precip.**

**Record High: 48 in 1942**  
**Record Low: -42 in 2009**  
**Average High: 23°F**  
**Average Low: 2°F**  
**Average Precip in Jan.: 0.30**  
**Precip to date in Jan.: 0.43**  
**Average Precip to date: 0.30**  
**Precip Year to Date: 0.43**  
**Sunset Tonight: 5:17:16 PM**  
**Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:05:54 AM**





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## FINDING FAITH

QUESTION: Which has the strongest position in your life - faith or fear?

God never promised Christians freedom from fear or immunity from trouble. Nor are we assured that every day will be filled with sunshine and smiling flowers. But He did promise His presence and power.

Unfortunately, it is our thoughts of terrible things that bring us worry and fear.

We often think about our past: our failures and flaws. Or we think about the future: the "might" happens or the "surely" will occur.

When we confess our shortcomings of the past, God forgives them and forgets them. And if we allow Him, He can and will turn them into triumphs and our setbacks into successes.

But what of the future? We must commit it to our God because He is in control of tomorrow. Fate and circumstances are not! He can turn what we see as obstacles to opportunities and what threatens us into triumphs.

Sir Henry Lauder was an internationally known Scottish entertainer. He visited many hospitals where the wounded were recovering. One day he received news that his son had been killed in combat. He turned to a friend and said, "At a time like this a man can turn to many things that could destroy him. I will turn to Christ."

The Psalmist said, "He will have no fear of bad news; his heart is steadfast, trusting in the Lord. His heart is secure; he will have no fear..."

Prayer: Give us, Lord, the peace of Your presence and the guarantee of Your guidance in uncertain times. Hold our hands and teach us to walk in faith. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: – They will have no fear of bad news; their hearts are steadfast, trusting in the LORD. Their hearts are secure, they will have no fear; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes. Psalm 112: 7-8

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

### Indigenous group to turn ex-booze hotbed into healing center

By RICHARD TWO BULLS South Dakota Public Broadcasting

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Thunder Valley Community Development Corporation wants to change the narrative of the small unincorporated border town of Whiteclay, Nebraska.

The small town's four liquor stores left a decades-long scar on the people of the nearby Pine Ridge Indian Reservation and the land that once belonged to them.

The liquor stores sold 4 million cans of beer annually, mostly taking advantage of the Tribal citizens just two miles to the north. In 2017, the Nebraska Liquor Commission declined to renew the stores' liquor licenses.

It took years of work by a variety of people to make that happen. Whiteclay's booming alcohol industry, which took advantage of existing social issues faced by the people of Pine Ridge, was effectively shut down. Thunder Valley hopes the healing can now begin, South Dakota Public Broadcasting reported.

Thunder Valley CDC started on the Pine Ridge Reservation as a way to connect youth with the Lakota way of life. It continues its efforts to enhance the Oglala Lakota Oyate by offering a variety of initiatives such as food sovereignty, Lakota language education, housing and home ownership, a regenerative community development and more. The corporation recently acquired 48 acres of land in Whiteclay with the intent of building a holistic healing community.

Former Oglala Sioux Tribe attorney general and current Thunder Valley Executive Director Tatewin Means wants to write a new chapter focusing on healing, and changing the narrative around Whiteclay and the connection it had to her people.

"It's tremendous because we're able to be really intentional about building a healing community that is focused on really our relatives that are on the periphery, those that are forgotten or invisible or having a harder time accessing resources," said Means, who is the daughter of the late Russell Means, a prominent member of the American Indian Movement.

The idea of the community is transitional housing or permanent supportive housing with access to resources in one centralized place.

"Right now, we're focused on designing this community, what will it look like? What will be included?" said Means. "And that's going to take a lot of engagement with our community members, with justice-system stakeholders."

This project is one of many initiatives that Thunder Valley is doing to help tribal citizens reclaim their identity.

"Reclaiming our identity as Lakota people, that's a part of liberation, right? That's a part of freedom," said Means. "And so eliminating those messages of colonialism that have bound us for so many generations, and so how do you do that? How do you begin that process of decolonizing?"

Healing is a first step in that liberation process, according to Means.

"We can't hope and dream and think and act like Lakota again if we are still holding on to traumas, if we're still holding on to colonial mindsets," said Means. "We're finding our way through it just as everyone else is, but being open to that and making ourselves vulnerable to that, because it's scary to truly think about healing for ourselves. That takes a lot of courage."

Means hopes that someday there can be a holistic healing community in each of Pine Ridge's nine districts that's intentional and specific to providing pathways for each district's members.

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## Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Herreid/Selby Area 42, Linton/HMB, N.D. 39

Mitchell 45, Pierre 41

New Underwood 56, Timber Lake 50

Philip 69, Colome 20

Rapid City Stevens 74, Campbell County, Wyo. 38

Tri-State, N.D. 69, Waubay/Summit 31

West Central 64, St. Thomas More 42

West River Tournament=

Consolation Semifinal=

Hot Springs 65, Oelrichs 38

Moorcroft, Wyo. 50, Newell 34

Semifinal=

Faith 36, Upton, Wyo. 33

Wall 46, Edgemont 35

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Lisbon, N.D. vs. Sisseton, ppd.

Ponca, Neb. vs. Elk Point-Jefferson, ppd. to Feb 12th.

Santee, Neb. vs. Takini, ppd.

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Belle Fourche 62, Redfield 51

Corsica/Stickney 79, Kimball/White Lake 59

Grant County/Mott-Regent, N.D. 86, Bison 15

Gregory 56, Burke 52

Mott-Regent, N.D. 86, Bison 15

Rapid City Stevens 79, Campbell County, Wyo. 57

Sioux Falls Washington 70, Sioux Falls Jefferson 64

Jones County Invite=

Consolation Semifinal=

Colome 60, Jones County 57, OT

Semifinal=

Lyman 41, Stanley County 28

White River 75, Philip 52

West River Tournament=

Consolation Semifinal=

Moorcroft, Wyo. 53, Newell 24

Wall 66, Edgemont 29

Semifinal=

Faith 62, Upton, Wyo. 61

Hot Springs 47, New Underwood 43

POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

Ponca, Neb. vs. Elk Point-Jefferson, ppd. to Feb 12th.

Santee, Neb. vs. Takini, ppd.

Sisseton vs. Hankinson, N.D., ppd.

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

## **GOP's midterm dilemma: How closely to align with Trump**

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Former President Donald Trump is stepping up his election-year effort to dominate the Republican Party with a Saturday rally in Arizona in which he plans to castigate anyone who dares to question his lie that the 2020 presidential election was stolen, likely including the state's GOP governor, Doug Ducey.

But 2,000 miles to the east in Washington, there are small signs that some Republicans are tiring of the charade. Mike Rounds, the generally unassuming senator from South Dakota, was perhaps the boldest in acknowledging the reality that the election was in fact fair. Instead of being shunned, he was supported by his GOP colleagues, including Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell. Rounds later said the party needed to get "louder" in telling voters the truth about the 2020 campaign.

Meanwhile, top Republicans in Washington have engaged in a behind-the-scenes effort to encourage Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan, one of Trump's most vocal antagonists in the party, to run for a Senate seat. And on Saturday, Glenn Youngkin will become the first Republican since 2010 to be sworn in as Virginia's governor after running a campaign that kept Trump at arm's length.

Less than two months before the 2022 primary season begins, Trump remains the most popular figure among the voters who will decide which Republicans advance to the fall general election. But the recent dynamics bring new clarity to the debate that will likely animate the GOP all year: how closely GOP candidates should align themselves with Trump and his election lie.

"I was very encouraged by the response from a number of different senators supportive of Sen. Rounds," said former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, who has been a rare Republican urging the party to move on from Trump and his election obsession.

There is no evidence to support Trump's claims that the election was stolen. Elections officials and his own attorney general rejected the notion. Trump's arguments have also been roundly rejected by the courts, including judges appointed by the former president.

Still, dissent from Trump's election lie within the GOP remains rare. From Ohio to Georgia and Arizona, candidates running for Senate, governor and attorney general have fully embraced Trump's falsehoods as they have tried to win over his endorsement, deflect his fury or win over his base.

In the short term, such positioning may help Republican candidates come out on top in primary fields that are often crowded. But there are concerns that it could hurt the party in the fall, especially among suburban voters who have become increasingly decisive in recent campaigns. The further to the right that Republicans go now, the easier it could become for their Democratic rivals to portray them as extreme in a general election.

And any time candidates spend looking backward is time not spent attacking President Joe Biden, who is seen as particularly vulnerable amid rising inflation and coronavirus cases.

"It's one of those issues that's quintessentially popular in a primary and unpopular in a general," said Chris DeRose, a Republican attorney and former clerk of the superior court in Arizona's Maricopa County.

He said candidates, who often privately acknowledge the election was fair, were clearly courting the former president by expressing skepticism about the 2020 election.

"Donald Trump's obviously the most sought-after endorsement among Republican candidates," he said. "That can make all the difference in a Republican primary."

John Shimkus, a Republican and former Illinois congressman, said it was easy for "armchair quarterbacks" who aren't on the ballot to judge candidates doing what they can to win their primaries.

"All the races are going to be fought by Trump and highlighted on Fox. So these candidates have to be very, very careful. They have to win the primary to win the general," he said.

The risk, however, is clear in Arizona's Senate race. In a year favoring Republicans, the state should be a relatively attainable pickup and some in the party are eager for Ducey to enter the race against Democratic incumbent Mark Kelly. But Trump's repeated attacks on Ducey, who has refused to back election conspiracies, could make it hard for him to succeed in a GOP primary.

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Ahead of his trip, Trump issued a statement that he would never endorse Ducey.

Whichever Republican emerges on top in Arizona and other critical races will have to convince voters that they should participate in an election system Trump has spent years deriding as rigged.

Many Republicans still blame Trump for the party's loss of Georgia's two Senate runoff elections in 2021, arguing he depressed turnout by insisting the election would be rigged, denying them control of the Senate. (Trump has argued that further investigation is the only way to instill confidence in future elections.)

"Trump still has this outsized voice and influence and too many candidates fear his wrath," said Charlie Dent, a former Republican congressman from Pennsylvania and Trump critic. "We know Donald Trump will use his megaphone to condemn those who don't buy his lies and his false narrative on the 2020 election. So these candidates are put in bind: If they tell the truth, they run the risk of losing their primaries and incurring the wrath of Trump, and if they acquiesce and go along with this nonissue, they run the risk of alienating a lot of voters."

Still, DeRose said he has no concern that the issue will depress turnout, despite what happened in Georgia.

"The Republican base is quite enthusiastic," he said, predicting turnout on par with 2010, when Republicans made historic gains in the House. With soaring inflation, ongoing criticism over Biden's pullout from Afghanistan, he said, "Things aren't going well in this country and I think you're going to see this enormous blowback."

Others disagreed. Barbara Comstock, a Trump critic and former GOP congresswoman from Virginia, warned Republicans risked nominating fringe candidates who would go on to lose in the general.

"Republicans feel like they're gong to win no matter whose on the ticket. And I don't agree with that thesis," she said, pointing to Ohio, where Senate candidates have been trying to desperately out-Trump one another. "I think you really are taking a chance in blowing reliable races."

Nonetheless, Trump is expected to keep hammering the issue on Saturday in Florence, Arizona, a Republican stronghold about 70 miles southeast of Phoenix. It's the first of what aides say will be a brisker pace of Trump events in the coming months. Trump on Friday announced another rally later in January in Texas, where the March 1 primary formally ushers in the midterm campaign.

## SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

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

Mega Millions

05-08-13-22-48, Mega Ball: 25, Megaplier: 2

(five, eight, thirteen, twenty-two, forty-eight; Mega Ball: twenty-five; Megaplier: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$325 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$48 million

## Transgender athlete ban, backed by Noem, clears committee

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota legislative committee on Friday approved a bill championed by Gov. Kristi Noem to ban transgender women and girls from participating in school sports leagues that match their gender identity.

With the Republican governor's full-fledged lobbying, the bill received enthusiastic approval in the Republican-dominated Senate State Affairs committee, clearing a legislative hurdle that has been a key roadblock to similar South Dakota bills in the past. It was the first bill the committee took up this year as lawmakers try to fast-track it through the Statehouse.

Every Republican on the committee approved the bill, despite warnings from opponents that it alienates and bullies transgender students and exposes public schools to legal action for a political cause that has not been an issue in South Dakota. Proponents say it protects girls' sports from trans athletes who may

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be bigger, faster and stronger than their peers.

"Passage of this bill would directly hurt children," said Jennifer Phalen, whose transgender daughter aspires to participate in school gymnastics. "It would directly hurt my daughter and take away her freedom to participate in activities with her peers."

"As a parent, I don't really care if she becomes an elite athlete, but I want her to have the experiences of being on a team," she told the committee in an emotional testimony.

If the bill passes the Legislature, South Dakota could be the 10th Republican-dominated state to adopt such a ban on transgender women or girls. In two of those states — Idaho and West Virginia — the laws have been halted by federal judges. The U.S. Department of Justice has challenged bans in other states, slamming them as violations of federal law.

But lawmakers have used as ammunition the Pennsylvania case of a 22-year-old transgender woman who has had a dominant year swimming for the University of Pennsylvania, as proof that trans athletes possess an unfair advantage over their competition.

"Allowing males to compete destroys fair competition and athletic opportunities for girls," Rachel Oglesby, the governor's policy advisor, told the committee. "Similarly gifted and trained males will always have physical advantages over females."

The high school activities association asserted that it already has a policy in place that ensures fair competition. The schools evaluate applications from transgender athletes on a case-by-case basis and have only once allowed a trans girl to play in a girls' league. She did not spoil the competition, the athletics association has said.

Groups representing public schools said politicians are forcing them to choose between violating state law or federal policy. The Associated School Boards warned that schools could lose federal funds if an investigation from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found them to have violated students' rights.

"This particular bill does nothing, does absolutely nothing as far as helping young people," said Dianna Miller, representing South Dakota's largest school districts. "What it is is discriminatory, unfair, and it's not necessary."

In an acknowledgment that schools were being put at legal risk, the governor's office amended the bill to stipulate that the state would provide legal representation and pay the costs of any lawsuits. Mark Miller, the governor's chief of staff, insisted that the proposed law complied with the Constitution, that other states had successfully implemented similar laws and the state would prevail in court if sued.

Noem last year shied away from signing a similar bill, issuing a "style and form veto" and arguing that it was flawed because it put the state at risk of litigation and retribution from the NCAA.

But this year, she seized on the momentum of a cause taking hold among Republicans and trumpeted her support for "protecting fairness in women's sports" as she tries to rehabilitate her standing with social conservatives.

Noem launched a campaign ad this week that claimed she "never backed down" on the issue. And if there was any doubt that her political ambitions lie beyond South Dakota — the state where she is running for reelection and where the proposed law would take effect — the ad is running on channels nationwide.

That's led critics to decry the bill as nothing more than propaganda.

"This isn't about an issue that's really happening in South Dakota," said Roger Tellinghuisen, representing the Human Rights Campaign, an organization that advocates for LGBTQ people. "It's a political statement — that's all it is."

Noem warming to the issue shows the growing clout of social conservatives in the GOP and their ability to cajole politicians into supporting legislation that discriminates against LGBTQ people.

Jon Schweppe, the director of policy at the social conservative group, American Principles Project, praised Noem's bill after last year slamming her for effectively killing the legislation.

"To see her now coming out with a stronger bill, to see her championing this issue and making it her priority, we haven't really seen anything like that before with Republicans," he said. "I think it's a significant



moment.”

## Sioux Falls man charged with stealing \$12K worth of tools

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A Sioux Falls man has been charged with stealing \$12,000 worth of power tools over a span of months.

The Argus Leader reported Friday that court documents state the 34-year-old man made a series of stops at Runnings between March and June of 2021.

An employee helped him order numerous Stihl brand tools and gave him tickets to hand over at the register. The man skipped the register and drove to the loading dock where he picked up the tools.

The store manager tried to contact the man about the tools but he denied taking any of them. The man faces two counts of grand theft.

## Heavy snow in Midwest slows travel, closes scores of schools

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Heavy snow spread Friday across a large swath of the Midwest, where travel conditions deteriorated and scores of schools closed or moved to online instruction.

The National Weather Service issued a winter storm warning for parts of Minnesota, the Dakotas, Iowa and Illinois, where forecasters were expecting up to 10 inches (24 centimeters) of fresh snow.

“This snow will combine with gusty winds to produce slippery, snow covered roads and significantly reduced visibility,” the Weather Service said on Twitter. “Travel will likely become hazardous to dangerous at times.”

The fast-moving storm may make travel difficult across parts of the Northern Plains and Upper Midwest into the Mid-Mississippi Valley through Saturday morning, forecasters said.

Several southern states along with portions of the Northeast were bracing for the possibility of snow and ice over the weekend.

In the Midwest, Southwest Airlines warned of possible flight cancellations, diversions and delays Friday and Saturday at airports in St. Louis; the Twin Cities; Kansas City, Missouri; Des Moines, Iowa; and Omaha, Nebraska.

“The duration of snowfall is likely to be from 14 to 20 hours in most locations, which should allow for widespread accumulation of over 4 inches and some locations exceeding 8 or more inches,” the weather service in Des Moines said.

Motorists traveling on Interstate 94 near Bismarck and Mandan, North Dakota, reported that the road had packed ice and snow, with driving speeds Friday morning down to about 45 mph (72 kph) or slower.

## GOP governors slam COVID limits while setting policy agendas

By ANDREW DeMILLO Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (AP) — As the omicron variant rages and fills up hospital beds around the country, Republican governors are highlighting their opposition to restrictions that have marked the COVID-19 pandemic even as they seek to move past it and set their agendas for the year.

The state of the state addresses governors are delivering to kick off their states’ legislative sessions are occurring as COVID-19 hospitalizations surge to their highest levels since the pandemic began in 2020 and soaring infections are disrupting seemingly all aspects of life, from schools to air travel.

Republican governors are using the speeches to rail against the Biden administration’s response, and to tout their opposition to mandates and lockdowns they argue didn’t work to stem the virus.

“These unprecedented policies have been as ineffective as they have been destructive,” Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who is eyeing a possible 2024 run for president, said as he took a dig at Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government’s top infectious disease expert. “They are grounded more in blind adherence to Faucian declarations than they are in the constitutional traditions.”

Another potential 2024 GOP presidential hopeful, South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem, vowed to push for

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legislation that she said would protect medical or religious exemptions from vaccine requirements. The U.S. Supreme Court on Thursday blocked the Biden administration's rule requiring workers at large businesses to vaccinate or get tested, but kept in place a similar requirement for most health care workers.

"Unvaccinated Americans are still Americans," Noem said.

In Arizona, Republican Gov. Doug Ducey complained about "COVID-era posturing and politics of some school board bureaucrats."

"There's been too much attention put on masks and not nearly enough placed on math," Ducey said.

The GOP broadsides against virus restrictions come as governors from both parties have shown little appetite for widespread public orders, school closures or business shutdowns. But Democratic governors are highlighting the omicron threat as they seek an infusion of state funds to address the spike in cases.

In California, Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom has asked the Legislature for \$2.7 billion to expand testing and boost hospital staffing as the state copes with a surge of new patients. Things are so urgent, Newsom said, that he wants lawmakers to give him permission to spend \$1.4 billion of that money immediately instead of waiting until the new budget year starts July 1.

"Where are we? Where are we going? And when is this thing behind us now? No one can answer the latter part of that," Newsom said. "We're all humbled by this pandemic."

Another Democrat, New York Gov. Kathy Hochul, has proposed a \$10 billion plan to boost the state's health care workforce by 20% over the next five years, after the sector suffered high burnout rates during the pandemic.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat who won reelection last year, announced he was reinstating a public health emergency he had declared because of the pandemic. Murphy said the order was mostly to continue a mask mandate in schools and daycares. It also preserves a test or vaccination requirement for state workers and health care employees.

"We are all in this together. And we must keep moving forward together," Murphy said. "But try as it may to knock us back and further divide us, one thing is certain. Omicron has not knocked us down."

Democratic Gov. Laura Kelly asked the majority-Republican Legislature in Kansas to keep in place through March orders she has issued that ease state licensing requirements for medical personnel and nursing home workers. She also asked for a freeze on college tuition, arguing it would help students hurt by the pandemic.

"In every corner of our state, ordinary people continue to do extraordinary things," Kelly said. "The Kansas spirit of neighbor helping neighbor has never been stronger."

Even as they rail against vaccine requirements, some Republican governors are still urging holdouts in their state to get vaccinated.

"If you haven't been vaccinated, I encourage, I plead, I beg of you to speak with your doctor and do so," Indiana's Republican Gov. Eric Holcomb said. "I say this, even if you've disagreed with every position I've taken. I want us both to be around to continue those disagreements."

West Virginia Gov. Jim Justice canceled his planned appearance before lawmakers to deliver his state of the state speech after testing positive for COVID-19. But the Republican governor still delivered a written speech read by a clerk.

While highlighting his opposition to vaccine requirements, Justice hailed the state's incentive program that included prizes throughout 2021 to residents who got vaccinated. Justice earlier this month asked the federal government to allow West Virginia to begin offering a fourth dose of the vaccine to certain at-risk residents four months after their first booster shot.

"We will continue to be the light in the dark, until this pandemic is behind us once and for all," Justice said.

## Volcano erupts in Pacific, West Coast under tsunami advisory

By NICK PERRY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — An undersea volcano erupted in spectacular fashion near the Pacific nation of Tonga on Saturday, sending large tsunami waves crashing across the shore and people rushing

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to higher ground. A tsunami advisory was in effect for Hawaii and the U.S. Pacific coast.

There were no immediate reports of injuries or the extent of the damage as communications with the small nation remained cut off hours after the eruption.

In Hawaii, the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center reported waves slamming ashore from half a meter (a foot) in Nawiliwili, Kauai, to 80 centimeters (2.7 feet) in Hanalei.

"We are relieved that there is no reported damage and only minor flooding throughout the islands," the center said.

On Tonga, video posted to social media showed large waves washing ashore in coastal areas, swirling around homes and buildings.

New Zealand's military said it was monitoring the situation and remained on standby, ready to assist if asked.

Satellite images showed a huge eruption, a plume of ash, steam and gas rising like a mushroom above the blue Pacific waters.

The Tonga Meteorological Services said a tsunami warning was declared for all of the archipelago, and data from the Pacific tsunami center showed waves of 80 centimeters (2.7 feet) had been detected.

Residents of American Samoa were alerted of the tsunami warning by local broadcasters as well as church bells that rang territory-wide. An outdoor siren warning system was out of service. Those living along the shoreline quickly moved to higher ground.

As night fell, there were no reports of any damage and the Hawaii-based tsunami center canceled the alert.

Authorities in the nearby island nations of Fiji and Samoa also issued warnings, telling people to avoid the shoreline due to strong currents and dangerous waves. The Japan Meteorological Agency said there may be a slight swelling of the water along the Japanese coasts, but it was not expected to cause any damage.

The Islands Business news site reported that a convoy of police and military troops evacuated Tonga's King Tupou VI from his palace near the shore. He was among the many residents who headed for higher ground.

The explosion of the Hunga Tonga Hunga Ha'apai volcano was the latest in a series of spectacular eruptions.

A Twitter user identified as Dr. Faka'iloatonga Taumoefolau posted video showing waves crashing ashore.

"Can literally hear the volcano eruption, sounds pretty violent," he wrote, adding in a later post: "Raining ash and tiny pebbles, darkness blanketing the sky."

Earlier, the Matangi Tonga news site reported that scientists observed massive explosions, thunder and lightning near the volcano after it started erupting early Friday. Satellite images showed a 5-kilometer (3 mile) -wide plume rising into the air to about 20 kilometers (12 miles).

More than 2,300 kilometers (1,400 miles) away in New Zealand, officials were warning of storm surges from the eruption.

The National Emergency Management Agency said some parts of New Zealand could expect "strong and unusual currents and unpredictable surges at the shore following a large volcanic eruption."

The volcano is located about 64 kilometers (40 miles) north of the capital, Nuku'alofa. Back in late 2014 and early 2015, a series of eruptions in the area created a small new island and disrupted international air travel to the Pacific archipelago for several days.

Tonga is home to about 105,000 people.

## **Biden backers 'not seeing the results' a year into his term**

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Politics Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Just over a year ago, millions of energized young people, women, voters of color and independents joined forces to send Joe Biden to the White House. But 12 months into his presidency, many describe a coalition in crisis.

Leading voices across Biden's diverse political base openly decry the slow pace of progress on key cam-

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campaign promises. The frustration was especially pronounced this past week after Biden's push for voting rights legislation effectively stalled, intensifying concerns in his party that fundamental democratic principles are at risk and reinforcing a broader sense that the president is faltering at a moment of historic consequence.

"People are feeling like they're getting less than they bargained for when they put Biden in office. There's a lot of emotions, and none of them are good," said Quentin Wathum-Ocama, president of the Young Democrats of America. "I don't know if the right word is 'apoplectic' or 'demoralized.' We're down. We're not seeing the results."

The strength of Biden's support will determine whether Democrats maintain threadbare majorities in Congress beyond this year or whether they will cede lawmaking authority to a Republican Party largely controlled by former President Donald Trump. Already, Republicans in several state legislatures have taken advantage of Democratic divisions in Washington to enact far-reaching changes to state election laws, abortion rights and public health measures in line with Trump's wishes.

If Biden cannot unify his party and reinvigorate his political coalition, the GOP at the state and federal levels will almost certainly grow more emboldened, and the red wave that shaped a handful of state elections last year could fundamentally shift the balance of power across America in November's midterm elections.

For now, virtually none of the groups that fueled Biden's 2020 victory are happy.

Young people are frustrated that he hasn't followed through on vows to combat climate change and student debt. Women are worried that his plans to expand family leave, child care and universal pre-K are stalled as abortion rights erode and schools struggle to stay open. Moderates in both parties who once cheered Biden's centrist approach worry that he's moved too far left. And voters of color, like those across Biden's political base, are furious that he hasn't done more to protect their voting rights.

"We mobilized to elect President Biden because he made promises to us," Rep. Cori Bush, D-Mo., told The Associated Press, citing Biden's pledge to address police violence, student loan debt, climate change and voter suppression, among other issues.

"We need transformative change — our very lives depend on it," Bush said. "And because we haven't seen those results yet, we're frustrated — frustrated that despite everything we did to deliver a Democratic White House, Senate and House of Representatives, our needs and our lives are still not being treated as a top priority. That needs to change."

Facing widespread frustration, the White House insists Biden is making significant progress, especially given the circumstances when he took office.

"President Biden entered office with enormous challenges — a once-in-a-generation pandemic, economic crisis and a hollowed-out federal government. In the first year alone, he has delivered progress on his promises," said Cedric Richmond, a senior adviser to the president. He pointed to more than 6 million new jobs, 200 million vaccinated Americans, the most diverse Cabinet in U.S. history and the most federal judges confirmed a president's first year since Richard Nixon.

Richmond also highlighted historic legislative accomplishments Biden signed into law — specifically, a \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief bill that sent \$1,400 checks to most Americans and a subsequent \$1 trillion infrastructure package that will fund public works projects across every state in the nation for several years.

In an interview, Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, a leading voice in the Democratic Party's left wing, described Biden's pandemic relief package as among the most significant pieces of legislation ever enacted to help working people.

"But a lot more work needs to be done," he said.

Like other Biden allies, Sanders directed blame for the president's woes at two Senate Democrats: Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona. They are blocking the president's plan to protect voting rights by refusing to bypass the filibuster, having already derailed Biden's "Build Back Better" package, which calls for investments exceeding \$2 trillion for child care, paid family leave, education and climate change, among other progressive priorities.

"It has been a mistake to have backroom conversations with Manchin and Sinema for the last four months, or five months," Sanders said. "Those conversations have gotten nowhere. But what they have

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done is demoralize tens of millions of Americans.”

But blaming fellow Democrats will do little to improve Biden’s political standing.

According to Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research polling released last month, the president’s approval ratings have been falling among virtually every demographic as the pandemic continues to rage, inflation soars and the majority of his campaign promises go unfulfilled. A series of legal setbacks in recent days stand to make things worse. The Supreme Court on Thursday blocked Biden’s vaccine and testing requirements for big businesses.

About 7 in 10 Black Americans said they approved of Biden in December, compared with roughly 9 in 10 in April. Among Hispanics, support dipped to roughly half from about 7 in 10.

Just half of women approved of Biden last month compared to roughly two-thirds in the spring.

There was a similar drop among younger voters: Roughly half of Americans under 45 approved of the president, down from roughly two-thirds earlier in the year. The decline was similar among those age 45 and older. And among independents, a group that swung decidedly for Biden in 2020, just 40% of those who don’t lean toward a party approved of Biden in December, down from 63% in April.

“Biden is failing us,” said John Paul Mejia, the 19-year-old spokesman for the Sunrise Movement, a national youth organization focused on climate change. “If Biden doesn’t use the time he has left with a Democratic majority in Congress to fight tooth and nail for the promises that he was elected on, he will go down in history as a could-have-been president and ultimately a coward who didn’t stand up for democracy and a habitable planet.”

Christian Nunes, president of the National Organization for Women, said she wants to see more urgency from Biden in protecting women’s priorities.

“In these times, we need somebody who’s going to be a fighter,” she said.

Nunes called on Biden to work harder to protect voting rights and access to abortion, which have been dramatically curtailed in several Republican-led states. A looming Supreme Court decision expected this summer could weaken, or wipe away, the landmark Roe v. Wade precedent that made abortion legal.

“We are in a really dire time right now. We’re seeing so many laws passed that are really challenging peoples’ constitutional rights,” Nunes said. “We need someone who’s going to say we’re not going to tolerate this.”

Charlie Sykes, an anti-Trump Republican who backed Biden in 2020, said the president is also in danger of losing moderate voters in both parties unless he can shift his party’s rhetoric more to the middle when talking about public safety, crime and voting.

“He ran as very much a centrist, center-left candidate, but I think that a lot of moderate swing voters are feeling a little bit left out and wondering where the Joe Biden of 2020 went,” Sykes said.

Having only been in office for a year, Biden may have time to turn things around before the November midterms — especially as Trump reemerges as a more visible player in national politics. In recent years, nothing has unified Democrats more than Trump himself.

Mary Kay Henry, president of the two-million-member Service Employees International Union, said her members want more from Washington, but they would be out in full force this year to remind voters of the work Biden has already done to address concerns about the pandemic and economic security.

“President Biden is not the obstacle,” Henry said, pointing to the “intransigent Republican caucus in the Senate” who have unified against Biden’s Build Back Better package and his plan to protect voting rights. “We’re going to have this president’s back.”

Not everyone is as willing to commit to the Democratic president.

“We need to see Joe Biden the fighter. That’s kind of where I’m at,” said Wathum-Ocama, the Young Democrats of America president. “The unifier is appropriate at times. But we need somebody who’s going to fight for our issues if we’re going to come out and turn out for him in ‘22.”

## Legal risks in sedition conspiracy case against Oath Keepers

By JACQUES BILLEAUD and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

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The seditious conspiracy case against members and associates of the far-right Oath Keepers militia group marks the boldest attempt so far by the government to prosecute those who attacked the U.S. Capitol, but invoking the rarely used charge carries considerable risks.

Still, legal experts who have reviewed the indictment unsealed this past week against Oath Keepers founder Stewart Rhodes and 10 others said prosecutors stand a good chance of winning convictions on allegations that the defendants were working together to use force to stop the peaceful transfer of presidential power.

The Civil War-era charge is hard to prove, and scholars say overzealousness in applying it, going back centuries, also discredited its use.

The experts who examined the indictment against the 11 Oath Keepers members and associates said the government's case is supported by detailed allegations that participants in the plot discussed their plans in encrypted chats, traveled to the nation's capital from across the country, organized into teams, used military tactics, stashed weapons outside Washington in case they felt they were needed and communicated with each other during the riot on Jan. 6, 2021.

"This is as good a case as you could bring," said Carlton Larson, a law professor at the University of California at Davis who is an expert in treason law.

In the weeks leading up to the insurrection, the indictment alleged, Oath Keepers discussed trying to overturn the results of the 2020 White House election, preparing for a siege by purchasing weapons and setting up battle plans.

"We aren't getting through this without a civil war. Too late for that. Prepare your mind, body, spirit," the indictment quoted Rhodes as writing in a November 2020 chat after President Donald Trump was projected to have been defeated by Democrat Joe Biden.

Authorities say several members of the Oath Keepers shouldered their way through the crowd on Jan. 6 and into the Capitol in a military-style stack formation. Group members are accused of setting up "quick reaction force" teams that stationed weapons outside of Washington and were prepared to deliver arms to group members and associates if they believed the need arose.

In late December 2020, Rhodes wrote in a chat that the only chance Trump had to succeed in overturning the election outcome was if he and the Oath Keepers frightened members of Congress and "convince them it will be torches and pitchforks time is (sic) they don't do the right thing. But I don't think they will listen," according to the indictment.

Rhodes did not enter the Capitol building on Jan. 6, but authorities say he was communicating with Oath Keepers outside on the Capitol grounds. Phillip Linder, one of the lawyers representing Rhodes, said his client intends to fight the charges. Rhodes remains jailed in Texas and has a detention hearing this coming Thursday.

"We believe he is not a flight risk, not a danger and should be released," Linder said after Rhodes' first court appearance on Friday.

Rhodes has said in interviews with right-wing hosts that there was no plan to storm the Capitol and that the members who did so went rogue. But he has continued to push the lie that the 2020 election was stolen.

University at Albany assistant professor Sam Jackson, author of the book "Oath Keepers: Patriotism and the Edge of Violence in a Right-Wing Antigovernment Group," said it wasn't clear to him before the indictment whether Rhodes or Oath Keepers leaders were involved in a plot to attack the Capitol.

"Now it's clear that that is the case," he said. "It's also clear that national leadership was not solely focused on some anticipated or perceived threat from antifa or other opponents of Donald Trump. But they really were thinking about, 'OK, how do we prevent the certification of the Electoral College vote if members of Congress don't see things the way that we do?'"

The last sedition case was filed in 2010 against members of a Michigan militia. Two years later, they were acquitted by a judge who said their hateful diatribes didn't prove they ever had detailed plans for a rebellion.

Lawyer William Swor, who represented Hutaree militia leader David Stone, said prosecutors in the decade-old case failed to prove that group members were "more than just talking" and were "actively planning

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to oppose the government.”

“It’s a substantial burden on the government and it is a substantial risk,” he said. “If the government fails to meet its burden, they’re out on the street.”

Among the last successful convictions for seditious conspiracy stemmed from the storming of the Capitol in 1954 when four Puerto Rican nationalists opened fire on the House floor, wounding five representatives.

Mark Pitcavage, a senior research fellow at the Anti-Defamation League’s Center on Extremism, said the collapse of earlier sedition cases against far-right extremists suggests that judges and juries may have difficulty believing that a small group of people “seriously thought they could take on the entire U.S. government.”

Pitcavage said prosecutors in the case against Oath Keepers appear to have a “tremendous amount of evidence about planning beforehand” as well as compelling video evidence of the group members storming the Capitol.

“That sort of evidence was largely missing from all these previous cases,” Pitcavage said. “Sedition cases, in my opinion, are always inherently risky to a certain degree. But I do think prosecutors in this case have a far stronger case to make for the jury than some of their predecessors did.”

If convicted of seditious conspiracy, the defendants could face a maximum prison sentence of 20 years, compared with five for the other conspiracy charges.

In all, more than 700 people have been arrested and charged with federal crimes in the Jan. 6 riot. More than 70 defendants remain detained on riot charges. At least 186 defendants have pleaded guilty to riot-related charges as of Thursday.

## Fire near New Jersey chemical plant spreads thick smoke

Associated Press undefined

PASSAIC, N.J. (AP) — A large chemical fire burned through the night and into Saturday morning in northern New Jersey, its smoke so heavy that it was detected on weather radar and seen and smelled in neighboring New York City.

The fire at Majestic Industries and the Qualco chemical plant in Passaic spread to multiple buildings and threatened their collapse, officials said.

Water from firefighter hoses froze in cold weather and made the environment slick and hazardous for responders.

“There have been bad fires, but this is the worst that I’ve ever seen,” Passaic Mayor Hector Lora told NorthJersey.com.

Security guard Justin Johnson told WCBS-TV he was working alone, checking water pressure, when he noticed smoke coming from a smokestack-like tower. He wasn’t sure what to make of it but called the fire department as alarms went off.

The fire was in buildings housing plastics, pallets and chlorine, officials said, but Fire Chief Patrick Trentacost said the part where most of the chlorine was stored appeared to under control.

Residents near the blaze were advised to close their windows but were not required to evacuate, with officials saying air quality remained acceptable and would continue to be monitored.

Some residents fled nonetheless.

“It’s worrying. You don’t know what’s going to happen,” Joel Heredia told WBCS-TV.

One firefighter was taken to a hospital after being struck by debris, officials said. He was doing well, though other firefighters slipped and fell in the slick conditions, officials said.

## A digital divide haunts schools adapting to virus hurdles

By ANNIE MA Associated Press

When April Schneider’s children returned to in-person classrooms this year, she thought they were leaving behind the struggles from more than a year of remote learning. No more problems with borrowed tablets.

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No more days of missed lessons because her kids couldn't connect to their virtual schooling.

But coronavirus cases in her children's New York City classrooms, and the subsequent quarantines, sent her kids back to learning from home. Without personal devices for each child, Schneider said they were largely left to do nothing while stuck at home.

"So there you go again, with no computer, and you're back to square one as if COVID just begun all over again in a smaller form," Schneider said.

As more families pivot back to remote learning amid quarantines and school closures, reliable, consistent access to devices and home internet remains elusive for many students who need them to keep up with their schoolwork. Home internet access for students has improved since the onset of the pandemic with help from philanthropy, federal relief funding and other efforts — but obstacles linger, including a lack of devices, slow speeds and financial hurdles.

Concerns around the digital divide have shifted toward families that are "underconnected" and able to access the internet only sporadically, said Vikki Katz, a communication professor at Rutgers University.

"It's about whether or not you can withstand the disruptions of these quick pivots in ways that don't derail your learning," she said.

In two studies, one conducted in 2015 and another in 2021, Katz and other researchers surveyed low-income families with young children. While rates of home internet access and computer ownership are up significantly, the proportion of lower-income families whose internet access is unreliable or insufficient remained roughly the same.

A year into the pandemic, more than half the families Katz surveyed reported that their children's ability to tune into online classes had been disrupted in some way.

Racial and income divides persist in home internet access, according to data from the Pew Research Center. One survey conducted in April of 2020 found that during the initial school closures, 59% of lower-income families faced digital barriers, such as having to log on from a smartphone, not having a device or having to use a public network because their home network was not reliable enough.

About 34% of households making less than \$30,000 reported having trouble paying for their home internet bill, as did 25% of those making between \$30,000 and \$50,000. Compared to white households, Black and Latino families were less likely to have access to broadband and a computer at home.

For Schneider's children, not having enough working devices at home during the previous school year for remote learning meant missing assignments and classes. The kids struggled to focus on their work, even if they received paper assignments. During quarantine periods this year, she said, they were largely unable to participate in any instruction at all.

"Without the equipment ... their experience was that they were more off than on," Schneider said. "As soon as they said school was going to back up ... I just had to take my chances and send them. They needed not to be out of school any longer."

Even before the pandemic sent most schools to some form of remote learning, classrooms have increasingly embraced the role of technology in teaching, creating a "homework gap" between those who do and do not have access to internet and devices at home. Roughly 2.9 million school children lived in households without internet access, according to pre-pandemic Census data, and about 2.1 million lived in households without a laptop or desktop computer.

Some families are frustrated more hasn't been done to close the gap.

When her grandchildren's Pittsburgh school moved to online learning in March of 2020, Janice Myers and her four grandchildren shared a single laptop. One month, she struggled to afford the internet bill on her fixed retirement income. She tried to access the company's \$10 monthly rate designed to keep low-income kids connected during the pandemic, but said she was told she did not qualify because she was an existing customer.

This school year, the children were adjusting well to in-person learning until a quarantine sent them home for a week, Myers said. Around Thanksgiving, the school shut down in-person classes again, this time for nearly three weeks. Both times, the school did not send the children home with tablets, leaving



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them with little instruction except a thin packet of worksheets, she said.

"To my mind, you had an entire school year to learn how to be better prepared, and how to be proactive and how to incorporate a Plan B at the drop of a hat," she said. "There was no reason why every student, when they returned to school, didn't receive or keep their laptop."

Among the districts using some of their federal relief money to boost home internet access is California's Chula Vista Elementary School District, which is incorporating the cost of hotspots and other internet services into the budget for the next three years. It gives priority for internet hot spots to kids who have the most trouble connecting to school, such as foster children and youth experiencing housing instability.

Assistant superintendent Matthew Tessier said the district found many low-income families may have internet access through a wireless phone, but faced limits like data caps and set monthly minutes. Those caps often made connecting kids to homework and online resources a challenge even before the pandemic.

Identifying which kids are in greater need and having devices ready to go can help minimize the impact of disruptions to learning, Katz said.

"All these conversations we keep having about learning loss, whether or not we should use that term, places the responsibility and the blame for what kids have learned on the students and the family ... instead of recognizing that this is still the school's responsibility to bridge this gap when they send kids home," Katz said.

## Second gentleman Emhoff acts as public link to White House

By WILL WEISSERT and DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As America's first second gentleman, Doug Emhoff has attended a U.S. naturalization ceremony in New York, dished up spaghetti and chocolate milk to kids at a YMCA near New Orleans and reminisced with second graders in Detroit about an early job at McDonald's.

Emhoff visited 31 states over the past year, meeting with doctors, parents, community leaders and small-business owners everywhere from Albuquerque, New Mexico, to Allentown, Pennsylvania. The most important part of such trips, though, may be making it home in time for dinner, when his wife, Vice President Kamala Harris, will toss out that evergreen conversation starter, "How was your day?"

"It gets me to really talk about the folks I meet," Emhoff told The Associated Press. He added that if he's "with the president, first lady, or a Cabinet secretary — or one of their chiefs — you really do, you really can bring specifics back and turn that into a response or action."

After Emhoff met BB Beltran, an advocate for domestic abuse survivors, during an April visit to Oregon, she was later invited to participate in a federal roundtable on how the government can better support legal aid initiatives.

"I felt supported and validated by Mr. Emhoff," said Beltran, executive director of Sexual Assault Support Services in Eugene, Oregon.

Emhoff, 57, sees himself as a conduit between Americans and President Joe Biden's White House. His training as a lawyer, he says, taught him the value of "listening over talking and really trying to understand issues, understand people and understand a problem."

It's meant taking a role that has been largely ceremonial — the "seconds" rarely get much attention — and making it more substantive, trying to buoy the administration from a nonpolitician's perspective.

Being a link between the administration and the public is a quietly powerful role commonly played by first ladies. Kate Andersen Brower, who has written books about presidential spouses and about the vice presidency, said that during the 1980 Iran hostage crisis, when President Jimmy Carter halted campaigning for reelection, his wife, Rosalynn, traveled the country in his place and "people would come up to her all the time and tell her about their problems."

Andersen Brower noted that Hillary Clinton pushed her husband, President Bill Clinton, to nominate Ruth Bader Ginsburg for the Supreme Court after Betty Ford unsuccessfully lobbied her husband, President Gerald Ford, to choose a woman for the high court. Nancy Reagan helped control access to President Ronald Reagan and influenced staffing decisions.

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Second ladies have sometimes gotten in on the act, as well. Pat Nixon helped organize schedules for her husband, President Richard Nixon, and gave input on speeches when he was vice president. Barbara Bush logged more than a million miles outside Washington and reported back to then-Vice President George H.W. Bush.

"People always talk about pillow talk," Andersen Brower said. "This is kind of a different side of it -- seeing a man play that role."

Emhoff says he understands that "I wouldn't be here if the country hadn't elected the first woman vice president." And he stresses that men need to "step up" and better support their spouses' careers.

"So many women have had to, unfairly, take a step back in the workplace because of COVID," Emhoff said. He said he wants "not only to speak about it, but to, hopefully, set an example of somebody who stepped away from their primary career to support my wife."

Born in Brooklyn and raised in New Jersey, Emhoff was a Los Angeles-based attorney specializing in entertainment and intellectual property law who earned nearly \$3 million in 2019, before leaving his job pre-Inauguration Day. He and Harris have two grown children from Emhoff's previous marriage, and the second gentleman now teaches at Georgetown Law School.

Emhoff said that nearly a year in his post has taught him that "the role I have is more of a generalist, where I'm going to just go where needed."

He has traveled most frequently to COVID-19 vaccination clinics, visiting more than 20. During a March trip to Mary's Center, a community health facility in Silver Spring, Maryland, outside Washington, he calmed a woman nervous about being vaccinated, speaking to her briefly in Spanish and smiling broadly behind his mask.

Emhoff was "interested in the process. You could tell it wasn't just for show," said Dr. Tollie Elliott, the center's CEO.

"It's just really nice to see, when you meet people in those spaces, that they're human, that they're genuine and they're not there just for a picture or for political gain," Elliott said.

Emhoff has also been active in combating misinformation surrounding the coronavirus vaccine after hearing Americans tell him falsehoods.

"This wasn't necessarily political. These were folks of all different stripes who were coming back to me with just pure misinformation," said Emhoff. He said he approaches pushing back on mistruths like preparing for legal cases.

Emhoff says he has seen vaccine misinformation evolve from misconceptions about costs and availability to claims focused on vaccines causing health problems despite "a year of data" now refuting that. The most persistent misinformation is people thinking COVID-19 vaccines were developed too quickly to be effective, even though they derived from years of research, Emhoff said.

"No," he said flatly of the mistruth, "that is not the fact."

U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy praised Emhoff's battles against misinformation, saying he "understands the urgency of the issue so viscerally."

Shortly before Christmas, Emhoff joined Murthy and first lady Jill Biden in visiting a children's hospital near Waukesha, Wisconsin, where a man drove an SUV into a parade, killing six. Murthy said Emhoff approaches such moments "thinking about his role as a father and as a husband, and then he draws his empathy from his identity."

"You can talk to him like you would talk to anybody else," Murthy said.

Emhoff said that his dinner conversations with Harris often focus on everyday issues, adding that they try to ignore the political criticism the vice president has faced over things such as U.S.-Mexico border policy and the departures of several top aides from her office.

"She pays it no mind," Emhoff said of his wife. The couple's biggest evening challenge, he said, is sometimes settling on what to watch on Netflix — especially when there are so many choices that they never actually make one.

Emhoff said the couple will finally think, "We should watch that."

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"And then we realize it's getting late, and we've had a long day, and we've got a big day tomorrow," he said, "and we just don't watch it."

## **Tulips for Amsterdam: Growers hand out free flowers**

AMSTERDAM (AP) — As stores in Amsterdam and across the Netherlands cautiously reopened after weeks of being under a coronavirus lockdown, the Dutch capital's mood was lightened further Saturday by dashes of color from thousands of free bunches of tulips being handed out.

National Tulip Day is usually marked by an improvised flower garden in front of the royal palace on the capital's central Dam Square. But with pandemic lockdown measures continuing to restrict large public gatherings, organizers this year took to Amsterdam's World Heritage-listed canals to hand out their flowers.

The event is held each year to celebrate the start of the growing season for the iconic flowers, a major export for Dutch farmers.

"It is a gloomy and uncertain time for many people with the ongoing pandemic," Arjan Smit, chairman of Tulip Promotion Netherlands, an association of hundreds of Dutch growers. "So we're going to provide some joy. We hope to create many happy faces by handing out tulip bouquets."

Dutch flower and plant auctioneer Royal FloraHolland had record sales in 2021 of 5.6 billion euros (\$6.4 billion) thanks to higher prices for plants and cut flowers.

## **Djokovic back in detention, continues to fight deportation**

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Novak Djokovic was back in immigration detention Saturday after his legal challenge to avoid being deported from Australia for being unvaccinated for COVID-19 was moved to higher court.

A Federal Court hearing has been scheduled for Sunday, a day before the men's No. 1-ranked tennis player and nine-time Australian Open champion was due to begin his title defense at the first Grand Slam tennis tournament of the year.

Djokovic and his lawyers had a morning meeting with immigration officials and, by mid-afternoon, Australian media reported the tennis star was taken back into detention. Television footage showed the 34-year-old Serb wearing a face mask as he sat in a vehicle near an immigration detention hotel.

He spent four nights confined to a hotel near downtown Melbourne before being released last Monday when he won a court challenge on procedural grounds against his first visa cancellation.

Immigration Minister Alex Hawke on Friday blocked the visa, which was originally revoked when he landed at a Melbourne airport on Jan. 5.

Deportation from Australia can lead to a three-year ban on returning to the country, although that may be waived, depending on the circumstances.

Djokovic has acknowledged that his travel declaration was incorrect because it failed to indicate that he'd been in multiple countries in the two-week period before his arrival in Australia.

But that wasn't why Hawke decided that deporting Djokovic was in the public interest.

Lawyers for Djokovic filed documents in court that revealed Hawke had stated that the tennis star "is perceived by some as a talisman of a community of anti-vaccination sentiment."

Australia has one of the highest COVID-19 vaccination rates in the world.

But the minister said Djokovic's presence in Australia may be a risk to the health and "good order" of the Australian public and "may be counterproductive to efforts at vaccination by others in Australia."

The Health Department advised that Djokovic was a "low" risk of transmitting COVID-19 and a "very low" risk of transmitting the disease at the Australian Open."

The minister cited comments Djokovic made in April 2020 that he was "opposed to vaccination" and had wouldn't want to be forced by someone to take a vaccine to compete.

Djokovic's lawyers argued that the minister had cited no evidence that Djokovic's presence in Australia

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may "foster anti-vaccination sentiment."

Hundreds of activists held a peaceful rally outside the Melbourne Park complex that hosts the Australian Open, and planned another for Monday.

"We're at Rod Laver Arena to support Novak. He's won nine (Australian Open) titles here. Hopefully this will be No. 10 -- if he can get out of quarantine and get his visa back," Harrison McLean, one of the rally organizers, said. "We're a peaceful movement, here to raise awareness and support everyone's freedom of choice."

On Saturday, Federal Chief Justice James Allsop announced that he would hear the case with Justices David O'Callaghan and Anthony Besanko.

The decision for three judges to hear the appeal instead of a single judge elevates the importance of the case from the judiciary's perspective and means any verdict would be less likely to be appealed.

Sydney-based immigration lawyer Simon Jeans said he was surprised that Djokovic was no longer being deported because his COVID-19 infection last month did not exempt him from Australia's strict rules that foreign visitors are vaccinated unless there are sound medical reasons that they can't be.

"The unanswered question is if Djokovic was such a threat to good order, why grant him a visa" in November," Jeans asked. "This is a high-risk strategy. It's going to be much harder for the minister to convince three judges that what he did was in the public interest."

Djokovic, who has won the last three Australian Open titles, will be allowed out of hotel detention on Sunday to visit his lawyers' offices for the video court hearing.

He is seeking a record 21st Grand Slam singles title. He is currently tied with Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer for the most by a man in history.

In a post on social media Wednesday that constituted his most extensive public comments yet on the episode, Djokovic blamed his agent for checking the wrong box on his travel document, calling it "a human error and certainly not deliberate."

In that same post, Djokovic said he went ahead with an interview and a photo shoot with a French newspaper in Serbia despite knowing he'd tested positive for COVID-19. Djokovic has been attempting to use what he says was a positive test taken on Dec. 16 to justify a medical exemption that would allow him to avoid the vaccine requirement on the grounds that he already had COVID-19.

In canceling Djokovic's visa, Hawke said Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government "is firmly committed to protecting Australia's borders, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic."

The episode has touched a nerve in Australia, and particularly in Victoria state, where locals went through more than 260 days of lockdowns during the worst of the pandemic.

Australia faces a massive surge in virus cases driven by the highly transmissible omicron variant. On Friday, the nation reported 130,000 new cases, including nearly 35,000 in Victoria state. Although many infected people aren't getting as sick as they did in previous outbreaks, the surge is still putting severe strain on the health system and disrupting supply chains.

Djokovic's supporters in Serbia have been dismayed by the visa cancellations. Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic accused the Australian government of "harassing" and "maltreating" Djokovic and asked whether Morrison's government is just trying to score political points ahead of upcoming elections.

"Why didn't you return him back right away, or tell him it was impossible to get a visa?" Vucic asked the Australian authorities in a social media address. "Why are you harassing him and why are you maltreating not only him, but his family and an entire nation that is free and proud."

Everyone at the Australian Open is required to be vaccinated.

According to Grand Slam rules, if Djokovic is forced to pull out of the tournament before the order of play for Day 1 is announced, No. 5 seed Andrey Rublev would move into Djokovic's spot in the bracket.

If Djokovic withdraws from the tournament after Monday's schedule is released, he would be replaced in the field by what's known as a "lucky loser" — a player who loses in the qualifying tournament but gets into the main draw because of another player's exit before competition has started.

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## Major winter storm: South braces for big blast of snow, ice

By SUDHIN THANAWALA and JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Forecasts of snow and ice as far south as Georgia have put a big part of the Southeast on an emergency preparedness footing as shoppers scoured store shelves for storm supplies and crews raced to treat highways and roads as a major winter storm approached from the Midwest.

In Virginia, where a blizzard left thousands of motorists trapped on clogged highways earlier this month, outgoing Gov. Ralph Northam declared a state of emergency and urged people to take the approaching storm seriously.

In North Carolina, some store shelves were stripped bare of essentials including bread and milk.

Elsewhere, trucks began spraying a briny mixture on hundreds of miles of interstates and other roads to prevent icing across the region.

Travis Wagler said he hadn't seen such a run on supplies at his Abbeville, South Carolina, hardware store in at least two winters.

"We're selling everything you might expect: sleds, but also salt, shovels and firewood," Wagler said from Abbeville Hardware on Friday. That region faced predictions of a quarter-inch (0.6 centimeters) of ice or more on trees and power lines, which could lead to days without electricity.

"People are worried," Wagler said.

Parts of Tennessee could get as much as 6 inches (15 centimeters) of snow, forecasters said, and northern Mississippi and the Tennessee Valley region of Alabama could receive light snow accumulations. With lows predicted in the 20s across a wide area, any precipitation could freeze, making driving difficult if not hazardous.

By Friday, the fast-moving storm had already dropped heavy snow across a large swath of the Midwest, where travel conditions deteriorated and scores of schools closed or moved to online instruction.

The storm, after its expected weekend dip into the Southeast, was then expected to head into the Northeast while dropping snow, sleet and rain around the densely populated Eastern Seaboard.

A winter storm watch extended from just north of metro Atlanta to Arkansas in the west and Pennsylvania in the north, covering parts of 10 states including Kentucky, Ohio and West Virginia. Travel problems could extend into metro Atlanta, where about 2 inches (5 centimeters) of snow brought traffic to a slip-sliding halt in 2014, an event still known as "Snowmagedon."

A mixture of ice and up to an inch (2.5 centimeters) of snow is expected in Atlanta, according to an advisory issued Saturday by the National Weather Service.

At Dawsonville Hardware about 60 miles (95 kilometers) north of Atlanta, owner Dwight Gilleland said he was already out of heaters by noon Friday and only had five bags of salt and sand left.

"I think the pandemic has made people more anxious than normal," he said.

In the mountains of northeast Georgia, Rick Story was out buying milk and cereal in the town of Clayton and noticed some empty shelves, mostly food items. Up to 10 inches (25 centimeters) of snow is expected there.

"People are stocking up and erring on the side of caution," said Story, director of the Rabun County Chamber of Commerce. "It could be the proverbial calm before the storm."

Story's main concern is the potential loss of power. "It can take a while up here for us to have power restored because we do have more remote areas and mountain roads," he said.

Possible power outages and travel problems could be exacerbated by any coating of ice — and winds gusting to 35 mph (55 kph), the National Weather Service said.

"Hopefully, the storm will underdeliver, but it could overdeliver. We just don't know," said Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp as he announced storm preparations. He was taking no chances as he declared a state of emergency and crews began treating major roads and highways in north Georgia.

Gov. Henry McMaster in neighboring South Carolina also issued an emergency order, saying the state would likely start feeling the effects of the major winter storm Sunday morning.

"There is a potential for very dangerous conditions caused by accumulations of ice and snow, which will

likely result in power outages across the state," he said.

The city of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, had to borrow workers from other departments to help treat roads ahead of the storm because COVID-19 had caused a shortage of workers, spokesman Randy Britton said. Even volunteers pitched in to help as the city stepped up its normal schedule of preparing for winter weather, he said.

"We feel real good about where we are," he said. "We've checked the boxes."

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper signed an emergency order and the administration urged people to stay at home once the storm hits. The state highway agency warned that labor shortages meant crews might not respond to problems areas as quickly as normal.

"We just don't have as many people to drive the trucks or operate the equipment," said spokesman Marcus Thompson at the North Carolina Department of Transportation.

Many schools and businesses will be closed Monday for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, which could help reduce travel problems along with temperatures that are supposed to rise into the 40s.

## Kazakhstan activists recall path from protest to bloodshed

By KIRILL ZARUBIN and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

ALMATY, Kazakhstan (AP) — The mass protests in Kazakhstan began peacefully over the New Year's weekend, with marchers denouncing a sharp rise in fuel prices. They spread quickly from the western part of the Central Asian nation to more populous areas, eventually reaching its largest city of Almaty.

But something changed over the course of a week.

Groups of armed men appeared in Almaty, with some seen riding in cars without license plates or with their faces covered. Marchers at the peaceful protests say these men began urging them to storm government buildings, promising to give them guns.

Clashes with police soon broke out, and by the night of Jan. 5, Almaty was in chaos. City Hall was burning, as were cars and buses; stores were looted; and attempts were made to storm the presidential residence. Gunshots were heard in the streets, the internet was blacked out, and even the airport was briefly seized.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has blamed the unrest on "terrorists" who received foreign training and support.

But nearly two weeks after the events that led to scores of deaths and about 16,000 arrests, the government has not presented any evidence to support its allegation of outside involvement.

It remains unclear whether these more violent actors were individuals taking advantage of the mayhem to loot and vandalize stores, or if they were part of organized groups with larger political motives.

Protesters, however, say their rallies were somehow undermined, leading to the crackdown by security forces. Tokayev has said authorities didn't use force at peaceful demonstrations.

Although the protests began over the higher price of fuel, the scope and the agenda of the demonstrations expanded quickly. Large crowds rallied in major cities, venting their frustration with worsening living conditions and inequality under the authoritarian government that has maintained a tight grip on power for over three decades in the energy-rich nation of 19 million.

Much of that occurred under longtime leader Nursultan Nazarbayev, who stepped down in 2019 in favor of Tokayev, his hand-picked successor, but has maintained behind-the-scenes influence. The slogan "Shal ket!" — "Old man go!" — was chanted at rallies.

"A significant part of the people are those who came at the call of their hearts to express their attitude towards the authorities, because they are tired, because they do not feel like the state is providing them with social security," said human rights activist Galym Ageleuov, president of the Liberty Foundation.

Tokayev initially tried to calm the crowds by announcing a 180-day cap on fuel prices and removing Nazarbayev as head of the National Security Council, a move widely seen as an attempt to end the former leader's patronage while also consolidating power.

But the protests continued and the violence escalated amid the peaceful rallies in Almaty.

A protester whose first name is Bezshan said that on Jan. 5, armed men approached and asked young

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people in the crowd to help them storm a police station. "They said they would hand out weapons," he told The Associated Press, recalling the incident more than a week later. AP has chosen not to publish the full names of protesters interviewed out of caution for their security.

Beken, another protester, said he also saw "provocateurs" at the rally that day, urging an attack on police: "We tried to stop them as much as we could, telling them: 'Everyone, stay put.' We don't need weapons, we came out to a peaceful rally," he said.

On Jan. 6, security forces opened fire and killed dozens of protesters. At least 12 officers also were reported killed. The next day, Tokayev announced he had given security forces shoot-to-kill orders to halt the violent unrest, saying: "We intend to act with maximum severity regarding lawbreakers."

Almaty police spokeswoman Saltynat Azirbek called the Jan. 5 attack on the police department "a proper battle."

The attackers "didn't put forward any demands," she told reporters. "They deliberately came to destroy, to kill."

She also insisted police were unarmed when working at unsanctioned demonstrations in Almaty, but she didn't clarify whether she meant the Jan. 6 rally.

Amid the bloodshed, Tokayev also called in troops from the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russia-led military alliance of six former Soviet states, which helped restore order.

Some saw the blaming of foreign instigators as a pretext for bringing in the mostly Russian forces.

"In order to invite Russian troops, you need a serious reason ... that is not an internal standoff with the people," political analyst Dimash Alzhayev said in an interview. "So naturally, (the authorities) needed to come up with terrorists."

A protester named Marat told AP that the authorities "haven't so far showed us a single terrorist," citing only the highly publicized arrest of Vikram Ruzakhunov, a well-known jazz pianist from neighboring Kyrgyzstan.

The musician appeared on Kazakh television after his arrest with large bruises on his face and said in the broadcast he had flown in and was promised money for participating in the protests.

Kyrgyz authorities protested Ruzakhunov's arrest and demanded that Kazakhstan release him. He was freed shortly afterward, and upon returning to Kyrgyzstan said his statement on Kazakh TV was false — he was visiting a friend in Almaty and got swept up while trying to leave the city.

Ruzakhunov told a Kyrgyz broadcaster that while in jail, his cellmates said the quickest way to get released was to confess to a false story, so that's what he did.

Alzhanov, the analyst, noted that Kazakh state broadcasters amplified the government's message by repeatedly airing video of the turmoil.

"They continued broadcasting the visuals, so the government was interested in communicating them to a broad audience," he said, adding that the state of emergency that was declared provided a pretext to suppress the demonstrations with force.

A protester named Daulet told AP that he believed the "security forces deliberately painted the protesters as some kind of a fringe group prepared to riot."

Beken, the protester who described seeing what he called "provocateurs," criticized the security forces "for shooting at their own people." He said a Jan. 6 rally he attended featured protesters walking toward the military with a white flag.

"It is unfathomable. I can't understand it. How is this possible?" he said.

## COVID, China, climate: Online Davos event tackles big themes

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — The coronavirus pandemic has forced the World Economic Forum's annual meeting of world leaders, business executives and other heavyweights to go virtual for the second year in a row, but organizers still hope to catapult the world into thinking about the future with a scaled-down online version this week.

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The gathering, an online alternative to the event typically held in the Swiss ski town of Davos, will feature speeches by the leaders of countries including China, India, Israel, Japan and Germany as well as panel discussions with business, government and philanthropy figures like Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top U.S. infectious disease expert who will talk about COVID-19, and Bill Gates and John Kerry, who are expected to discuss climate change.

Organizers still hope their plans for a larger in-person gathering can go ahead this summer. Until then, here are five things to watch at next week's online event:

## CHINA LOOMS LARGE

President Xi Jinping, who hasn't left China since the coronavirus emerged in early 2020, will be beamed in — just like last year — as perhaps the top headliner of the event.

He traditionally uses appearances at international gatherings like Davos to appeal for cooperation to fight climate change and the coronavirus and lambast what Beijing sees as U.S. efforts to hold back China's rise and dominate global governance.

In a speech Monday, Xi could well again tout changes that Beijing says are opening the state-dominated economy and reject complaints that it wants to detach from international trade. His comments reflect the ruling Communist Party's desire for global influence to match China's status as the second-largest economy.

Keep an eye out for any mention of self-ruled Taiwan, which China considers part of its territory and has threatened to attack, and claims to the South and East China Seas or parts of the Himalayas, which have kindled tension with its neighbors.

## MODI'S MOOD

One of those neighbors with tense ties to China is India, and Prime Minister Narendra Modi also takes the virtual floor Monday.

During the 8-year-old tenure of Modi, the star of the Hindu nationalist BJP party, India has seen an upswing in attacks against the Muslim minority. India's political parties are gearing up for state elections, just two months after Modi's government made a rare retreat on an agricultural reform bill that drew huge protests from farmers.

The campaign has drawn crowds of tens of thousands, even as the omicron variant, like elsewhere, has driven a surge in COVID-19 cases.

## HOPING FOR A POST-COVID WORLD

It's impossible for the Davos crowd to overlook the health crisis that has upended its plans for the last two years.

The pandemic gets a top billing on Monday, with Fauci and the CEO of vaccine maker Moderna joining a panel discussion that addresses what's next for COVID-19, which has taken several big turns as the omicron variant sweeps the globe.

On Tuesday, World Health Organization chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus is certain to promote his often-repeated call for greater vaccine equity at a panel on the subject. Many developing countries remain far behind their rich counterparts when it comes to access to vaccines. WHO says greater vaccine equity can help prevent the emergence of worrisome, highly transmissible variants like omicron.

## TECH ON TAP

Climate change and energy — along with a regional look at Latin America — get top billing Wednesday, with a speech by the Saudi energy minister and a look at how the world transitions from its dependence on fossil fuels. Kerry, the special envoy for climate under U.S. President Joe Biden, joins Davos stalwart Gates — recent author of "How to Avert a Climate Disaster" — on a panel on climate innovation.

## TECHNOLOGY, TRADE AND THE ECONOMY

True to its name, the economic forum never strays far from the world of business activity. The week rounds out with discussions on issues like capitalism for a sustainable future, trade at a time of strained global supply chains, and how government actions are needed to produce sustainable and equitable recovery after the pandemic.

U.S. Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen gets the last word Friday with a talk at the virtual forum, where she has an opportunity to promote President Joe Biden's plans to reengage globally to prevent new envi-



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ronmental catastrophes. Amid the pandemic and rapidly rising inflation, the former Federal Reserve chair also could touch on financial recovery efforts, the administration's \$1 trillion infrastructure law and her support for a global corporate minimum tax agreed to by more than 130 countries.

## Clap, don't chant: China aims for 'Zero COVID' Olympics

By CANDICE CHOI Associated Press

Athletes will need to be vaccinated — or face a long quarantine — take tests daily and wear masks when not competing or training. Clapping is OK to cheer on teammates, not chanting. Anyone who tests positive for COVID-19 will be sent into isolation and unable to compete until cleared for discharge.

Welcome to the Beijing Olympics, where strict containment measures will aim to create a virus-proof "bubble" for thousands of international visitors at a time when omicron is fueling infections globally.

The prevention protocols will be similar to those at the Tokyo Games this summer, but much tighter. That won't be a stretch in Beijing, with China having maintained a "Zero COVID" policy since early in the pandemic.

Still, China's ability to stick to its zero-tolerance approach nationally is already being tested by the highly transmissible omicron variant, which is more contagious than earlier variants of the virus and better able to evade protection from vaccines.

With just weeks to go before the Feb. 4 start of the Games, more than 20 million people in six cities are under lockdown after recent outbreaks.

Here's how the Games will work.

### DO ATHLETES HAVE TO BE VACCINATED?

Yes, athletes and other participants including team staff and news media need to be fully vaccinated to be allowed in the designated Olympic areas without completing a 21-day quarantine. Those areas will consist of the Olympic Village, game venues, other select spots and dedicated transport.

That's different from the Tokyo Games, where participants didn't have to be vaccinated.

Participants are considered fully vaccinated according to the definitions outlined by their countries. Before boarding their flights, everyone also needs to provide two recent negative tests from approved labs.

The threat of being sidelined by a positive test is adding to the pressure for athletes.

Mogul skier Hannah Soar said she's avoiding contact with people indoors and behaving as if everyone has the virus: "We're basically at the point of acting like it's March 2020."

### WHAT ABOUT DAILY LIFE?

Upon arrival at the airport in Beijing, participants will have their temperatures taken and be tested with throat and nasal swabs. An Olympics official who recently arrived on site said at a press briefing the process took him 45 minutes, though organizers note times might vary.

A bus will then take people to their designated lodging, where they'll wait up to six hours for test results to clear them to move about in approved areas. Restrictions on movement within that "closed loop" are intended to seal off any potential contact between Olympic participants and the local population.

Throat swabs for testing will be required daily for all participants. In Tokyo, participants spit into vials for antigen tests.

Standard prevention measures are being encouraged, such as ventilating rooms and keeping a distance of about 3 feet (1 meter) from others — or 6 feet (2 meters) from athletes.

Masks that are N95 or of a similar caliber will also be required in indoor and outdoor areas with few exceptions, such as when people are eating or drinking. Dining halls will have partitions and seating capacity will be reduced to help maintain distancing.

In spaces where distancing isn't possible, such as elevators, talking isn't allowed. Staff will be stationed in key areas to help guide people and ensure protocols are being followed.

### WHAT HAPPENS IF AN ATHLETE TESTS POSITIVE?

In Tokyo, organizers say 33 athletes tested positive during the Games. Of those, 22 were withdrawn from from competition. Even with the tightened precautions in Beijing, experts say some positive tests

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are likely, especially with omicron in play.

If an athlete or other participant tests positive but doesn't have symptoms, they'll need to go into isolation in a dedicated hotel. They'll be provided with meals and can open their windows for fresh air but won't be able to leave their rooms, which organizers say will be about 270 square feet (25 square meters).

Athletes can request fitness equipment for training.

People with no symptoms can leave isolation after two days of negative tests. Organizers say those testing positive will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis, but it might still be too late for athletes to compete.

As a general rule, organizers say the panel will review those who keep testing positive for more than 14 days.

Those who test positive and have symptoms have to go into isolation in a hospital. They'll also need to two days of negative tests to be let loose, as well as three days of normal temperatures and symptoms subsiding.

Organizers have said athletes who recover after testing positive ahead of the Games will also be assessed on a case-by-case basis in a "more flexible manner."

## WILL THERE BE FANS?

Spectators from overseas won't be allowed. As for local fans, Beijing organizers say they're finalizing rules for their attendance.

It's not clear how the recent outbreaks around China will factor into the decisions. But organizers of the Tokyo Games had also planned to allow some domestic fans, before scrapping the idea because a surge in local cases. The result was surreal scenes of athletes competing in empty stadiums.

Even if some fans are allowed in Beijing, their presence will be muted. Everyone is being asked to clap instead of shouting or singing, as had been the plan in Tokyo.

## CAN IT WORK?

Despite the omicron-fueled surge hitting many parts of the world including China, organizers may still be able to pull off the Olympics without as much disruption as some fear.

Olympic athletes are highly motivated to avoid infection so they can compete, noted Dr. Sandro Galea, a public health expert at Boston University. And even if it's harder with omicron, he noted it's no mystery what people need to do to avoid infection — take prevention measures, such as limiting exposure to others.

## Headed to disaster? US, Russia harden stances in talks

By MATTHEW LEE and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The failure of last week's high-stakes diplomatic meetings to resolve escalating tensions over Ukraine has put Russia, the United States and its European allies in uncharted post-Cold War territory, posing significant challenges for the main players to avoid an outright and potentially disastrous confrontation.

Unlike previous disagreements that have arisen since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the current Ukraine crisis and seemingly insurmountable differences between Washington and Moscow carry real risks of debilitating economic warfare and military conflict that are exacerbated by the dangers of miscalculation and overreaction.

For the U.S. and its NATO and other European allies, nothing less than a vast pullback of the roughly 100,000 Russian troops now deployed near the Ukrainian border will prove that Russian President Vladimir Putin has any intention of negotiating in good faith. For the Russians, the West's absolute refusal to consider a ban on NATO expansion and the withdrawal of troops from Eastern Europe is proof of its perfidy.

Potential concessions are complicated by the fact neither Putin nor President Joe Biden wants to be seen as backing down before either domestic or foreign audiences.

The refusal thus far by each side to climb down from what the other regards as unrealistic and maximalist demands has left the prospects for diplomacy in limbo, with the U.S. and its allies accusing Russia of stoking tensions for no legitimate reason and the Russians complaining again that the Americans are the aggressors.

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Some believe the situation will have to become even more dire before the impasse can be broken.

"The gap in perceptions is so broad that a new and dangerous escalation could be necessary to make the parties open up their imagination and search for agreements," Fyodor Lukyanov, the head of the Moscow-based Council for Foreign and Defense Policies, observed in a commentary.

For Western analysts, it seems a situation in which Putin will have to compromise if conflict is to be avoided. Some think Putin's focus on NATO, which has struggled for years with questions about its relevance, may have given the alliance a new lease on life.

"This is an extremely uncertain and tense period without an obvious way out unless Putin backs down," said Jeff Rathke, a Europe expert and former U.S. diplomat who is currently president of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at Johns Hopkins University.

"He's talked himself into a frenzy that is hard to walk away from if he doesn't get the fundamental redrawing of the European security architecture that he claims to want. He's shown he's ready to play chicken with the threat of massive military force to bring that about and he's certainly gotten everyone's attention, but he hasn't changed anyone's views," Rathke said.

U.S. officials from Biden, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and national security adviser Jake Sullivan to chief negotiator Wendy Sherman have said it is Russia that faces a "stark choice." De-escalate or face punishing sanctions and the opposite of what it wants: an increased NATO presence in Eastern Europe and a more well-armed Ukraine.

Yet in Russia, officials say the shoe is on the other foot. They have cast their demands as an "absolute imperative" and have argued that the Western failure to meet them makes talks on other issues irrelevant.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Friday that Russia had vainly tried for years to persuade the U.S. and its allies to engage in talks on the non-deployment of intermediate-range missiles to Europe, limits on war games and rules to avoid dangerously close encounters between Russian and allied warships and aircraft until the U.S. and NATO expressed willingness to discuss those issues this week.

He attributed the change in approach to a U.S. desire to shift attention away from Russia's main demands, adding that Moscow will focus on NATO non-expansion. And he insisted that it's the U.S. that's formulating the position in talks while other allies just march on its orders.

"To be frank, everyone understands that the prospect for reaching a deal depends on the U.S.," Lavrov said. He said whatever the U.S. says about the need to consult allies in negotiations "are just excuses and attempts to drag the process out."

Thus, the stalemate.

The West's approach has been to have "as much diplomatic effort as possible to de-escalate," said Andrew Weiss, vice president for studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, where he oversees research in Washington and Moscow on Russia and Eurasia.

"The problem we've got is that the Russians mean business, and they've shown us in a bunch of cases, in 2014, in 2008, that they're prepared to go to war to get these things, and we're not," he said. "And that's the challenge."

The tough and uncompromising Russian positions have led some to believe that Moscow will only up the ante after receiving what all sides expect will be formal, written refusals from the U.S. and NATO to accede to its demands.

Indeed, the chief Russian negotiator in the talks, Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov, suggested Thursday that Moscow might respond to rejections by escalating matters outside of Europe through the potential deployment of troops to Cuba and Venezuela. The U.S. has called such a suggestion "bluster" and said it would respond decisively if it happened.

"The lack of a diplomatic solution logically leads to the further exacerbation of the crisis," wrote Dmitri Trenin, the head of the Carnegie Moscow Center, in an online analysis.

Trenin predicted that a set of "military-technical measures" that Putin said Russia would take if the West rejects its demands could include "a broad array of moves ... from the deployment of new weapons systems in various regions to much stronger military ties with Belarus and a closer coordination with the Chinese partners."

Still, there's a risk that by focusing his ire on NATO, Putin may have inadvertently strengthened its hand, especially with its newer members like the Baltic states, Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic.

"For countries that have joined NATO since the Cold War, you can definitely say that NATO is more relevant to them now than it was a year ago or in 2014," Rathke said. "Anyone who thought that NATO was no longer relevant to European security has been taught a lesson in the last few months. And it's only going to get worse."

## **Biden team regroups after court loss on COVID shots-or-test**

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Concerned but not giving up, President Joe Biden is anxiously pushing ahead to prod people to get COVID-19 shots after the Supreme Court put a halt to the administration's sweeping vaccinate-or-test plan for large employers.

At a time when hospitals are being overrun and record numbers of people are getting infected with the omicron variant, the administration hopes states and companies will order their own vaccinate-or-test requirements. And if the presidential "bully pulpit" still counts for persuasion, Biden intends to use it.

While some in the business community cheered the defeat of the mandate, Biden insisted the administration effort has not been for naught. The high court's ruling on Thursday "does not stop me from using my voice as president to advocate for employers to do the right thing to protect Americans' health and economy," he said.

The court's conservative majority all-but-struck down the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's requirement that employers with 100 or more employees require their workers to be vaccinated against the coronavirus or tested weekly. However, it did leave in place a vaccination requirement for health care workers.

Meanwhile, the White House announced Friday that the federal website where Americans can request their own free COVID-19 tests will begin accepting orders next Wednesday. Those tests could provide motivation for some people to seek vaccination, and the administration is looking to address nationwide shortages. Supplies will be limited to just four free tests per home.

On Thursday, the Supreme Court ruled that OSHA appeared to overstep its congressional authority to implement occupational standards, saying, "Although COVID-19 is a risk that occurs in many workplaces, it is not an occupational hazard in most."

The mandate was announced last September, accompanied by biting criticism from Biden for the roughly 80 million American adults who hadn't yet gotten shots

"We've been patient. But our patience is wearing thin, and your refusal has cost all of us," he said. The unvaccinated minority, he said, "can cause a lot of damage, and they are."

In a statement after the Supreme Court ruling, Biden expressed disappointment with the outcome but said the mandates have already had their desired effect on reducing the number of unvaccinated adults.

"Today, that number is down to under 35 million," he said of the unvaccinated. "Had my administration not put vaccination requirements in place, we would be now experiencing a higher death toll from COVID-19 and even more hospitalizations."

While the court left open the possibility for the U.S. to pursue more targeted mandates, White House officials said there were no immediate plans to seek a redo of the regulation.

"It's now up to the states and individual employers to put in place vaccination requirements," said White House press secretary Jen Psaki on Friday.

The United States is already "languishing," with a 60% vaccination rate, near the bottom of peer nations, said Lawrence Gostin, a public health law expert at Georgetown University.

"The OSHA rule was truly the president's last best shot at significantly boosting the vaccination rate," Gostin said. But the court, "in a very highly partisan way, intentionally tried to handcuff the president in doing what he needs to do."

Many large businesses that had already put in place vaccination-or-testing requirements indicated they had no plans to reverse course. But smaller companies said they were breathing a sigh of relief, fearing

worker shortages if the OSHA rule had been allowed to go into force.

The Supreme Court decision has “taken a little bit of a burden of worry off of our shoulders,” said Kyle Caraway, marketing director at Doolittle Trailer Manufacturing, which joined a lawsuit by the Missouri attorney general challenging Biden’s policy. About 90% of the 175 employees at the Holts Summit, Missouri-based company had indicated they would refuse to comply with a vaccination requirement, he said.

“It became apparent to us that our team was going to shrink greatly overnight if that vaccine mandate went into place,” said Caraway, who counted himself among those opposing Biden’s policy. Halting production could have forced the company “to consider shuttering our doors,” he said.

The Service Employees International Union, which represents more than 2 million workers, said the court decision was a relief for health care workers but leaves others without critical protections.

“In blocking the vaccine-or-test rule for large employers, the court has placed millions of other essential workers further at risk, caving to corporations that are trying to rig the rules against workers permanently,” the union said.

The union called on Congress and states to pass laws requiring vaccinations, masks and paid sick leave. Workers also need better access to testing and protective equipment, the union said.

The renewed debate over vaccination mandates comes as a record number of Americans are hospitalized with COVID-19, the country is averaging nearly 800,000 new cases and 1,700 deaths a day and resistance to vaccines remains a problem, most notably in deeply conservative states like Mississippi, Alabama, Wyoming and Idaho where less than half the population is fully vaccinated.

Hospitals nationwide are suffering chronic staffing shortages and being bombarded with people showing up at emergency rooms in need of virus tests. National Guard troops have been activated in dozens of states to help out at medical centers, nursing homes and testing sites.

A hospital on the edge of the Kansas City area had to borrow ventilators from the state of Missouri’s stockpile and hunt for more high-flow oxygen machines, and the largest county in Kansas said Friday that it’s running out of morgue space — again.

Gostin predicted the court’s action would have grave influence on other federal agencies’ efforts to protect public health, by ruling that OSHA can’t regulate something that would have a huge economic impact without explicit authorization from Congress. And he said states won’t be able to make up for the ruling’s impact.

“If COVID has taught us anything, it’s taught us that states can’t deal with big, bold problems, can’t prevent a pathogen from going from Florida to New York,” he said. “These are national problems requiring federal solutions.”

Psaki said the White House would work with businesses to promote the benefits of vaccination-or-testing requirements and that Biden would highlight successful programs.

“The Court has ruled that my administration cannot use the authority granted to it by Congress to require this measure,” Biden said. So “I call on business leaders to immediately join those who have already stepped up – including one third of Fortune 100 companies – and institute vaccination requirements to protect their workers, customers, and communities.”

## White House: Russia prepping pretext for Ukraine invasion

By AAMER MADHANI, NOMAAN MERCHANT and VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence officials have determined a Russian effort is underway to create a pretext for its troops to further invade Ukraine, and Moscow has already prepositioned operatives to conduct “a false-flag operation” in eastern Ukraine, according to the White House.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki said on Friday the intelligence findings show Russia is also laying the groundwork through a social media disinformation campaign that frames Ukraine as an aggressor that has been preparing an imminent attack against Russian-backed forces in eastern Ukraine.

Psaki charged that Russia has already dispatched operatives trained in urban warfare who could use explosives to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia’s own proxy forces — blaming the acts on Ukraine

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— if Russian President Vladimir Putin decides he wants to move forward with an invasion.

"We are concerned that the Russian government is preparing for an invasion in Ukraine that may result in widespread human rights violations and war crimes should diplomacy fail to meet their objectives," Psaki said.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby described the intelligence as "very credible." A U.S. official, who was not authorized to comment on the intelligence and spoke on condition of anonymity, said much of it was gleaned from intercepted communications and observations of the movements of people.

The U.S. intelligence findings, which were declassified and shared with U.S. allies before being made public, estimate that a military invasion could begin between mid-January and mid-February.

Ukraine is also monitoring the potential use of disinformation by Russia. Separately, Ukrainian media on Friday reported that authorities believed Russian special services were planning a possible false flag incident to provoke additional conflict.

The new U.S. intelligence was unveiled after a series of talks between Russia and the U.S. and its Western allies this week in Europe aimed at heading off the escalating crisis made little progress.

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan on Thursday said the U.S. intelligence community has not made an assessment that the Russians, who have massed some 100,000 troops on Ukraine's border, have definitively decided to take a military course of action.

But Sullivan said Russia is laying the groundwork to invade under false pretenses should Putin decide to go that route. He said the Russians have been planning "sabotage activities and information operations" that accuse Ukraine of prepping for its own imminent attack against Russian forces in eastern Ukraine.

He said this is similar to what the Kremlin did in the lead-up to Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea, the Black Sea peninsula that had been under Ukraine's jurisdiction since 1954.

The Crimea crisis came at a moment when Ukraine was looking to strengthen ties with the West. Russia had stepped up propaganda that Ukraine's ethnic Russians were being oppressed in eastern Ukraine.

Russia has long been accused of using disinformation as a tactic against adversaries in conjunction with military operations and cyberattacks. In 2014, Russian state media tried to discredit pro-Western protests in Kyiv as "fomented by the U.S. in cooperation with fascist Ukrainian nationalists" and promoted narratives about Crimea's historical ties to Moscow, according to a report by Stanford University's Internet Observatory.

Efforts to directly influence Ukrainians appear to have continued during the ongoing conflict in eastern Ukraine, in which at least 14,000 people have died. The Associated Press reported in 2017 that Ukrainian forces in the east were constantly receiving text messages warning that they would be killed and their children would be made orphans.

Nina Jankowicz, a global fellow at the Washington-based Wilson Center, said Russia's disinformation efforts have evolved between the lead-up to its annexation of Crimea and now. This time, the Kremlin appears to be driving anti-Ukraine narratives with top officials making bellicose public statements, said Jankowicz, author of "How To Lose the Information War: Russia, Fake News, and the Future of Conflict."

"The officials are setting the tone for the state media and they're just running with it," she said.

So-called "troll farms" that post fake comments are less influential in part because social media companies have gotten better at stopping them, she said. Russian efforts on social media often play on existing doubts in Ukrainian society about whether the U.S. will support Ukraine in a conflict and whether the West can be trusted, she said.

The U.S. intelligence community has taken note of a buildup on social media by Russian influencers justifying intervention by emphasizing deteriorating human rights in Ukraine, suggesting an increased militancy of Ukrainian leaders and blaming the West for escalating tensions.

"We saw this playbook in 2014," Sullivan told reporters on Thursday. "They are preparing this playbook again."

The Russians, while maintaining they don't plan to invade Ukraine, are demanding that the U.S. and NATO provide written guarantees that the alliance will not expand eastward. The U.S. has called such demands nonstarters but said that it's willing to negotiate with Moscow about possible future deployments

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of offensive missiles in Ukraine and putting limits on U.S. and NATO military exercises in Eastern Europe.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned on Friday that Moscow wouldn't wait indefinitely for the Western response, saying he expects the U.S. and NATO to provide a written answer next week.

Lavrov described Moscow's demands for binding guarantees that NATO will not embrace Ukraine or any other former Soviet nations, or station its forces and weapons there, as essential for the progress of diplomatic efforts to defuse soaring tensions over Ukraine.

He argued that NATO's deployments and drills near Russia's borders pose a security challenge that must be addressed immediately.

"We have run out of patience," Lavrov said at a news conference. "The West has been driven by hubris and has exacerbated tensions in violation of its obligations and common sense."

## **Biden team regroup after court loss on COVID shots-or-test**

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## South prepares for weekend threat of debilitating snow, ice

By SUDHIN THANAWALA and JEFFREY COLLINS Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Weather forecasters' predictions of debilitating snow and ice as far south as Georgia sent parts of the region into a tizzy Friday with shoppers scouring store shelves for storm supplies and road crews trying to prevent a repeat of past wintertime debacles.



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In Virginia, where a blizzard left thousands of motorists trapped on clogged highways earlier this month, Gov. Ralph Northam declared a state of emergency and urged people to take the approaching storm seriously. Some store shelves were stripped bare of essentials including bread and milk in North Carolina.

Trucks prepared to spray a briny mixture on roads to prevent icing across the region, and Travis Wagler said he hadn't seen such a run on supplies at his Abbeville, South Carolina, hardware store in at least two winters.

"We're selling everything you might expect: sleds, but also salt, shovels and firewood," Wagler said from Abbeville Hardware. There, forecasters predict a quarter-inch (0.6 centimeters) of ice or more on trees and power lines, which could lead to days without electricity.

"People are worried," Wagler said.

South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster issued an emergency order saying the state would likely feel the effects of the major winter storm starting Sunday morning.

"There is a potential for very dangerous conditions caused by accumulations of ice and snow, which will likely result in power outages across the state," he said.

The National Weather Service said from 2 inches (5 centimeters) to 5 inches (12.7 centimeters) of snow could fall as far south as northeast Georgia from Saturday evening through Sunday, and power outages and travel problems will be made all the worse by an additional coating of ice and winds gusting to 35 mph (56 km/h). Snow accumulations could reach 8 inches (20 centimeters) in the highest elevations.

The storm, after dipping down into the Southeast through the weekend, was so large it was expected to head into the Northeast while dropping snow, sleet and rain around the densely populated Eastern Seaboard.

In Georgia, Gov. Brian Kemp said the state was preparing "to the max" for the blast. He declared a state of emergency late Friday, saying the focus of concern was the northern part of Georgia from just above the east-west Interstate 20 route.

"Hopefully, the storm will underdeliver, but it could overdeliver. We just don't know," he said.

Parts of Tennessee could get as much as 6 inches (15 centimeters) of snow, forecasters said, and northern Mississippi and the Tennessee Valley region of Alabama could receive light snow accumulations. With lows predicted in the 20s across a wide area, any precipitation could freeze and make driving difficult.

On Friday, the fast-moving storm dropped heavy snow across a large swath of the Midwest, where travel conditions deteriorated and scores of schools closed or moved to online instruction.

A winter storm watch extended from just north of metro Atlanta to Arkansas in the west and Pennsylvania in the north, covering parts of 10 states including Kentucky, Ohio and West Virginia. Travel problems could extend into metro Atlanta, where about 2 inches (5 centimeters) of snow brought traffic to a slip-sliding halt in 2014, an event still known as "Snowmagedon."

At Dawsonville Hardware about 60 miles (97 km) north of Atlanta, owner Dwight Gilleland said he was already out heaters by noon Friday and only had five bags of salt and sand left.

"I think the pandemic has made people more anxious than normal," he said.

The city of Winston-Salem, North Carolina, had to borrow workers from other departments to help treat roads ahead of the storm because COVID-19 had caused a shortage of workers, spokesman Randy Britton said. Even volunteers pitched in to help as the city stepped up its normal schedule of preparing for winter weather, he said.

"We feel real good about where we are," he said. "We've checked the boxes."

North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper signed an emergency order and the administration urged people to stay at home after the storm hits. The state highway agency warned that labor shortages meant crews might not respond to problems areas as quickly as normal.

"We just don't have as many people to drive the trucks or operate the equipment," said Marcus Thompson, a spokesman for the North Carolina Department of Transportation.

Many schools and businesses will be closed Monday for the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, which could help reduce travel problems along with temperatures that are supposed to rise into the 40s.

Pam Thompson, who owns Dillard House Stables in north Georgia's Rabun County, was near the bullseye of the largest snow forecast. She was gathering feed and hay for about 40 horses in case the snow and ice doesn't make a fast departure.

"We have snow every year up here in the mountains and it will be anywhere from 6 to 8 inches, and it's usually gone pretty fast," Thompson said. "What I'm seeing on the forecast is that it's going to be really cold next week, so the snow may not go away as quickly as normal."

## Djokovic's appeal of canceled visa moves to higher court

By JOHN PYE and ROD MCGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Novak Djokovic's effort to play in the Australian Open despite being unvaccinated for COVID-19 moved to a higher court Saturday as the No. 1-ranked tennis player appealed the second cancellation of his visa.

Djokovic was not seen on the online feed available to the public for the 15-minute procedural hearing, which began just two days before he is scheduled to play his first match of 2022 at Melbourne Park.

Judge David O'Callaghan ruled that lawyers representing Djokovic and the government would need to submit written arguments later Saturday, and he scheduled another hearing for Sunday morning.

Immigration Minister Alex Hawke blocked the 34-year-old Serb's visa, which was originally revoked when he landed at a Melbourne airport last week. But it was restored Monday by a judge on procedural grounds because Djokovic was not allowed to have a lawyer with him at the airport.

Deportation from Australia can lead to a three-year ban on returning to the country, although that may be waived, depending on the circumstances.

Djokovic has acknowledged that his travel declaration was incorrect because it failed to indicate that he had been in multiple countries over the two weeks before his arrival in Australia.

He has a record nine Australian Open titles, including the past three in a row, part of his overall Grand Slam haul of 20 championships. He is tied with Rafael Nadal and Roger Federer for the most by a man in history.

In a post on social media Wednesday that constituted his most extensive public comments yet the episode, Djokovic blamed his agent for checking the wrong box on the form, calling it "a human error and certainly not deliberate."

In that same post, Djokovic said he went ahead with an interview and a photo shoot with a French newspaper in Serbia despite knowing he had tested positive for COVID-19 two days earlier. Djokovic has been attempting to use what he says was a positive test taken on Dec. 16 to justify a medical exemption that would allow him to skirt the vaccine requirement on the grounds that he already had COVID-19.

Hawke said he canceled the visa on "health and good order grounds, on the basis that it was in the public interest to do so." His statement added that Prime Minister Scott Morrison's government "is firmly committed to protecting Australia's borders, particularly in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic."

The main idea of the appeal of Hawke's decision, according to the athlete's lawyers, was that it was not based on the health risk that Djokovic might pose by not being vaccinated, but on how he might be perceived by anti-vaxxers.

Morrison himself welcomed Djokovic's pending deportation. The episode has touched a nerve in Australia, and particularly in Victoria state, where locals went through hundreds of days of lockdowns during the worst of the pandemic and there is a vaccination rate among adults of more than 90%.

Australia faces a massive surge in virus cases driven by the highly transmissible omicron variant. On Friday, the nation reported 130,000 new cases, including nearly 35,000 in Victoria state. Although many infected people aren't getting as sick as they did in previous outbreaks, the surge is still putting severe strain on the health system, with more than 4,400 people hospitalized. It has also disrupted workplaces and supply chains.

"This pandemic has been incredibly difficult for every Australian, but we have stuck together and saved lives and livelihoods. ... Australians have made many sacrifices during this pandemic, and they rightly

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expect the result of those sacrifices to be protected," Morrison said. "This is what the Minister is doing in taking this action today."

His supporters in Serbia have been dismayed by the visa cancellations.

Everyone at the Australian Open — including players, their support teams and spectators — is required to be vaccinated. Djokovic is not inoculated.

His exemption was approved by the Victoria state government and Tennis Australia, apparently allowing him to obtain a visa to travel. But the Australian Border Force rejected the exemption and canceled his visa when he landed in the country on Jan. 5.

Djokovic spent four nights in an immigration detention hotel before a judge overturned that decision. That ruling allowed him to move freely around Australia and he has been practicing at Melbourne Park daily.

"It's not a good situation for anyone," said Andy Murray, a three-time Grand Slam champion and five-time runner-up at the Australian Open. "It just seems like it's dragged on for quite a long time now."

According to Grand Slam rules, if Djokovic is forced to pull out of the tournament before the order of play for Day 1 is announced, No. 5 seed Andrey Rublev would move into Djokovic's spot in the bracket.

If Djokovic withdraws from the tournament after Monday's schedule is released, he would be replaced in the field by what's known as a "lucky loser" — a player who loses in the qualifying tournament but gets into the main draw because of another player's exit before competition has started.

And if Djokovic plays in a match — or more — and then is told he can no longer participate in the tournament, his next opponent would simply advance to the following round and there would be no replacement.

## New Texas voting law snags US citizens, mail ballot requests

By ACACIA CORONADO, PAUL WEBER and NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas (AP) — A sweeping new Texas voting law that Republicans muscled through the Legislature last year over dramatic protests is drawing fire again, even before some of the most contentious restrictions and changes kick in ahead of the state's first-in-the-nation primary.

Thousands of Texans — including some U.S. citizens — have received letters saying they have been flagged as potential noncitizens who could be kicked off voting rolls. And this week, local elections officials said hundreds of mail-in ballot applications are being rejected for not including required new information.

"It's just a bad situation on a number of levels," said James Slattery, an attorney with the Texas Civil Rights Project, one of several voting rights groups that has sued the state over the new law.

The Texas law was approved last year by Republicans, who joined their party colleagues in at least 18 states, including Florida, Georgia and Arizona, in enacting new voting restrictions since the 2020 election, according to the Brennan Center for Justice. The national GOP campaign to tighten voting laws has been partly driven by former President Donald Trump's false claims that he won the election, not President Joe Biden.

Democrats have strenuously objected — including by walking out and to gridlock the Legislature, warning it could disenfranchise untold numbers of voters, especially Black, Latino and Asian people. Many of its provisions, such as expanded powers for partisan poll watchers, don't take effect until the election. But Democrats and civil rights groups say what has happened so far is alarming.

First, Texas sent letters to more than 11,000 voters warning them their registrations will be canceled unless they prove to their local elections office they are citizens. More than 2,000 registrations ended after the voters did not come in, according to the Texas Secretary of State's office. But some who received the warning letters were citizens.

Monty Tew, a 52-year-old who was born in Texas, said he couldn't understand why he got the letter asking him to prove his citizenship. He said he paid \$30 to request a copy of his birth certificate, which he then sent the county a picture of as proof of citizenship and was soon notified the issue was resolved.

"I feel fortunate for that not to have been that big of a deal, it wasn't that burdensome," said Tew, of Round Rock, a city outside Austin. "But I can imagine how that can be a much bigger flogging for someone else perhaps, if they didn't have their hands on technology or if paying someone \$30 to get something

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that was a waste of your time, money and effort could be a hassle.”

Then this week, election administrators in some of Texas’ largest counties, which are run by Democrats, began raising early alarms about hundreds of mail-in ballot applications they’ve had to reject for not complying with strict new provisions.

Tucked into the 76-page law is a new requirement that voter include either their driver’s license number or the last four digits of their Social Security number on mail-in ballot applications, or the number of a state-issued identification.

Counties then match those numbers to their records before mailing an actual ballot. Texas already had some of the nation’s most restrictive mail-in ballot rules, and was among only a handful of states that did not expand mail balloting in 2020 during the pandemic.

As of Friday, Harris County officials said they had rejected more than 200 of 1,200 applications from voters in the Houston area. In Austin, county election officials put the rate of rejections at roughly 50%.

“It’s definitely a red flag,” said Isabel Longoria, the Harris County elections administrator. “At this point, to be so low in the number of applications and have a 20 percent rejection rate for the primaries? It’s really got me worried.”

The Secretary of State’s office said in a statement Friday that counties should check with it on how to properly reject mail ballots. It had previously said the letters warning voters they may lose their right to vote were sent as part of the implementation of the new voting law. That measure includes provisions setting out a procedure to comply with a settlement of a 2019 lawsuit settlement over the last time Texas had tried to weed out noncitizen voters and ended up threatening to revoke the registration of large numbers of U.S. citizens as well.

“Voters who do not provide proof of citizenship to their county voter registrar within 30 days of receiving the notice of examination will have their registration cancelled, with the opportunity to be reinstated if the voter later provides proof of citizenship, including at the polling place,” said Sam Taylor, a spokesman for the office.

Of the 2,327 voters whose registration have been canceled through the procedure, 278 have been confirmed as noncitizens, Taylor said.

But civil rights groups say the state is not taking the correct steps to ensure U.S. citizens don’t get caught in the process. The state is supposed to only flag people who identified as noncitizens on their driver’s licenses after registering to vote. But it’s also catching some like Harish Vyalla, 35, of Austin, who said he has voted in the county at least twice since becoming a US citizen in 2013.

“I had no concerns because I know I am a citizen with proper documentation, but I was surprised because nobody had asked me in the past,” said Vyalla, adding it took about a month to preserve his right to vote. “The government should already have all these proofs and documents in hand.”

Nina Perales, an attorney with the Mexican-American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, helped write the settlement of the 2019 case. She said state state officials are clearly not following it and are setting themselves up for another lawsuit.

Perales said Texas voters should brace for a potential rocky voting experience as the law’s provisions fully kick in during the March 1 primary.

“Texans would be well-served to know their rights when they go to the polls, because I think there’ll be confusion and doubt for a lot of voters,” Perales said.

## Garbage and recyclables pile up as omicron takes its toll

By TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (AP) — The omicron variant is sickening so many sanitation workers around the U.S. that some cities have had to delay or suspend garbage or recycling pickup, angering residents shocked that governments can’t perform this most basic of functions.

The slowdowns have caused recycling bins full of Christmas gift boxes and wrapping paper to languish on Nashville curbs, trash bags to pile up on Philadelphia streets, and uncollected yard waste — grass clip-

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pings, leaves, branches — to block sidewalks in Atlanta.

"It's just a shame," said Madelyn Rubin, who lives in Jacksonville, Florida, where officials have halted recycling.

"You know that they could find the money to do it if they wanted to," she said. "If it was a business that wanted to come in here, they would dump money in to make it happen."

Cities including Atlanta, Nashville and Louisville are so shorthanded they have temporarily stopped collecting things like recyclable bottles, cans, paper and plastic, yard waste or oversized junk to focus on the grosser, smellier stuff. The delays are more than an annoyance to residents, creating problems such as clogged storm drains and blocked sidewalks.

Nashville City Council member Freddie O'Connell was just as surprised as his constituents when he received notice before Christmas that the city was halting curbside recycling.

"I was just stunned there wasn't an alternative or a back-up plan," he said. "No hotline for people who are mobility impaired or don't have reliable access to a car" to carry their recyclables to a central drop-off site. In Nashville, staffing shortages exacerbated a problem that includes not enough working garbage trucks and a contract with a bankrupt private trash collector.

"It feels like a failure of governance," he added.

The garbage crisis is actually the third of the pandemic. The first happened in the spring of 2020, when COVID-19 took hold in the U.S. Problems arose again as the delta variant spiked over the summer.

The Solid Waste Association of North America warned government officials and trash haulers in December to "plan now for staffing shortages."

The highly contagious variant hit just when Americans were generating a lot of trash — over the Christmas holidays. Combine that with a relatively low vaccination level among front-line sanitation workers and you have a "perfect storm for delayed collection," the association's executive director, David Biderman, said this week.

In some communities, up to a quarter of the waste-collection workforce is calling in sick, Biderman said.

Garbage collection has become just another of the many basic services disrupted by omicron. Around the U.S., teachers, firefighters, police officers and transit workers have been out sick in large numbers.

"We're getting calls, emails, everything. People are understandably frustrated," said Atlanta City Council member Liliana Bakhtiari.

Atlanta officials said Monday that because of the worker shortage, recycling and yard waste will be picked up "as staffing allows."

Los Angeles said delays in the collection of recyclables could continue through the month.

In Louisville, Kentucky, sanitation workers stopped picking up yard waste in early January until further notice. Residents can drop off branches and clippings at Christmas tree collection sites.

New York City, which boasts the largest municipal sanitation force in the world, had around 2,000 of its 7,000 workers out because of the latest round of the coronavirus, but the rest are working long hours to clear a backlog of waste. The city has not suspended any services.

Harry Nespoli, president of the union local representing the city's sanitation workers, said some are coming back after quarantining, while others are testing positive for the virus: "Right now it's a swinging door."

In Philadelphia, sometimes called Filthadelphia because of the condition of its streets, around 10% to 15% of the 900-person sanitation workforce is out on any given day, leading to delays in waste collection, according to Streets Commissioner Carlton Williams.

"When people are out, we can't just hire to replace them," he said. "We have to give them time to get well."

To keep the trash from piling up, some municipalities are hiring temporary workers or contracting with private haulers. Some are offering signing or retention bonuses or pay raises.

Chattanooga, Tennessee, increased starting wages for drivers by more than 40%, from just over \$31,500 to \$45,000.

That allowed the city to restore recycling collection in November after halting it in July and continue routine pickups despite the omicron surge, said spokesperson Mary Beth Ikard.

## Ohio Supreme Court rejects GOP-drawn congressional map

By JULIE CARR SMYTH Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Ohio's Republican-drawn congressional map was rejected by the state's high court Friday, giving hope to national Democrats who had argued it unfairly delivered several potentially competitive seats in this year's critical midterm elections to Republicans.

In the 4-3 decision, the Ohio Supreme Court returned the map to the Ohio General Assembly, where Republicans hold supermajorities in both chambers, and then to the powerful Ohio Redistricting Commission. The two bodies have a combined 60 days to draw new lines that comply with a 2018 constitutional amendment against gerrymandering.

The commission was already in the process of reconstituting so it can redraw GOP-drawn legislative maps the court also rejected this week as gerrymandered. That decision gave the panel 10 days to comply.

With Feb. 2 and March 4 looming as the filing dates for legislative and congressional candidates, respectively, the decisions have raised questions of whether the state's May 3 primary may have to be extended.

Ohio Republican Party Chair Bob Paduchik called the situation a mess, criticizing the Ohio Supreme Court for giving the commission less than two weeks to come up with new legislative maps.

"That's a lot to dump on a commission with a very short period of time," he said during a forum at the City Club of Cleveland on Friday. "It's hard to say what's going to happen."

Justices chastised Republicans in both decisions for flouting the voters' wishes and the Constitution and directed them to move with haste.

Writing for the majority, Justice Michael Donnelly wrote, "(T)he evidence in these cases makes clear beyond all doubt that the General Assembly did not heed the clarion call sent by Ohio voters to stop political gerrymandering."

Donnelly and the court's other two Democrats were joined by Chief Justice Maureen O'Connor, a moderate Republican set to depart the court due to age limits at the end of the year.

The court's three other Republicans — including Justice Pat DeWine, son of Republican Gov. Mike DeWine, a named plaintiff in the cases — raised their objections in an unprecedented "joint dissent" that failed to identify its author. The majority called the format "unusual and inexplicable."

In it, the three said it was unclear how it should be determined that a map "unduly favors" one party over another.

"When the majority says that the plan unduly favors the Republican Party, what it means is that the plan unduly favors the Republican Party as compared to the results that would be obtained if we followed a system of proportional representation," the dissent said.

They explained that the U.S. has never adopted a system that requires congressional seats to be proportionally distributed to match the popular vote, nor does Ohio's Constitution require it.

In her separate opinion, O'Connor said voting-rights and Democratic groups that challenge the maps never argued strict proportionality was required.

"The dissenting opinion's dismissive characterization of all the metrics used by petitioners' experts as simply being measures of 'proportional representation' is sleight of hand," she wrote. "No magician's trick can hide what the evidence overwhelmingly demonstrates: the map statistically presents such a partisan advantage that it unduly favors the Republican Party."

Friday's decision affects separate lawsuits brought by the National Democratic Redistricting Commission's legal arm, as well as the Ohio offices of the League of Women Voters and the A. Philip Randolph Institute. The groups calculated that either 12 or 13 of the map's 15 districts favor Republicans, despite the GOP garnering only about 54% of votes in statewide races over the past decade.

Republicans had defended the map — which was pushed through the approval process in a flurry — as fair, constitutional and "highly competitive."

Voting rights advocates and Democrats praised the court's ruling, their second victory this week.

"The manipulation of districts is the manipulation of elections and voters have had enough," said Cath-

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erine Turcer, executive director of Common Cause Ohio, a plaintiff. "We expect legislative leaders to learn from their mistakes and finally listen to the people's call for fair maps."

Ohio and other states were required to redraw their congressional maps to reflect results of the 2020 census, under which Ohio lost one of its current 16 districts due to lagging population.

## UK leader's office apologizes for party before royal funeral

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Boris Johnson's office apologized to the royal family on Friday for holding staff parties in Downing Street on the eve of Prince Philip's funeral last year — the latest in a catalogue of allegedly lockdown-breaching gatherings that are threatening to topple the British prime minister.

Farewell parties for Johnson's departing spin doctor and another staffer, complete with late-night drinking and dancing, took place on April 16, 2021, the night before Queen Elizabeth II sat alone at her husband's funeral because of social distancing rules in place to slow the spread of the coronavirus.

Johnson spokesman Jamie Davies acknowledged that news of the gatherings had caused "significant public anger."

"It's deeply regrettable that this took place at a time of national mourning and No. 10 has apologized to the palace," he said, using a term for the prime minister's 10 Downing St. office.

Johnson's former communications director James Slack — who is now deputy editor-in-chief of tabloid newspaper The Sun — apologized "unreservedly" for the "anger and hurt" caused by his farewell party.

Johnson's office said the prime minister wasn't in Downing Street, where he both lives and works, on April 16, and had been unaware any gatherings were planned.

But each new revelation about social events inside the prime minister's office while most in the the U.K. were enduring lockdowns has weakened his hold on power and strengthened calls for him to resign. A scandal that began weeks ago with a report of a December 2020 Christmas party has grown to about a dozen alleged social events in 10 Downing Street and other government buildings.

The former head of the government's COVID-19 task force, Kate Josephs, apologized on Friday for holding a drinks gathering in her office in December 2020. The Daily Mirror reported that Johnson encouraged his office staff to "let off steam" at regular after-work "wine time Fridays." The paper said staff had a wine fridge delivered to Downing Street to hold supplies for the gatherings.

So far none of the alleged parties have been denied by Johnson's office.

The prime minister is not alleged to have attended many of the soirees. But earlier this week, Johnson apologized for going to a Downing Street garden party in May 2020, when the U.K. was under strict lockdown and people were banned by law from meeting more than one person outside their households. Millions were cut off from family and friends, and even barred from visiting dying relatives in hospitals.

Most indoor social gatherings were also banned in April 2021, and funerals were limited to 30 people.

The symbolism of the April parties' timing has appalled many in Britain. The Daily Telegraph, which broke the news, said Downing Street staff drank, danced and socialized late into the night, and that at one point an employee was dispatched with a suitcase to a nearby supermarket to buy more booze. The next day, the widowed queen sat alone in a church at Windsor Castle to say goodbye to her husband of 73 years.

Photos of the monarch, clad in black and wearing a face mask, became a powerful image of the isolation and sacrifice endured by many during the pandemic.

Many Conservatives fear "partygate" could become a tipping point for a leader who has weathered a series of other storms over his expenses, and his moral judgment.

In a sign of growing Conservative anger at the revelations, the party's association in the staunchly Tory district of Sutton Coldfield in central England voted unanimously on Thursday night to withdraw its support from Johnson.

"The culture starts at the top, doesn't it?" said Simon Ward, a Conservative local councilor. He said people across the country had been asked to make "massive sacrifices" during the pandemic.

"I think we have the right to expect everybody in government and in those positions of leadership to

follow those same rules and guidelines as well," he said.

Johnson said in his apology on Wednesday that he understood public "rage," but stopped short of admitting wrongdoing, saying he had considered the garden gathering a work event to thank staff for their efforts during the pandemic.

Johnson urged people to await the conclusions of an investigation by senior civil servant Sue Gray into all the party allegations. Gray, a respected public servant who has investigated past allegations of ministerial wrongdoing, is expected to report by the end of the month.

The government says Gray's inquiry is independent, but she is a civil servant and Johnson is, ultimately, her boss. Gray could conclude that Johnson broke the code of conduct for government ministers, though she does not have the power to fire him. Johnson has not said what he will do if she found he was at fault.

Johnson does not have to face voters' judgment until the next general election, scheduled for 2024. But his party could seek to oust him sooner if colleagues believe the leader they chose for his popular appeal has become toxic.

Under Conservative rules, a no-confidence vote in the leader can be triggered if 54 party lawmakers — 15% of the total — write letters demanding it.

Roger Gale, a Conservative lawmaker who has long been critical of Johnson, said he had already submitted a letter calling for a leadership change.

"I do think that minds are now, over this weekend, being focused upon the need to take the necessary action," he said. "I believe that there is some momentum which is growing."

Cabinet ministers are standing by Johnson, at least for now.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss — often cited as a potential successor to Johnson — said she understood "people's anger and dismay" at the party revelations.

But she said "I think we now need to move on."

## Shkreli ordered to return \$64M, is barred from drug industry

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Martin Shkreli must return \$64.6 million in profits he and his former company reaped from jacking up the price and monopolizing the market for a lifesaving drug, a federal judge ruled Friday while also barring the provocative, imprisoned ex-CEO from the pharmaceutical industry for the rest of his life.

U.S. District Judge Denise Cote's ruling came several weeks after a seven-day bench trial in December that featured recordings of conversations that Cote said showed Shkreli continuing to exert control over the company, Vyera Pharmaceuticals LLC, from behind bars and discussing ways to thwart generic versions of its lucrative drug, Daraprim.

"Shkreli was no side player in, or a 'remote, unrelated' beneficiary of Vyera's scheme," Cote wrote in a 135-page opinion. "He was the mastermind of its illegal conduct and the person principally responsible for it throughout the years."

The Federal Trade Commission and seven states brought the case in 2020 against the man known in the media as "Pharma Bro," about two years after he was sentenced to prison in an unrelated securities fraud scheme.

"Envy, greed, lust, and hate, don't just 'separate,' but they obviously motivated Mr. Shkreli and his partner to illegally jack up the price of a life-saving drug as Americans' lives hung in the balance," New York Attorney General Letitia James said, peppering the written statement with references to the Wu-Tang Clan, whose one-of-a-kind album Shkreli had to fork over to satisfy court debt.

"But Americans can rest easy because Martin Shkreli is a pharma bro no more."

Messages seeking comment were left with Shkreli's lawyers.

Shkreli was CEO of Turing Pharmaceuticals — later Vyera — when it raised the price of Daraprim from \$13.50 to \$750 per pill after obtaining exclusive rights to the decades-old drug in 2015. It treats a rare parasitic disease that strikes pregnant women, cancer patients and AIDS patients.

Shkreli defended the decision as capitalism at work and said insurance and other programs ensured that



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people who need Daraprim would ultimately get it.

But the move sparked outrage from the medical community to Congress and was a rare source of bipartisan agreement on the 2016 presidential campaign trail, where Democrat Hillary Clinton called it price-gouging and future President Donald Trump, a Republican, called Shkreli "a spoiled brat."

Shkreli eventually offered hospitals half off — still amounting to a 2,500% increase. But patients normally take most of the weeklong treatment after returning home, so they and their insurers still faced the \$750-a-pill price.

Shkreli resigned as Turing's CEO in 2015, a day after he was arrested on securities fraud charges related to two failed hedge funds he ran before getting into the pharmaceutical industry. He was convicted of lying to investors and cheating them out of millions and is serving a seven-year sentence at a federal prison in Allenwood, Pennsylvania, and is due to be released in November.

The FTC and seven states — New York, California, Illinois, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania and Virginia — alleged in their case that Vyera hiked the price of Daraprim and illegally created "a web of anticompetitive restrictions" to prevent other companies from creating cheaper generic versions. Among other things, they alleged, Vyera blocked access to a key ingredient for the medication and to data the companies would want to evaluate the drug's market potential.

Vyera and its parent company, Phoenixus AG, settled last month, agreeing to provide up to \$40 million in relief over 10 years to consumers and to make Daraprim available to any potential generic competitor at the cost of producing the drug. Former Vyera CEO Kevin Mulleady agreed to pay \$250,000 if he violates the settlement, which barred him from working for a pharmaceutical company" for seven years.

Shkreli proceeded to trial but opted not to attend the proceedings, instead submitting a written affidavit that served as his testimony.

The trial record included evidence showing Shkreli kept in regular contact with company executives, even after he went to prison. A spreadsheet kept by one executive showed more than 1,500 contacts with Shkreli between December 2019 and July 2020.

The record also included recordings of conversations Shkreli had from prison in which he discussed his control of Vyera, saying he had "no problem firing everybody," boasting how he controlled the board, and comparing himself to Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and the pharmaceutical company to the social media behemoth.

Zuckerberg "just happens to own the thing, and that's the way it is," Shkreli said in one of the recordings. You "can't go in there and tell Zuckerberg what to do."

In 2019, Shkreli was sent to solitary confinement for a time after prison officials discovered him using a contraband smartphone to conduct business.

"Whether he used a smuggled phone or the prison's authorized phones, he stayed in touch with Vyera's management and exercised his power over Vyera as its largest shareholder," Cote wrote.

## Goodbye 'godsend': Expiration of child tax credits hits home

By JOHN RABY, FATIMA HUSSEIN and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. (AP) — For the first time in half a year, families on Friday are going without a monthly deposit from the child tax credit — a program that was intended to be part of President Joe Biden's legacy but has emerged instead as a flash point over who is worthy of government support.

Retiree Andy Roberts, from St. Albans, West Virginia, relied on the checks to help raise his two young grandchildren, whom he and his wife adopted because the birth parents are recovering from drug addiction.

The Robertses are now out \$550 a month. That money helped pay for Girl Scouts, ballet and acting lessons and kids' shoes, which Roberts noted are more expensive than adult shoes. The tax credit, he said, was a "godsend."

"It'll make you tighten up your belt, if you've got anything to tighten," Roberts said about losing the payments.

The monthly tax credits were part of Biden's \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package — and the president

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had proposed extending them for another full year as part of a separate measure focused on economic and social programs.

But Democratic Sen. Joe Manchin, from Roberts' home state of West Virginia, objected to extending the credit out of concern that the money would discourage people from working and that any additional federal spending would fuel inflation that has already climbed to a nearly 40-year high.

According to IRS data, 305,000 West Virginia children benefited from the expanded credit last month.

Manchin's opposition in the evenly split Senate derailed Biden's social spending package and caused the expanded tax credits that were going out in the middle of every month to expire in January. This is whittling down family incomes at the precise moment when people are grappling with higher prices.

However, families only received half of their 2021 credit on a monthly basis and the other half will be received once they file their taxes in the coming months. The size of the credit will be cut in 2022, with full payments only going to families that earned enough income to owe taxes, a policy choice that will limit the benefits for the poorest households. And the credits for 2022 will come only once people file their taxes at the start of the following year.

West Virginia families interviewed by The Associated Press highlighted how their grocery and gasoline bills have risen and said they'll need to get by with less of a financial cushion than a few months ago.

"You're going to have to learn to adapt," said Roberts, who worked as an auto dealer for five decades. "You never really dreamed that everything would all of a sudden explode. You go down and get a package of hamburger and it's \$7-8 a pound."

By the Biden administration's math, the expanded child tax credit and its monthly payments were a policy success that paid out \$93 billion over six months. More than 36 million families received the payments in December. The payments were \$300 monthly for each child who was five and younger, and \$250 monthly for children between the ages of six and 17.

The Treasury Department declined to address questions about the expiration of the expanded child tax credit, which has become a politically sensitive issue as part of Biden's nearly \$2 trillion economic package that has stalled in the Senate.

Manchin has supported some form of a work requirement for people receiving the payment, out of concern that automatic government aid could cause people to quit their jobs. Yet his primary objection, in a written statement last month, sidestepped that issue as he expressed concerns about inflation and that a one-year extension masked the true costs of a tax credit that could become permanent.

"My Democratic colleagues in Washington are determined to dramatically reshape our society in a way that leaves our country even more vulnerable to the threats we face," Manchin said. He added that he was worried about inflation and the size of the national debt.

But Joanna Vance of Beckley, who works for a nonprofit social justice group, said Manchin needs to learn more about his constituents, especially southern communities where thousands of coal mining jobs were lost over the past decade as companies and utilities explore using other energy sources such as natural gas, solar and wind.

"Take a drive through there," Vance said Friday. "Now they're just ghost towns. There's no jobs there. There's no child care there. There's no transportation there. And it's that way for 20 miles in either direction.

"So I understand wanting to have a work requirement. You can't have a work requirement when it's not even viable."

The Census Bureau surveyed the spending patterns of recipients during September and October. Nearly a third used the credit to pay for school expenses, while about 25% of families with young children spent it on child care. About 40% of recipients said they mostly relied on the money to pay off debt.

There are separate benefits in terms of improving the outcomes for impoverished children, whose families could not previously access the full tax credit because their earnings were too low. An analysis by the Urban Institute estimated that extending the credit as developed by the Biden administration would cut child poverty by 40%.

The tax credits did not cause an immediate exodus from the workforce, as some lawmakers had feared.

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The Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the percentage of people with jobs increased from 58% the month before the monthly payments began to 59.5% last month. That same trend occurred in West Virginia, where the employment-population ratio rose to the pre-pandemic level of 52.9%.

There's an academic debate over whether the credit could suppress employment in the long term, with most studies suggesting that the impact would be statistically negligible.

Academics who study the tax credit are torn on how a permanent program would affect the economy and child welfare.

Katherine Michelmore, an associate professor of public policy at the University of Michigan, and two other researchers estimated that roughly 350,000 parents would exit the workforce, a figure that is not all that significant in an economy with roughly 150 million jobs.

Michelmore said the long-term effects of a permanent tax credit would have a positive impact on the economy, as children who grow up in families with higher incomes "tend to do better in school, they're more likely to graduate from high school. It might be 15 years down the road but there will be more cost savings in the future."

One of the key questions for policymakers is whether bureaucracies or parents are better at spending money on children. Manchin has proposed a 10-year, funded version of Biden's economic proposal that would scrap the child tax credits focus and instead finance programs such as universal pre-kindergarten, to avoid sending money directly to families.

"It's a moral question of do you trust families to make their own decisions," Michelmore said.

Hairdresser Chelsea Woody is a single mother from Charleston, West Virginia, who works six days a week to make ends meet. The extended child tax credit payments had helped pay for her son's daycare, as well as letting her splurge on clothes for him.

"It truly helps out a lot. It's an extra cushion, instead of me worrying how I'm going to pay a bill or if anything comes up," Woody said as she loaded groceries into her car. "It's helpful for a lot of people. It helps working families out because we struggle the most. I'm hardly home with my kid because I work all the time."

## Federal testing website launches next week, 4 tests per home

By ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal website where Americans can request free COVID-19 tests will begin accepting orders on Wednesday as the White House looks to address nationwide shortages, but supplies will be limited to just four free tests per home.

Starting on Jan. 19, the website COVIDTests.gov will provide tests at no cost, including no shipping fee, the White House announced Friday.

As he faced criticism for low inventory and long lines for testing, President Joe Biden announced last month that the U.S. would purchase 500 million at-home tests to launch the program and on Thursday the president announced that he was doubling the order to 1 billion tests.

But Americans shouldn't expect a rapid turn-around on the orders and they will have to plan ahead and request the tests well before they meet federal guidelines for when to use a test.

The White House said "tests will typically ship within 7-12 days of ordering" through the U.S. Postal Service, which reports shipping times of 1-3 days for its first-class package service in the continental United States.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends at-home testing when experiencing COVID-19 symptoms including fever, cough, sore throat, respiratory symptoms and muscle aches, five days after a potential COVID-19 exposure, or as part of test-to-stay protocols in schools and workplaces.

"Certainly if you're going to gather with family, if you're going to a gathering where people are immunocompromised or where they're elderly or where you have people who might be unvaccinated or poorly protected from a vaccine that might be an opportunity you want to test," said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, the CDC director, on Wednesday.

Officials emphasized that the federal website is just one way for people to procure COVID-19 tests.

Starting on Saturday, private insurance companies will be required to cover the cost of at-home rapid tests, allowing Americans to be reimbursed for tests they purchase at pharmacies and online retailers. That covers up to eight tests per month.

The White House said the four-test limit on website orders will be applied to each residential address and will apply to the first tranche of 500 million tests. It estimates that the cost of purchasing and distributing the first block of tests at \$4 billion.

Officials said they are cognizant that any launch of a website carries some risks — and memories of the disastrous roll-out during the Obama administration of Healthcare.gov are still fresh — but said they believe they are well-positioned to handle expected demand for tests.

## **Treasury: Arizona risks relief funds over anti-mandate rules**

By FATIMA HUSSEIN, ZEKE MILLER and BOB CHRISTIE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Biden administration is threatening to recoup COVID-19 relief funds sent to Arizona over state provisions that it says discourage families and school districts from following federal guidance recommending face coverings in schools.

At issue are two state programs that are meant to help schools and students but that direct funding away from jurisdictions with mask requirements. Arizona's Education Plus-Up Grant Program provides \$163 million in funding to schools, but districts that require face coverings are ineligible. And its COVID-19 Educational Recovery Benefit Program provides for up to \$7,000 for parents if their child's school requires face coverings or quarantines after exposure. It lets parents use the money for private school tuition or other education costs and its design mirrors the state's existing school voucher program.

The program has had few takers, despite Republican Gov. Doug Ducey's office touting it as a response to an outcry from parents. As of last week, only 85 students were getting the vouchers and less than \$600,000 of the \$10 million had been allocated.

Also last week, the governor created a third program that is likely to run afoul of Treasury Department spending rules. It is another \$10 million school voucher program for parents whose children's schools close for even one day after Jan. 2 due to COVID-19.

In a Friday letter, the Treasury Department warned that the state has 60 days to remove the anti-masking provisions before the federal government moves to recover the relief money, and it threatened to withhold the next tranche of aid as well.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends universal mask-wearing in school settings to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

"By discouraging families and school districts from following this guidance, the conditions referenced above undermine efforts to stop the spread of COVID-19," the Treasury Department wrote. "Accordingly, these school programs as currently structured are ineligible uses of (Coronavirus State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds)."

Ducey's chief of staff on Friday pushed back against the Biden administration's claims.

"We think that this program is aboveboard," Daniel Ruiz said. "We're going to defend that program and any other future program that is designed to get kids caught back up and mitigate the learning loss" that has taken place over the last year.

Arizona has already received about half of the \$4.2 billion awarded to the state under the 2021 coronavirus relief bill.

## **December retail sales slip after a record holiday season**

By ANNE D'INNOCENZIO AP Retail Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Americans overlooked shortages, spiking prices and uncertainty over the omicron variant to break spending records during the critical holiday shopping season. But figures released Friday show that after spending robustly early in the holiday season, consumers sharply slowed their purchases

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from November to December.

The National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, said that sales surged by a record 14.1% from November and December 2020 to the same months in 2021. Those figures blew away the federation's projections for growth of between 8.5% to 10.5%, and more than tripled the average gain over the past five years of 4.4%.

"After a dispiriting holiday season in 2020, most shoppers were absolutely determined to enjoy themselves come what may," said Neil Saunders, managing director of GlobalData.

Yet data issued by the Commerce Department showed that by the end of December, spending had trailed off sharply enough to catch economists off guard and raise doubts about the sustainability of retail sales in the face of omicron, inflation and persistent shortages of labor and supplies. Retail sales fell a seasonally adjusted 1.9% from November to December.

Spending fell broadly across numerous sectors: Department store sales fell 7%, restaurant 0.8% and online purchases 8.7% compared with November.

Many economists expect the caution that consumers displayed last month to carry over into this year and potentially slow the economy. Still, with average hourly pay rising and unemployment rate steadily dropping, analysts say spending and growth could pick up, at least modestly, once omicron fades.

"American consumers closed 2021 on a very sour note," said Sal Guatieri, senior economist at BMO Capital Markets. "That said, high household savings, strong job growth, and improved confidence once the latest COVID wave crests should put consumers back on a high-spending track in the second quarter."

Retailers warned for months that their supply chains had become snarled as the nation swiftly emerged from the pandemic recession, and they urged consumers to shop early for their holiday purchases. It appears that many Americans took heed and, in effect, moved up the usual holiday shopping period by a month or so.

Commerce Department figure show retail sales jumped 1.8% in October, and on Friday it reported that year-over-year numbers show that retail sales surged 16.9% last month compared with December 2020. For all of 2021, sales spiked 19.3% compared with the previous year.

Some economists caution that the seasonal adjustment of retail sales has been thrown off by the pandemic. Seasonal adjustment is intended to account for the normal spike in shopping in December for the holiday season. This year, though, because many Americans started shopping so early, the seasonal adjustment might have exaggerated any December spending retreat.

Some analysts also suspect that shoppers who waited until the end of the holiday season and didn't find what they wanted and took a pass or they bought gift cards. That spending won't show up in retail data until those cards are redeemed.

All told, Americans appear to be spending their money differently — and spending more, not less, collectively.

Mastercard SpendingPulse, which tracks all kinds of payments including cash and debit cards, reported late last month that holiday sales surged 8.5% from Nov. 1 through Dec. 24 from a year earlier. That was the fastest such pace in 17 years.

"Consumer spending will remain the cornerstone of economic growth this year, but the near-term path will be choppy amid surging omicron cases," said Lydia Boussour, lead U.S. economist at Oxford Economics. Boussour said she thinks that after a soft patch in the first quarter, spending should rebound in the spring on the strength of strong wage growth and savings.

Stephen Stanley, chief economist at Amherst Pierpoint, agreed, pointing to a robust job market, pent-up demand and "a mountainous pile of extra cash to spend."

"People will spend again once the omicron wave fades," Stanley predicted.

The omicron variant has led to widespread worker shortages with many people calling out sick. And supply shortages have curtailed what goods make it to store shelves. Stores and restaurants have slashed operating hours or remained closed on days when they had previously been open.

This week, Lululemon warned that fourth-quarter sales and profits will likely come in at the low end of its expectations as it grapples with the variant's fallout.

"We started the holiday season in a strong position but have since experienced several consequences of the omicron variant, including increased capacity constraints, more limited staff availability and reduced operating hours in certain locations," said CEO Calvin McDonald.

And inflation has settled in across almost every level of the economy, forcing the Federal Reserve to no longer characterize rising prices as "transitory."

Last month, inflation jumped at its fastest pace in nearly 40 years, a 7% spike from a year earlier that is increasing household expenses and biting into wage gains. And the largest price spikes are hitting where Americans can most feel it, with the cost of homes, cars, clothes and food racing higher.

Raquel Schuttler, who works in fashion sales, says that the surging cost of food has had a psychological impact on her spending everywhere.

The 53-year-old Atlanta resident, who does grocery shopping for her 17-year-old son and her fiancée, used to make intermittent trips to the grocery store in between big shopping trips. Those smaller trips are now costing her roughly \$280, instead of \$220, she said. She has pulled back on lunches at the mall with friends to avoid the temptation to shop there.

"I am being much more conservative," Schuttler said. "I stopped any kind of going out impulsively."

## 5 players are unanimous choices for AP's NFL All-Pro Team

By BARRY WILNER AP Pro Football Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Five players, including dynamic pass catchers Cooper Kupp and Davante Adams, are unanimous choices for The Associated Press 2021 NFL All-Pro Team.

Joining the Rams' Kupp and the Packers' Adams in receiving votes Friday from all 50 members of a nationwide panel of media members who regularly cover the league are Colts running back Jonathan Taylor, Steelers edge rusher T.J. Watt, and Rams defensive tackle Aaron Donald.

While Donald is a perennial pick — the three-time Defensive Player of the Year makes the team for the seventh time in his eight pro seasons — Watt is on it for a third time. He tied the NFL record for sacks with 22 1/2. Adams makes it for the second time, and the other two are newcomers as All-Pros. Kupp led the NFL in receptions (145), yards receiving (1,947) and TD catches (16). Taylor was the top rusher by a landslide with 1,811 yards and scored 18 touchdowns on the ground, two as a receiver.

"Obviously, it's an honor to be recognized, and it wouldn't be possible without my coaches and incredible teammates, but the awards and accolades aren't what drives me," said Watt, whose Steelers play at Kansas City on Sunday. "It's competing with and for them, this franchise, and this city, that drives me. My coaches and teammates are the people that put me in a position to make splash, help us win, and this recognition honestly doesn't come without them."

Like Donald, although not nearly as often as the offense-wrecking DT, several players are making another appearance on the All-Pro Team. Green Bay quarterback Aaron Rodgers is on for the fourth time, as is Philadelphia center Jason Kelce — one more than his brother, Chiefs' star tight end Travis. One better than them: Dallas right guard Zack Martin and Baltimore placekicker Justin Tucker at five.

Three-time All-Pros are Colts linebacker Darius Leonard, Rams cornerback Jalen Ramsey, and Steelers defensive tackle Cam Heyward. Double All-Pros are Browns edge rusher Myles Garrett and Titans safety Kevin Byard.

The other 14 2021 All-Pros are making their debuts. On offense, 49ers left tackle Trent Williams is a newcomer in his 11th NFL season, joined by Ravens tight end Mark Andrews, Buccaneers right tackle Tristan Wirfs, Browns left guard Joel Bitonio, and 49ers wide receiver Deebo Samuel. On defense, it's linebackers Micah Parsons of Dallas, the only rookie on the squad, and De'Vondre Campbell of Green Bay; Cowboys cornerback Trevon Diggs; Bills safety Jordan Poyer; and five special teamers: Las Vegas punter A.J. Cole, Jets kick returner Braxton Berrios, Ravens punt returner Devin Duvernay, Saints special teams ace J.T. Gray, and Colts long snapper Luke Rhodes.

Perhaps the most thrilled player is Williams, whose been a stellar blocker for a decade with Washington and now San Francisco, but never got the All-Pro nod.

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"I do feel more comfortable than I've ever felt," he said. "I do feel like I'm as strong as I've ever been. I do feel my football IQ is probably better than it's ever been. As a football player, as a competitor every year you want to be better than the last year. That's my goal and always has been my goal. So if this year is better than last year, I hope so. That's the plan."

Almost as unusual as sweeping the votes is having a rookie on the team. Parsons has been so outstanding he's also considered a strong contender for the Defensive Player of the Year award.

"I think it's an extraordinary honor," he said of being an All-Pro. "It speaks to the work and the position the Cowboys put me in. I think it's just a true blessing. It just makes you want to go harder.

"I think when you achieve things early, you've got to learn how to sustain it. People always say when you get there it gets easier. But I think when you get there, it gets harder. Once you get it, you've got it. But it's hard to sustain it than it is just to get there. I've got to just keep working and keep getting better and find a way to beat this season next year, which is the harder part."

Byard was an All-Pro in 2017, and now he's back on the roster after what he felt was a down 2020 season.

"It means a lot to me, honestly," he acknowledged. "I put a lot of work in every single offseason by myself, not necessarily with the team in training camp, but just try to come into the next season to try to play the best I can be for my team.

"I've talked about it a lot. Just not felt like I played my best last year. So to be able to bounce back and see the kind of the work that I put in mentally and physically kind of pay off."

The Packers, Colts, Ravens, Rams and Cowboys each have three All-Pros. There's an even breakdown by conference of 14 apiece.

## George Lucas, Kathleen Kennedy honored by Producer's Guild

By LINDSEY BAHR AP Film Writer

George Lucas and Kathleen Kennedy, stewards of the Star Wars universe and numerous other notable motion pictures, are being honored by the Producers Guild of America for their contributions to the film industry. The PGA said Friday that Lucas and Kennedy will receive the Milestone Award at the Producers Guild Awards in March, joining the ranks of previous honorees that include Louis B. Mayer, Walt Disney and Steven Spielberg.

Lucas, in a statement, said the award is a celebration of all that goes into bringing stories to life: "Protecting creativity while balancing business, moving technology forward to make real what you can see in your mind's eye and doing it all from scratch most of the time."

Lucas, in addition to films he's directed from "American Graffiti" to "Star Wars," has produced and executive produced for the likes of Spielberg, Francis Ford Coppola and Akira Kurosawa all while building the Lucasfilm empire, including Industrial Light & Magic and Skywalker Sound.

"Being recognized alongside my longtime friend and fellow producer Kathleen Kennedy makes this honoring of our shared and individual works even more meaningful," Lucas continued.

He and Kennedy shared friends and collaborators and both worked on "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom," her through the production company she co-founded with Spielberg and Frank Marshall, Amblin Entertainment. Kennedy's credits include "E.T. The Extra Terrestrial," "Schindler's List," "Jurassic Park" and the "Back to the Future" films. In 2012 she became co-chair of Lucasfilm with Lucas. A few months later, when the company was acquired by Disney, Lucas stepped aside and Kennedy became president, where she has produced the newest Star Wars trilogy and various spinoffs.

"I am very honored to share this award with George Lucas who has inspired a generation of filmmakers who were coming of age, not only through his storytelling but through technological innovation that unlocked our imagination," Kennedy said in a statement.

Producers Guild of America presidents, Gail Berman and Lucy Fisher, added in a joint statement that Lucas and Kennedy have, "carved out a fantastic empire of entertainment that inspires and entertains billions, all with the highest levels of both creative and technical achievement.

"What George has built through his movies and through Lucasfilm has enriched every facet of filmmaking,

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and his colossal creativity and technical genius amazed the world. Kathleen has ascended to the highest levels of our industry, facing ever-changing challenges each time she succeeded in producing one of the brilliant and boundary breaking films she is known for. And since joining Lucasfilm as president, she has expertly exalted its IP to be even more influential and treasured around the world...We're very proud to honor George and Kathleen as they celebrate the 50th anniversary of Lucasfilm."

The 33rd Producers Guild Awards will take place at an untelevised event in Los Angeles on March 19.

## **Analysis: Biden overshoots on what's possible in divided DC**

By ZEKE MILLER, COLLEEN LONG and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — He was supposed to break through the congressional logjam. End the pandemic. Get the economy back on track.

Days before he hits his one-year mark in office, a torrent of bad news is gnawing at the foundational rationale of President Joe Biden's presidency: that he could get the job done.

In the space of a week, Biden has been confronted by record inflation, COVID-19 testing shortages and school disruptions, and the second big slap-down of his domestic agenda in as many months by members of his own party. This time, it's his voting rights push that seems doomed.

Add to that the Supreme Court's rejection of a centerpiece of his coronavirus response, and Biden's argument — that his five decades in Washington uniquely positioned him to deliver on an immensely ambitious agenda — was at risk of crumbling this week.

Jeffrey Engel, director of the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University, said Biden's sweeping promises have collided with the realities of enacting change in a divided Washington where his party has only the slimmest margins of control in Congress.

"I don't think there's any way to reach any other conclusion than he's overshoot here," Engel said. "It's important to separate the politically possible from the politically desirable."

Biden's troubles extend back to August, when the administration executed a chaotic and deadly withdrawal from Afghanistan. And the president's professed competence was already under question as migrants multiplied at the southern border with no clear federal plan in sight. It deteriorated further as inflation that was supposed to be "transitory" only intensified at the end of the year.

"I've been hired to solve problems," Biden said last March during his first press conference in office. Yet they've proven persistent.

The difficulty of navigating Washington's vexing partisanship and the unpredictability of the presidency should have come as no surprise to Biden, a senator for more than three decades who also spent eight years as vice president.

Biden is unlikely to get much sympathy from the public for his predicament.

Even with the now widespread protection of vaccination, new scenes of long virus testing lines and sold-out grocery store shelves hark back to the chaotic earliest days of the pandemic and drag down the nation's psyche.

The administration is going all-out to counter that mindset and demonstrate it's on top of the virus.

A federal website to send free COVID-19 tests to Americans' doorsteps will launch next week — a speedy turnaround after Biden first announced the initiative in December — but one that nonetheless struck even allies as coming far too late to blunt the winter virus surge that should have been expected. And it was only after months of pressure that Biden finally came around to announcing Thursday that his administration will begin making "high-quality masks" available to Americans for free.

That announcement was overshadowed, on a day that brought nothing but bad news for Biden, by a Supreme Court ruling against the Biden administration's rule requiring large employers to have their workers get vaccinated or be subject to weekly COVID-19 testing. White House officials had always anticipated legal challenges, and many in the administration believe just the rollout of the rule helped drive millions of people to get vaccinated. Still, the ruling stung.

The day also brought new indications that Biden's voting rights push, like his social spending bill before it, appears to be doomed by a shortage of support in his own party and his inability to attract Republicans.



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In each case, Biden delivered a lofty speech on the need to get something done and traveled to Capitol Hill to rally his own party, only to be rebuffed.

Both pieces of legislation required all 50 Democratic votes to pass the Senate — and in the case of voting rights, a commitment from those same senators to change the chamber's rules to allow the bill to pass by simple majority.

But on Thursday, Democratic Sen. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona didn't even give Biden the courtesy of hearing his pitch in person before restating her longstanding position that she wouldn't get behind the change. She joined West Virginia's Joe Manchin in again deflating Biden's legislative dreams.

The two senators spent just over an hour at the White House on Thursday evening, but it looked nearly impossible to find a path forward for the legislation.

Rep. Peter Meijer, R-Michigan, said Biden had cultivated "sky-high expectations when he inevitably cannot meet them."

"If you want to be FDR," Meijer added, "it's probably a prerequisite that you have a mandate. On the same ballot that elected Joe Biden into office, the Dems nearly lost the House."

Biden's handling of the economy has brought its own set of challenges. The president has presided over record job creation but also over renewed fears of inflation.

Biden tried to tamp down concerns about inflation this summer, insisting that it was the predictable result of restarting the economy after the pandemic and that rising prices would soon fade.

"Our experts believe and the data shows that most of the price increases we've seen were expected, and expected to be temporary," he said in July. "The reality is, you can't flip the global economic light back on and not expect this to happen."

But inflation only multiplied as the summer ended and oil prices rose. That prompted the president who has promised a future without fossil fuels to make a record-setting release from the U.S. petroleum reserve to help tamp down the cost of gasoline. Even so, inflation in December reached a nearly 40-year high of 7% annually.

And Friday marked the first time in half a year that families are going without a monthly deposit from the child tax credit, which had been seen as a legacy-making program for Biden but has emerged instead as a flash point over who is worthy of government support.

The high prices slashed into public confidence in Biden. Just 41% of Americans approved of his economic leadership last month, down from 60% in March, and below his overall approval rating of 48% in the same poll by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

At the same time, amid the rise of new COVID-19 variants — first delta and now omicron — Biden's approval rating on handling the pandemic fell from 70% early in his presidency to 57% in the December survey.

The White House shrugged off the setbacks as a part of the job for a president aims high.

"You do hard things in White Houses," press secretary Jen Psaki said Thursday. "You have every challenge laid at your feet, whether it's global or domestically. And we could certainly propose legislation to see if people support bunny rabbits and ice cream, but that wouldn't be very rewarding to the American people."

## Russia demands US, NATO response next week on Ukraine

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia on Friday strongly reaffirmed its demand that NATO doesn't expand eastward despite the rejection of that by the military alliance amid a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov warned that Moscow wouldn't wait indefinitely for the Western response, saying he expects the U.S. and NATO to provide a written answer next week.

Lavrov described Moscow's demands for binding guarantees that NATO will not embrace Ukraine or any other ex-Soviet nations, or station its forces and weapons there as essential for the progress of diplomatic efforts to defuse soaring tensions over Ukraine.

He argued that NATO's deployments and drills near Russia's borders pose a security challenge that must

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be addressed immediately.

"We have run out of patience," Lavrov said at a news conference. "The West has been driven by hubris and has exacerbated tensions in violation of its obligations and common sense."

Amid the tensions, Ukraine sustained a massive cyberattack Friday, which hit websites of multiple government agencies.

This week's negotiations in Geneva and a related NATO-Russia meeting in Brussels were held amid a significant Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that the West fears might be a prelude to an invasion.

Russia, which annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, has denied having plans to attack its neighbor but warned the West that NATO's expansion to Ukraine and other ex-Soviet nations is a "red line" that mustn't be crossed.

Washington and its allies firmly rejected Moscow's demand for security guarantees precluding NATO's expansion, but Russia and the West agreed to leave the door open to possible further talks on arms control and confidence-building measures intended to reduce the potential for hostilities.

Lavrov said that those issues are secondary in respect to Moscow's main demand for the non-expansion of NATO and the non-deployment of its weapons near the Russian territory, emphasizing that the Russian proposals represent a "package, not a menu."

"They must understand that the key to everything is the guarantee that NATO will not expand eastward," Lavrov said.

He countered the U.S. and NATO's argument that Russia doesn't have veto power to prevent other nations from joining the alliance by pointing to international agreements emphasizing that the security of some states mustn't be achieved at the expense of others.

Russia's top diplomat warned that "if our proposals are rejected ... we will make a decision on how to ensure our security in a reliable way," citing President Vladimir Putin's warning that Moscow will take unspecified "military-technical measures" if the West stonewalls its demands.

Lavrov's deputy, Sergei Ryabkov, who led the Russian delegation at the talks in Geneva, said Thursday that he would "neither confirm nor exclude" the possibility of Russia sending military assets to Cuba and Venezuela if the U.S. and its allies don't curtail their military activities on Russia's doorstep.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan dismissed the statements about a possible Russian deployment to Cuba and Venezuela as "bluster in the public commentary."

The negotiations took place as an estimated 100,000 Russian troops with tanks and other heavy weapons are massed near Ukraine's eastern border. The U.S. and its allies urged Russia to deescalate by pulling troops back to their permanent bases, but Moscow has rebuffed the demand, saying it's free to deploy forces on its territory wherever it deems necessary.

Lavrov called the Western demand "absurd," noting that "while they are demanding that we pull troops on our own territory back to their barracks, the U.S. and British troops are deployed to the Baltics."

The Russian Defense Ministry said Friday that troops stationed in eastern Siberia and the far east region have been scrambled for movement across the country as part of snap drills to check their "readiness to perform their tasks after redeployment to a large distance."

The ministry noted that "a special attention will be given to the assessment of the country's transport infrastructure to ensure the movement of troops," adding that the troops will conduct drills involving firing live ammunition after the redeployment.

Russia seized the Crimean Peninsula after the ouster of Ukraine's Moscow-friendly leader and in 2014 also threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in eastern Ukraine. More than 14,000 people have been killed in nearly eight years of fighting between the Russia-backed rebels and Ukrainian forces in the country's industrial heartland called Donbas.

Ukraine's military intelligence said Friday that separatist forces have launched drills involving firing live ammunition that are overseen by Russian military officers.

Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of deploying its troops to Donbas to back separatists — accusations that Moscow has denied.

## Study nixes Mars life in meteorite found in Antarctica

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — A 4 billion-year-old meteorite from Mars that caused a splash here on Earth decades ago contains no evidence of ancient, primitive Martian life after all, scientists reported Thursday.

In 1996, a NASA-led team announced that organic compounds in the rock appeared to have been left by living creatures. Other scientists were skeptical and researchers chipped away at that premise over the decades, most recently by a team led by the Carnegie Institution for Science's Andrew Steele.

Tiny samples from the meteorite show the carbon-rich compounds are actually the result of water — most likely salty, or briny, water — flowing over the rock for a prolonged period, Steele said. The findings appear in the journal *Science*.

During Mars' wet and early past, at least two impacts occurred near the rock, heating the planet's surrounding surface, before a third impact bounced it off the red planet and into space millions of years ago. The 4-pound (2-kilogram) rock was found in Antarctica in 1984.

Groundwater moving through the cracks in the rock, while it was still on Mars, formed the tiny globs of carbon that are present, according to the researchers. The same thing can happen on Earth and could help explain the presence of methane in Mars' atmosphere, they said.

But two scientists who took part in the original study took issue with these latest findings, calling them "disappointing." In a shared email, they said they stand by their 1996 observations.

"While the data presented incrementally adds to our knowledge of (the meteorite), the interpretation is hardly novel, nor is it supported by the research," wrote Kathie Thomas-Keprta and Simon Clemett, astromaterial researchers at NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston.

"Unsupported speculation does nothing to resolve the conundrum surrounding the origin of organic matter" in the meteorite, they added.

According to Steele, advances in technology made his team's new findings possible.

He commended the measurements by the original researchers and noted that their life-claiming hypothesis "was a reasonable interpretation" at the time. He said he and his team — which includes NASA, German and British scientists — took care to present their results "for what they are, which is a very exciting discovery about Mars and not a study to disprove" the original premise.

This finding "is huge for our understanding of how life started on this planet and helps refine the techniques we need to find life elsewhere on Mars, or Enceladus and Europa," Steele said in an email, referring to Saturn and Jupiter's moons with subsurface oceans.

The only way to prove whether Mars ever had or still has microbial life, according to Steele, is to bring samples to Earth for analysis. NASA's Perseverance Mars rover already has collected six samples for return to Earth in a decade or so; three dozen samples are desired.

Millions of years after drifting through space, the meteorite landed on an icefield in Antarctica thousands of years ago. The small gray-green fragment got its name — Allan Hills 84001 — from the hills where it was found.

Just this week, a piece of this meteorite was used in a first-of-its-kind experiment aboard the International Space Station. A mini scanning electron microscope examined the sample; Thomas-Keprta operated it remotely from Houston. Researchers hope to use the microscope to analyze geologic samples in space — on the moon one day, for example — and debris that could ruin station equipment or endanger astronauts.

## In vaccination battles, pro athletes become proxy players

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The pandemic-era saga of tennis star Novak Djokovic in Australia this week is but one of many: Pro athletes who have refused to be vaccinated have been put at center court in a larger contest — as famous faces who are becoming proxy players in the accelerating worldwide cultural battles over COVID jabs.

The NBA's Kyrie Irving missed the first months of the Brooklyn Nets' season before making a partial re-

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turn. The NFL's Aaron Rodgers went from revered veteran to polarizing figure. And we're still not finished with the diplomatic standoff and fallout over Djokovic's exemption to play in the Australian Open.

It's a cultural issue, not a question of numbers. The vast majority of players in professional sports organizations are vaccinated — more than the U.S. population at large — and tacitly or explicitly accept the evidence of their safety and efficacy. But the handful of high-profile objectors represent a new front in what one expert calls the "oversized role of sports" in society's conversations.

"We look to sports to give us an answer or clarify issues in the larger culture," says Robert T. Hayashi, an associate professor of American studies at Amherst College in Massachusetts whose specialties include the history of sports. "Many times, the most detailed conversations we see arising in the culture and the media are regarding sports."

Their centrality is not necessarily because they are exceptional, but because they serve as avatars for all of us.

"They are all different individuals. They have different approaches," says Dan Lebowitz, executive director of the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University. "Athletes," he says, "are no different than really the whole of humanity."

And in that sense, they are subject to the same information and misinformation — the same receptiveness or stubbornness — as the rest of the population.

"We live in a world where we've moved really far away from a central set of facts," Lebowitz says. "None of these athletes are impervious to all the information that's coming at them around the world, or impervious to the divisions that we have."

While figures like Irving, Rodgers and Djokovic are at the center of the conversation, they may not actually be driving it. COVID vaccines, in their brief existence, have been fast-tracked into an elite group of divisive political and cultural issues — things about which people tend to pick a side and stick to it no matter what.

Mark Harvey, a professor at the University of Saint Mary in Kansas and author of "Celebrity Influence: Politics, Persuasion, and Issue-based Advocacy," says these are the topics on which famous people may actually have the least sway.

"The kind of issues where they aren't really influential are the traditional wedge issues," Harvey says. "Celebrities aren't really going to change anyone's minds on abortion or guns. For most people, this has become part of what has become a wedge issue."

Well-known voices then become something else — amplification devices, opinions used more as fodder for existing arguments than as actual agents of influence.

"People that have certain beliefs that they want to promulgate forward ... they're going to grab on to these athletes as spokespersons for their cause," Lebowitz says.

That doesn't necessarily mean that famous voices have no actual effect, though. Harvey says a celebrity's personal connection to an issue can matter — and can command attention.

For example: "Today" show host Katie Couric got a colonoscopy on the air in 2000 after her husband died from colon cancer, and the number of such procedures saw a major spike in the months that followed. And Elton John talking to LGBTQ communities — especially about LGBTQ issues — might find himself heard more than someone else.

By the same logic, devoted fans of a team like the Green Bay Packers might be more likely to listen to vaccination opinions from a storied local player like Rodgers. And the opinions of Black athletes might grab more traction in African-American communities, especially when tapping into a history of medical mistreatment.

"They can feel a sort of lack of trust, with memories of the Tuskegee experiments and forced sterilization for women of color," Hayashi says. "Those identities are not stripped away in these situations."

The stance of Djokovic might similarly resonate in the Serbian athlete's home country, given its role in European conflicts of the 20th century.

"For Djokovic, the Serbian community with their role in Europe and how they've been presented as bad guys, he can become a symbol for some certainly by asserting a sort of national pride with the way he's standing up," Hayashi says.

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While sports have always been indivisible from politics and public conflicts, there has been a major ground shift in the years since Michael Jordan made public neutrality on all non-sports issues an essential part of his brand. Today there is almost an expectation of advocacy, especially with the precedent set by Colin Kaepernick's protests and the embrace by many athletes of the Black Lives Matter cause.

"We expect an awful lot of them," Leibowitz says. "We ask them to fix hate and hurt. And now we expect a groundswell from them on public health."

These expectations were heightened through the cultural crucible of the Trump era, which Harvey says were "defined by celebrity advocacy" under a president who himself — as businessman, reality-TV star and general high-profile person — helped build the notion of celebrity voice into an American bully pulpit in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

"I think the moral of the story that celebrities are learning, which is where you kind of have to take a side," Harvey says. "Nowadays, if you don't take a side, people don't think you don't have a spine."

And while athletes don't necessarily feel the pressure they once might have to constantly think of the children they're influencing, the expectation that they remain role models for the young remains embedded in the culture — as it has since the years of the earliest sports mega-celebrities like Babe Ruth more than a century ago.

"There's a lot of things we see in society, sports being the crucible for shaping youth and certain ideas that we value, sacrifice and effort and goal orientation, learning how to work hard and set goals, to be this shaper of youth and morality," Hayashi says. "I find this kind of perversely laughable that we turn to these kinds of figures for this. You can't get that from being a disciplined violin player or an artist or a writer?"

## Study: More evidence links a virus to multiple sclerosis

By LAURAN NEERGAARD AP Medical Writer

There's more evidence that one of the world's most common viruses may set some people on the path to developing multiple sclerosis.

Multiple sclerosis is a potentially disabling disease that occurs when immune system cells mistakenly attack the protective coating on nerve fibers, gradually eroding them.

The Epstein-Barr virus has long been suspected of playing a role in development of MS. It's a connection that's hard to prove because just about everybody gets infected with Epstein-Barr, usually as kids or young adults -- but only a tiny fraction develop MS.

Thursday, Harvard researchers reported one of the largest studies yet to back the Epstein-Barr theory. They tracked blood samples stored from more than 10 million people in the U.S. military and found the risk of MS increased 32-fold following Epstein-Barr infection.

The military regularly administers blood tests to its members and the researchers checked samples stored from 1993 to 2013, hunting antibodies signaling viral infection.

Just 5.3% of recruits showed no sign of Epstein-Barr when they joined the military. The researchers compared 801 MS cases subsequently diagnosed over the 20-year period with 1,566 service members who never got MS.

Only one of the MS patients had no evidence of the Epstein-Barr virus prior to diagnosis. And despite intensive searching, the researchers found no evidence that other viral infections played a role.

The findings "strongly suggest" that Epstein-Barr infection is "a cause and not a consequence of MS," study author Dr. Alberto Ascherio of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health and colleagues reported in the journal *Science*.

It's clearly not the only factor, considering that about 90% of adults have antibodies showing they've had Epstein-Barr -- while nearly 1 million people in the U.S. are living with MS, according to the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

The virus appears to be "the initial trigger," Drs. William H. Robinson and Lawrence Steinman of Stanford University wrote in an editorial accompanying Thursday's study. But they cautioned, "additional fuses must be ignited," such as genes that may make people more vulnerable.

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Epstein-Barr is best known for causing "mono," or infectious mononucleosis, in teens and young adults but often occurs with no symptoms. A virus that remains inactive in the body after initial infection, it also has been linked to later development of some autoimmune diseases and rare cancers.

It's not clear why. Among the possibilities is what's called "molecular mimicry," meaning viral proteins may look so similar to some nervous system proteins that it induces the mistaken immune attack.

Regardless, the new study is "the strongest evidence to date that Epstein-Barr contributes to cause MS," said Mark Allegretta, vice president for research at the National Multiple Sclerosis Society.

And that, he added, "opens the door to potentially prevent MS by preventing Epstein-Barr infection."

Attempts are underway to develop Epstein-Barr vaccines including a small study just started by Moderna Inc., best known for its COVID-19 vaccine.

## Bad luck: Pope acknowledges he got caught at record store

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis has long lamented that he can't walk around town unnoticed like he used to before becoming pope. But he seems to have nevertheless kept his sense of humor after he was caught on camera making an unannounced visit to a Rome record shop this week.

Francis wrote a note to the Vatican reporter who happened to be in the right place at the right time Tuesday evening when the pope slipped out of the Vatican to bless the newly renovated Stereo Sound shop near the Pantheon.

Javier Martinez-Brocal, director of the Rome Reports news agency, filmed Francis leaving the shop, in footage that went viral and even got written up in the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano.

Martinez-Brocal wrote the pope a note afterward, explaining that he wasn't a paparazzo and regretting Francis can't move around unnoticed anymore, but adding that the story provided a much-needed dose of good news for a world inundated with tragedy.

"I won't deny that it was (bad luck) that after taking all the precautions, there was a journalist waiting for someone on the taxi line," Francis replied. But he added: "You can't lose your sense of humor."

Writing in his trademark tiny script, Francis then repeated that what he misses most about being pope is no longer being able to take walks, as he used to do in Buenos Aires. The former Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was known for taking public transport around the Argentine capital, eschewing the private cars that fellow cardinals usually take to visit parishes. He became pope in 2013.

Francis acknowledged that Martinez-Brocal was only doing his job as a journalist when he recorded the event. "Thank you for doing your vocation, even if it put the pope in difficulty," he quipped.

The shop owners later told The Associated Press that Francis had arrived unannounced at around 7 p.m., after he had told them during a previous encounter at the Vatican that he would come to visit. "He walked in the shop and it was an amazing meeting. And as he promised, he blessed the shop," said shop owner Tiziana Esposito.

Co-owner Danilo Genio said Francis was a longtime customer who had popped in whenever he was in Rome for meetings at the Vatican when he was a priest, archbishop and then cardinal in Buenos Aires.

"When he came to Rome to go to the Vatican he used to come here first to buy some gifts," he said.

Francis, who grew up listening to opera on the radio and loves tango, Mozart and Wagner, didn't buy anything this time around. But the shop owners gave him a CD of classical music.

## Afghan tradition allows girls to access the freedom of boys

By MSTYSLAV CHERNOV and ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — In a Kabul neighborhood, a gaggle of boys kick a yellow ball around a dusty playground, their boisterous cries echoing off the surrounding apartment buildings.

Dressed in sweaters and jeans or the traditional Afghan male clothing of baggy pants and long shirt, none stand out as they jostle to score a goal. But unbeknown to them, one is different from the others.

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At not quite 8 years old, Sanam is a bacha posh: a girl living as a boy. One day a few months ago, the girl with rosy cheeks and an impish smile had her dark hair cut short, donned boys' clothes and took on a boy's name, Omid. The move opened up a boy's world: playing soccer and cricket with boys, wrestling with the neighborhood butcher's son, working to help the family make ends meet.

In Afghanistan's heavily patriarchal, male-dominated society, where women and girls are usually relegated to the home, bacha posh, Dari for "dressed as a boy," is the one tradition allowing girls access to the freer male world.

Under the practice, a girl dresses, behaves and is treated as a boy, with all the freedoms and obligations that entails. The child can play sports, attend a madrassa, or religious school, and, sometimes crucially for the family, work. But there is a time limit: Once a bacha posh reaches puberty, she is expected to revert to traditional girls' gender roles. The transition is not always easy.

It is unclear how the practice is viewed by Afghanistan's new rulers, the Taliban, who seized power in mid-August and have made no public statements on the issue.

Their rule so far has been less draconian than the last time they were in power in the 1990s, but women's freedoms have still been severely curtailed. Thousands of women have been barred from working, and girls beyond primary school age have not been able to return to public schools in most places.

With a crackdown on women's rights, the bacha posh tradition could become even more attractive for some families. And as the practice is temporary, with the children eventually reverting to female roles, the Taliban might not deal with the issue at all, said Thomas Barfield, a professor of anthropology at Boston University who has written several books on Afghanistan.

"Because it's inside the family and because it's not a permanent status, the Taliban may stay out (of it)," Barfield said.

It is unclear where the practice originated or how old it is, and it is impossible to know how widespread it might be. A somewhat similar tradition exists in Albania, another deeply patriarchal society, although it is limited to adults. Under Albania's "sworn virgin" tradition, a woman would take an oath of celibacy and declare herself a man, after which she could inherit property, work and sit on a village council — all of which would have been out of bounds for a woman.

In Afghanistan, the bacha posh tradition is "one of the most under-investigated" topics in terms of gender issues, said Barfield, who spent about two years in the 1970s living with an Afghan nomad family that included a bacha posh. "Precisely because the girls revert back to the female role, they marry, it kind of disappears."

Girls chosen as bacha posh usually are the more boisterous, self-assured daughters. "The role fits so well that sometimes even outside the family, people are not aware that it exists," he said.

"It's almost so invisible that it's one of the few gender issues that doesn't show up as a political or social question," Barfield noted.

The reasons parents might want a bacha posh vary. With sons traditionally valued more than daughters, the practice usually occurs in families without a boy. Some consider it a status symbol, and some believe it will bring good luck for the next child to be born a boy.

But for others, like Sanam's family, the choice was one of necessity. Last year, with Afghanistan's economy collapsing, construction work dried up. Sanam's father, already suffering from a back injury, lost his job as a plumber. He turned to selling coronavirus masks on the streets, making the equivalent of \$1-\$2 per day. But he needed a helper.

The family has four daughters and one son, but their 11-year-old boy doesn't have full use of his hands following an injury. So the parents said they decided to make Sanam a bacha posh.

"We had to do this because of poverty," said Sanam's mother, Fahima. "We don't have a son to work for us, and her father doesn't have anyone to help him. So I will consider her my son until she becomes a teenager."

Still, Fahima refers to Sanam as "my daughter." In their native Dari language, the pronouns are not an issue since one pronoun is used for "he" and "she."

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Sanam says she prefers living as a boy.

"It's better to be a boy ... I wear (Afghan male clothes), jeans and jackets, and go with my father and work," she said. She likes playing in the park with her brother's friends and playing cricket and soccer.

Once she grows up, Sanam said, she wants to be either a doctor, a commander or a soldier, or work with her father. And she'll go back to being a girl.

"When I grow up, I will let my hair grow and will wear girl's clothes," she said.

The transition isn't always easy.

"When I put on girls' clothes, I thought I was in prison," said Najieh, who grew up as a bacha posh, although she would attend school as a girl. One of seven sisters, her boy's name was Assadollah.

Now 34, married and with four children of her own, she weeps for the freedom of the male world she has lost.

"In Afghanistan, boys are more valuable," she said. "There is no oppression for them, and no limits. But being a girl is different. She gets forced to get married at a young age."

Young women can't leave the house or allow strangers to see their face, Najieh said. And after the Taliban takeover, she lost her job as a schoolteacher because she had been teaching boys.

"Being a man is better than being a woman," she said, wiping tears from her eye. "It is very hard for me. ... If I were a man, I could be a teacher in a school."

"I wish I could be a man, not a woman. To stop this suffering."

## Mask rules get tighter in Europe in winter's COVID-19 wave

By FRANCES D'EMILIO Associated Press

ROME (AP) — To mask or not to mask is a question Italy settled early in the COVID-19 outbreak with a vigorous "yes." Now the onetime epicenter of the pandemic in Europe hopes even stricter mask rules will help it beat the latest infection surge.

Other countries are taking similar action as the more transmissible — yet, apparently, less virulent — omicron variant spreads through the continent.

With intensive care units in Italy's hospitals rapidly filling with mostly unvaccinated COVID-19 patients, the government announced on Christmas Eve that FFP2 masks — which offer users more protection than cloth or surgical masks — must be worn on public transport, including planes, trains, ferries and subways.

That's even though all passengers in Italy, as of this week, must be vaccinated or recently recovered from COVID-19. FFP2s also must now be worn at theaters, cinemas and sports events, indoors or out, and can't be removed even for their wearers to eat or drink.

Italy reintroduced an outdoor mask mandate. It had never lifted its indoor mandate — even when infections sharply dropped in the summer.

On a chilly morning in Rome this week, Lillo D'Amico, 84, sported a wool cap and white FFP2 as he bought a newspaper at his neighborhood newsstand.

"(Masks) cost little money, they cost you a small sacrifice," he said. "When you do the math, it costs far less than hospitalization."

When he sees someone from the unmasked minority walking by, he keeps a distance. "They see (masks) as an affront to their freedom," D'Amico said, shrugging.

Spain reinstated its outdoor mask rule on Christmas Eve. After the 14-day contagion rate soared to 2,722 new infections per 100,000 people by the end of last week — from 40 per 100,000 in mid-October — Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez was asked whether the outdoor mask mandate was helping.

"Of course, it is. It's not me saying it. It's science itself saying it because (it's) a virus that is contracted when one exhales," Sanchez said.

Portugal brought masks back at the end of November, after having largely dropped the requirement when it hit its goal of vaccinating 86% of the population.

Greece has also restored its outdoor mask mandate, while requiring an FFP2 or double surgical mask on public transport and in indoor public spaces.



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This week, the Dutch government's outbreak management team recommended a mask mandate for people over age 13 in busy public indoor areas such as restaurants, museums and theaters, and for spectators at indoor sports events. Those places are currently closed under a lockdown until at least Jan. 14.

In France, the outdoor mask mandate was partially reinstated in December in many cities, including Paris. The age for children to start wearing masks in public places was lowered to 6 from 11.

Austrian Chancellor Karl Nehammer announced last week that people must wear FFP2 masks outdoors if they can't keep at least two meters (6.5 feet) apart.

In Italy, with more than 2 million people currently positive for the virus in a nation of 60 million and workplace absences curtailing train and bus runs, the government also sees masks as a way to let society more fully function.

People with booster shots or recent second vaccine doses can now avoid quarantine after coming into contact with an infected person if they wear a FFP2 mask for 10 days.

The government has ordered shops to make FFP masks available for 75 euro cents (\$0.85). In the pandemic's first year, FFP2s cost up to 10 euros (\$11.50) — whenever they could be found.

Italians wear them in a palette of colors. The father of a baby baptized this week by Pope Francis in the Sistine Chapel wore one in burgundy, with matching tie and jacket pocket square. But the pontiff, who has practically shunned a mask in public, didn't wear one.

On Monday, Vatican City State mandated FFP2s in all indoor places. The tiny, walled independent state across the Tiber from the heart of Rome also stipulated that Vatican employees can go to work without quarantining after coming into contact with someone testing positive if, in addition to being fully vaccinated or having received a booster shot, they wear FFP2s.

Francis did appear to be wearing a FFP2 when, startling shoppers in Rome on Tuesday evening, he emerged from a music store near the Pantheon before being driven back to the Vatican.

In Britain, where Prime Minister Boris Johnson has focused on vaccination, masks have never been required outdoors.

This month, though, the government said secondary school students should wear face coverings in class. But Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi said that rule wouldn't apply "for a day longer than necessary."

When the British government lifted pandemic restrictions in July 2021, turning mask-wearing from a requirement to a suggestion, mask use fell markedly.

Nino Cartabellotta, president of the Bologna-based GIMBE foundation, which monitors health care in Italy, says Britain points to what can happen when measures like mask-wearing aren't valued.

"The situation in the U.K. showed that use of vaccination alone wasn't enough" to get ahead of the pandemic, even though Britain was one of the first countries to begin vaccination, he said in a video interview.

## Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Saturday, Jan. 15, the 15th day of 2022. There are 350 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 15, 2009, US Airways Capt. Chesley "Sully" Sullenberger ditched his Airbus 320 in the Hudson River after a flock of birds disabled both engines; all 155 people aboard survived.

On this date:

In 1862, the U.S. Senate confirmed President Abraham Lincoln's choice of Edwin M. Stanton to be the new Secretary of War, replacing Simon Cameron.

In 1892, the original rules of basketball, devised by James Naismith, were published for the first time in Springfield, Massachusetts, where the game originated.

In 1929, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. was born in Atlanta.

In 1943, work was completed on the Pentagon, the headquarters of the U.S. Department of War (now Defense).

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In 1967, the Green Bay Packers of the National Football League defeated the Kansas City Chiefs of the American Football League 35-10 in the first AFL-NFL World Championship Game, retroactively known as Super Bowl I.

In 1973, President Richard M. Nixon announced the suspension of all U.S. offensive action in North Vietnam, citing progress in peace negotiations.

In 1976, Sara Jane Moore was sentenced to life in prison for her attempt on the life of President Gerald R. Ford in San Francisco. (Moore was released on the last day of 2007.)

In 1981, the police drama series "Hill Street Blues" premiered on NBC.

In 1993, a historic disarmament ceremony ended in Paris with the last of 125 countries signing a treaty banning chemical weapons.

In 2001, Wikipedia, a web-based encyclopedia, made its debut.

In 2014, a highly critical and bipartisan Senate report declared that the deadly September 2012 assault on the American diplomatic compound in Benghazi, Libya, could have been prevented; the report spread blame among the State Department, the military and U.S. intelligence.

In 2020, Chinese officials said they couldn't rule out the possibility that a new coronavirus in central China could spread between humans, though they said the risk of transmission appeared to be low. House Democratic leaders carried articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump across the U.S. Capitol in a formal procession to the Senate.

Ten years ago: Addressing a conference in Beirut on democracy in the Arab world, U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon demanded that Syria's president, Bashar Assad, stop killing his own people, and said the "old order" of one-man rule and family dynasties was over in the Middle East. At the Golden Globes, "The Artist" won best movie musical or comedy, while "The Descendants" won best drama; on the TV side, "Homeland" won best drama series while "Modern Family" was recognized as best musical or comedy series.

Five years ago: In his final interview as president, Barack Obama told CBS' "60 Minutes" that the increase of Israeli settlements had "gotten so substantial" that it was inhibiting the possibility of an "effective, contiguous Palestinian state."

One year ago: The global death toll from COVID-19 topped 2 million; Johns Hopkins University reported the milestone amid a monumental but uneven effort to vaccinate people against the coronavirus. Federal watchdogs launched a sweeping review of how the FBI, the Pentagon and other law enforcement agencies responded to the riot at the U.S. Capitol. The Pentagon said it had reached its goal of reducing the number of troops in Afghanistan to roughly 2,500, a drawdown that appeared to violate a last-minute congressional prohibition on troop withdrawals. The National Rifle Association announced it had filed for bankruptcy protection and would seek to incorporate in Texas instead of New York, where a state lawsuit was trying to put the organization out of business.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Margaret O'Brien is 84. Actor Andrea Martin is 75. College and Pro Football Hall of Famer Randy White is 69. Actor-director Mario Van Peebles is 65. Rock musician Adam Jones (Tool) is 57. Actor James Nesbitt is 57. Actor Chad Lowe is 54. Alt-country singer Will Oldham (aka Bonnie Prince Billy) is 52. Actor Regina King is 51. Actor Dorian Missick is 46. Actor Eddie Cahill is 44. Former NFL quarterback Drew Brees is 43. Rapper/reggaeton artist Pitbull is 41. Actor Victor Rasuk is 37. Actor Jessy Schram is 36. Electronic dance musician Skrillex is 34. Actor/singer Dove Cameron is 26. Singer-songwriter Grace VanderWaal (TV: "America's Got Talent") is 18.