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UpComing Events

Thursday, Jan. 27

Basketball Doubleheader at Northwestern: Rolling schedule: Boys C starts at 3:30 followed by Girls JV, Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity.

Saturday, Jan. 29

Groton Area Wrestling Tournament, 10 a.m.

5 p.m.: Boys Basketball vs. Lennox at Madison

Sunday, Jan. 30

Groton Robotics Pancake Feed at Groton Community Center, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Carnival of Silver Skates, 2 p.m. and 6:30 p.m.

Monday, Jan. 31

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

Tuesday, Feb. 1

Boys Basketball hosts Langford Area with JV at 6 p.m. followed by varsity

City Council Meeting, 7 p.m.

Thursday, Feb. 3

Basketball Doubleheader at Faulkton

Friday, Feb. 4

Wrestling triangular at Preshop

Saturday, Feb. 5

Girls basketball at Madison

10 a.m.: Wrestling at Stanley County

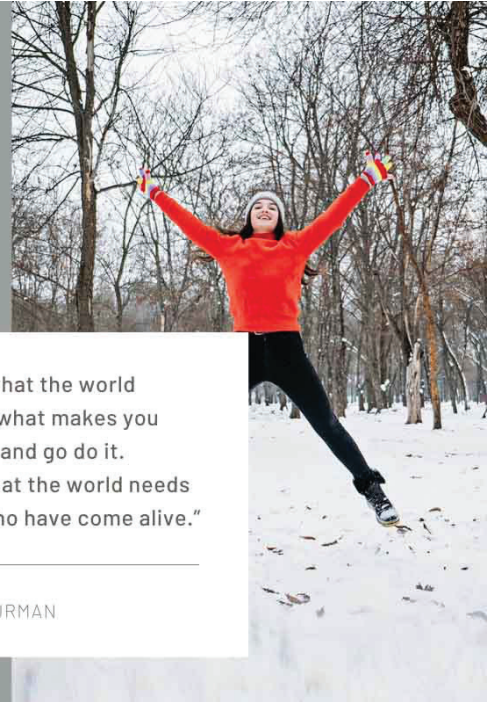
Boys Basketball with Clark/Willow Lake at Groton (7th grade at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade, JV and Varsity).

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PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445

Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

Chicken Soup
for the Soul.



"Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."

HOWARD THURMAN

Monday, Feb. 7

Junior High Boys Basketball at Aberdeen Christian. 7th grade at 6 p.m. followed by 8th grade.

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 8

Girls Basketball hosting Tiospa Zina with JV game at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity.

Boys Basketball vs. North Central at Edmunds Central with JV at 6:30 p.m. followed by Varsity.

Thursday, Feb. 10

Basketball Double Header at Milbank. 4 p.m.: Girls JV at elementary gym, Boys C game at Armory; 5 p.m.: Girls C game at elementary gym, Boys JV at Armory. 6:15 p.m.: Girls Varsity at HS Gym, 7:45 p.m. Boys Varsity at HS Gym.

Friday, Feb. 11

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg

Saturday, Feb. 12

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg

Saturday, February 12, 2022

9 a.m.: State Junior High Wrestling at Pierre

Basketball Doubleheader with Mobridge-Pollock in Groton. Girls JV at 1 p.m. followed by Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity

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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Groton Area COVID-19 Report

It's amazing what a difference a few days makes when counting the COVID-19 cases. The Groton Area School District had peaked at 37 and has since then dropped to 13 in the count from yesterday. Only the fifth grade seen an increase of one while the rest of the grades experienced a decrease or stayed the same.

Groton Area School District

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated January 26, 2022; 11:58 AM

**Decrease of 23 from
Last Friday**

J	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	1	1	S	T
K	G										0	1	2	t	o
														f	a
														f	l
0	1	0	0	1	0	3	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	4	13

Change **-1 -1 -3 -1 0 +1 -2 -1 -2 -3 -2 -2 -3 -3 -23**

**GUN SHOW: Dakota Territory Gun Collectors Association
ABERDEEN Show, Saturday, Feb. 5, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday,
Feb. 6, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at THE DAKOTA EVENT CENTER.
Laura Ennen 701-214-3388.**



Shortage of classroom substitutes makes teaching and learning more difficult in South Dakota

By: Bart Pfankuch

A shortage of substitutes to fill in for full-time teachers is forcing school districts in South Dakota and across the country to take sometimes drastic measures to keep classrooms staffed, and concerns are rising that the quality of student education may diminish as a result.

Many full-time teachers are losing planning and training time to fill in for absent colleagues. Some classes are being combined, resulting in higher staff-to-student ratios. A few South Dakota schools have closed temporarily or shifted to virtual learning via computer because of teacher absences and limited substitutes to cover for them.

The number of available substitutes has been dropping steadily for several years in many school districts, as fewer people want to take on the challenge of teaching a group of students they don't know in a subject in which they may not be well-versed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has turned the substitute shortage into a crisis in some districts.

As the pandemic lingers, and the highly contagious omicron variant of the coronavirus has become dominant in South Dakota, more full-time teachers are out sick with COVID-19 or staying home to care for ill or exposed children than normal, increasing the need for substitutes. Meanwhile, many former substitutes — especially those who are retirees and at greater risk of COVID-19 complications — do not want to take the risk of teaching indoors with dozens of children. Education experts also say working as a substitute teacher has become less attractive, as some American children have become more assertive and less respectful of teachers than in the past.

Furthermore, a general worker shortage has given potential substitutes far more options to work where and when they want, in some cases for higher pay and benefits.

To attract more substitutes, some school districts have increased pay or reduced educational requirements for applicants.

In Sioux Falls, the state's largest school system, the district has dropped its requirement that substitutes have a college degree, now requiring only a high school diploma. In January 2022, the district increased daily pay for substitutes from \$125 to \$160 at most schools, from \$140 to \$175 at high-need schools and from \$150 to \$190 per day for long-term subs.

"When unemployment is low, getting substitute teachers is tricky," said Becky Dorman, human resources director for Sioux Falls schools. "We're always looking for more substitutes, but we've had to make changes



Substitute teacher Laurie Hansen Neisen ran students through a math lesson at Creekside Elementary School in Spearfish in fall 2021. Hansen Neisen has been a substitute teacher for about 10 years. Photo: Courtesy Mark Watson, Black Hills Pioneer

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on all fronts to staff our schools during the pandemic.”

The shortage of both full-time teachers and substitute teachers has raised concerns among education experts that the quality of teaching and depth of learning may be suffering across the U.S. public school system.

“A shortage of substitute teachers, both in quantity and quality, across the country has never been more severe,” wrote Geoffrey Smith, director of the Substitute Teacher Training Institute at Utah State University, in a recent article for the national School Superintendents Association website.

Substitutes play a critical role in maintaining educational consistency for children who are in their formative learning years, said Dennis Fischer, superintendent of the Hot Springs School District in southwestern South Dakota.

“When a teacher is out, we still need learning to take place because we only have 36 weeks of teaching per year,” Fischer said. “If we’re going to have a teacher out a day or a whole week or more, we expect the education to go on,” Fischer said.

When schools have limited options to fill teaching slots, administrators acknowledge they may sometimes be forced to bring in someone who serves mostly as a classroom attendant.

In most cases, however, school officials do their best to fill open classroom slots with qualified, experienced substitute teachers who keep learning on track.

Joel Bailey, superintendent of the Platte Geddes School District in southeastern South Dakota, said he once read an estimate that each public student will on average be taught by substitutes the cumulative equivalent of one year of their K-12 education.

“The effectiveness of subs in the classroom is extremely important,” Bailey said.

Classes combined or moved to virtual learning

At some point, if teacher absences rise and enough substitutes cannot be found, school districts must make the difficult decision to close schools and transition to virtual teaching via computers. Rapid City Area Schools shuttered three schools temporarily in January because of high staff absences due to coronavirus infections.

Also in mid-January, an outbreak of COVID-19 and subsequent high number of close contacts with infected people prompted the Hot Springs district to move to virtual learning for its secondary school that houses grades 6-12. Some teachers fell ill with COVID-19, some had to quarantine due to close contacts with infected people, while others had to stay home to care for children who were ill, said Superintendent Fischer.

“We could not get all the classrooms filled,” Fischer said. “We did have a shortage of staffing and a shortage of subs that caused us to go virtual.”

Full-time teachers in Hot Springs, as in many South Dakota school districts, have sacrificed planning periods to cover for absent colleagues.

In some cases, three classes of children in Hot Springs have been combined into two larger groups when teachers and substitutes were scarce, Fischer said.

On rare occasions, when instructor absences were particularly high, four or five classes of children have been sent to the school library, where they work on homework and are supervised more than being taught, Fischer said.

“We were supposed to be socially distancing, but we were packing people into the library, which was really a last resort,” he said.

Hot Springs uses a sliding pay scale depending on the qualifications of each substitute and now long the sub works, Fischer said.

Substitutes in Hot Springs must have a college degree and pass a background check, Fischer said. Base pay is \$90 per day, but those who have a teaching certification are paid \$100 per day, and can make even more if they become a long-term substitute who may cover for a teacher out for a week or several weeks, Fischer said.

“It’s a very difficult and challenging job, and It takes a certain type of persona and personality to just

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step in with these kids," Fischer said. "Kids are kids and it's always been that way. You see a substitute teacher and you think it's a day off, so some of our kids will challenge the subs and they have to know how to handle that."

In the article for the superintendents association, Smith notes that school districts across the U.S. are lowering job requirements, increasing pay and engaging in aggressive recruitment efforts to attract more potential substitutes. Smith argues that offering health and other benefits — which typically are not provided to substitutes — is one way to increase the pool of potential subs. He added that the easiest, least-expensive way to improve the teaching abilities of substitutes is to improve and expand training opportunities for them.

"No other small investment in education today will make a more significant improvement in the classroom than training substitute teachers," Smith wrote.

As a result of challenges related to the pandemic, availability of substitute teachers has fallen across the country. According to reports by FutureEd, an education research institute at Georgetown University, U.S. schools were able to fill about 80% of all open classroom slots with substitutes on a regular basis. During the pandemic, that coverage rate has fallen to 50% to 60%, the institute said in a recent report.

The institute provides states and school districts with data and suggestions to improve the availability and quality of substitute teachers. One major challenge for school districts is to provide adequate training before subs enter the classroom, and relevant follow-up training after the school day ends. Research showed that only about 40% of U.S. school districts provide training to subs, and even fewer provide training in classroom management, which the institute sees as a key component of substitute success and effectiveness.

"Just 11 percent of school districts offer classroom-management training to subs, and most of the time, it's a one-time orientation to the job," the institute wrote in October 2021. "As a result, people go into the classroom unprepared. Not surprisingly, lots of people don't stay. Even when people do stay, without basic training and support, the classroom experience isn't great."

FutureEd experts concluded that unless schools do more to improve substitute training, pay and job support, the substitute shortage will continue. "The labor market right now is really sending us such a clear signal that [the system] is not working," the report said.

New incentives sought to lure subs

The South Dakota Department of Education does not keep track of teacher or staff absences and has no significant role in arranging substitute teachers, a task handled at the local school level, said Ruth Raveling, spokeswoman for the department.

"We know that South Dakota educators and school leaders are doing the best they can to keep students and staff safe, healthy, and in-person as much as possible," Raveling wrote to News Watch in an email. "They remain committed to keeping school doors open, and we commend their efforts in the face of current challenges."

Raveling said the department and office of Gov. Kristi Noem are working to improve overall teacher



Alisha Fahey, a substitute in the Lead-Deadwood School District, passed out snacks at the local elementary school in late 2021. Photo: Courtesy Wendy Pitlick, Black Hills Pioneer

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staffing in South Dakota by supporting a 6% increase in state aid to education, which Noem suggested should be used to raise teacher salaries and aid recruitment of new educators.

The Sioux Falls schools have begun to incentivize substitutes to teach more days by offering contests in which subs can win \$100 retail gift cards and are entered more often if they work more days, Dorman said.

"It's fun stuff like that to further push the that we need them, we appreciate them and we're glad they're here," she said. "Those kinds of things seem to be helping."

The district currently has a pool of more than 800 potential substitutes, but still has had difficulty covering classroom positions during the pandemic, Dorman said.

The district of about 24,000 students has about 1,900 teachers and 400 educational assistants, and it is not uncommon to have 285 teaching absences each day, Dorman said.

The pandemic has resulted in more teacher absences than usual, she said, especially so far in 2022 as the highly contagious omicron variant has become dominant, Dorman said.

"The past two and a half weeks have been challenging because we're seeing highest absentee rates in January than anytime in the past five years," she said.

But before the pandemic, the district has seen spikes in instructor absences occur when influenza has been active or teachers are taken away by major sporting events such as the state basketball tournament, Dorman said.

Substitutes are in greater need at a time when the number of new teachers entering the profession is also down, she said. The declining interest in teaching as a career has reduced a former pipeline of potential substitutes among college students seeking teaching degrees who wanted real-world experience during their studies, as well as among recent education graduates trying to secure a full-time position in the district, she said.

Substitutes in the Sioux Falls school district undergo four hours of in-person training before starting in the classroom and are offered an optional eight-hour online training course by the district.

The lack of available substitutes has cut into the time full-time teachers are able to undergo training that makes them better teachers, Dorman said.

"Prior to the pandemic, it was common for us to offer teachers a lot of professional development, and we could do that by having subs cover for them," Dorman said. "That has not been an option during surges of the pandemic when we really need substitutes."

The Platte Geddes district is facing a shortage of substitute teachers but has not suffered major classroom interruptions because COVID-19 outbreaks have been mild and did not cause a large number of teachers to be out at any one time, said Superintendent Bailey.

The district has a core group of potential substitutes that is largely made up of retired teachers who still enjoy the classroom experience or want to make some part-time money, Bailey said. At times, during breaks in the higher-education schedule, the district attracts college students who seek part-time work. Subs in Platte Geddes are required to have a high school diploma and pass a background check, and are paid \$110 a day, Bailey said.



Black Hawk Elementary, part of the Rapid City Area Schools, closed to in-person teaching temporarily in January 2022 due to a shortage of staff and substitute teachers caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Photo: Bart Pfankuch, South Dakota News Watch

"We are certainly not unscathed by the sub shortage, but we are managing to get by," he said.

Over time, as demand for their services has increased, substitute teachers have become more selective in when and for which school or age group they are willing to teach, Bailey said.

Platte Geddes and other districts also face difficulty in finding substitutes for higher-level or advanced courses, such as upper-level chemistry, biology or math, Bailey said.

The district has about 500 students in K-5 and 6-12 schools and two Hutterite colony schools and has roughly 45 teachers and assistants among its 70 total employees.

The district has seen some older substitutes exit the pool because they are concerned for their health amid the pandemic, Bailey said.

Meanwhile, Platte Geddes has sometimes had administrators take over teaching of classes when substitutes cannot be arranged to cover for instructor absences. Teachers have also surrendered their planning periods to fill in for absent colleagues. "You hate to take away a teacher's prep time, but we compensate them for that," Bailey said, adding that teachers who lose planning periods are paid a roughly \$25 bonus.

A flexible, fulfilling position for some

For some substitute teachers, the job provides a great way to earn extra money, have a highly flexible work schedule and work closely with children, according to Elizabeth "Liz" Campbell, an experienced substitute teacher.

Campbell has worked as a substitute teacher for several years, the last three in Hot Springs where she fills in mostly in the elementary school.

Subbing works out well for Campbell, 43, because she has prior teaching experience and her four school-age children attend the Hot Springs schools. She said she enjoys teaching young children and has received strong support and respect from teachers and administrators in the Hot Springs district.

In 2020, Campbell said she worked several days a week because many older substitutes dropped out of the workforce due to concerns over COVID-19. This year, some older subs have returned, so Campbell is working about two days a week.

Subbing for teachers who have a planned absence is easier because the teachers tend to leave behind lesson plans, as opposed to filling in for teachers who are unable to plan for unexpected absences, Campbell said. But technology, including so-called "smart boards," allows absent teachers to quickly share classroom materials with subs via shared computer access.

Managing a classroom of students who are unknown to the substitute is challenging and may turn some people away from the job, Campbell said.

"Not all substitutes are educators, so some come in and they don't know how to handle a classroom," she said. "'I've taught before, so I know how to handle a classroom, and now in Hot Springs I know most of the kids.'"

Campbell said she understands why some potential substitutes have turned away from the profession, especially in larger districts or more urban areas where children may be less respectful than in a small town like Hot Springs.

"There's definitely a change you see in the respect from kids," said Campbell, who has also worked as a sub at an inner-city school in Kansas City. "Those are really things that are taught in the home and part of the breakdown in families."

The uncertain work schedule and lack of benefits may also turn some people away from subbing, she said.

School officials in South Dakota say they will continue to promote subbing as a rewarding, flexible way to earn extra money.

"It's the most flexible job you could ever have," said Dorman of the Sioux Falls schools. "Even if you had two afternoons free a month, we would love to have you."



**Elizabeth
"Liz"
Campbell**



ABOUT BART PFANKUCH

Bart Pfankuch, Rapid City, S.D., is the content director for South Dakota News Watch. A Wisconsin native,

he is a former editor of the Rapid City Journal and also worked at newspapers in Florida. Bart has spent more than 30 years as a reporter, editor and writing coach.

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December Gaming Up 11.45% Marking One Full Year of Up Numbers

DEADWOOD, S.D. (1/26/2022) - According to statistics released yesterday by the South Dakota Commission on Gaming, Deadwood December gaming handle was up 11.45 percent over December of 2020, with slot machine handle increasing by 10.61 percent when compared to December 2020. The table game handle increased by 13.14 percent when compared to 2020 December's table game handle. Deadwood gaming operators rewarded players with \$1,561,382 in "free-play" for the month of December, leaving taxable adjusted gross revenues of \$10,094,677 for December of 2021. Deadwood's 2021 year-end revenues are up 34.93% over 2020 and up 31.76% over 2019, the last full year of gaming revenues.

"What an incredible year for Deadwood gaming," said Mike Rodman, executive director of the Deadwood Gaming Association. "It has been an unbelievable rebound from the pandemic impacts. Deadwood has blossomed on the national stage as an integrated gaming destination."

Deadwood's sports wagering operators look forward to their first Super Bowl and March Madness with the ability to place live sports wagers in Deadwood.

SDDVA Secretary Whitlock's January Column Honoring our Prisoners of War and Those Missing in Action

Earlier this month, veterans gathered in Pierre for the dedication and unveiling of the POW/MIA chair of honor. The chair, donated by Rolling Thunder Inc. Chapter 2 of Brookings, is located on the west wing of the second floor at the South Dakota Capitol.

Special thanks to Bob Foster and the members of Rolling Thunder Inc. Chapter 2, Governor Kristi Noem, the South Dakota Bureau of Administration, and the members of the Capitol Complex Restoration and Beautification Commission for their support of this display.

America's Prisoners of War fought fiercely and served with honor and distinction under the worst conditions. They demonstrated personal courage, selflessness, and unflagging loyalty to their country. Theirs is a quiet courage based on hope and trust that saw them through the most brutal and depressing of all military experiences. Whether their imprisonment lasted a few weeks or many years, during that trying time there was no end in sight, only their personal will to go on.

To lose your freedom while fighting for the freedom of others is a personal irony that has deep emotional impact. We who have not experienced that loss can't comprehend it on a personal level, but we can make it meaningful for every citizen by honoring those who have given their freedom for the security of our nation. In their service to our country, former prisoners of war have sacrificed mightily to maintain the promise of liberty that we hold dear.

They served with dignity and honor under the worst of human conditions – starvation, isolation, torture, and the ever-present threat of death. Yet even during their darkest hour, they demonstrated remarkable personal courage and unwavering devotion to family and country. Their strength is a testament to American character.

To the thousands of military families tormented by uncertainty due to the loss of loved ones whose whereabouts remain unknown, we want you to know that we will never forget their courage; nor the sacrifices they made so that we can enjoy the freedoms we embrace today as Americans.

Greg Whitlock, Secretary
South Dakota Department of Veterans Affairs

Groton Robotics Pancake Feed

Sponsored by Groton Lions Club

Sunday, January 30, 2022

10:00am-1:00pm

Groton Community Center



Pancakes, Sausage, Coffee, Milk and Juice will be served!

Free will donation!

Proceeds will go to Groton Robotics.

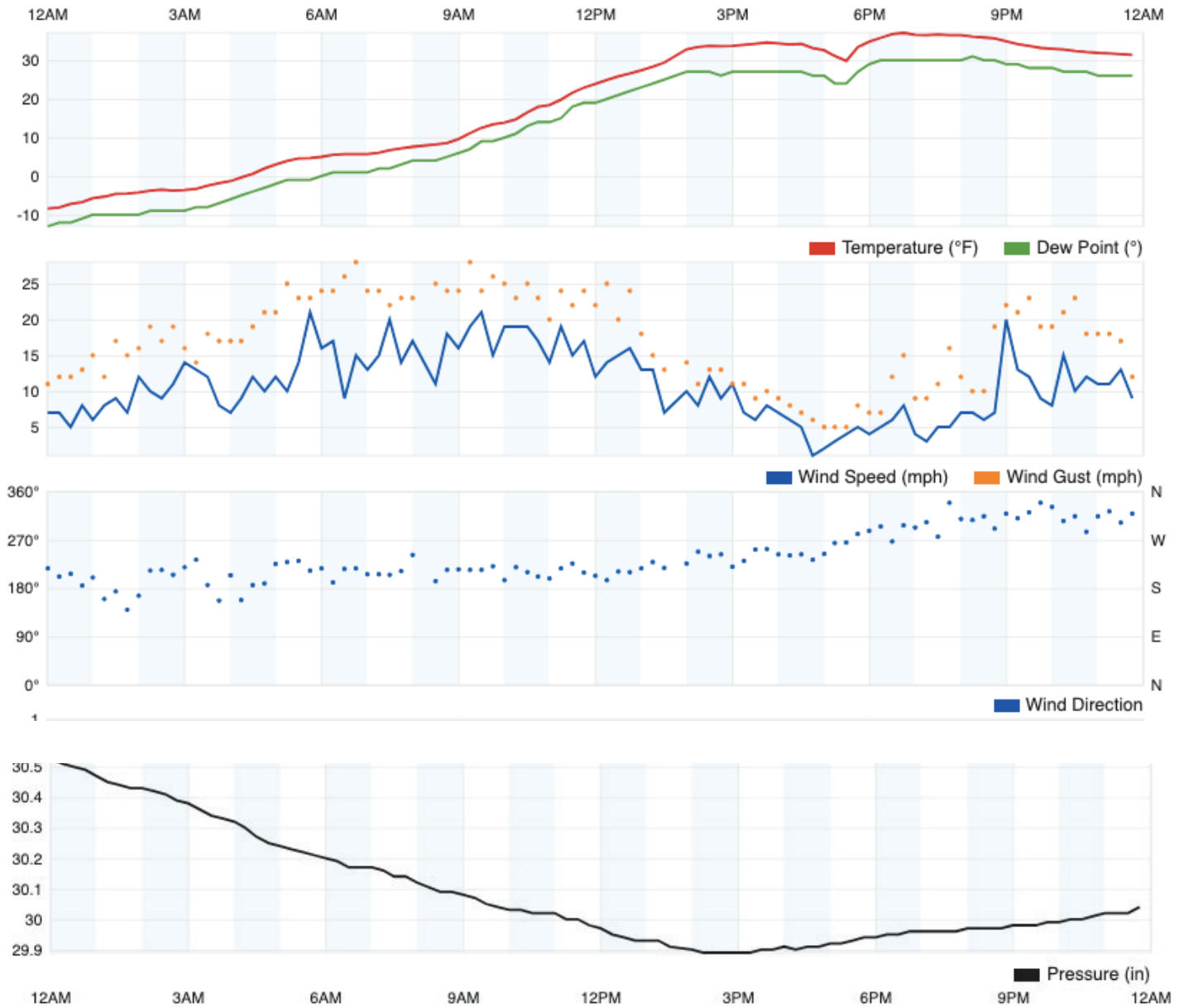


Carnival of Silver Skates performing at 2pm & 6:30pm!

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Slight Chance Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow

High: 26 °F ↓

Tonight



Partly Cloudy

Low: -14 °F

Friday



Mostly Sunny

High: 20 °F

Friday Night



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 8 °F

Saturday



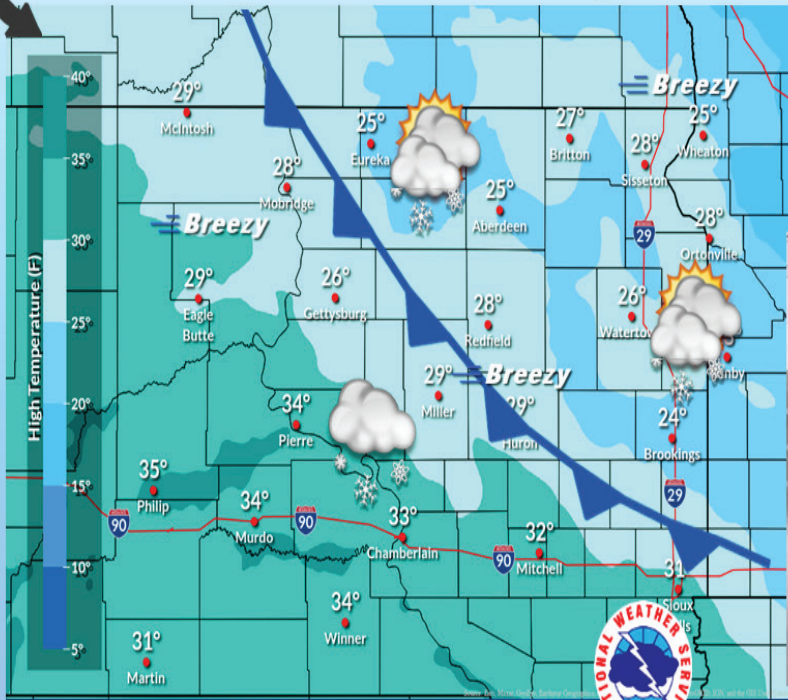
Partly Sunny then Mostly Sunny and Blustery

High: 31 °F

Snow Showers, Colder, Breezy

High temperatures will take place this morning, as readings drop through the day behind a cold front. Snow showers and breezy north winds will lead to potential periods of reduced visibility this AM into the early

afternoon. Take note if traveling, as conditions may change quickly from one minute to the next. Bitterly cold across & east of the Prairie Coteau tonight.



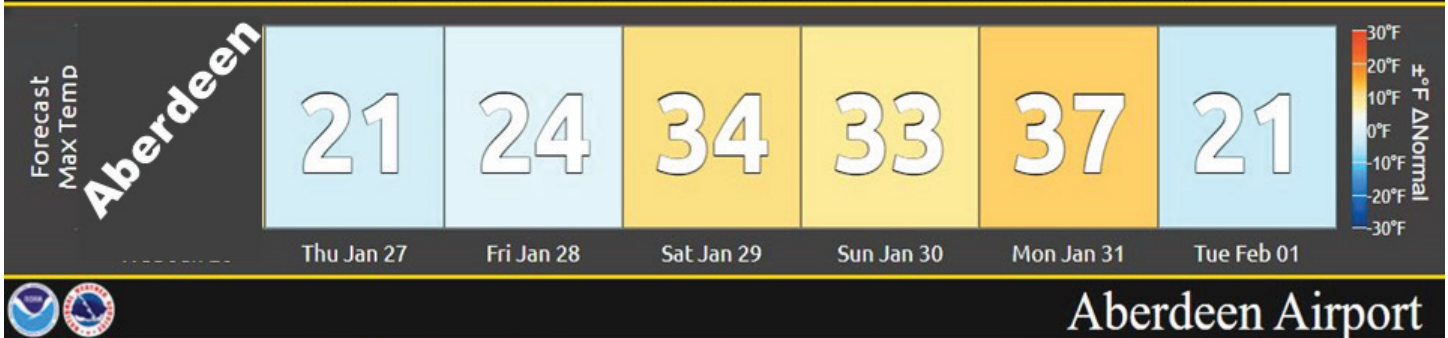
National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD weather.gov/abr Updated 1/27/2022 5:35 AM

A cold front will bring wintry weather today. Heads up for potential reduced visibilities down to a mile or less at times with passing snow showers this morning and early afternoon, as well as much colder air by tonight across northeastern SD and west central MN. Above average readings build back in Friday and through the weekend.

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Forecast Daily Max Temp vs Departure for Jan 27-Feb 01, 2022



Forecast Daily Max Temp vs Departure for Jan 27-Feb 01, 2022



The weather pattern will continue to support these large swings in temperature from well above freezing to well below freezing right into next week. The lack of snow cover over much of central and north central South Dakota only makes things worse.

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Today in Weather History

January 27th, 1969: Snowfall of 7 to 10 inches combined with winds of 15 to 30 mph caused widespread low visibilities and heavy drifting from the 27th to the 29th across Minnesota. Many roads were blocked or remained blocked. Many schools were closed with many accidents.

1922: On this date through the 29th, a significant snowstorm struck the East Coast from South Carolina to southeastern Massachusetts. Washington, DC, reported 28 inches of snow. The heavy snow on the Knickerbocker Theater's flat roof put a significant strain on the structure. On the evening of the 28th, during a showing of the silent comedy "Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford," the building collapsed, killing 98 people and injuring 130 others.

1772 - The "Washington and Jefferson Snowstorm" occurred. George Washington reported three feet of snow at Mount Vernon, and Thomas Jefferson recorded about three feet at Monticello. (Sandra and TI Richard Sanders - 1987)

1966 - Oswego, NY, was in the midst of a five day lake effect storm which left the town buried under 102 inches of snow. (David Ludlum)

1967: Residents of Chicago, Illinois, began to dig out from the storm of the 26th and 27th, which produced 23 inches of snow in 29 hours, their worse snowstorm. The snow paralyzed the city and suburbs for days, and business losses were enormous.

1987 - A powerful storm moving into the western U.S. produced 13 inches of snow at Daggett Pass NV, and 16 inches in the Cascade Mountains of Oregon. Winds gusted to 63 mph at Reno NV, and wind gusts in Oregon exceeded 80 mph. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - The nation got a breather from winter storms, however, cold arctic air settled into the southeastern U.S. Hollywood FL reported a record low reading of 39 degrees. (National Weather Summary)

1989 - The last half of January was bitterly cold over most of Alaska. Nearly thirty stations established all-time record low temperatures. On this date Tanana reported a low of -76 degrees. Daily highs of -66 degrees were reported at Chandalar Lake on the 22nd, and at Ambler on the 26th. (The Weather Channel)

1989 - Low pressure in north central Alaska continued to direct air across northern Siberia and the edges of the Arctic Circle into the state. The temperature at Fairbanks remained colder than 40 degrees below zero for the eighth day in a row. Lows of 68 below at Galena, 74 below at McGrath, and 76 below at Tanana, were new records for the date. Wind chill readings were colder than 100 degrees below zero. (National Weather Summary)

1990 - Another in a series of cold fronts brought high winds to the northwestern U.S., and more heavy snow to some of the higher elevations. The series of vigorous cold fronts crossing the area between the 23rd and the 27th of the month produced up to 60 inches of snow in the Cascade Mountains of Washington State. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2005 - Month-to-date snowfall at Boston Logan International Airport totaled 43.1 inches, making January the snowiest month on record.

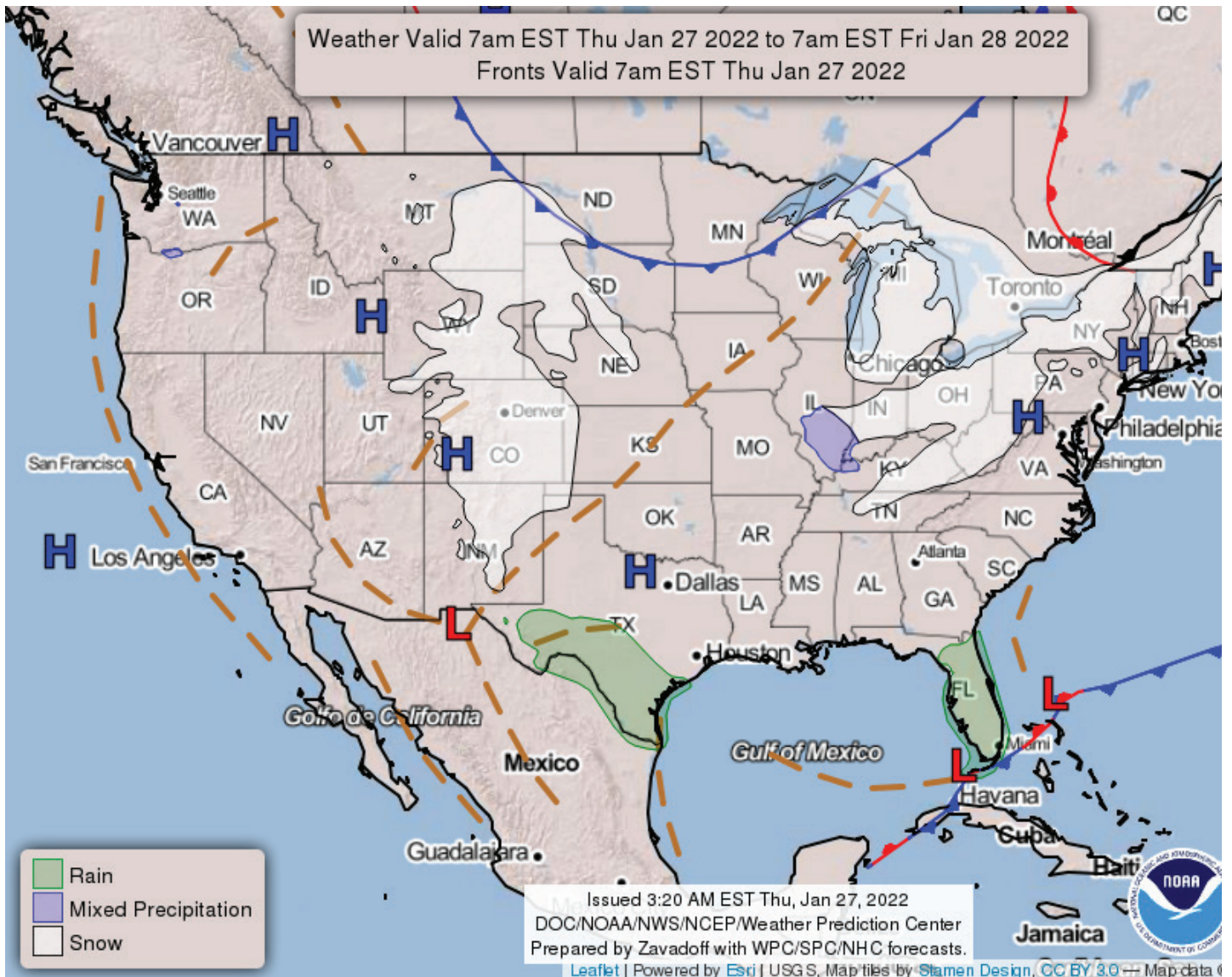
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 37 °F at 6:41 PM
Low Temp: -8 °F at 12:00 AM
Wind: 29 mph at 8:06 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 53 in 1934
Record Low: -34 in 1915
Average High: 24°F
Average Low: 2°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.49
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.59
Average Precip to date: 0.49
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 5:33:35 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:55:42 AM



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IS THE RIGHT PERSON ON YOUR SIDE?

The Civil War was a dark period in the history of the United States. President Abraham Lincoln had little time for anything else in his life. The demands on him were overwhelming, and he went for days without enjoying his family.

On one occasion while meeting with Secretary of State William Seward in the Cabinet room, his son burst through the door in tears and said, "I want my father!"

The secretary could have said, "Your father is too busy for you. Let me get you a teacher who can help you with your problems." Or, he could have said, "Let me get you an attorney who will represent you wisely and get you out of any problem you might have."

The child knew who he wanted, and it was not the Secretary of State or some other highly qualified person. He wanted his father. No one else could fill that need.

And, that is essentially what the Psalmist said when he cried, "In my anguish I cried to the Lord, and He answered by setting me free." God was his first responder.

Sometimes it is easy to turn to the person who we consider to be our closest friend when we face a tough time in our lives. Or, we may look for a person who is known for his brilliance or knowledge or wisdom or status to rescue us from any number of problems that are beyond our capabilities. That may not be wise.

When we face the uncertainties of life, the first person we need to call on for guidance is God. We must go to him as a child to a father knowing He is waiting to help.

Prayer: Lord, we know that no one cares for us as much as You do. Teach us to look to You first when we are in need, knowing that You are "for" us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: – In my anguish, I cried to the Lord, and He answered me by setting me free. Psalm 118:5

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2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/23/2022 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/24/2022 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/07/2022 Lions Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
St John's Lutheran Church VBS 9-11am
05/30/2022 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
Transit Fundraiser at the Community Center 4-7pm (Thursday Mid-June)
06/17/2022 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Start
06/18/2022 Groton Triathlon
Ladies Invitational at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Start
07/04/2022 Firecracker Couples Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start
(4th of July)
07/10/2022 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
Dacotah Bank Back To School Supply Drive
Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar 11am-1pm at the Groton Legion
Baseball Tourney
07/21/2022 Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
How can we... "Love Groton"? United Methodist Church 9:30am
Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm
JVT School Supply Drive
08/05/2022 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/12/2022 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
09/11/2022 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm

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News from the Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Wednesday:

Dakota Cash

05-07-17-25-32

(five, seven, seventeen, twenty-five, thirty-two)

Estimated jackpot: \$68,000

Lotto America

01-08-22-23-29, Star Ball: 2, ASB: 2

(one, eight, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-nine; Star Ball: two; ASB: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$6.71 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$421 million

Powerball

04-11-38-49-69, Powerball: 16, Power Play: 3

(four, eleven, thirty-eight, forty-nine, sixty-nine; Powerball: sixteen; Power Play: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$91 million

19 year old accused of having loaded gun at basketball game

BOX ELDER, S.D. (AP) — Authorities in southwestern South Dakota say a 19 year old was arrested Tuesday after he allegedly brought a loaded weapon to a high school basketball game.

Box Elder police said the teen was one of four people who showed up at the Douglas High School game after drinking. The suspect had the gun tucked into his waistband, police said.

Staff attending the game had notified the school resource officer of a potential problem, KELO-TV reported.

“Our law enforcement professionals and area school districts work together quickly to identify and resolve issues that has the potential to jeopardize the safety of our students, staff and fans,” said Capt. Tony Harrison with the Pennington County Sheriff’s Department.

The sheriff’s office said none of the individuals involved in the incident were students at Douglas High, which is located in Box Elder.

Governor scales back Custer State Park campsite proposal

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem has scaled back plans to expand campsites at Custer State Park after her initial proposal hit resistance in the Republican-controlled Legislature.

The Republican governor’s office shared new plans on Wednesday with lawmakers that would halve the number of campsites from the more than 176 that were proposed, the Sioux Falls Argus Leader reported. It would also cut the proposal to \$5 million after an initial \$10 million ask, as well as relocates the proposed campground away from the Wildlife Loop Road.

Republican lawmakers had soured on the plan after privately-owned campgrounds in the area spoke out against it and conservation groups raised concerns about how wildlife would be affected.

“This proposed site does not affect elk migration,” read a handout from Noem’s administration given to lawmakers Wednesday.

The proposal has been assigned to the House Agriculture and Natural Resources committee, but its hearing has not been scheduled.

Dakota State announces \$90M cybersecurity expansion, lab

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SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Dakota State University on Wednesday announced plans for a \$90 million expansion of its cybersecurity program, including the construction of a lab in Sioux Falls.

At an event to announce the program, Gov. Kristi Noem said it would help foster the cybersecurity industry in South Dakota and includes a statewide program to train high school students in programming while also doubling the student size of Dakota State's cybersecurity degree.

The cybersecurity lab, which is slated to open in 2025, represents a major expansion by the public university system into the state's largest city, Sioux Falls, which does not host any of the primary campuses for the state's six universities. Sanford Health is donating land for the campus.

Dakota State University President José-Marie Griffiths described the program as a "complex and future-leaning" project that would foster both educational and business opportunities.

The expansion will be funded by a mix of donations and state funds. Philanthropist T. Denny Sanford is contributing \$50 million, while Noem has proposed a \$30 million allotment from the state budget. The city of Sioux Falls is also donating \$10 million for the lab.

U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds in a statement called the program a "game-changer" for the state.

South Dakota House passes bill requiring teacher pay boost

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — The South Dakota House on Wednesday passed a proposal to push schools to increase average teacher compensation from what it was in 2017.

The bill easily passed the Republican-controlled House with just a single dissenting vote and will next proceed to the Senate. It would extend for three years a compensation boost requirement that came with a 2016 sales tax hike that channeled more money to school districts. But even with the funding increase, the state's average teacher pay has remained among the lowest in the nation.

The bill's sponsor, Republican Rep. Hugh Bartels, said it was aimed at "encouraging good teacher pay" and making sure the state doesn't tumble further down the list of states with the lowest average compensation.

Schools would risk losing state funding if they fail to increase pay, but can also apply for a waiver.

State lawmakers also considering whether to approve a historic 6% boost in state funding for schools to keep up with inflation.

South Dakota House committee approves trans athlete ban

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A South Dakota House committee on Wednesday approved a proposal from Republican Gov. Kristi Noem to ban transgender women and girls from competing in school sports leagues that match their gender identity.

All 11 Republicans on the House State Affairs committee voted in favor of the bill, which has been cast as "protecting fairness in women's sports." But advocates for transgender people decried the proposal as bullying that would deprive them of an opportunity to compete and belong to a team.

"Transgender girls like me want to play sports," said Hoera Kingi, a high school senior who has competed on her school's cheerleading team, adding that a ban on her competing as a girl "would have stopped me from meeting some of my favorite people and making some of my most cherished memories."

Noem has lobbied heavily for the proposal this year, setting it on track to be the first controversial piece of legislation passed by South Dakota lawmakers in this year's session.

It has already cleared the Senate and only awaits a vote on the House floor, where Republican lawmakers have in the past supported similar proposals. Some House members have indicated they want to see the proposal contain sharper enforcement.

"Science and common sense tell us that males are generally bigger, stronger and faster than females," Rachel Oglesby, the governor's policy advisor, told the committee.

Organizations representing the state's public schools have also voiced opposition to the bill, arguing that the high school activities association already has an effective policy that evaluates applications from transgender athletes on a case-by-case basis. School groups warned the bill, if enacted, would put them

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at odds with federal law, exposing them to the potential of lawsuits, a federal civil rights investigation or possibly a loss of federal funding.

Noem's chief of staff, Mark Miller, defended the legality of the proposal and pointed to instances when trans athletes in other states have given dominant performances.

"It's sort of like terrorism, you want to keep it over there, not let it get over here," he said when a Democratic lawmaker questioned why the governor was taking up the issue when it has not stirred controversy in South Dakota sports.

Democratic Rep. Jamie Smith called Miller's comparison "absolutely disgusting."

South Dakota could be the 10th Republican-controlled 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 LGBTQ advocates said statehouses have played host to a rise in discriminatory legislation in the last few years, reaching hundreds of bills every year.

Vivian Topping, the director of advocacy at Equality Federation, said that many of those proposals gain little traction, but added, "Once these bills have momentum, it is very hard to stop them."

Democrats eye Supreme Court pick to revive 2022 prospects

By STEVE PEOPLES AP National Politics Writer

Democrats stung by a series of election year failures to deliver legislative wins for their most loyal voters hope they'll be buoyed by the prospect that President Joe Biden will name the first Black woman to serve on the Supreme Court.

Justice Stephen Breyer's pending retirement, confirmed by numerous sources on Wednesday, couldn't have come at a better time for a Democratic Party reeling from the collapse of Biden's legislative agenda last week, including a push to overhaul election laws that voting rights advocates said was critical to protecting democracy.

As Democrats regroup with an eye on maintaining a tenuous grip on Congress after November's mid-term elections, the prospect of naming Breyer's replacement offered an opportunity to pause from those bruising battles. Seeing Biden's campaign pledge to appoint the first Black woman to the Supreme Court fulfilled, Democrats hope they can energize a dejected base, particularly Black voters whose support will be crucial in the fall campaign.

"This is a huge opportunity for us," said Aimee Allison, founder of She the People, a national organization that encourages women of color to vote. "It turns out that appointing a Black woman (to the Supreme Court) at this moment could help to make up for the policy and political losses that we've seen recently."

"It's a win," Allison said.

Among the names being circulated as potential nominees are California Supreme Court Justice Leandra Kruger, U.S. Circuit Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, prominent civil rights lawyer Sherrilyn Ifill and U.S. District Judge Michelle Childs, whom Biden has nominated to be an appeals court judge. Childs is a favorite of Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C., who made a crucial endorsement of Biden just before South Carolina's presidential primary in 2020.

The exact timing of Breyer's retirement remains unclear, but Senate Democrats who control the confirmation process plan to begin the proceedings as soon as possible.

Despite that energetic push, there are risks for Biden and his party that could jeopardize any apparent political advantages born of an election-year Supreme Court vacancy.

Replacing Breyer won't ultimately change the court's 6-3 conservative majority, which has stymied Biden on major priorities including his recent vaccine and testing mandate for large businesses.

And if every Senate Republican unites to oppose the nominee, the president would need to secure support from every Democrat in the chamber. That could potentially revive recent fights in which moderate Democratic Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema bucked the party and defeated its

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priorities.

In a statement Wednesday, Manchin made clear he would scrutinize the pick.

"I take my Constitutional responsibility to advise and consent on a nominee to the Supreme Court very seriously," he said. "I look forward to meeting with and evaluating the qualifications of President Biden's nominee to fill this Supreme Court vacancy."

Republicans, who privately conceded Wednesday's development may help Democrats in the short term, were quick to signal that they would cast the nominee as too far to the left no matter whom Biden selects.

"The Democrats know they will lose the Senate majority in 2022," said Florida Sen. Rick Scott, who leads the Senate GOP's campaign arm. "I predict that Chuck Schumer and whoever is running the White House will force all Democrats to obey and walk the plank in support of a radical liberal with extremist views."

Indeed, the development was most expected to influence the fight for the Senate majority, where Democrats have the slimmest possible majority.

Vulnerable Democratic incumbents from New Hampshire to Nevada seized on the upcoming Supreme Court confirmation debate, highlighting abortion rights in particular.

The high court's conservative majority in December signaled openness to dramatic restrictions on abortion and may even overturn the landmark *Roe v. Wade* precedent. A decision is expected by the summer.

"The next justice must understand how their decisions impact the Nevadans I fight for every day, and that is especially true when it comes to women's reproductive rights," said Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto, the Nevada Democrat who faces a challenging reelection test in a state where voters largely support abortion rights.

It's much the same dynamic in New Hampshire for Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen.

"There is so much at stake for Americans today that will be directly affected by the U.S. Supreme Court, from women's reproductive freedom to safeguarding civil liberties for all Americans and ensuring equal access to the ballot box," she said. "I look forward to reviewing President Biden's choice."

And while the politics may initially benefit Democrats, Republicans wasted no time in seizing on the looming Supreme Court vacancy to raise campaign cash.

Soon after news of Breyer's pending retirement was released, the Republican National Committee blasted out a fundraising email announcing the creation of an "Official Defend the Court Fund."

"Make NO mistake — Biden will pick a nominee that is pro-abortion, anti-gun and anti-religious liberty," the GOP warned.

Still, there was a palpable sense of relief and optimism among Democrats, including those who have grown frustrated with the slow pace of change under Biden.

"It's not a silver bullet, but my God, this is a big deal, man," said Young Democrats of America President Quentin Wathum-Ocama, who has been critical of the Biden presidency. "This is huge for so many reasons. It's going to get people excited."

Democrats need all the help they can get.

JB Poersch, who leads a super PAC aligned with Senate Democrats, said the nomination fight may help motivate Democratic voters — especially if Republicans try to interfere with the nomination process — but there are no guarantees.

"We have no room for error," he said.

Beijing's Olympic bubble makes a slightly surreal experience

BEIJING (AP) — For journalists covering the Beijing Winter Olympics, China's strict pandemic measures are creating a surreal and somewhat frustrating experience.

China requires electronic confirmation of the health status of those participating in or covering the Games and shunts them into a closed loop bubble upon arrival.

That kept Associated Press photo editor Yirmiyan Arthur on edge during her journey from New Delhi to Beijing via Tokyo on Tuesday.

A colleague helped her download the app in Beijing, but the presence of health workers in biohazard

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suits reminded her that restrictions would keep her inside the bubble requiring competitors, officials, staff and journalists to stay isolated from the general public.

"I know the only experience of Beijing I'm going to experience is the Beijing I will see out of my bus window and my hotel window," Arthur said. "I'm not really going to experience China, I'm just going to experience the Olympics within the bubble."

AP photographer Jae Hong said he had been warned about the bubble, but seeing it in effect in Beijing was still a shock.

Workers in protective suits met passengers and sent them off to hotels that were sealed off with fences, protected by round-the-clock guards, Hong said.

AP video journalist Johnson Lai is facing more stress because China has no formal relations with his self-governing Taiwan homeland that China claims as its own territory.

The lack of connection meant he was unable to complete the form in the Olympics app to get a code, which requires a test conducted at a Chinese-approved hospital.

"There's a lot of uncertain matters that we can't control. We can only apply based on their procedures," said Lai, who is forgoing celebrating Chinese New Year with his family to cover the Games.

So far, organizers say there have been 39 positive results out of the more than 2,500 tests at the airport among those who arrived for the Games since early January.

Within the bubble, there have been 33 positives out of 336,400 tests. None of the positives involved athletes. The average time spent in isolation for most has been around six days.

US response on Ukraine offers little optimism, Russia says

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The U.S. rejection of Russia's main demands to resolve the crisis over Ukraine leaves little ground for optimism, the Kremlin spokesman said Thursday, while adding that dialogue was still possible.

Tensions have soared in recent weeks, as the United States and its NATO allies expressed fear that a buildup of about 100,000 Russian troops near Ukraine signaled Moscow planned to invade its ex-Soviet neighbor. Russia denies having any such designs — and has laid out a series of demands it says will improve security in Europe.

But as expected, the U.S. and the Western alliance firmly rejected any concessions on Moscow's main points Wednesday, refusing to permanently ban Ukraine from joining NATO and saying allied deployments of troops and military equipment in Eastern Europe are nonnegotiable. The U.S. did outline areas in which some of Russia's concerns might be addressed, possibly offering a path to de-escalation.

"There is no change, there will be no change," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, repeating the warning that any Russian incursion into Ukraine would be met with massive consequences and severe economic costs.

All eyes are now on how Russia will respond amid fears that Europe could again be plunged into war. That decision that rests squarely with President Vladimir Putin.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters that the response from the U.S. — and a similar one from NATO — leaves "little ground for optimism."

At the same time, he added that "there always are prospects for continuing a dialogue, it's in the interests of both us and the Americans."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov noted that the U.S. response contains some elements that could lead to "the start of a serious talk on secondary issues" but emphasized that "the document contains no positive response on the main issue," the Russian demands for the non-expansion of NATO and the non-deployment of weapons that may threaten Russia.

Lavrov told reporters that top officials will now submit their proposals to Putin, who has the American response, and Peskov said the Russian reaction would come soon.

The evasive official comments reflect the fact that it's Putin who single-handedly determines Russia's next moves. The Russian leader has warned that he would order unspecified "military-technical measures"

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if the West refuses to heed the Russian security demands.

Peskov added that Putin and U.S. President Joe Biden will decide whether they need to have another conversation following two calls last month.

While the diplomacy sputters on, so, too, do maneuvers on both sides that have escalated tensions. Russia has launched a series of military drills: Motorized infantry and artillery units in southwestern Russia practiced firing live ammunition, warplanes in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea performed bombing runs, dozens of warships sailed for training exercises in the Black Sea and the Arctic, and Russian fighter jets and paratroopers arrived in Belarus for joint war games.

Meanwhile, NATO said it was bolstering its deterrence in the Baltic Sea region, and the U.S. ordered 8,500 troops on higher alert for potential deployment to Europe.

Amid the fears of Russian invasion in Ukraine, a top Putin associate alleged the country has become a Western tool to contain Russia.

"Ukraine has become a toy in the hands of NATO and, primarily, the United States, which are using it as an instrument of geopolitical pressure against Russia," Dmitry Medvedev, a deputy head of Russia's Security Council, said in an interview with Russian media.

He acknowledged that a Russia-NATO conflict "would be the most dramatic and simply catastrophic scenario, and I hope it will never happen."

Medvedev argued that Moscow sees no point in talking to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, but voiced hope that the Ukrainians would eventually become "weary of that bedlam and elect the leadership that would pursue policies ... aimed at normal economic relations with Russia."

Medvedev's comment follows a British claim that the Kremlin is seeking to replace Ukraine's government with a pro-Moscow administration — an allegation Russia denied.

In 2014, following the ouster of a Kremlin-friendly president in Kyiv, Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and threw its weight behind a separatist insurgency in the country's eastern industrial heartland. Fighting between Ukrainian forces and Russia-backed rebels has killed over 14,000 people, and efforts to reach a settlement have stalled.

While a senior Russian diplomat has pointedly refused to rule out military deployments to Cuba and Venezuela, Medvedev expressed skepticism about such prospect.

"Cuba and Venezuela are aiming to come out of isolation and restore normal relations with the U.S. to a certain extent, so there can't be any talk about setting up a base there as it happened during the Soviet times," he said.

Breyer: A pragmatic approach searching for a middle ground

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer has the air of an absent-minded professor, once joking in court that his wife put directions in his pocket to keep him from getting lost. He concocts outlandish hypothetical questions to try to get answers to difficult questions, often to the frustration of lawyers with limited time to make their arguments.

But if Breyer cultivates such an image, it does not mask a razor-sharp intellect, a sunny disposition or a relentlessly pragmatic approach to the law that often finds him searching for a middle ground or grasping for an outcome he can live with on an increasingly conservative court.

Breyer, 83, plans to retire, multiple sources told The Associated Press, but almost certainly not before the court finishes its work in early summer.

By then, the court will have rendered its verdict on abortion rights, including possibly overturning the nationwide right to an abortion the court first announced in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973 and has reaffirmed ever since, including in several opinions Breyer wrote.

His most important opinion came at the end of the court's term in June 2016. Breyer was in the majority to strike down Texas' regulations of abortion clinics because they provided "few, if any, health benefits for women," while making it harder to obtain an abortion.

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Although Breyer's votes usually put him to the left of center on an increasingly conservative court, he frequently saw the gray in situations that colleagues to his right and left preferred to describe as black or white.

This was never more clear than on June 27, 2005. In two cases involving displays of the Ten Commandments on public property, Breyer was alone among his colleagues in finding a 6-foot (1.8-meter) granite monument outside the Texas Capitol acceptable and framed copies in two Kentucky courthouses in violation of the Constitution.

In Fourth Amendment cases and law enforcement cases, Breyer would sometimes switch places with Justice Antonin Scalia and join the other conservatives while Scalia, who died in February 2016, voted with the court's liberals.

That was the breakdown in 2013, when Breyer was in the majority to uphold a Maryland law that allowed police to seize DNA without a warrant from people who have been arrested for serious crimes. Authorities could then submit that sample to a federal database to see if a suspect was wanted for unrelated crimes.

His willingness to side with authority when some of his liberal colleagues did not was part of his makeup. An Eagle Scout, Breyer was a believer in government and in working together to solve problems. He liked to point out that as an aide to Democratic Sen. Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, he worked daily with his counterpart on the staff of Republican Sen. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina. The consistent message from their bosses, Breyer said, was to work things out.

That same attitude didn't always carry over to the high court, especially after the retirement of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. The first woman on the Supreme Court was a former state lawmaker who was practiced in the art of political compromise. Breyer made no secret that he missed O'Connor, whose seat was taken by the more conservative Justice Samuel Alito.

In June 2007, at the end of the Alito's first full term as a justice, Breyer issued a long, impassioned dissent from a decision that invalidated public school integration plans. "It is not often that so few have so quickly changed so much," Breyer said of a five-justice conservative majority, noting that his dissenting opinion was more than twice as long as any he had written in 13 years on the court. It was a rare public display of pessimism for Breyer, who worried that he would be increasingly in dissent in a new era under the leadership of Chief Justice John Roberts.

Two months later, Breyer was whistling a happier, though still realistic, tune. The setbacks in cases involving abortion, pay discrimination against women and education underscored his faith in the rule of law. "When I look at it objectively, I think how I wish I'd won, but I also think, not a bad system," Breyer said at the American Bar Association meeting in his native San Francisco. "I'm not going to be in the majority all the time. How I wish I were, but that's the system. That's called the rule of law."

The rule of law was central to his argument that the public should not look at the court as politicians in robes, which he continues to speak out about even as opinion polls find increasing support for the view that the court's work is political.

Breyer's most pointed dissents occurred in ideologically split decisions and accused the majority of risking the court's nonpolitical reputation. In the *Bush v. Gore* case, when the court ruled on the outcome of the 2000 presidential election, Breyer wrote that the decision "runs the risk of undermining the public's confidence in the court itself ... we do risk a self-inflicted wound." Choosing a president "is of fundamental national importance. But that importance is political, not legal."

In 2015, Breyer concluded after 21 years on the court that it was "highly likely" that the death penalty was unconstitutional. His dissent drew only one other vote, that of Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

The justice straddled two eras of the court, the William Rehnquist years and the Roberts era. He sometimes seemed overshadowed by others in the court's liberal wing, perhaps because he had less seniority than Justices John Paul Stevens and Ginsburg.

Like Ginsburg, Breyer is Jewish. When Elena Kagan joined the court in 2010, those three Jewish justices served on the court with six Catholics and, for the first time in U.S. history, no Protestants. Breyer speaks about his Judaism and many other topics in frequent public speeches, both in the United States

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and internationally.

He speaks French well enough to deliver addresses in the language, including for his induction in 2013 as a foreign member of the France's Académie des Sciences Morales et Politiques, one of the five academies of the Institut de France. The court's press office would occasionally distribute texts of Breyer's remarks in French, at the justice's urging.

World remembers Holocaust as antisemitism rises in pandemic

By SAMUEL PETREQUIN Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — Holocaust survivors and politicians warned about the resurgence of antisemitism and Holocaust denial as the world remembered Nazi atrocities and commemorated the 77th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz concentration camp on Thursday.

"I have lived in New York for 75 years, but I still remember well the terrible time of horror and hatred," survivor Inge Auerbacher, 87, told the German parliament. "Unfortunately, this cancer has reawakened and hatred of Jews is commonplace again in many countries in the world, including Germany."

Commemorations are taking place amid a rise of antisemitism that gained traction during lockdowns as the pandemic exacerbated hatred online.

"This sickness must be healed as quickly as possible," Auerbacher said.

German parliament speaker Baerbel Bas noted that the coronavirus pandemic has acted "like an accelerant" to already burgeoning antisemitism.

"Antisemitism is here - it isn't just on the extreme fringe, not just among the eternally incorrigible and a few antisemitic trolls on the net," she said. "It is a problem of our society — all of society."

The U.N. General Assembly adopted a resolution in November 2005 establishing the annual commemoration, and chose Jan. 27 — the day that Auschwitz-Birkenau was liberated by Soviet troops in 1945.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, many International Holocaust Remembrance Day events were being held online this year again. A small ceremony, however, was to take place at the site of the former Auschwitz death camp, where World War II Nazi German forces killed 1.1 million people in occupied Poland. The memorial site was closed earlier in the pandemic but reopened in June.

In all, about 6 million European Jews and millions of other people were killed by the Nazis and their collaborators during the Holocaust. Some 1.5 million were children.

"Our country bears a special responsibility — the genocide against the European Jews is a German crime," Bas told a special parliamentary session in Berlin attended by the country's leaders. "But at the same time it is a past that is everyone's business -- not just Germans, not just Jews."

Israel's parliamentary speaker, Mickey Levy, broke down in tears at Germany's Bundestag while reciting the Jewish mourner's prayer from a prayer book that belonged to a German Jewish boy who celebrated his bar mitzvah on the eve of Kristallnacht.

Levy said that Israel and Germany experienced "an exceptional journey on the way to reconciliation and establishing relations and brave friendship between us."

Auerbacher recalled being nearly hit by a stone thrown by Nazi thugs during the anti-Jewish pogrom of November 1938. In August 1942, she and other Jews were transported to the Theresienstadt camp-ghetto.

"I was 7 years old and the youngest of about 1,100 people, of whom my parents, I and a very few others survived," she said.

European Union lawmakers planned to observe a minute's silence later Thursday and welcome centenarian Holocaust survivor Margot Friedlander. The 100-year-old was arrested in 1944 while on the run and brought to Theresienstadt, in what is now the Czech Republic. A year before, her mother and brother were deported to Auschwitz, where they were both killed.

Friedlander and her husband immigrated to the U.S. in 1946 and returned to Berlin in 2010. She has since been traveling around Germany to tell the story of her life and promote remembrance.

Charles Michel, the head of the EU Council bringing together leaders of the 27 EU member countries, insisted on the importance of commemorating the Shoah as the number of survivors diminishes every year.

"With each passing year, the Shoah inches towards becoming a historical event," Michel said. "More and more distant, more and more abstract. Especially in the eyes of the younger generations of Europeans. This is why, paradoxically, the more the years go by, the more important the commemoration becomes. The more essential."

To tackle Holocaust denial, UNESCO and the World Jewish Congress launched a partnership Thursday with the online platform TikTok popular with youngsters. They say it will allow users to be oriented toward verified information when searching for terms related to the Shoah.

According to the U.N., 17% of content related to the Holocaust on TikTok either denied or distorted the Holocaust.

"Denying, distorting or trivializing the true facts of the Holocaust is a pernicious form of contemporary antisemitism," said UNESCO Director-General Audrey Azoulay. "All online platforms must take responsibility for the spread of hate speech by promoting reliable sources of information."

Buttigieg vows help as US car fatalities keep spiking higher

By HOPE YEN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg is vowing to help stem rising traffic fatalities, releasing a broad-based strategy aimed at reducing speed, redesigning roads and boosting car safety features such as automatic emergency braking.

Buttigieg told The Associated Press that new federal data being released next week will show another increase in traffic fatalities through the third quarter of 2021. While still being finalized, the third-quarter numbers were expected to point to another sizable increase in deaths compared with the same period in 2020, adding to a half-year traffic death total of 20,160 that already was the highest half-year figure since 2006.

"It doesn't look good, and I continue to be extremely concerned about the trend," Buttigieg said in a phone interview ahead of the strategy's release on Thursday.

"Somehow it has become over the years and decades as normal, sort of the cost of doing business," he said. "Even through a pandemic that led to considerably less driving, we continue to see more danger on our roads."

To prioritize safety, Buttigieg said his department is embracing a new "safe system" approach urged by auto safety advocates to bolster initiatives already underway in several cities that seek to eliminate fatalities by taking into account the whole system rather than just driver behavior.

Over the next two years, he said, his department will provide guidance as well as \$5 billion in grants to states to spur lower speed limits and embrace safer road design such as dedicated bike and bus lanes, better lighting and crosswalks. When roads become safer for bicyclists and pedestrians, it opens up transit options overall and can lead to fewer dangerous cars on the road, he said.

The Safe Streets and Roads for All grants, the first of which could be awarded later this year, are included in President Joe Biden's infrastructure law, which has an additional \$4 billion in funding through the Highway Safety Improvement Program.

Citing his experience as mayor of South Bend, Indiana, Buttigieg said he envisions cities and states taking interim steps with federal support. He pointed to Hoboken, New Jersey, which has made roadway improvements such as curb extensions and retimed traffic signals to give pedestrians a head start in crosswalks.

The nationwide road safety strategy released Thursday notes the rising trend of crash deaths, including a disproportionate deadly impact on nonwhite drivers, cyclists and pedestrians.

It urges pilot programs to study and promote greater use of speed cameras, which the department says could provide more equitable enforcement than police traffic stops. Automakers, meanwhile, will be prodded to adopt more crash avoidance features and publish detailed information about them for consumers on window stickers for new car sales.

It pledges a shift in approach on the state and local level in part with planned updates to the federal

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Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices, which lays down the requirements for U.S. street markings and design. Among the possibilities is rethinking how speed limits are set. Currently, many cities set limits at whatever 85% of drivers are traveling, essentially letting drivers make the decision.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, a part of the Transportation Department, also plans to move forward on rulemaking to require automatic emergency braking in all new passenger vehicles, set new standards on car safety performance by emphasizing features such as lane keeping assistance and require crash avoidance information on new car window stickers.

The NHTSA has struggled with a growing backlog of safety rules ordered by Congress that are years overdue, while the new infrastructure law added new requirements, such as a federal mandate to auto-makers to install anti-drunken driving technology. No firm deadlines were specified for finalizing the rules, which the NHTSA must write up and can take years.

Traffic deaths began to spike in 2019, and the NHTSA blamed speeding and other reckless driving behavior for the increases during the coronavirus pandemic. Before then, the number of fatalities had fallen for three straight years.

Cathy Chase, president of Advocates for Highway and Auto Safety, called the department's strategy a step in the right direction, citing the importance of "swift implementation of identified solutions which have been proven to prevent crashes and save lives," such as issuing minimum performance standards for automatic emergency braking.

Jennifer Homendy, chair of the National Transportation Safety Board and a strong advocate for the broader "safe systems" approach, also has praised the department's initial steps but stressed the importance of a sustained effort to get full cooperation from states, communities and automakers. Last week, Homendy criticized the NHTSA for moving too slowly in removing from its website statistics that suggested that 94% of serious crashes are solely due to driver error; in fact, the agency's own research describes it as one of several key contributing factors. The NHTSA has since removed the language.

"This is achievable. We may not get to zero crashes, but we could get to zero fatalities and we could drive down serious injuries considerably," Homendy told the AP last week. "Their biggest hurdle is, can you get the same commitments from the state departments of transportation, and is the will there with NHTSA? It's really going to take a big effort."

China demands US halt Olympics 'interference'

BEIJING (AP) — China is demanding the U.S. end "interference" in the Beijing Winter Olympics, which begin next week, in an apparent reference to a diplomatic boycott imposed by Washington and some of its allies.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi made the demand in a phone call with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken on Thursday Beijing time, according to the Foreign Ministry.

The U.S. has said it will not send dignitaries to the Games, which open Feb. 4, in a protest over China's detention of more than 1 million Uyghur Muslims in the northwestern region of Xinjiang, along with crackdowns on human rights elsewhere in the country.

The boycott does not prevent U.S. athletes from taking part in the Games, which are being held under strict anti-pandemic rules. China has also protested what it says are calls within the State Department to withdraw staff and their dependents from the embassy and consulates around China over the tightening restrictions.

According to a news release posted on the ministry's website Thursday, Wang also called for an end to U.S. support for self-governing Taiwan, which China claims as its own territory.

China's growing assertiveness directed at the U.S. has extended as far as relations with Central American nations and as close as Beijing's maritime claims in the South and East China Seas.

At a monthly briefing Thursday, Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson Wu Qian responded to a question about U.S. military movements in the Asia-Pacific region by saying China's armed forces were "fully prepared to deal with any foreign provocations or emergency situations" that arise during the Olympics.

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The U.S. says it doesn't recognize most of China's claims in the strategically crucial South China Sea and routinely sails warships and flies planes near Chinese-held islands.

Foreign Minister Wang also complained that the administration of President Joe Biden has maintained tough political and economic policies enacted earlier despite its expressed wishes for a less confrontational relationship.

"The U.S. continuously puts forward wrong words and actions toward China, causing new conflicts in relations between the two countries," Wang was quoted as saying.

A brief statement from the State Department said that Blinken and Wang exchanged views on how to manage strategic risk, health security and climate change. It did not mention the Olympics or Taiwan. Blinken underscored the economic and security risks posed by Russian aggression against Ukraine, the statement said.

The phone call follows the appointment of veteran diplomat Nicholas Burns as the new U.S. ambassador to China, a position that has remained empty for more than a year.

WHO staff complaint, email allege racism and abuse in Asia

By MARIA CHENG AP Medical Writer

Current and former staffers have accused the top director of the World Health Organization in the Western Pacific of racist, unethical and abusive behavior that has undermined the U.N. health agency's efforts to curb the coronavirus pandemic.

The allegations were laid out in an internal complaint filed in October and again in an email last week, sent by unidentified "concerned WHO staff" to senior leadership and the executive board and obtained by the Associated Press. Two of the authors said more than 30 staffers were involved in writing it, and that it reflected the experiences of more than 50 people.

The internal complaint and the email describe a "toxic atmosphere" with "a culture of systemic bullying and public ridiculing" at WHO's Western Pacific headquarters in Manila, led by Dr. Takeshi Kasai, director of a vast region that includes China and his home country of Japan. The AP also has obtained recorded snippets of meetings where Kasai is heard making derogatory remarks about his staff based on nationality. Eleven former or current WHO staffers who worked for Kasai told the AP he frequently used racist language.

Staffers, who did not identify themselves to WHO "for fear of retaliation," said in the email that Kasai's authoritarian style has led to the departure of more than 55 key staff in the past year and a half, most of whom have not been replaced. This resulted in a lack of understanding and involvement with member countries that "significantly contributed" to a surge of cases in many countries in the region, they said. However, other WHO staffers pointed out that spikes in COVID cases were due to numerous reasons, including countries' own resources and the timing of their national efforts.

The complaint and message also accused Kasai of improperly sharing potentially sensitive vaccine information with Japan, one of 37 countries in the region he leads.

In an email to the AP, Kasai denied allegations of racism and unethical behavior. He said that after receiving the email last week, he immediately took steps to communicate with all his staff.

"I ask a lot of myself, and our staff," he said. "This has particularly been the case during the COVID-19 response. But it should not result in people feeling disrespected."

Kasai said he was committed to making changes that would ensure "a positive work environment" for all WHO staff in the region. However, an internal WHO message seen by the AP shows that in a meeting last week, Kasai ordered all his senior directors and country representatives to "reject" the accusations made in the email and to "totally support" him.

Among the most damning claims is that Kasai made "racist and derogatory remarks to staff of certain nationalities." The internal complaint filed to WHO alleges that Kasai once aggressively questioned a Filipino staffer during a coronavirus meeting, saying: "How many people in the Pacific have you killed so far and how many more do you want to kill further?" The complaint said he then asked "if she was incapable of delivering good presentations because she was Filipina."

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Several WHO officials present when the statements were made confirmed to the AP that the regional director has made numerous racist comments in meetings denigrating people from countries including China, the Philippines and Malaysia. They said the harassed staffers were sometimes driven to tears.

The email also said Kasai had blamed the rise in COVID cases in some countries on their "lack of capacity due to their inferior culture, race and socioeconomic level." Three WHO staffers who were part of the agency's coronavirus response team in Asia told the AP Kasai said repeatedly in meetings that the COVID response was hampered by "a lack of sufficiently educated people in the Pacific."

Kasai rejected allegations that he had ever used racist language.

"It is true that I have been hard on staff, but I reject the suggestion that I have targeted staff of any particular nationality," he said. "Racism goes against all of the principles and values I hold dear as a person....I believe deeply and sincerely in WHO's mission to serve all countries and people."

The claims add to a litany of internal protests from WHO personnel about the agency's management of the pandemic during the last two years, including privately complaining about China's delayed sharing of information while publicly praising the government. In their complaint, WHO staff admonished Kasai for "not daring to criticize the Chinese authorities" and failing to disclose what happened during a trip to Beijing to meet President Xi Jinping shortly after the coronavirus was identified in Wuhan.

"We request your urgent intervention to address our serious concerns...which is negatively impacting WHO's performance to support (countries) in the region and WHO's ability to function as an effective public health organization, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic," the staffers wrote.

Kasai is a Japanese doctor who began his career in his country's public health system before moving to WHO, where he has worked for more than 15 years. He is credited with developing the region's response to emerging outbreaks after the SARS epidemic in 2003.

Lawrence Gostin, director of the WHO Collaborating Center on Public Health Law and Human Rights at Georgetown University, said he was in contact with many people at the office in the Western Pacific, and knew they felt battered during the pandemic.

"Dr. Kasai came into office with a good reputation, as a reasonably strong public health leader with his country's support," Gostin said. "But I was not surprised to hear these allegations."

Gostin said racism in a WHO office at the center of the pandemic would be "unconscionable," and that the allegations wounded WHO's credibility and capacity to do what was needed during the pandemic.

"If you ever needed WHO and its key regional offices to be acting with a single voice, with a single purpose and with great energy, it would be now," he said. "And the fact that the staff are so demoralized, feel so defeated, so humiliated and morale is so low, it hurts the pandemic response in the region."

In the email, staffers accused Kasai of not respecting WHO's own guidelines in the pandemic through a forced return to the office and to commutes during strict lockdown in Manila. In an internal email to staff from April 1, 2020, he said that three people on the Manila team had COVID but that "we must remain functional....This has meant keeping our country offices and the Regional office open to some level." Some staffers were concerned that parts of the advice — including car-pooling with other staff and continuing to share desks — could put them at higher risk of catching COVID-19.

WHO staffers also alleged that Kasai abused his position to aid the Japanese government in COVID-19 vaccination planning by providing confidential data. Many countries expect WHO not to share details on sensitive issues like disease rates or vaccination unless they explicitly consent.

A WHO scientist who worked on COVID-19 vaccination in Asia told the AP that Kasai shared data with Japan so that the government could decide how to donate doses to its regional neighbors for a political advantage. The staffer, who asked not to be identified for fear of retaliation, said Kasai also pressured WHO personnel to prioritize vaccine donations from Japan over the U.N.-backed COVAX effort.

In his response to the AP, Kasai disputed that he had ever inappropriately shared information with Japan.

"At no time have I pressured staff to facilitate donations from Japan rather than COVAX," he said. "The vast majority of Japan's vaccine donations to other countries in the Western Pacific Region have been through the COVAX (effort.)"

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Japan has donated about 2.5 million doses to countries in WHO's Western Pacific region via COVAX since June, according to data this month from its Ministry of Foreign Affairs. By contrast, Japan has donated more than 11 million doses bilaterally over the same period to countries including Vietnam, Malaysia and the Philippines.

WHO has dealt with internal complaints from staffers alleging systemic racism, sexism and other problems before; its director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus ordered an internal probe in January 2019 to assess such allegations. Last year, the AP reported that senior WHO management was informed of multiple sexual abuse reports involving its own staffers during the Ebola outbreak in Congo, but failed to act.

The authors of the WHO email in the Western Pacific said most of them had "exhaustively" filed complaints through various WHO mechanisms, including its ombudsman, ethics hotline, staff association and office of internal oversight, but have not been informed of any investigation into their allegations.

Under WHO's governance structure, regional directors are largely answerable only to the member countries that elect them and to the executive board that confirms their selection. Kasai was elected by member countries in the Western Pacific in 2019 and could run again next year.

WHO's headquarters in Geneva said in an email that it was "aware of the allegations and is taking all appropriate steps to follow up on the matter." Kasai said in a statement that he was "ready to cooperate fully with any process to investigate the concerns which have been raised."

Kasai does not technically report to Tedros, but "all staffers are subject to the authority of the Director-General," according to the agency's staff rules. During a press briefing last April, Tedros praised Kasai as "my brother" and thanked him for "everything you continue to do to serve the people of the Western Pacific."

At a virtual meeting this week, WHO's executive board is slated to discuss issues including the ongoing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also on the agenda are various "management matters," including the prevention of abuse and harassment and "increased efforts to address racism."

France's Macron takes own path, seeks dialogue with Russia

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — There's still room for diplomacy in the Ukrainian crisis. At least that's the conviction of French President Emmanuel Macron, who continues to push for dialogue with Russia despite signs pointing to a potential war.

His stance reflects France's post-World War II tradition of carving its own geopolitical path, refusing to line up blindly behind the U.S. It's also part of Macron's domestic political strategy amid campaigning for April's presidential election, where nationalists are setting the agenda and a war in Ukraine could prove an unwelcome distraction.

Macron is preparing to talk Friday with Vladimir Putin, and Macron's presidential palace hosted marathon talks Wednesday between Russian and Ukrainian advisers, the first such face-to-face negotiations since Russia has massed troops near Ukraine in recent weeks.

Wednesday's talks among Russian, Ukrainian, French and German advisers appeared to buy all sides more time, as they agreed to meet again in two weeks. But France's diplomacy-focused strategy complicates efforts by the U.S. and NATO to show a tough, united front against Russia. And experts question whether it will be enough to deter a Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Macron's call with Putin on Friday morning has two goals, French government spokesman Gabriel Attal said: "to continue dialogue" and to "push Russia to clarify its position and the aim of (military) maneuvering."

Moscow has denied it is planning an assault, but it has moved an estimated 100,000 troops near Ukraine in recent weeks and is holding military drills at multiple locations in Russia. That has led the United States and its NATO allies to prepare for the worst.

Macron "is at the heart of efforts towards de-escalation" and will also speak to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in the coming days, Attal said.

French expert on geopolitics Dominique Moïsi told The Associated Press that Macron has tried since in power "to reset the relation between France and Russia, and to do it based on a mix of being open and

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being firm... This is very laudable, but did it work? Will it work this time? That's the challenge."

European diplomacy has helped cool tensions in the past. Wednesday's talks took place in the so-called "Normandy format," which helped to ease hostilities in 2015, a year after Putin ordered the annexation of Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and the Russia-backed insurgency began in eastern Ukraine.

Soon after his election in 2017, Macron invited Putin to a meeting in the sumptuous Palace of Versailles, letting him be "very impressed by the grandeur of France," according to the Russian's president's own words.

Macron also invited Putin to his summer residence at the Fort de Bregancon, on the French Riviera, in a rare honor meant to give a boost to peace talks with Ukraine during summer 2019.

"Macron has shown extreme confidence in his ability to seduce, to charm world leaders and start with them a dialogue," Moisi said.

It hasn't always worked. His unlikely bond with Donald Trump early in their presidencies quickly soured. And despite similar world views, relations between Macron and President Joe Biden were deeply damaged by a secret U.S.-Australia-U.K. submarine deal last year that squeezed France out of the market and undermined the 250-year-old alliance between the U.S. and France.

Macron said it was a "good thing" that the U.S. and Russia have resumed talks in recent weeks, but noted he did not see any concrete results. "It's because a discussion with Russia is always difficult," he added, citing his own efforts to establish a personal relationship with Putin.

The French position has two question marks, Moisi said: "Will Macron have such power of seduction toward Putin?" and "Can France rally support from a large number of European countries?"

Countries that used to be under Soviet influence are particularly worried about Russia's intentions in Ukraine and want a tougher line.

Last June, Macron and former German Chancellor Angela Merkel tried to press EU leaders to hold a summit with Putin. The plan was rejected, notably by the Baltic countries and Poland, amid concerns about meeting with the Russian leader at a time when Europe's relations with Moscow were so poor.

But Macron has made in recent days a fresh push for such a high-level meeting. He insisted that it wouldn't disturb ongoing negotiation efforts from the U.S. and NATO.

"Each of these channels must be exploited until the end to get Russia back into a process of de-escalation, to get guarantees, and allow us to build a new (European) security and stability order," he said this week.

He also pressed last week for a new EU security plan to ease tensions with Russia. Some EU partners expressed concerns that this would make things even more complex, and undermine cooperation with the U.S.

The French presidency stressed that Paris is working in close coordination with Washington and EU partners to be ready for a joint response if there were to be a Russian offensive in Ukraine. In such a case, "there will be retaliation and the cost (for Russia) will be very high," Macron reaffirmed this week.

France also expressed its willingness to station troops in Romania as part of a NATO force. France's defense minister is on a visit Thursday to Romania, which has a border with Ukraine, for talks on "deepening" defense ties, including in "armaments cooperation."

"Nothing that concerns European security can be discussed or decided without the full involvement of Europeans," French foreign minister Jean-Yves Le Drian told EU lawmakers this week. "We are at the table. We are not simply on the menu."

As world marks Holocaust, some survivors in Israel struggle

By ILAN BEN ZION and ISAAC SCHARF Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Several dozen octogenarians, bundled against the cold, chattered in Russian and Hebrew as they picked through heaps of carrots, onions and grapefruit in a Jerusalem courtyard.

Nearly all of them Holocaust survivors, they were picking up donations of food and winter blankets before a snowstorm hit the city on the eve of International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

Israel was established in 1948 as a refuge for Jews in the wake of the Holocaust, and it makes great efforts to remember the 6 million Jewish victims of the Nazi genocide and to honor those who survived

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as heroes.

Yet among Israel's estimated 165,000 survivors, roughly one in three lives in poverty, according to a survivors' advocacy group. Though survivors receive government stipends, many still depend on food donations organized by Israeli charities like Chasdei Naomi.

"The ones who really need to be responsible for taking care of Holocaust survivors is the state of Israel. Unfortunately, that doesn't exist," said Tshuva Cabra, the group's head of donations.

The charity's staff and volunteers distributed food parcels, flowers and chocolates to impoverished survivors in Jerusalem on Wednesday. "If we will not be there for them, who will? It's really sad that only NGOs are standing up and acting," she said.

Thursday's international remembrance day marked the 77th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazis' Auschwitz-Birkenau death camp in Poland. An estimated one-third of world Jewry was annihilated by Nazi Germany and its allies. After the war, hundreds of thousands of survivors made their way to the newly established Israel.

With each passing year, the number of remaining Holocaust survivors continues to dwindle, and with it the country's living connection to those who endured one of the greatest atrocities in modern history. The Holocaust Survivors' Rights Authority, a government department, said that more than 15,000 survivors died in 2021.

The Center of Organizations of Holocaust Survivors in Israel, an umbrella group representing 50 organizations that assist Holocaust survivors, said that around one-third of Israel's Holocaust survivors live in poverty.

Many of the most destitute immigrated to Israel in the 1990s from the former Soviet Union after its dissolution. They arrived with little means, had difficulty learning a new language late in life and many struggled to establish social networks.

"During the war, it was very difficult for the Jews. Jews suffered from the Nazis. We fled and we did whatever we could to survive," said Paulina Perchuk, an 83-year-old immigrant from Ukraine. "I hope it will not happen again in the world."

Colette Avital, a former Israeli diplomat and Holocaust survivor who heads the Center of Organizations of Holocaust Survivors in Israel, said that while the government's attitude has improved, "the blanket is short and that is not enough." She said there's broad public support for survivors but the government needs to provide more assistance.

Israel's Social Equality Ministry said it doled out some \$1.2 billion in support to Holocaust survivors in 2021. Just over 50,000 survivors receive monthly stipends of between \$800 and \$2,000 per month, while around 15,500 receive \$3,600 because of more severe disability.

But for many, those sums are not enough to make ends meet as the cost of living in Israel continues to skyrocket. The Chasdei Naomi charity says it provides food to 10,000 survivors, a figure that increased by 4,000 since the start of the coronavirus pandemic. In the past year, requests for assistance in paying electric bills rose 40% alongside inflation and rising cost of living in Israel.

Meirav Cohen, Israel's social equality minister, said her department oversees the "final watch" over Holocaust survivors' well-being.

"The average age of Holocaust survivors is 85," she said in a statement released by her office. "These are the final years we have to serve them, to allow them to grow old with dignity and document as much as possible from their stories, because very soon, there won't be anyone left to tell them."

Her office declined an interview request.

Holocaust remembrance remains a cornerstone of Israeli identity. A large percentage of the country is made up of survivors and generations of their descendants. The country marks its own Holocaust Remembrance Day each spring. Foreign dignitaries visiting the country pay homage to the Jews killed in the Holocaust at Yad Vashem, the World Holocaust Remembrance Center in Jerusalem, which serves as a memorial and research center.

Earlier in the week, Prime Minister Naftali Bennett said that the government would budget nearly \$10

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million in additional funds to Yad Vashem to help "preserve the memory of the Holocaust in Israel and the world." That marked a nearly 20% jump in the institution's annual budget in 2020, of which the Israeli government financed over a third.

Avital praised the government for allocating more funds to Yad Vashem but added that "the welfare of Holocaust survivors should come before anything else."

In freezing Afghanistan, aid workers rush to save millions

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

PUL-E-ALAM, Afghanistan (AP) — A flickering flame of paper, rags and random twigs is the only heat Gulnaz has to keep her 18-month-old son warm, barely visible beneath his icy blanket as she begs on a bitterly cold highway on the road to Kabul.

The 70-kilometer (45-mile) stretch of highway is flanked by snow-swept hills. Occasionally a driver slows his car and shoves an Afghani note into the 28-year-old woman's bare, dirt-caked hand. She sits for hours on the highway medium, positioned just beyond a bump in the road that slows traffic.

Her 16-year-old sister, Khalida, sits nearby. Both are hidden behind encompassing blue burqas. By the end of the day, Gulnaz, who gave just the one name, says they might make 300 Afghanis (\$2.85). But most days it is less.

The Taliban's sweep to power in Afghanistan in August drove billions of dollars in international assistance out of the country and sent an already dirt-poor nation, ravaged by war, drought and floods, spiraling toward a humanitarian catastrophe.

But in recent weeks it is the bitter winter cold that is devastating the most vulnerable and has international aid organizations scrambling to save millions from starving or freezing because they have neither food nor fuel. For the poorest the only heat or means of cooking is with the coal or wood they can scrounge from the snowy streets or that they receive from aid groups.

"The extent of the problem now in Afghanistan for people is dire," said Shelley Thakral, spokeswoman for the World Food Program in Afghanistan. "We're calling this a race against time. We need to get to families in very difficult, hard to reach areas. It's winter, it's cold, the snow."

The cost of the humanitarian effort is staggering. Thakral said the WFP alone will need \$2.6 billion this year.

"Break that number down. That's \$220 million a month, that's 30 cents per person per day, and that's what we're asking for. . . . We need the money because we need to reach people as quickly as we can," she said.

Earlier this month the United Nations launched its largest single country appeal for more than \$5 billion to help a devastated Afghanistan.

It's estimated that roughly 90 percent of Afghanistan's 38 million people are dependent on aid and the U.N. says nearly 3 million are displaced in their own country, driven from their homes by drought, war and famine.

In 2020 alone, 700,000 Afghans became displaced, many living in desperate conditions on the outskirts of cities, in parks and open spaces, wherever they could erect a makeshift shelter.

Gulnaz migrated to central Logar province from the northern province of Kunduz, where her husband had been a shoemaker. But his work dried up with war and the coming of the Taliban and "we have come here," she said as she sat with her sister on the side of the highway linking Logar's capital, Pul-e-Alam, with Kabul.

"We have no heat at home and every day whether it is raining or snowing we come and sit here," she said.

In Pul-e-Alam, where temperatures in January and February can drop to lows of minus-16 degrees Celsius (3 degrees Fahrenheit), thousands of men and women line up in the bitter cold to collect a World Food Program ration of flour, oil, salt and lentils.

The WFP surveyed the city for the neediest, giving each a voucher to collect their rations, but word spread quickly through the snow- and mud-covered streets that food was being distributed and soon

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scores of men and women pushed and pleaded for rations. Fights broke out among some in the crowd and security forces tried to cordon those without vouchers off to one side.

Each day for a week this month the WFP distributed rations to as many as 500 families a day, said Hus-sain Andisha, who manages the distribution. Most people in Logar province are desperate, he said.

As he spoke, four women in burqas slipped past the men at the gate taking vouchers. None had a ration card, but they pleaded for food. One woman, who gave her name only as Sadarat, said her husband was a drug addict — a devastating problem that has mushroomed in the past two decades, with as many as 1 million people, or 8% of Afghanistan's population, counted as addicts, according to the U.N. Afghanistan produces over 4,000 tons annually of opium. the raw material used to make heroin.

"I don't know where he is. I have no food for my children. Please I need something," she said.

Like hundreds of thousands of Afghans, poverty and conflict drove Sadarat and her five children from their rural home in Logar province's Charkh district to the capital, 38 kilometers (24 miles) away.

Shouting from behind Sadarat, another women, Riza Gul, said she has 10 children and a husband who earns less than \$1 a day as a laborer on the days he can find work.

"What can we do? Where can we go?" she pleaded.

Andisha said the January distribution would provide staples to 2,250 families in Pul-e-Alam, the capital of roughly 23,000 people. Already the WFP has surveyed the seven districts of Logar province and begun distribution in four. Roads are deep in snow and passage for the hundreds of trucks transporting the food is slow going and can be treacherous.

Andisha said the need is desperate and gets worse with each passing day.

"Even from the first day we arrived here, the situation has worsened. People have no jobs," he said, adding that women who were working before the Taliban took power "now cannot work in government departments."

"It is certain the situation will worsen," he said.

The Taliban administration in Logar has not interfered in the WFP aid work, Andisha added, and has provided security at distribution sites.

Thakral, the WFP spokeswoman, said donor contributions go directly to the people, even as aid organizations and the international community struggle to address one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters without dealing directly with Afghanistan's Taliban rulers.

"People come first and that's important to remember in this humanitarian crisis," she said. "We work independently from the de facto government so the assurance there is that any donation received will be given directly to the people."

Virus-ravaged Iran finds brief respite with mass vaccination

By NASSER KARIMI and ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran (AP) — As much of the world sees vaccination slowing and infections soaring with the spread of omicron, Iran has found a rare, if fleeting, respite from the anxiety and trauma of the pandemic.

After successive virus waves pummeled the country for nearly two years, belated mass vaccination under a new, hard-line president has, for a brief moment, left the stricken nation with a feeling of apparent safety.

Now, the specter of an omicron-fueled surge looms large. Hospitals are preparing for the worst as infections tick upward after a monthslong lull. But so far, the variant has not battered the Islamic Republic as it has many Western countries where most adults got jabs a year ago.

Drastic infection surges among the inoculated from the United States to Russia have revealed the vaccine's declining defenses against infection even as its protection against hospitalization and death remains strong. Meanwhile, Iranians have received doses more recently and are feeling off the hook with their immunity still robust.

"A large number of people already have contracted the virus and huge vaccination has taken place in recent months," health official Moayed Alavian said in an attempt to explain the sharp drop in infections easing the burden on Iran's overwhelmed health system.

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The virus has killed over 132,000 people by Iran's official count — the highest national toll in the Middle East.

Iran's recently elected president, conservative cleric Ebrahim Raisi, has made it a mission to expedite imports of foreign-made COVID-19 vaccines. With hard-liners in control of all branches of government, the new administration is fast fulfilling a task that had been vexed by power struggles during former President Hassan Rouhani's term.

The contrast is not lost on ordinary Iranians.

"I do not know what happened," said Reza Ghasemi, a Tehran taxi driver. "Suddenly vaccination happened in a widespread and quick way after Raisi came to office."

"By the way," he added, "I am thankful."

But skeptics question the presidents' starkly different pandemic responses, criticizing the human cost of the country's factional rivalries.

"We delayed vaccination because of political issues," reformist lawmaker Masoud Pezeshkian bluntly said last September.

Former President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw America from Tehran's landmark nuclear deal with world powers and pile on sanctions doomed the relatively moderate President Rouhani and his political camp.

Talks to revive the nuclear deal floundered over the past year, deepening mistrust of the West as hopes for quick sanctions relief faded.

With anti-American hostility simmering, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei banned the import of Western shots a year ago. Hard-liners swept the parliament and railed against American-made vaccines even as virus deaths shattered records.

Scrambling to contain a vicious virus wave that inundated hospitals with intubated patients last summer, authorities urged Iranians to get one of the country's five domestically produced shots instead of foreign alternatives.

Rouhani's health officials struggled as information they provided was publicly contradicted, leading to conflicting messaging and leaving the vaccine program in shambles. Desperate Iranians flocked to neighboring Armenia for spare doses. In the end, Rouhani's government distributed just 5 million shots.

Now under Raisi, Iran is riding high on its successes against COVID-19. Cases have fallen to about 7,000 a day from some 40,000 just months before. The death toll plummeted to 20 a day this month from peaks of over 700. His administration has provided 180 million vaccines since taking the reins in August.

More than 88% of all of those eligible for vaccines have been fully vaccinated. Iran has administered booster shots to 20% of its population. Last week the government announced it would make vaccines available to children under 18.

Like many middle-income countries, Iran has relied on Sinopharm, the state-backed Chinese vaccine, but offers citizens a smorgasbord of other shots to choose from — Oxford-AstraZeneca, Russia's Sputnik V, Indian firm Bharat's Covaxin and its homegrown COVIran Barekat shot.

In a sign that resistance toward Western vaccines has softened, British-Swedish AstraZeneca makes up a substantial amount of Iran's inoculations. Although Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech remain forbidden, some Iranians have described receiving the American-made shots through a booming black market.

While Raisi gets credit for a triumphant inoculation program, observers note that the campaign's foundations, including vaccine-sharing agreements and supply issues, were set under Rouhani.

"Under Raisi," Health Ministry spokesman Alireza Raisi said in September, "our past contracts have come into practice."

The groundwork for public acceptance was laid long before.

Iran's historically robust national vaccination program grew out of its battles against disease outbreaks from cholera to polio. In response to the El Tor strain of cholera that spawned a pandemic through the 1960s, Iran produced millions of vaccine doses, distributed American antibiotics to pilgrims and controlled the spread.

Coronavirus vaccination marks the nation's first mass inoculation campaign outside of childhood illnesses

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since the 1979 Islamic Revolution that toppled the Western-backed shah.

Although the usual flood of misinformation about coronavirus shots fills Iranian social media, only a small percentage of Iran's population has shunned the shot.

The climbing vaccination rate has fueled a sense among citizens that they have overcome the worst of the crisis. Virus restrictions — and public compliance with health measures — have notably relaxed. Tehran's cafes, markets and metro stations are bustling with maskless patrons. Last week, Raisi increased spectator capacity at major sporting events and trade shows.

"I think the disease is over," declared Masoud Navabi, a maskless 39-year-old delivery worker in downtown Tehran.

But authorities fear a nightmare wave of infection as omicron spreads. Iran recorded its first three deaths from the variant this month. The central city of Ardalan was classified on Wednesday as the country's first high-infection "red zone" because of the variant.

The country faces its sternest test in the next months as it marks the anniversary of its 1979 Islamic Revolution and Nowruz, the Persian New Year. The events typically involve massive street celebrations and gatherings.

The country's modest success against the virus has now given way to uncertainty, officials say. A recent uptick in cases reveals how fragile its gains against the virus can be.

"All (medical) centers should be on alert," Deputy Health Minister Saeed Karimi warned. "This is an alarm bell."

Meet the man who won a trip to space and gave it to a friend

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — He told his family and a few friends. He dropped hints to a couple of colleagues. So hardly anyone knew that the airline pilot could have — should have — been on board when SpaceX launched its first tourists into orbit last year.

Meet Kyle Hippchen, the real winner of a first-of-its-kind sweepstakes, who gave his seat to his college roommate.

Though Hippchen's secret is finally out, that doesn't make it any easier knowing he missed his chance to orbit Earth because he exceeded the weight limit. He still hasn't watched the Netflix series on the three-day flight purchased by a tech entrepreneur for himself and three guests last September.

"It hurts too much," he said. "I'm insanely disappointed. But it is what it is."

Hippchen, 43, a Florida-based captain for Delta's regional carrier Endeavor Air, recently shared his story with The Associated Press during his first visit to NASA's Kennedy Space Center since his lost rocket ride.

He opened up about his out-of-the-blue, dream-come-true windfall, the letdown when he realized he topped SpaceX's weight restrictions of 250 pounds (113 kilograms) and his offer to the one person he knew would treasure the flight as much as himself. Four months later, he figures probably fewer than 50 people know he was the actual winner.

"It was their show, and I didn't want to be distracting too much from what they were doing," said Hippchen, who watched the launch from a VIP balcony.

His seat went to Chris Sembroski, 42, a data engineer in Everett, Washington. The pair roomed together starting in the late 1990s while attending Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. They'd pile into cars with other student space geeks and make the hourlong drive south for NASA's shuttles launches. They also belonged to a space advocacy group, going to Washington to push commercial space travel.

Despite living on opposite coasts, Hippchen and Sembroski continued to swap space news and champion the cause. Neither could resist when Shift4 Payments founder and CEO Jared Isaacman raffled off a seat on the flight he purchased from SpaceX's Elon Musk. The beneficiary was St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Hippchen snapped up \$600 worth of entries. Sembroski, about to start a new job at Lockheed Martin, shelled out \$50. With 72,000 entries in the random drawing last February, neither figured he'd win and

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didn't bother telling the other.

By early March, Hippchen started receiving vague emails seeking details about himself. That's when he read the contest's small print: The winner had to be under 6-foot-6 and 250 pounds (2 meters and 113 kilograms).

Hippchen was 5-foot-10 and 330 pounds (1.8 meters and 150 kilograms).

He told organizers he was pulling out, figuring he was only one of many finalists. In the flurry of emails and calls that followed, Hippchen was stunned to learn he'd won.

With a September launch planned, the timeline was tight. Still new at flying people, SpaceX needed to start measuring its first private passengers for their custom-fitted flight suits and capsule seats. As an aerospace engineer and pilot, Hippchen knew the weight limit was a safety issue involving the seats, and could not be exceeded.

"I was trying to figure how I could drop 80 pounds in six months, which, I mean, it's possible, but it's not the most healthy thing in the world to do," Hippchen said.

Isaacman, the spaceflight's sponsor, allowed Hippchen to pick a stand-in.

"Kyle's willingness to gift his seat to Chris was an incredible act of generosity," he said in an email this week.

Isaacman introduced his passengers at the end of March: a St. Jude physician assistant who beat cancer there as a child; a community college educator who was Shift4 Payments' winning business client; and Sembroski.

Hippchen joined them in April to watch SpaceX launch astronauts to the International Space Station for NASA, the company's last crew flight before their own.

In gratitude, Sembroski offered to take personal items into space for Hippchen. He gathered his high school and college rings, airline captain epaulets, a great-uncle's World War I Purple Heart and odds and ends from his best friends from high school, warning, "Don't ask any details."

By launch day on Sept. 15, word had gotten around. As friends and families gathered for the liftoff, Hippchen said the conversation went like this: "My name's Kyle. Are you The Kyle? Yeah, I'm The Kyle."

Before climbing into SpaceX's Dragon capsule, Sembroski followed tradition and used the phone atop the launch tower to make his one allotted call. He called Hippchen and thanked him one more time.

"I'm forever grateful," Sembroski said.

And while Hippchen didn't get to see Earth from orbit, he did get to experience about 10 minutes of weightlessness. During Sembroski's flight, he joined friends and family of the crew on a special zero-gravity plane.

"It was a blast."

From Tiananmen to Hong Kong, China's crackdowns defy critics

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — From the deadly crushing of Beijing's 1989 pro-democracy protests to the suppression of Hong Kong's opposition four decades later, China's Communist Party has demonstrated a determination and ability to stay in power that is seemingly impervious to Western criticism and sanctions.

As Beijing prepares to hold the Winter Olympics opening next week, China's president and party leader Xi Jinping appears firmly in control. The party has made political stability paramount and says that has been the foundation for the economic growth that has bettered lives and put the nation on a path to becoming a regional if not global power.

While many have benefitted economically, the price has been paid by those who wanted more freedom, from ethnic groups in the far western regions of Tibet and Xinjiang to the largely student-led protesters in Hong Kong in 2019. The party leadership was divided when an earlier generation of student protesters took control for weeks of the symbolically important grounds of Beijing's Tiananmen Square in 1989. The hardline leaders won and the protesters were crushed rather than accommodated, a fateful decision that has guided the party's approach to this day.

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"The world came up with the assumption that with economic engagement with China, China would thrive, which would give birth to a powerful middle class, which would give birth then to a civil society which would give birth then to a democracy that would make China a responsible stakeholder in the world arena," said Wu'er Kaixi, who as a university student helped lead the 1989 protests and now lives in exile in Taiwan.

That assumption, he added, proved naive and wrong.

Beijing's hosting of the 2008 Summer Olympics manifested hope that reforms might be on the way, bringing greater space for free speech, independent labor unions and protection of the cultural and religious identities of ethnic groups. Tibetan groups staged protests in China and abroad, disrupting the torch relay.

Nearly 15 years later, on the eve of the Winter Games, the reality is far different. Tibet remains firmly under Communist Party control, and the government launched a fierce crackdown against the Turkic Muslim Uyghurs in Xinjiang in 2017 and enacted new laws and loyalty requirements to drive out opposition in Hong Kong in response to massive protests that turned violent in 2019.

Under Xi, who came to power in 2012, the party has clamped down on dissident voices and anyone who challenges its version of events, from a #MeToo movement that flourished briefly to citizen journalists who exposed the crisis and chaos in Wuhan in the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Xi is now expected to be appointed to a third five-year term as the ruling party's general secretary this fall, cementing his position as China's strongest leader since Mao Zedong. With no term limits on the position, Xi could remain leader indefinitely, with no clearly defined rules on succession.

Xi approaches the party meeting bolstered by a strong economy, the ending of separatist violence in Xinjiang and the passage of a sweeping national security law and electoral changes in Hong Kong that have eviscerated the political opposition in the territory.

"Xi Jinping wants to become a leader like Mao," said Joseph Cheng, a political scientist and veteran Hong Kong pro-democracy activist who now lives in Australia. Mao Zedong founded China's communist state in 1949 and led the country for more than two decades.

Having maintained relative prosperity and rock-hard political control, Xi and the party face little pressure and see no need to make concessions, Cheng said.

"There are no checks and balances domestically and internationally. As a result, there is an increasingly authoritarian regime," he said.

The suppression of the Tiananmen protests marked the end of a period of limited political liberalization in the 1980s. The chaos and violence of the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution and the decline of the Soviet Union had already impressed on the ruling party that political stability should be maintained at whatever cost.

The crackdown carried out with tanks and assault troops was seen as the only way to ensure continued Communist Party rule and what Xi has since termed the realization of the "Chinese dream" of restoring the country's position in the world. The events of 1989 remain a taboo topic in China to this day.

Future years saw advocates for free expression and civil rights continue to push the boundaries. Beijing responded to some appeals by releasing pro-democracy activists into foreign exile.

At the same time, the party opened new avenues for education and employment, loosened restrictions on the private sector and welcomed foreign investment. A new generation of young Chinese grew up with heightened expectations and little knowledge of the political turmoil of past years.

Despite their misgivings about the crackdown, China's booming economy was too much of a draw to ignore, and Western democracies swiftly re-engaged with the regime in the 1990s and 2000s.

More recently, the U.S. has turned against China, viewing what is now the world's second largest economy as a growing competitor as well as an opportunity. China's policies in Xinjiang, Tibet and Hong Kong, and on human rights in general, have brought travel and financial sanctions from the U.S. and others on the officials and companies involved.

Beijing has responded with dismissals and disdain. A diplomatic boycott of the Olympics announced by Washington, the U.K. and others was greeted with contempt by Beijing for what it called a meaningless gesture that would change nothing.

China has sought to redefine human rights as improvements in the quality of life, and cites economic growth and poverty reduction as the real determinants. It has written off campaigns by foreign politicians,

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trade groups and companies to boycott cotton goods and other products from Xinjiang over allegations of forced labor.

China calls such claims “the lie of the century,” although some experts say the bad publicity may have prompted it to shut down its prison-like system of internment camps.

But activists’ calls to move the Olympics out of China have gone unheeded. A diplomatic boycott won’t stop the athletes from competing. Sophie Richardson, the China director for Human Rights Watch, said the International Olympic Committee lost all credibility on promoting human rights after choosing Beijing for the Winter Games.

Kaixi, the former Tiananmen protester and an ethnic Uyghur, said China could not have succeeded in its defiance without the acquiescence of the international community.

“China can only get away with all this because the world is giving in,” he said.

At least 3 judges eyed as Biden mulls Supreme Court pick

By COLLEEN LONG, ZEKE MILLER, MICHAEL BALSAMO and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is eyeing at least three judges for an expected vacancy on the Supreme Court as he prepares to quickly deliver on his campaign pledge to nominate the first Black woman to the nation’s highest court, according to aides and allies.

Biden and Justice Stephen Breyer are expected to hold an event at the White House Thursday to formally announce Breyer’s plans to retire, according to a person briefed on the planning who was not authorized to publicly discuss it in advance.

Early discussions about a successor are focusing on U.S. Circuit Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, U.S. District Judge J. Michelle Childs and California Supreme Court Justice Leandra Kruger, according to four people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss White House deliberations. Jackson and Kruger have long been seen as possible nominees.

Since Biden took office in January 2021, he has focused on nominating a diverse group of judges to the federal bench, installing five Black women on federal appeals courts, with three more nominations pending before the Senate. Other possible candidates for the high court could come from among that group, Biden aides and allies said, especially since almost all of the recent Supreme Court nominees have been federal appeals judges.

“He has a strong pool to select a candidate from, in addition to other sources. This is an historic opportunity to appoint someone with a strong record on civil and human rights,” said Derrick Johnson, the NAACP’s president.

By the end of his first year, Biden had won confirmation of 40 judges, the most since President Ronald Reagan. Of those, 80% are women and 53% are people of color, according to the White House.

Jackson, 51, was nominated by President Barack Obama to be a district court judge. Biden elevated her to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Early in her career, she was also a law clerk for Breyer.

Childs, a federal judge in South Carolina, has been nominated but not yet confirmed to serve on the same circuit court. Her name has surfaced partly because she is a favorite among some high-profile lawmakers, including Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C.

Kruger, a graduate of Harvard and Yale’s law school, was previously a Supreme Court clerk and has argued a dozen cases before the justices as a lawyer for the federal government.

Breyer, 83, will retire at the end of the summer, according to two sources who confirmed the news to The Associated Press on Wednesday. They spoke on condition of anonymity so as not to preempt Breyer’s formal announcement.

But the Senate can confirm a successor before there is a formal vacancy, so the White House was getting to work and it was expected to take at least a few weeks before a nomination was formalized.

Biden said Wednesday he wasn’t going to get ahead of Breyer’s announcement.

“Every justice should have an opportunity to decide what he or she is going to do and announce it on

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their own," Biden said. "Let him make whatever statement he's going to make and I'll be happy to talk about it later."

When Biden was running for the White House, he said that if he had the chance to nominate someone to the court, he would make history by choosing a Black woman. And he's reiterated that pledge since.

"As president, I'd be honored, honored to appoint the first African American woman. Because it should look like the country. It's long past time," Biden said in February 2020 shortly before South Carolina's presidential primary.

Adding a Black woman to the court would mean a series of firsts — four female justices and two Black justices serving at the same time on the nine-member court. Justice Clarence Thomas is the court's only Black justice and just the second ever, after Thurgood Marshall.

And Biden would have the chance to show Black voters increasingly frustrated with a president they helped to elect that he is serious about their concerns, particularly after he has been unable to push through voting rights legislation.

At the same time, Breyer's replacement by another liberal justice would not change the ideological makeup of the court. Conservatives outnumber liberals by 6-3, and Donald Trump's three nominees made an already conservative court even more conservative.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Biden's nominee "will receive a prompt hearing in the Senate Judiciary Committee and will be considered and confirmed by the full United States Senate with all deliberate speed."

But Republicans in particular remain upset about Justice Brett Kavanaugh's contentious 2018 hearing. Still, Democrats have the 50 votes plus a tiebreaker in Vice President Kamala Harris that they need to confirm a nominee.

Republicans who changed the Senate rules during the Trump-era to allow simple majority confirmation of Supreme Court nominees appeared resigned to the outcome. Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, an influential Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, said in a statement, "If all Democrats hang together — which I expect they will — they have the power to replace Justice Breyer in 2022 without one Republican vote in support."

Nonetheless, Democrats have also been unable to get all their members on board for Biden's social and environmental spending agenda or to move forward with a voting rights bill.

As a senator, Biden served as chairman of the Judiciary Committee, overseeing six Supreme Court confirmation hearings from 1987 to 1995, including Breyer's.

And one person who will be central to Biden's process is chief of staff Ron Klain, a former Supreme Court law clerk and chief counsel to that committee.

Two other Black women whom Biden appointed to federal appeals courts are also seen as contenders: Holly Thomas, a longtime civil rights lawyer he named to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit, and Candace Jackson-Akiwumi, a former public defender he named to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit.

Biden could also choose someone from outside the judiciary, though that seems less likely. One contender would be the head of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Sherrilyn Ifill, 59. She has headed the fund since 2013 and has announced she is stepping down in the spring.

The Supreme Court has had three women on it for more than a decade, since 2010, when Obama named Justice Elena Kagan to the court to replace the retiring John Paul Stevens. Kagan joined Obama's other nominee, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the court's first Latina justice, and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. When Ginsburg died in September 2020, Trump announced his choice of Amy Coney Barrett eight days later.

Will virus be 'over'? Most Americans think not: AP-NORC poll

By KATE BRUMBACK, NATHAN ELLGREN and JOCELYN NOVECK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — Early in the pandemic, Ryan Wilson was careful to take precautions — wearing a mask, not really socializing, doing more of his shopping online.

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The 38-year-old father and seafood butcher from Casselberry, Florida, says he relaxed a bit after getting vaccinated last year. He had a few friends over and saw his parents more, while making sure to still mask up at places like the grocery store. The recent virus surge hasn't caused him to change his behavior much, because he's vaccinated and has read that the variant causes less severe illness.

And, like many, Wilson has come to believe COVID-19 is probably never fully going away.

"It'll become endemic and we'll be stuck with it forever," he says. "It's frustrating, but what can you do about it?"

Many Americans agree that they're going to "be stuck with it forever" — or, at the least, for a long time. A poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research shows that few — just 15% — say they'll consider the pandemic over only when COVID-19 is largely eliminated. By contrast, 83% say they'll feel the pandemic is over when it's largely a mild illness.

The poll shows that 59% of Americans think it's essential that they personally be vaccinated against COVID-19 to feel safe participating in public activities.

But, underscoring what authorities call alarmingly low COVID-19 vaccination rates in U.S. children ages 5 to 11, just 37% of parents consider it essential that their children are vaccinated before they return to normal. And although boosters provide significantly better protection against COVID-19, especially the omicron variant, than a two-shot course of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines, just 47% of Americans think it's essential that they get one.

Wilson, in Florida, said that while he is vaccinated, he doesn't plan to have his 5-year-old daughter vaccinated because he's heard the odds of healthy children suffering anything more than cold symptoms are low.

In Minneapolis, 36-year-old public health researcher Colin Planalp got his 6-year-old son vaccinated as soon as he could. "Kids can get really sick from COVID," he says, faulting health authorities for not making that more clear to the public.

Although kids tend to fare better than adults, experts say they still can suffer from serious illness and long-term health impacts from the virus.

The poll shows more Americans are taking precautionary measures against the virus than before the omicron surge.

Overall, 64% now say they are always or often avoiding large groups and 65% are wearing face masks around others, both up from 57% in December. Sixty percent say they are regularly avoiding nonessential travel, up from 53% one month ago. That level of precaution is the highest since last spring, before millions of Americans were fully vaccinated.

Early in the pandemic, Planalp and his wife worked at home for months on end, and kept their young son home. But when they got vaccinated they allowed themselves to go out more, to visit family out of state, even to work part-time in the office.

Then the delta variant hit, and they ratcheted up their precautions. With omicron, they upped them even more.

"I've switched to wearing N95 masks because I'm no longer confident in the regular cloth masks, and I hardly go out at all anymore," Planalp says. "We've canceled travel plans. My son has been out of school for more than a week now and hopefully he'll get to go back in a week. But who really knows?"

Planalp, too, doesn't think the virus is going anywhere — and isn't sure it will get milder, either: "We're not going to be done with this. It's going to change over time and we just can't predict exactly how it's going to change."

Vaccinated Americans remain much more likely to practice precautions. Seventy-three percent of vaccinated Americans say they frequently wear a mask around others, compared with 37% of unvaccinated Americans.

David Close, 50, who is unvaccinated, says he never changed any of his behavior. "It's been over for me," he says. "I never really went into any type of pandemic fear."

Close, who moved from Tampa, Florida, to Vonore, Tennessee, in May, says he, his wife and their two kids all had COVID-19 in October. He thinks his wife became infected at work, but they didn't take precau-

tions to keep her isolated from the rest of the family.

"I got into bed every night and laid in bed and fell asleep next to her because that's what I've always done," he says.

Close had a fever of about 103 or 104 for about 24 hours and was back up and feeling great within 36 hours, he says. He lost his taste and smell for about 10 days.

"I can always make it through an illness," he says. "I'm not fearful of things like that."

Studies show that even for people who have had it already, vaccination provides additional protection against COVID-19, which has so far killed more than 850,000 Americans.

In Minersville, Utah, Jamie Costello, 57, a math teacher and mother of eight, has not been vaccinated — not because she opposes vaccines, but because she has had severe reactions to flu shots, and has recovered from COVID-19. Like many Americans, Costello feels COVID is something that will come to feel as familiar as the flu.

"It's a very fast-mutating virus," she says. "We're just going to eventually have to say, well, it's the flu and COVID season, instead of just the flu season. It's just there, and we have to get as back to normal as we can."

N. Korea, after harsh 2-year lockdown, slowly reopens border

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — After spending two years in a strict lockdown because of the COVID-19 pandemic, North Korea may finally be opening up — slowly. The reason could reflect a growing sense of recognition by the leadership that the nation badly needs to win outside economic relief.

The North's tentative reopening is seen in the apparent resumption of North Korean freight train traffic into neighboring China. But it comes even as Pyongyang has staged several weapons tests, the latest being two suspected ballistic missiles on Thursday, and issued a veiled threat about resuming tests of nuclear explosives and long-range missiles targeting the American homeland.

The apparently divided message — opening the border, slightly, on one hand, while also militarily pressuring Washington over a prolonged freeze in nuclear negotiations — likely signals a realization that the pandemic has worsened an economy already damaged by decades of mismanagement and crippling U.S.-led sanctions over North Korean nuclear weapons and missiles.

According to South Korean estimates, North Korea's crucial trade with its ally China shrank by about 80% in 2020 before plunging again by two-thirds in the first nine months of 2021 as it sealed its borders.

The partial reopening of the border also raises questions about how North Korea plans to receive and administer vaccines following a yearlong delay in its immunization campaign.

"North Korea could end up being the planet's last battlefield in the war against COVID-19. Even the poorest countries in Africa have received outside aid and vaccines or acquired immunity through infection, but North Korea is the only country in the world without a real plan," said analyst Lim Soo-ho at Seoul's Institute of National Security Strategy, a think tank run by South Korea's main spy agency.

Commercial satellite images indicate that the first North Korean freight train that crossed the Yalu River last week then returned from China and unloaded cargo at an airfield in the border town of Uiju, according to the North Korea-focused 38 North website. The airfield is believed to have been converted to disinfect imported supplies, which may include food and medicine.

China's Foreign Ministry has said trade between the border towns will be maintained while pandemic controls stay in place. But South Korean officials say it isn't immediately clear whether the North is fully reopening land trade with China, which is a major economic lifeline.

Some South Korean media have speculated North Korea may have temporarily reopened the railroad between Sinuiju and China's Dandong just to receive food and essential goods meant as gifts for its people during important holidays, including the 80th birth anniversary of leader Kim Jong Un's father next month, and the 110th birth anniversary in April of his grandfather who founded North Korea.

Many experts, however, say it's more likely that the pandemic's economic strain is forcing North Korea to explore a phased reopening of its borders that it could quickly close if greater risks emerge.

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Following two years of extreme isolation and economic decay, Pyongyang's leadership is looking for more sustainable ways to deal with a pandemic that could last years.

While North Korea has so far claimed zero virus infections, it also calls its antiviral campaign a matter of "national existence." It has severely restricted cross-border traffic and trade, banned tourists and kicked out diplomats, and is even believed to have ordered troops to shoot-on-sight any trespassers.

Pyongyang's leadership knows that a major COVID-19 outbreak would be devastating because of North Korea's poor health care system and may even fan social unrest when combined with its chronic food shortage, experts say.

South Korean officials have said that North Korea established disinfection zones in recent months at border towns and seaports. The World Health Organization said in October that the North had started receiving shipments of medical supplies transported by sea from China through its port of Nampo.

The pandemic is another difficulty for Kim, who gained little from his nuclear disarmament-for-aid diplomacy with former U.S. President Donald Trump. Those talks imploded in 2019.

Kim in 2020 acknowledged that his previous economic plans weren't working and opened 2021 by issuing a new development plan for the next five years.

But North Korea's review of its 2021 economy during a December ruling party meeting indicated that the first year of the plan was disappointing, Lim said. A rare piece of tangible progress was a modest increase in food production, which rebounded from a 2020 marked by crop-killing storms and floods.

North Korea's resumed trade with China will be driven by imports. Most of North Korea's major export activities are blocked under international sanctions tightened since 2016 after Kim accelerated nuclear and missile development.

The North may focus on importing fertilizer to boost food production. It also needs construction materials for development projects important to Kim. Factory goods and machinery are crucial to revive industrial production, which has been decimated by two years of halted trade.

Experts, however, still expect North Korea's trade with China to be significantly smaller than pre-pandemic levels.

North Korea can't immediately purchase a huge amount of goods because the multiyear toll of sanctions and pandemic-related difficulties has thinned out foreign currency reserves.

"Still, it's clear that North Korea isn't a country that can survive without imports for two or three years, so it's certain they will attempt to slowly increase imports within a limited scope," said Go Myong-hyun, an analyst at Seoul's Asan Institute for Policy Studies.

North Korea has so far shunned millions of vaccine shots offered by the U.N.-backed COVAX distribution program, possibly reflecting an unease toward accepting international monitors. But the country may still seek help from China and Russia to inoculate workers, officials and troops in border areas as it proceeds with a phased resumption of trade, said Hong Min, an analyst at Seoul's Korea Institute for National Unification.

North Korea may also be forced to adopt a scaled-back vaccination program by tightly restricting access to border areas and providing regular testing and vaccination for border workers.

"It could take nearly 100 million shots to fully vaccinate the North Korean population of more than 25 million, and the country will never get anything close to that," Lim said.

Firefighter: Floyd 'needed help and wasn't getting it'

By AMY FORLITI, STEVE KARNOWSKI and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — First it was a paramedic, testifying that the officers who restrained George Floyd didn't call in critical information as his ambulance rushed to the scene where Floyd would soon be pronounced dead. Then it was an off-duty firefighter, recounting her frustration that Floyd obviously "needed help and wasn't getting it."

Federal prosecutors building their case against three Minneapolis police officers on trial on charges accusing them of violating Floyd's civil rights turned Wednesday to a pair of witnesses who testified last year

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at Derek Chauvin's trial in which he was convicted of state murder and manslaughter charges.

Genevieve Hansen, a Minneapolis firefighter, was on a walk when she came across Chauvin and Officers J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao. Hansen said she could see Floyd's head being pressed onto the street under Chauvin's knee as other officers helped hold him down.

"It was just alarming, the amount of people that were on top of one person not moving and handcuffed," said Hansen, who said she is a trained emergency medical technician. She acknowledged that she got louder and began swearing because Floyd "needed help and he wasn't getting it."

Kueng, Lane and Thao are accused of depriving Floyd of his civil rights while acting under government authority in the killing that triggered worldwide protests and a reexamination of racism and policing. Their trial resumes Thursday with more testimony. Chauvin pleaded guilty in December to a federal civil rights charge.

Hansen said she asked Thao — who kept bystanders from intervening — to check Floyd's pulse. Kueng knelt on Floyd's back and Lane held his legs, according to prosecutors. Hansen testified that Thao told her something to the effect of, if she were a firefighter, she would know better than to get involved.

Robert Paule, an attorney for Thao, responded by showing Hansen a transcript of an FBI interview in which she said that she wasn't sure that Thao had any idea what was going on with Floyd and the other officers, who were behind him.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Manda Sertich sought to show jurors that responding paramedics were not given important information, and that Floyd should have been given medical attention immediately.

Paramedic Derek Smith testified that he wasn't told Floyd wasn't breathing and had no pulse when officers upgraded the urgency of an ambulance call. Smith said that after he arrived, he could not find a pulse in Floyd's neck and that his pupils were large, indicating he "was probably deceased."

On video footage from Lane's body camera played for jurors, Smith asked Lane what happened. Lane recounted the officers' response to a 911 call that Floyd tried to use a counterfeit \$20 bill at a corner store, and a struggle as Floyd kicked his way out of a squad car. He said officers were "just basically restraining him until you guys got here." Lane said nothing about Floyd's medical condition.

Smith agreed with Sertich that CPR should have been started as soon as possible — something the officers were trained to do. Paramedics put Floyd in the ambulance and took him to another location to be treated.

Lane's attorney, Earl Gray, asked whether Lane was helpful by getting into the ambulance and trying to revive Floyd, including squeezing an air bag to try to ventilate Floyd's lungs. "In my opinion, he was helpful, yes," Smith said.

Paule, Thao's attorney, got Smith to say that he would have not taken Floyd to another location to work on him if it weren't for the bystanders.

Smith also acknowledged that he was concerned that Floyd might have been in a state of "excited delirium" — a disputed condition in which someone is described as having extraordinary strength, often after taking drugs, having a mental health episode or other health problem.

There is no universally accepted definition of excited delirium and researchers have said it's not well understood. One 2020 study concluded it is mostly cited as a cause of death when the person was restrained.

Later, Minneapolis Fire Department Capt. Jeremy Norton — who arrived after paramedics had moved Floyd — testified that his department would have started CPR on the scene, and that providing care as early as possible would have been the best chance to save Floyd. A 911 dispatcher testified Tuesday that she would have sent the Fire Department instead of an ambulance if she had known Floyd wasn't breathing because they could have gotten there faster.

Kueng, who is Black; Lane, who is white; and Thao, who is Hmong American, all are charged for failing to provide Floyd with medical care, while Thao and Kueng face an additional count for failing to stop Chauvin, who is white. Both counts allege the officers' actions resulted in Floyd's death.

U.S. District Judge Paul Magnuson has said the trial could last four weeks.

Lane, Kueng and Thao also face a separate state trial in June on charges they aided and abetted murder

and manslaughter.

Justice Breyer to retire, giving Biden first court pick

By MARK SHERMAN and MICHAEL BALSAMO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Longtime liberal Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer is retiring, numerous sources said Wednesday, giving President Joe Biden his first high court opening, which he has pledged to fill with the historic naming of the court's first Black woman.

Breyer, 83, has been a pragmatic force on a court that has grown increasingly conservative, trying to forge majorities with more moderate justices right and left of center. His retirement will give Biden the chance to name and win confirmation of a replacement before next fall's election when Republicans could retake the Senate and block future nominees.

Biden and Breyer are expected to hold an event at the White House Thursday to formally announce Breyer's plans to retire, according to a person briefed on the planning who was not authorized to publicly discuss it in advance. Democrats are planning a swift confirmation, perhaps even before Breyer officially steps down, which is not expected before summer.

He has been a justice since 1994, appointed by President Bill Clinton. Along with the late Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, he opted not to step down the last time the Democrats controlled the White House and the Senate during Barack Obama's presidency. Ginsburg died in September 2020, and then-President Donald Trump filled the vacancy with a conservative justice, Amy Coney Barrett.

Breyer's departure won't change the 6-3 conservative advantage on the court because his replacement will almost certainly be confirmed by a Senate where Democrats have the slimmest majority. It will make conservative Justice Clarence Thomas the oldest member of the court. Thomas turns 74 in June.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said Biden's nominee "will receive a prompt hearing in the Senate Judiciary Committee and will be considered and confirmed by the full United States Senate with all deliberate speed." A White House decision on a nominee could take several weeks, Biden aides and allies said.

Republicans who changed the Senate rules during the Trump era to allow simple majority confirmation of Supreme Court nominees appeared resigned to the outcome.

Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, a Republican who previously chaired the Senate Judiciary Committee, said in a statement: "If all Democrats hang together — which I expect they will — they have the power to replace Justice Breyer in 2022 without one Republican vote in support."

Liberal interest groups expressed relief. They have been clamoring for Breyer's retirement, concerned about confirmation troubles if Republicans retake the Senate.

"Justice Breyer's retirement is coming not a moment too soon, but now we must make sure our party remains united in support of confirming his successor," Demand Justice Executive Director Brian Fallon said.

Among the names being circulated as potential nominees are California Supreme Court Justice Leondra Kruger, U.S. Circuit Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, prominent civil rights lawyer Sherrilyn Ifill and U.S. District Judge Michelle Childs, whom Biden has nominated to be an appeals court judge. Childs is a favorite of Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C., who made a crucial endorsement of Biden just before South Carolina's presidential primary in 2020.

Biden's pledge to name the first Black woman to the Supreme Court was made during the 2020 presidential campaign. Since he took office a little more than a year ago, he has been focused on increasing racial, ethnic and experiential diversity in the lower federal courts. He has doubled the number of Black women who serve on appellate courts just below the Supreme Court, with three more nominees pending.

Democratic Rep. Joyce Beatty of Ohio, the chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, said, "We know that when America's boardrooms, legislatures and even the Supreme Court start to resemble America, we all benefit."

Nomination of a Black woman could also help Biden politically with some of the Democratic Party's most important Election Day supporters. He has been criticized by black leaders and groups for failing so far to persuade the Senate to pass legislation shoring up voting rights that are being restricted in a number

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of Republican-led states.

Change comes slowly to the Supreme Court. Of the 115 justices in U.S. history, there have been just five women, beginning with Sandra Day O'Connor in 1981. One of the five, Justice Sonia Sotomayor is a Latina. Thomas and the late Thurgood Marshall are the only two Black men who have served on the court.

The president wouldn't address reports of Breyer's retirement on Wednesday.

"Every justice should have an opportunity to decide what he or she is going to do and announce it on their own," Biden said. "Let him make whatever statement he's going to make and I'll be happy to talk about it later."

Often overshadowed by his fellow liberal Ginsburg, Breyer authored two major opinions in support of abortion rights on a court closely divided over the issue, and he laid out his growing discomfort with the death penalty in a series of dissenting opinions in recent years.

Breyer's views on displaying the Ten Commandments on government property illustrate his search for a middle ground. He was the only member of the court in the majority in both cases in 2005 that barred displays in two Kentucky courthouses but allowed one to remain on the grounds of the state Capitol in Austin, Texas.

In more than 27 years on the court, Breyer has been an active and cheerful questioner during arguments, a frequent public speaker and quick with a joke, often at his own expense. He made a good natured appearance on a humorous National Public Radio program in 2007, failing to answer obscure questions about pop stars.

He is known for his elaborate, at times far-fetched, hypothetical questions to lawyers during arguments and he sometimes has had the air of an absent-minded professor. He taught antitrust law at Harvard earlier in his professional career.

He also spent time working for the late Sen. Edward Kennedy when the Massachusetts Democrat was chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee. That experience, Breyer said, made him a firm believer in compromise.

Still, he could write fierce dissents, as he did in the Bush v. Gore case that effectively decided the 2000 election in favor of Republican George W. Bush. Breyer unsuccessfully urged his colleagues to return the case to the Florida courts so they could create "a constitutionally proper contest" to decide the winner.

At the end of a trying term in June 2007 in which he found himself on the losing end of roughly two dozen 5-4 rulings, his frustrations bubbled over as he summarized his dissent from a decision that invalidated public school integration plans.

"It is not often that so few have so quickly changed so much," Breyer said in a packed courtroom.

His time working in the Senate led to his appointment by President Jimmy Carter as a federal appeals court judge in Boston, and he served there for 14 years. His 87-9 high-court confirmation was the last with fewer than 10 dissenting Senate votes.

Breyer's opinions were notable because they never contained footnotes. He was warned off such a writing device by Arthur Goldberg, the justice for whom Breyer clerked as a young lawyer.

"It is an important point to make if you believe, as I do, that the major function of an opinion is to explain to the audience of readers why it is that the court has reached that decision," Breyer once said. "It's not to prove that you're right. You can't prove that you're right; there is no such proof."

Born in San Francisco, Breyer became an Eagle Scout as a teenager and began a stellar academic career at Stanford, graduating with highest honors. He attended Oxford, where he received first-class honors in philosophy, politics and economics.

Breyer then attended Harvard Law School, where he worked on the Law Review and graduated with highest honors.

He worked in the Justice Department's antitrust division before splitting time as a Harvard law professor and a lawyer for the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Breyer and his wife, Joanna, a psychologist and daughter of the late British Conservative leader John Blakenham, have three children — daughters Chloe and Nell and a son, Michael — and six grandchildren.

At least 3 judges eyed as Biden mulls Supreme Court pick

By COLLEEN LONG, ZEKE MILLER, MICHAEL BALSAMO and JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press
WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden is eyeing at least three judges for an expected vacancy on the Supreme Court as he prepares to quickly deliver on his campaign pledge to nominate the first Black woman to the nation's highest court, according to aides and allies.

Biden and Justice Stephen Breyer are expected to hold an event at the White House Thursday to formally announce Breyer's plans to retire, according to a person briefed on the planning who was not authorized to publicly discuss it in advance.

Early discussions about a successor are focusing on U.S. Circuit Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, U.S. District Judge J. Michelle Childs and California Supreme Court Justice Leandra Kruger, according to four people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss White House deliberations. Jackson and Kruger have long been seen as possible nominees.

Since Biden took office in January 2021, he has focused on nominating a diverse group of judges to the federal bench, installing five Black women on federal appeals courts, with three more nominations pending before the Senate. Other possible candidates for the high court could come from among that group, Biden aides and allies said, especially since almost all of the recent Supreme Court nominees have been federal appeals judges.

"He has a strong pool to select a candidate from, in addition to other sources. This is an historic opportunity to appoint someone with a strong record on civil and human rights," said Derrick Johnson, the NAACP's president.

By the end of his first year, Biden had won confirmation of 40 judges, the most since President Ronald Reagan. Of those, 80% are women and 53% are people of color, according to the White House.

Jackson, 51, was nominated by President Barack Obama to be a district court judge. Biden elevated her to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Early in her career, she was also a law clerk for Breyer.

Childs, a federal judge in South Carolina, has been nominated but not yet confirmed to serve on the same circuit court. Her name has surfaced partly because she is a favorite among some high-profile lawmakers, including Rep. James Clyburn, D-S.C.

Kruger, a graduate of Harvard and Yale's law school, was previously a Supreme Court clerk and has argued a dozen cases before the justices as a lawyer for the federal government.

Breyer, 83, will retire at the end of the summer, according to two sources who confirmed the news to The Associated Press on Wednesday. They spoke on condition of anonymity so as not to preempt Breyer's formal announcement.

But the Senate can confirm a successor before there is a formal vacancy, so the White House was getting to work and it was expected to take at least a few weeks before a nomination was formalized.

Biden said Wednesday he wasn't going to get ahead of Breyer's announcement.

"Every justice should have an opportunity to decide what he or she is going to do and announce it on their own," Biden said. "Let him make whatever statement he's going to make and I'll be happy to talk about it later."

When Biden was running for the White House, he said that if he had the chance to nominate someone to the court, he would make history by choosing a Black woman. And he's reiterated that pledge since.

"As president, I'd be honored, honored to appoint the first African American woman. Because it should look like the country. It's long past time," Biden said in February 2020 shortly before South Carolina's presidential primary.

Adding a Black woman to the court would mean a series of firsts — four female justices and two Black justices serving at the same time on the nine-member court. Justice Clarence Thomas is the court's only Black justice and just the second ever, after Thurgood Marshall.

And Biden would have the chance to show Black voters increasingly frustrated with a president they

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helped to elect that he is serious about their concerns, particularly after he has been unable to push through voting rights legislation.

At the same time, Breyer's replacement by another liberal justice would not change the ideological makeup of the court. Conservatives outnumber liberals by 6-3, and Donald Trump's three nominees made an already conservative court even more conservative.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said Biden's nominee "will receive a prompt hearing in the Senate Judiciary Committee and will be considered and confirmed by the full United States Senate with all deliberate speed."

But Republicans in particular remain upset about Justice Brett Kavanaugh's contentious 2018 hearing. Still, Democrats have the 50 votes plus a tiebreaker in Vice President Kamala Harris that they need to confirm a nominee.

Republicans who changed the Senate rules during the Trump-era to allow simple majority confirmation of Supreme Court nominees appeared resigned to the outcome. Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, an influential Republican on the Senate Judiciary Committee, said in a statement, "If all Democrats hang together — which I expect they will — they have the power to replace Justice Breyer in 2022 without one Republican vote in support."

Nonetheless, Democrats have also been unable to get all their members on board for Biden's social and environmental spending agenda or to move forward with a voting rights bill.

As a senator, Biden served as chairman of the Judiciary Committee, overseeing six Supreme Court confirmation hearings from 1987 to 1995, including Breyer's.

And one person who will be central to Biden's process is chief of staff Ron Klain, a former Supreme Court law clerk and chief counsel to that committee.

Two other Black women whom Biden appointed to federal appeals courts are also seen as contenders: Holly Thomas, a longtime civil rights lawyer he named to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit, and Candace Jackson-Akiwumi, a former public defender he named to the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 7th Circuit.

Biden could also choose someone from outside the judiciary, though that seems less likely. One contender would be the head of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Sherrilyn Ifill, 59. She has headed the fund since 2013 and has announced she is stepping down in the spring.

The Supreme Court has had three women on it for more than a decade, since 2010, when Obama named Justice Elena Kagan to the court to replace the retiring John Paul Stevens. Kagan joined Obama's other nominee, Justice Sonia Sotomayor, the court's first Latina justice, and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. When Ginsburg died in September 2020, Trump announced his choice of Amy Coney Barrett eight days later.

'Jeopardy!' champion Amy Schneider's history-making run ends

By LYNN ELBER AP Television Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — "Jeopardy!" champion Amy Schneider's dazzling streak is over, snapped Wednesday by a Chicago librarian after 40 consecutive wins and nearly \$1.4 million in prize money.

Schneider's success put her in the ranks of Ken Jennings, who's serving as guest host, and the quiz show's other all-time greats. It also made Schneider, a trans woman, a visible symbol of achievement for often-marginalized people.

"It's still a little hard to believe," she said of her impressive run. "It's something that I'm going to be remembered for, and that's pretty great,"

New champ Rhone Talsma had the correct response to the final "Jeopardy!" clue for a winning total of \$29,600. Schneider, who found herself in the unusual position of entering the last round short of a run-away, was second with \$19,600.

"I'm still in shock," Talsma said in a statement. "I did not expect to be facing a 40-day champion, and I was excited to maybe see someone else slay the giant. I just really didn't think it was going to be me, so I'm thrilled."

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Schneider told The Associated Press that Talsma played well and did a "great job of taking the opportunities when they came up and putting himself position to be able to win."

The answer that stumped Schneider was about countries of the world: The only nation whose name in English ends in an "h" and which is also one of the 10 most populous. (Cue the "Jeopardy!" music — and the response is, "What is Bangladesh?")

Among her immediate reactions when the game and her streak ended: She was sad but also relieved that "I don't have to come up with anymore anecdotes," the stories that contestants share during game breaks.

Contestants receive their winnings after their final game airs, and Schneider's spending plans include clothes shopping and, especially, travel.

An engineering manager and Dayton, Ohio, native who lives in Oakland, California, Schneider's regular-season play made her No. 2 in consecutive games won, placing her between Jennings with 74 games and Matt Amodio, winner of 38 games in 2021.

Schneider's prize total of \$1,382,800 puts her in fourth place on the regular-season winnings list, behind Jennings (\$2,520,700), James Holzhauer (\$2,462,216) and Amodio (\$1,518,601).

Schneider, will be part of the show's "Tournament of Champions," and is the first trans person to qualify, She was braced for her streak to end, she told AP.

"I had a feeling my time was winding down, even though it didn't look that way in the scores," Schneider said. The routine of traveling to Los Angeles for tapings — five shows a day, two days a week — was tiring, and that took a toll.

After she surpassed Amodio's tally of consecutive victories, she added, the prospect of trying to break Jennings' long-standing record was "hard to imagine."

Schneider's depth of knowledge, lightning-fast answers and gracious but efficient manner won her a devoted fan base. Comedy writer Louis Virtel, a former "Jeopardy!" contestant, tweeted earlier this month that Schneider was like a "case worker assigned to each episode, and when she's done she picks up her briefcase, nods, and leaves."

She was also admired for her handling of anti-trans trolls, with one measured reply prompting a shoutout to her from writer and Broadway star Harvey Fierstein.

"The best outcome of all of this always is going to be whatever help I've been able to offer the trans community," Schneider said. "I'm here because of the sacrifices countless trans people have made, often to the extent of risking their lives. To do my part to move that cause forward, it's really special."

Schneider has a message for "Jeopardy!" viewers who will miss making her part of their daily routine: "I realized that I am really just so sad for all my fans. ... I want to thank them for all their support, and tell them that's it's OK."

For the season through Jan. 17, "Jeopardy!" ranked as the most-watched syndicated program with an average 9.4 million viewers — a substantial increase of 563,000 over the last season. The show averaged 11 million viewers for the week of Jan. 10-17, according to Nielsen.

The streaks by Schneider and Amodio have helped ease "Jeopardy!" past the mishandled replacement of its admired host, the late Alex Trebek. Executive producer Mike Richards was picked by Sony Pictures Television to replace Trebek last year, but quickly exited the show after old podcasts surfaced that included his misogynistic and other demeaning comments.

A permanent host has yet to be named, with Mayim Bialik, who was named host of prime-time "Jeopardy!" specials, and Jennings trading off this season. Jennings is also a consulting producer for the show.

EPA acts to curb air, water pollution in poor communities

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Environmental Protection Agency announced a series of enforcement actions Wednesday to address air pollution, unsafe drinking water and other problems afflicting minority communities in three Gulf Coast states, following a "Journey to Justice" tour by Administrator Michael Regan last fall.

The agency will conduct unannounced inspections of chemical plants, refineries and other industrial sites

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suspected of polluting air and water and causing health problems to nearby residents, Regan said. And it will install air monitoring equipment in Louisiana's "chemical corridor" to enhance enforcement at chemical and plastics plants between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. The region contains several hotspots where cancer risks are far above national levels.

The EPA also issued a notice to the city of Jackson, Mississippi, saying its aging and overwhelmed drinking water system violates the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. The order directs the city to outline a plan to "correct the significant deficiencies identified" in an EPA report within 45 days.

In separate letters, Regan urged city and state officials to use nearly \$79 million in funding allocated to Mississippi under the bipartisan infrastructure law "to solve some of the most dire water needs in Jackson and other areas of need across Mississippi."

The actions were among more than a dozen steps announced being taken in response to Regan's tour last November. Regan visited low-income, mostly minority communities in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas as part of an effort to focus federal attention on communities adversely affected by decades of industrial pollution.

A Toxics Release Inventory prepared by the EPA shows that African Americans and other minority groups make up 56% of those living near toxic sites such as refineries, landfills and chemical plants. Negative effects include chronic health problems such as asthma, diabetes and hypertension.

"In every community I visited during the Journey to Justice tour, the message was clear: residents have suffered far too long and local, state and federal agencies have to do better," Regan said.

The unannounced inspections of chemical plants and other sites "are going to keep these facilities on their toes," he told reporters on a conference call.

Inspections currently are done on a schedule or with advance notice, Regan said, but that is about to change. "We are amping up our aggressiveness to utilize a tool that's in our toolbox that ... has been there for quite some time," he said.

When facilities are found to be noncompliant, the EPA "will use all available tools to hold them accountable," he added.

A pilot project combining high-tech air pollution monitoring with additional inspectors will begin in three Louisiana parishes — St. John the Baptist, St. James and Calcasieu — that are home to scores of industrial sites and are long plagued by water and air pollution.

President Joe Biden has made addressing racial disparities, including those related to the environment, central to his agenda. He has pledged that at least 40% of new spending on climate and the environment go to poor and minority communities. The administration's commitment to the issue has come under renewed scrutiny in recent weeks, as two key environmental justice appointees departed. Cecilia Martinez, a top official at the White House Council on Environmental Quality, and David Kieve, who conducted outreach with environmental justice groups, both left the White House, putting a spotlight on promises yet to be fulfilled.

Regan, a former environmental regulator in North Carolina, has made environmental justice a top priority since taking over as EPA head last year. As the first Black man to lead the agency, the issue "is really personal for me, as well as professional," he told The Associated Press in November.

"I pledge to do better by people in communities who have been hurting for far too long," he said Tuesday.

Historically marginalized communities like St. John and St. James, along with cities such as New Orleans, Jackson and Houston, will benefit from the \$1 trillion bipartisan infrastructure law signed by Biden, Regan said. The law includes \$55 billion for water and wastewater infrastructure, while a sweeping climate and social policy bill pending in the Senate would pump more than twice that amount into EPA programs to clean up the environment and address water and environmental justice issues.

As part of its enforcement action, the EPA is requiring a former DuPont petrochemical plant in La Place, Louisiana, to install fence-line monitors to identify emissions from the site, Regan said. The plant is now owned by the Japanese conglomerate Denka.

The agency also said it will push for greater scrutiny of a proposed expansion of a Formosa Plastics

plant in St. James and issued a notice of violation to a Nucor Steel plant that emits hydrogen sulfide and other harmful chemicals.

Regan said he has spoken with New Orleans Mayor LaToya Cantrell about Gordon Plaza, a city neighborhood built on the site of a former toxic landfill. Gordon Plaza was designated as a Superfund site in the 1990s, but dozens of mostly Black families still live there.

The EPA will review the site, starting in March, Regan said, and will add nine homes not included in earlier plans to help families move. City officials hope to use money from the infrastructure law to relocate families and build a solar farm on the site.

EPA also said it has completed a review of proposed actions to clean up creosote contamination from a site in Houston now owned by Union Pacific Railroad. The site, in the Kashmere Gardens area in the city's Fifth Ward, has been linked to higher than normal cancer rates in the historically Black neighborhood.

EPA said it will work with Texas officials to ensure corrective actions address the concerns of community members.

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner, who toured the area with Regan, said Wednesday it was "very encouraging" that federal officials "share our concerns and know the names and faces of those affected."

Sharon Lavigne, president of Rise St. James, a grassroots organization that has battled petrochemical plants in Louisiana, said the EPA's actions were "just the beginning of what needs to be done" to address pollution from the petrochemical industry.

"It's important that EPA recognizes the need to listen to the science, which shows the destructive Formosa plastics facility should be stopped and that no other harmful chemical facilities should be allowed to cause harm in our community anymore," Lavigne said. "I'm hopeful that he will really get some things done."

Hospital patient without COVID shot denied heart transplant

By PHILIP MARCELO and RODRIQUE NGOWI Associated Press

MENDON, Mass. (AP) — A Boston hospital is defending itself after a man's family claimed he was denied a new heart for refusing to be vaccinated against COVID-19, saying most transplant programs around the country set similar requirements to improve patients' chances of survival.

The family of D.J. Ferguson said in a crowdfunding appeal this week that officials at Brigham and Women's Hospital told the 31-year-old father of two that he was ineligible for the procedure because he hasn't been vaccinated against the coronavirus.

"We are literally in a corner right now. This is extremely time sensitive," the family said in its fundraising appeal, which has raised tens of thousands of dollars. "This is not just a political issue. People need to have a choice!"

D.J.'s mother, Tracey Ferguson, insists that her son isn't against vaccinations, noting he's had other immunizations in the past. But the trained nurse said Wednesday that he's been diagnosed with atrial fibrillation — an irregular and often rapid heart rhythm — and that he has concerns about the side effects of the COVID-19 vaccine.

"D.J. is an informed patient," Tracey Ferguson said in a brief interview at her home in Mendon, about 30 miles (48 kilometers) southwest of Boston. "He wants to be assured by his doctors that his condition would not be worse or fatal with this COVID vaccine."

Brigham and Women's Hospital declined to comment on D.J. Ferguson's case, citing patient privacy laws. But it pointed to a response that it posted on its website in which it said the COVID-19 vaccine is one of several immunizations required by most U.S. transplant programs, including a flu shot and hepatitis B vaccines.

The hospital said research has shown that transplant recipients are at higher risk than non-transplant patients of dying from COVID-19, and that its policies are in line with the recommendations of the American Society of Transplantation and other health organizations.

Patients also must meet other health and lifestyle criteria to receive donated organs, and it's unknown if D.J. Ferguson did or would have met them.

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Brigham & Womens Hospital also stressed that no patient is placed on an organ waitlist without meeting those criteria, and rejected the notion that a transplant candidate could be considered "first on the list" for an organ — a claim Ferguson's family made in its fundraising post.

"There are currently more than 100,000 candidates on waitlists for organ transplantation and a shortage of available organs — around half of people on waiting lists will not receive an organ within five years," the hospital said.

Hospitals in other states have faced similar criticism for denying transplants to patients who weren't vaccinated against COVID-19.

In Colorado last year, a woman suffering from late-stage kidney disease said she was denied a transplant by her hospital because she was unvaccinated. Leilani Lutali, a born-again Christian, said she opposed immunization because of the role that fetal cell lines play in some vaccines' development.

There is a scarcity of donor organs, so transplant centers only place patients on the waiting list whom they deem the most likely to survive with a new organ.

"A donor heart is a precious and scarce gift which must be cared for well," said Dr. Howard Eisen, medical director for the advanced heart failure program at Penn State University in Hershey, Pennsylvania. "Our goal is to preserve patient survival and good outcomes post-transplant."

The United Network for Organ Sharing, the nonprofit that manages the country's organ transplant system, doesn't track how many patients refusing to get a COVID-19 vaccine have been denied transplants, said Anne Paschke, an organization spokesperson.

She said patients who are denied organ transplants still have the right to go elsewhere, though individual hospitals ultimately decide which patients to add to the national waitlist.

According to the online fundraiser, D.J. Ferguson was hospitalized in late November for a heart ailment that caused his lungs to fill with blood and fluid. He was then transferred to Brigham and Women's, where doctors inserted an emergency heart pump that the family says is only meant to be a temporary stopgap.

"It's devastating," Tracey Ferguson said. "No one ever wants to see their child go through something like this."

Mississippi capital city struggles with aging water system

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — The unreliable water system in Mississippi's capital city causes problems several times a year at Styles of Essence hair salon, where water service can suddenly get cut off as workers repair broken pipes nearby.

Owner and stylist Belinda Smith keeps more than a dozen jugs of water in the small shop in south Jackson, stashed under sinks and along the base of a wall painted with the slogan, "Jesus Is Lord." Even if water stops flowing from the city system, she needs to rinse chemicals off her customers' hair.

"I have been in here and they will turn off the water without letting me know," Smith said Wednesday. "You don't want to get into a situation where you didn't fill your bottles back up."

Jackson has longstanding, expensive-to-fix problems with its aging water system, and the EPA issued a notice this week that the system violates the federal Safe Drinking Water Act. The order directs the city to outline a plan to "correct the significant deficiencies identified" in an EPA report within 45 days.

Like many older cities around the U.S., Jackson faces more water system problems that it can afford to fix. The tax base of Mississippi's capital has eroded over the past few decades as the population has decreased — the result of mostly white flight to suburbs that began after public schools integrated in 1970. The city's population is now more than 80% Black, with about 25% of residents living in poverty.

After arctic weather blanketed parts of the South last February, equipment froze in a Jackson water treatment plant. For weeks, tens of thousands of people were left with no running water or water pressure that was dangerously low. The city ran distribution sites where people brought buckets to pick up water to bathe or flush toilets. The National Guard helped distribute cases of drinking water, and volunteers delivered bottled water to people without access to transportation.

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When water pressure drops, there's a possibility that untreated groundwater can enter a water system through cracked pipes, so customers are told to boil water to kill potentially harmful bacteria. Jackson customers had to boil their water for a month after the problems in 2021.

The city is experiencing water woes again this week because temperatures dipped below freezing and caused problems with membranes in a treatment plant. Crews have been scrambling to fix newly broken pipes, and several Jackson schools closed for in-person instruction because they had no water or low pressure.

EPA Administrator Michael Regan traveled to Mississippi in mid-November as part of a five-day tour of low-income, mostly minority communities in the South. On the day he was in Jackson to look at water problems, he visited an elementary school that was temporarily closed because of water issues. Even when classes were in session, students and teachers had to use portable toilets outside because of low water pressure.

In addition to water pressure, Jackson has also had water quality problems for years. Because of concerns about lead levels, the city has long told people to avoid using hot tap water for drinking or cooking and to only use filtered or bottled water for baby formula.

Sybil Smith lives in south Jackson, the part of the city most likely to have water pressure problems because it's far from the treatment plants. She said Wednesday that she worries that the city water might harm her and her family.

"Personally, I don't drink it," said Sybil Smith, a retired hospital employee who's not related to Belinda Smith at the hair salon.

Sybil Smith said she and her husband typically keep several cases of bottled water stockpiled in their home. During the cold snap last February, they had no running water for a few days and low pressure for many more.

Jackson will request at least \$42 million for short-term water system repairs as state legislators consider how to spend Mississippi's share of federal money for infrastructure improvements and pandemic relief, said Justin Vicory, who works in communications for Jackson Mayor Chokwe Antar Lumumba.

Legislators have not decided how much of the pandemic relief money to spend on water and sewer systems statewide, although an initial proposal is about \$750 million. Jackson is run by Democrats and the Legislature is run by Republicans. The Legislature is also known for protecting rural interests, splitting money as widely as possible.

Fed plans to raise rates starting in March to cool inflation

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve signaled Wednesday that it will begin a series of interest-rate hikes in March, reversing pandemic-era policies that have fueled hiring and growth — and stock market gains — but also stubbornly high inflation.

Chair Jerome Powell said at a news conference that inflation has gotten "slightly worse" since the Fed last met in December. He said raising the Fed's benchmark rate, which has been pegged at zero since March 2020, will help prevent high prices from becoming entrenched.

Seeking to calm fears that higher rates might hurt the economy, Powell said the central bank can manage the process in a way that prolongs growth and keeps unemployment low. "I think there is quite a bit of room to raise interest rates without threatening the labor market," he said.

Economists said they were surprised by the likely timing and intensity of rate hikes sketched out by Powell, who said the economy is stronger now than in 2015, when the Fed began to raise rates slowly. "The Fed is signaling that they are going to be moving earlier, and maybe at a quicker pace, than we thought," said Steve Rick, chief economist at CUNA Mutual Group.

The Fed's rate hikes will make it more expensive, over time, to borrow for a home, car or business. The Fed's intent is to temper economic growth and cool off inflation, which is at a 40-year high and eating into Americans' wage gains and household budgets.

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"The best thing we can do to support continued labor market gains," Powell said, "is to promote a long expansion, and that will require price stability."

The central bank's latest policy statement follows dizzying gyrations in the stock market as investors have been gripped by fear and uncertainty over just how fast and far the Fed will go to reverse its low-rate policies, which have nurtured the economy and the markets for years.

The broad S&P 500 index fell nearly 10% this month and fell slightly Wednesday.

Asked about the stock market's wild volatility, Powell stressed that the Fed's "ultimate focus" is on the "real economy." But he suggested that the recent market moves are a positive sign: "We feel like the communications we have with market participants and the general public are working."

High inflation has become a serious political threat to President Joe Biden and congressional Democrats, with Republicans pointing to rising prices as one of their principal lines of attack as they look toward the November elections.

Biden said last week that it was "appropriate" for Powell to adjust the Fed's policies. And congressional Republicans have endorsed Powell's plans to raise rates, providing the Fed with rare bipartisan support for tightening credit.

"The risk is for a faster pace of Fed tightening given the stickiness of inflation," said Kathy Bostjancic, an economist at Oxford Economics, a consulting firm.

Supply-chain and labor-market constraints have lasted longer than the Fed anticipated. Consumer prices are rising at 7% — well above the Fed's long-run inflation target of 2% — and Powell said the outlook for the U.S. economy remains uncertain.

Powell said that while he thinks shipping bottlenecks and labor constraints will ease over time, it's critical for Fed policymakers to have "humility" and to be "nimble" in their decision-making.

For now, Powell said Fed policymakers are "of a mind to raise the federal funds rate at the March meeting, assuming that conditions are appropriate for doing so."

The Fed also said it will phase out in March monthly bond purchases that have been intended to reduce longer-term rates. And in another step that will tighten credit, the policymakers said they would start reducing their huge \$9 trillion balance sheet this year, which some economists think will start by July.

Powell and the Fed were "very, very clear that rate hikes are imminent, that the scope for rate hikes is large, and that they are moving quickly toward reducing the size of the Fed balance sheet," said Eric Winograd, U.S. economist at AB, an asset manager.

The central bank faces a delicate and even risky balancing act. If the stock market is engulfed by more chaotic declines, economists say, the Fed might decide to delay some of its credit-tightening plans. Modest drops in share prices, though, won't likely affect the Fed's thinking.

Some economists have expressed concern that the Fed is already moving too late to combat high inflation. Others say they worry that the Fed may act too aggressively. They argue that numerous rate hikes could unnecessarily slow hiring. In this view, high prices mostly reflect snarled supply chains that the Fed's rate hikes are powerless to cure.

Powell has acknowledged that he failed to foresee the persistence of high inflation, having long expressed the belief that it would prove temporary.

The inflation spike has broadened to areas beyond those that were affected by supply shortages — to apartment rents, for example — which suggests it could endure even after goods and parts flow more freely.

Feds accuse Texas man of selling gun used to take hostages

By JAKE BLEIBERG and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

DALLAS (AP) — A Texas man has been charged with a federal gun crime after authorities say he sold a gun to a man who held four hostages inside a Texas synagogue earlier this month before being fatally shot by the FBI, the Justice Department said Wednesday.

Henry "Michael" Williams, 32, was charged with being a felon in possession of a firearm after authorities say he sold the weapon that Malik Faisal Akram used when he entered Congregation Beth Israel in

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Colleyville, Texas, on Jan. 15 and held the synagogue's rabbi and three others hostage for hours.

The attorney listed for Williams in court records did not immediately respond Wednesday to a phone message and email seeking comment from The Associated Press.

Akram, a 44-year-old British citizen, held hostages in the Dallas-area suburb while demanding the release of a federal prisoner. The standoff ended after more than 10 hours when the temple's rabbi threw a chair at Akram and fled with the other two remaining hostages just as an FBI tactical team was moving in. None of the hostages were injured.

Prosecutors say Williams sold Akram a semi-automatic pistol on Jan. 13 — two days before the hostage-taking. The pistol was recovered from the scene.

Akram paid \$150 for the gun, according to charging documents. The documents state Williams was convicted in 2005 of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and attempted possession of a controlled substance in 2013.

Williams allegedly acknowledged to investigators that he was aware he was not allowed to have a firearm and knew selling the gun to Akram was illegal.

He told FBI agents in an interview one day after the hostage crisis that he recalled meeting a man with a British accent but didn't remember his name. During a separate interview this week, authorities said, Williams was shown a photo of Akram and this time confirmed that he sold Akram the weapon at an intersection in South Dallas.

Williams told investigators that Akram told him he intended to use the gun to intimidate someone who owed an outstanding debt, according to authorities.

Dallas police arrested Williams on an outstanding warrant Monday, and he told federal investigators that he sold the gun to Akram after being read his rights, according to charging documents.

Earlier Wednesday, British police said they arrested another two men in the investigation into the hostage-taking incident. The counter-terrorism force Policing North West did not disclose details about the two men arrested in the northern English city of Manchester but said they were being held for questioning and had not yet been charged with a crime.

On Jan. 20, British police had detained two other men in the cities of Birmingham and Manchester for questioning as part of the same investigation. The men were released with no further action. And two British teenagers were also detained earlier in Manchester and released without charge. The teens were Akram's sons, two U.S. law enforcement officials have told AP.

Akram was originally from the town of Blackburn in northwest England.

The hostages said Akram cited antisemitic stereotypes, and authorities said Akram was demanding the release of Aafia Siddiqui, a Pakistani neuroscientist convicted of trying to kill U.S. troops in Afghanistan and who is serving a lengthy sentence in a prison near Colleyville.

British media reported that Akram was investigated by MI5, the domestic security service, in the second half of 2020, but was deemed not to be a credible threat at the time.

Vaccine mandate to kick in for first wave of health workers

By DAVID A. LIEB and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

Health care workers in about half the states face a Thursday deadline to get their first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine under a Biden administration mandate that will be rolled out across the rest of the country in the coming weeks.

While the requirement is welcomed by some, others fear it will worsen already serious staff shortages if employees quit rather than comply.

And in some Republican-led states that have taken a stand against vaccine mandates, hospitals and nursing homes could find themselves caught between conflicting state and federal demands.

"We would like to see staff vaccinated. We think that it's the safest option for residents, which is our biggest concern," said Marjorie Moore, executive director of VOYCE, a St. Louis County, Missouri, nonprofit that works on behalf of nursing home residents. "But not having staff is also a really big concern, because

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the neglect that happens as a result of that is severe and very scary.”

The mandate affects a wide swath of the health care industry, covering doctors, nurses, technicians, aides and even volunteers at hospitals, nursing homes, home-health agencies and other providers that participate in the federal Medicare or Medicaid programs.

It comes as many places are stretched thin by the omicron surge, which is putting record numbers of people in the hospital with COVID-19 while sickening many health workers.

Nationwide, about 81% of nursing home staff members already were fully vaccinated as of earlier this month, ranging from a high of 98% in Rhode Island to a low of 67% in Missouri, according to the federal Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. The data is unclear about the vaccination levels in hospitals and other health care sites.

The mandate ultimately will cover 10.4 million health care workers at 76,000 facilities.

It is taking effect first in jurisdictions that didn't challenge the requirement in court. Those include some of the biggest states, with some of the largest populations of senior citizens, among them: California, Florida, New York and Pennsylvania.

“There absolutely have been employee resignations because of vaccination requirements,” said Catherine Barbieri, a Philadelphia attorney at Fox Rothschild who represents health care providers. But “I think it's relatively small.”

At Wilson Medical Center in rural Neodesha, Kansas, three of the roughly 180 employees are quitting, and several others have sought exemptions from the vaccine mandate, said hospital spokeswoman Janice Reese.

“We are very fortunate that that is all we are losing,” she said, noting that the hospital was not in favor of the mandate. “We didn't feel like it was our place to actually try to tell a person what they had to do.”

Reese said the vaccine requirement could also make it more difficult for the hospital to fill vacancies.

In Florida, medical centers find themselves caught between dueling federal and state vaccination policies. They could lose federal funding for not adhering to the Biden administration mandate, but could get hit with fines for running afoul of state law.

Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican who has waged a legal campaign against coronavirus mandates, last year signed legislation that forces businesses with vaccine requirements to let workers opt out for medical reasons, religious beliefs, immunity from a previous infection, regular testing or an agreement to wear protective gear. Businesses that fail to comply can be fined \$10,000 to \$50,000 per violation.

Asked if the state would pursue fines against hospitals that enforce the federal mandate, a spokeswoman for the Florida attorney general said all employee complaints “will be thoroughly reviewed by our office.”

Some states already have their own vaccine requirements for health care workers. In California, for example, they have been required to be fully vaccinated since Sept. 30 and must get a booster by Feb. 1.

The federal mandate is “better late than never,” said Sal Rosselli, president of the National Union of Healthcare Workers, which represents about 15,000 people in California. “But if it happened sooner, we wouldn't have gone through the surge, and a lot more people would be alive today.”

The government said it will begin enforcing the first-dose vaccine requirement Feb. 14 in two dozen other states where injunctions were lifted when the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the mandate two weeks ago. The requirement will kick in on Feb. 22 in Texas, which had filed suit separately.

In Missouri, one nursing home served notice this week that it intends to take advantage of a state rule that allows facilities to close for up to two years if they are short-staffed because of the vaccine requirement.

“Obviously we are proponents of vaccines,” said Lisa Cox, a spokeswoman for the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services. But “throughout all of this, we knew that mandating it would be a negative impact really on our health care system ... just because of crippling staffing levels.”

Cox identified the facility that was closing as Cedarcrest Manor, in the eastern Missouri city of Washington. She said there are just 42 patients in the 177-bed facility amid the staffing shortages. A woman who answered the phone at the facility took a message but couldn't immediately comment.

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The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services ultimately could cut off funding to places that fail to comply with the mandate. But it plans to begin enforcement with encouragement rather than a heavy hand.

CMS guidance documents indicate it will grant leniency to places that have at least 80% compliance and an improvement plan in place, and it will seek to prod others.

"The overarching goal is to get providers over that finish line and not be cutting off federal dollars," said MaryBeth Musumeci, a Medicaid expert with the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation.

The states affected on Thursday are: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Florida, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Vermont, Virginia, Washington and Wisconsin, along with the District of Columbia and U.S. territories.

Norwegian skiers, other Olympic hopefuls positive for virus

OSLO (AP) — Two members of Norway's women's cross-country ski team have tested positive for the coronavirus ahead of next month's Beijing Olympics, the team said Wednesday, as other countries also face tense waits to see whether their own infected athletes can recover in time.

Swiss hockey players, Russian bobsledders and German skeleton sliders are among other would-be Olympians facing a nervous wait. Also on that list: U.S. bobsledder Josh Williamson, who revealed a positive test Wednesday and will not accompany his teammates on their Thursday flight to China — though he remains hopeful of getting to the Games in plenty of time to compete.

Heidi Weng, a two-time overall World Cup champion, and Anne Kjersti Kalvå contracted COVID-19 at a training camp in the Italian Alpine resort of Seiser Alm and are now isolating.

Norwegian cross-country manager Espen Bjervig said in a video call their participation in the Olympics was uncertain.

Team doctor Øystein Andersen said Italian rules mean that Weng and Kalvå will be in isolation for 10 days, until Feb. 3. The opening ceremony is on Feb. 4 and the Olympic cross-country skiing program starts the next day.

"This is a shocking situation," Andersen said.

Weng is the top-ranked Norwegian and a five-time world champion.

"We have a reserve in the squad, and we also have other athletes who are accredited and can be ready," Bjervig said of possible replacements. "But basically now the focus is on looking at the opportunities for those who have been taken out."

Norway is the leading nation in cross-country skiing, with its women's team winning three of the six events on the program at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games.

The team had planned to leave for Beijing on Thursday but will now be delayed.

The entire men's team is also in isolation in Seiser Alm after head coach Arild Monsen tested positive for COVID-19 after returning to Norway on Monday.

All eight team members were defined as a close contact of Monsen and were awaiting the results of PCR tests. They are now scheduled to depart for Beijing on Monday.

Some U.S. athletes leave on Thursday and Williamson was planning to be on that charter. He will have to wait at least a few days before reaching what would be his first Olympics.

"This has not been an easy pill to swallow," Williamson said.

China imposes strict restrictions on all arrivals, but especially on people who recently had the virus. They are required to supply proof of five recent negative test results since the infection. All athletes will be tested each day they are in China, too.

Switzerland said two of its women's hockey players won't fly out with their teammates to Beijing on their scheduled flight Wednesday following virus tests. The Swiss Olympic team said some results for Alina Müller and Sinja Leemann in recent days were over the threshold for entry into China, but said it hoped they could take a later flight and join the team in time for its opening game against Canada on Feb. 3.

Two Russian bobsledders from the same sled crew reported positive tests. Alexei Pushkarev and Vasily

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Kondratenko are in isolation after a training camp in the southern city of Sochi, coach Denis Alimov told broadcaster Match TV.

There have been four virus cases on the Russian Olympic team this week. Nikita Tregubov, the skeleton silver medalist in 2018, tested positive after attending the same camp as the bobsledders. Figure skater Mikhail Kolyada tested positive and was replaced on the team Tuesday after feeling unwell.

German skeleton racers Axel Jungk and Hannah Neise are also hoping to compete despite recent infections. Coach Christian Baude said both tested positive earlier this month after competing at a World Cup event, in comments reported by German agency dpa. Baude said Neise had already provided a negative test since her infection.

Ukraine's front line: Where lives turn on distant decisions

By INNA VARENYTSIA and LORI HINNANT Associated Press

In trenches dusted with snow and tinged with soot, men search for enough cellphone signal to hear the latest from the distant capitals that will decide their fate.

Moscow, Washington, London, Paris, Berlin, Vienna. Sometimes Kyiv. But only sometimes.

These Ukrainians are far from the Russian ships headed to a naval exercise off the coast of Ireland, from the American-built fighter jets streaming to the Baltics and from the U.S. aircraft carrier steadily sailing the Mediterranean.

As Western-supplied weapons land by the planeload in Kyiv, soldiers and civilians alike wait here with helpless anticipation for decisions made by people who know little about the lives of those on the eastern front lines — a battle-weary region near where Russia has massed tens of thousands of soldiers in a troop buildup that U.S. President Joe Biden said could mount the largest invasion since World War II.

The soldiers in Zolote 4 have been defending against Russian encroachment for years. They are just a few hundred meters from pro-Russia separatist fighters, who are on the other side of a checkpoint that no one can safely cross. The soldiers assume that's where the snipers are, though they've never seen any gunmen.

After three days with no shooting, "all of a sudden they opened up with grenade launchers and firearms. One mortar shell flew over and fell in the field behind us. Two more hit between ours and the next position. In 15 minutes, everything was quiet again. Why? What for? Nobody knows. And that's how it is around here," said Oleh Surhov, a Ukrainian soldier who fled Crimea in 2014 after the Russians seized the peninsula. He joined the fight soon after he evacuated his wife, children and grandchildren to western Ukraine.

Zolote 1 through 5 got their names decades ago during the Soviet era — the name means "Golden" — when they were labeled as units of the local coal mining operation. Now 1 through 4 are in Ukraine and 5 sits less than a kilometer (half-mile) away, across the checkpoint.

The sense of waiting for someone else's decisions has also infected the nearby village of Katerynivka, which bears the scars of eight years of shelling. It has newer trenches, which are heated by rough wood stoves whose warmth draws nearly as many dogs and cats as soldiers. The luckiest trench cats get taken back by soldiers when they rotate off the front.

"We joke that hope is the last thing to die. All of us are waiting for peace. Neither our children nor grandkids can visit us," said Liubov, a local woman who wouldn't give her last name. "We talk on the phone and that's enough. Let's wait until peace comes!"

If war comes instead, it is as likely as not to strike first in eastern Ukraine, where the pro-Russia separatists have been in control since 2014. In Russia, across the border, more than 100,000 troops are gathering, and thousands more are going into position for what Russia says are military exercises on Ukraine's border to the north with Belarus.

Moscow denies it is planning an assault, but the United States and its NATO allies are preparing for a possible war, bolstering their presence in the Baltics and putting 8,500 American troops on higher alert for potential deployment to Europe. Britain and the U.S. have sent multiple planeloads of weapons to Ukraine.

Ukrainian officials have accepted the help but found themselves on the sidelines of several rounds of high-

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stakes diplomacy that so far have not yielded a breakthrough. "Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine," U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said early this month after one such meeting.

But Ukraine's president was left to fume on Twitter last week when Biden mused aloud about how to respond to a "minor incursion."

"We want to remind the great powers that there are no minor incursions and small nations. Just as there are no minor casualties and little grief from the loss of loved ones," President Volodymyr Zelenskyy wrote.

On Monday, the White House summoned European leaders, including NATO's secretary-general, to a videoconference about Ukraine to discuss U.S. ideas on how to respond to Russia's demands.

"We have shared those ideas with our European allies and partners. We are taking their feedback. We are incorporating that feedback into the written response," U.S. State Department spokesman Ned Price said.

Ukraine wasn't invited to the videoconference, but American officials said their feedback was also key.

Ukrainian and Russian representatives met Wednesday in Paris to discuss the prospects for a stalled 2015 peace deal brokered by France and Germany to end the conflict in eastern Ukraine. The meeting went longer than expected and ended with agreement to meet again — in Berlin.

If Ukraine sometimes seems to be an afterthought for the powerful countries deciding its fate, the country's east is even farther from the centers of power.

In Vesele, a separatist area in the eastern Donetsk region, little has changed since the fighting in 2014. Signs still warn about minefields. Concrete block buildings have only crumbled further in the years since they were shelled, and no one has come to tow away the cars hastily abandoned under gunfire.

"There is practically no one here, because everything is broken. There is light, gas, water supply, but there is no life," said Vladimir, a local man who refused to give his last name. He estimated Ukrainian troops were about a kilometer (half-mile) away, and he wanted them gone so people could decide their own fates.

"If they would completely leave and liberate" the Donbas region in eastern Ukraine, "then we could decide. I think nobody wants (to be a part of) Ukraine here," he said.

But he, like most in the east, believed those decisions were in someone else's hands.

Picasso heirs launch digital art piece to ride 'crypto' wave

By JAMEY KEATEN Associated Press

GENEVA (AP) — Pablo, meet Crypto.

Heirs of Pablo Picasso, the famed 20th-century Spanish artist, are vaulting into 21st-century commerce by selling 1,010 digital art pieces of one of his ceramic works that has never before been seen publicly — riding a fad for "crypto" assets that have taken the art and financial worlds by storm.

For an exclusive interview before the formal launch this week, Picasso's granddaughter, Marina Picasso, and her son Florian Picasso opened up their apartment — which is swimming in works from their illustrious ancestor — in an upscale Geneva neighborhood. There they offered up a glimpse, however tantalizingly slim, of the piece behind what they're billing as an unprecedented fusion of old-school fine art and digital assets.

They're looking to cash in on and ride a wave of interest in non-fungible tokens, or NFTs, which have netted millions for far-less-known artists and been criticized by some as environmentally costly get rich schemes.

A Picasso, his family's promoters say, would mark the entry of a Grand Master into the game.

In economics jargon, a fungible token is an asset that can be exchanged on a one-for-one basis. Think of dollars or bitcoins — each one has the exact same value and can be traded freely. A non-fungible object, by contrast, has its own distinct value, like an old house or a classic car.

Cross this notion with cryptocurrency technology known as the blockchain and you get NFTs. They are effectively digital certificates of authenticity that can be attached to digital art or, well, pretty much anything else that comes in digital form — audio files, video clips, animated stickers, even a news article read online.

"We're trying to build a bridge between the NFT world and the fine art world," said Florian Picasso, the artist's great-grandson.

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The artist's descendants are playing close to the vest, to drum up interest and protect — for now — a family heirloom. They're showing only a sliver of the underside of the work linked to the NFTs, a ceramic piece about the size of a large salad bowl. The exposed parts show forms like a thick yellow line, a dribbling green splotch, and a brushed-on number "58" at the base.

Marina Picasso says the cherished pottery piece dates to October 1958, when she was a child.

"It's a work that represents a face, and it's very expressive," she said. "It's joyful, happy. It represents life ... It's one of those objects that have been part of our life, our intimate lives — my life with my children."

Cyril Noterman, a longtime manager for Florian Picasso, and Kathryn Frazier, a publicist for the project, told The Associated Press that Sotheby's would host an auction in March that will include a unique NFT as well as the actual ceramic bowl.

But Matthew Floris, a spokesman for Sotheby's, contacted the AP on Wednesday and said in a statement: "Sotheby's has clarified that it will not be selling an NFT of a work by Pablo Picasso."

Noterman and Frazier said a first-phase, online sale of more than 1,000 other NFTs starts Friday through the Nifty Gateway and Origin Protocol platforms.

Florian Picasso said they agreed on the colorful ceramic piece because it was "a fun one" to start.

An NFT Picasso brings with it almost epochal symbolism, something like when the Beatles collection was finally put up on iTunes. The family and its business managers say the aim is to create a younger community of Picasso fans.

"Everything is evolving," said Florian Picasso, insisting that the NFT honors the great artist.

"I think it fits within Picasso's legacies because we are paying tribute to him and his way of working, which was always being creative," he said.

How quaint seem those days of yore when Picasso, as the legend has it, would simply doodle on a napkin as payment for a restaurant meal — his handiwork supposedly carrying a value far in excess of the cost of the food and drinks he had enjoyed.

Some of the proceeds will be donated — one portion to a charity that aims to help overcome a shortage of nurses, and another to a nongovernmental organization that wants to help reduce carbon in the atmosphere. The NFTs will also come with music put together by Florian Picasso, who is a DJ and music producer, along with songwriter John Legend and rapper Nas.

Even a full rendering of that track isn't being publicly released just yet: Florian Picasso played a snippet for a reporter, then turned it off.

"And to hear more, you gotta purchase the NFT," he quipped.

How Fed hikes could affect mortgages, car loans, card rates

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Will mortgage rates go up? How about car loans? Credit cards?

How about those nearly invisible rates on bank CDs — any chance of getting a few dollars more?

With the Federal Reserve signaling Wednesday that it will begin raising its benchmark interest rate as soon as March — and probably a few additional times this year — consumers and businesses will eventually feel it.

The Fed's thinking is that with America's job market essentially back to normal and inflation surging well beyond the central bank's annual 2% target, now is the time to raise its benchmark rate from near zero.

The Fed had slashed its key rate after the pandemic recession erupted two years ago. The idea was to support the economy by encouraging borrowing and spending. But now, by making loans gradually costlier, the Fed hopes to stem the surging price increases that have been squeezing consumers and businesses.

Here are some questions on what this could mean for consumers and businesses.

I'M CONSIDERING BUYING A HOUSE. WILL MORTGAGE RATES GO STEADILY HIGHER?

Probably, but it's hard to say. Mortgage rates don't usually rise in tandem with the Fed's rate increases. Sometimes they even move in the opposite direction. Long-term mortgages tend to track the rate on the

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10-year Treasury, which, in turn, is influenced by a variety of factors. These include investors' expectations for future inflation and global demand for U.S. Treasuries.

When inflation is expected to stay high, investors tend to sell Treasuries because the yields on those bonds tend to provide little to no return once you account for inflation. As that happens, the selling pressure on the bonds tends to force Treasuries to pay higher rates. Yields then rise in response. The result can be higher mortgage rates. But not always.

DOES THAT MEAN HOME-LOAN RATES WON'T RISE MUCH ANYTIME SOON?

Not necessarily. Inflation is far exceeding the Fed's 2 percent target. Fewer investors are buying Treasuries as a safe haven. And with numerous Fed rate hikes expected, the rate on the 10-year note could rise over time — and so, by extension, would mortgage rates.

It's just hard to say when.

On the other hand, even when Treasury yields are comparatively low relative to inflation, as they are now, investors often still flock to them. That's especially true at times of global turmoil. Nervous investors from around the world often pour money into Treasuries because they are regarded as ultra-safe. All that buying pressure tends to keep a lid on Treasury rates, which generally has the effect of keeping mortgage rates relatively low.

WHAT ABOUT OTHER KINDS OF LOANS?

For users of credit cards, home equity lines of credit and other variable-interest debt, rates would rise by roughly the same amount as the Fed hike. That's because those rates are based in part on banks' prime rate, which moves in tandem with the Fed.

Those who don't qualify for such low-rate credit card offers might be stuck paying higher interest on their balances, because the rates on their cards would rise as the prime rate does.

The Fed's rate hikes won't necessarily raise auto loan rates. Car loans tend to be more sensitive to competition, which can slow the rate of increases.

WOULD I FINALLY EARN A BETTER-THAN-MEASLY RETURN ON CDS AND MONEY MARKET ACCOUNTS?

Probably, though it would take time.

Savings, certificates of deposit and money market accounts don't typically track the Fed's changes. Instead, banks tend to capitalize on a higher-rate environment to try to thicken their profits. They do so by imposing higher rates on borrowers, without necessarily offering any juicier rates to savers.

The exception: Banks with high-yield savings accounts. These accounts are known for aggressively competing for depositors. The only catch is that they typically require significant deposits.

UK government holds breath as it awaits 'partygate' report

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Prime Minister Boris Johnson braced Wednesday for the conclusions of an investigation into allegations of lockdown-breaching parties, a document that could help him end weeks of scandal and discontent, or bring his time in office to an abrupt close.

Senior civil servant Sue Gray is probing allegations that the prime minister and his staff flouted restrictions they imposed on the country in 2020 and 2021 to curb the spread of the coronavirus with "bring your own booze" office parties, birthday celebrations and "wine time Fridays."

The claims have caused public anger, led some Conservative lawmakers to call for Johnson's resignation, triggered intense infighting inside the governing party and sparked a criminal investigation into the prime minister and his staff by London's Metropolitan Police.

Gray is believed to have finished her inquiry, but has not said when she will submit her report to the government. Expectations among lawmakers that it would come on Wednesday gradually ebbed away as the day dragged on and Parliament adjourned for the night.

Johnson has promised to publish Gray's report in full and to address Parliament about its findings. The earliest that could come is now Thursday.

"When I receive it, of course I will do exactly what I said," Johnson said during a testy Prime Minister's

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Questions session in the House of Commons.

He batted away questions about the scandal and his future, saying he had “absolutely no intention” of resigning.

Wednesday’s headlines provided more bad news for Johnson, whose popularity in opinion polls has plunged amid the scandal. The Guardian’s front-page headline spoke of “PM’s peril,” while the left-leaning Daily Mirror said bluntly: “Number’s up, PM.” The right-of-center Daily Mail differed, declaring Britain: “A nation that has lost all sense of proportion.”

Johnson has urged his critics to wait for Gray’s conclusions, but his “wait and see” defense weakened Tuesday when police said they had opened a criminal investigation into some of the gatherings.

The Metropolitan Police said “a number of events” at Johnson’s Downing Street office and other government buildings met the force’s criteria for investigating the “most serious and flagrant” breaches of coronavirus rules.

The “partygate” allegations have infuriated many in Britain, who were barred from meeting with friends and family for months in 2020 and 2021 to curb the spread of COVID-19. Tens of thousands of people were fined by police for breaking the rules.

If detectives quiz Johnson about his involvement, it will be the first time a prime minister has been interviewed by police since Tony Blair was questioned as a witness over a “cash for honors” scandal in 2007. No one was charged in that case.

Conservative lawmaker Andrew Rosindell downplayed the extent of any wrongdoing by the prime minister. “I’m sure there are ministers that get parking tickets and speed fines, too,” he said. “Lots of people break the law in small ways, sometimes unintentionally. He’s not robbed a bank.”

Johnson and his allies have tried, without much success, to calm a scandal that is consuming government energies that could be better spent confronting the international crisis over Russia’s military build-up near Ukraine and a far-from-finished coronavirus pandemic.

Asked if Johnson was the right person to lead Britain at a time of international crisis, Defense Secretary Ben Wallace said simply: “Yes.”

Johnson has apologized for attending one event, a “bring your own booze” gathering in the garden of his Downing Street offices in May 2020, but said he had considered it a work gathering that fell within the rules.

Johnson’s supporters have also defended a June 2020 surprise birthday party for the prime minister inside Downing Street.

Loyal lawmaker Conor Burns said Johnson didn’t know about the gathering in advance.

“It was not a premeditated, organized party. ... He was, in a sense, ambushed with a cake,” Burns told Channel 4 News.

In more bad news for the prime minister, Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee on Wednesday published evidence that suggested Johnson personally OKed the airlift from Kabul of 200 dogs and cats from an animal charity run by a former Royal Marine.

Thousands of British citizens and their Afghan allies were flown out of Kabul as the Taliban took over in August. But many other Afghans at risk were left behind, and the animal airlift was accused of diverting time and resources from rescuing people.

Johnson has called claims that he intervened “nonsense.” But emails leaked by a former Foreign Office staffer involved in the evacuation effort said the “PM has just authorized ... staff and animals to be evacuated.”

Johnson’s office said Wednesday that Johnson “didn’t instruct officials to take any particular course of action.”

Hot stuff: Lab hits milestone on long road to fusion power

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

With 192 lasers and temperatures more than three times hotter than the center of the sun, scientists hit — at least for a fraction of a second — a key milestone on the long road toward nearly pollution-free

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fusion energy.

Researchers at the National Ignition Facility at the Lawrence Livermore National Lab in California were able to spark a fusion reaction that briefly sustained itself — a major feat because fusion requires such high temperatures and pressures that it easily fizzles out.

The ultimate goal, still years away, is to generate power the way the sun generates heat, by smooching hydrogen atoms so close to each other that they combine into helium, which releases torrents of energy.

A team of more than 100 scientists published the results of four experiments that achieved what is known as a burning plasma in Wednesday's journal Nature. With those results, along with preliminary results announced last August from follow-up experiments, scientists say they are on the threshold of an even bigger advance: ignition. That's when the fuel can continue to "burn" on its own and produce more energy than what's needed to spark the initial reaction.

"We're very close to that next step," said study lead author Alex Zylstra, an experimental physicist at Livermore.

Nuclear fusion presses together two types of hydrogen found in water molecules. When they fuse, "a small amount (milligrams) of fuel produces enormous amounts of energy and it's also very 'clean' in that it produces no radioactive waste," said Carolyn Kuranz, a University of Michigan experimental plasma physicist who wasn't part of the research. "It's basically limitless, clean energy that can be deployed anywhere," she said.

Researchers around the world have been working on the technology for decades, trying different approaches. Thirty-five countries are collaborating on a project in Southern France called the International Thermonuclear Experimental Reactor that uses enormous magnets to control the superheated plasma. That is expected to begin operating in 2026.

Earlier experiments in the United States and United Kingdom succeeded in fusing atoms, but achieved no self-heating, said Steven Cowley, director of the Princeton Plasma Physics Laboratory, who wasn't part of this study.

But don't bank on fusion just yet.

"The result is scientifically very exciting for us," said study co-author Omar Hurricane, chief scientist for Lawrence Livermore's fusion program. "But we're a long way from useful energy."

Maybe decades, he said.

It's already taken several years inside a lab that is straight out of Star Trek — one of the movies used the lab as background visuals for the Enterprise's engine room — and many failed attempts to get to this point. One adjustment that helped: Researchers made the fuel capsule about 10% bigger. Now it's up to the size of a BB.

That capsule fits in a tiny gold metal can that researchers aim 192 lasers at. They heat it to about 100 million degrees, creating about 50% more pressure inside the capsule than what's inside the center of the sun. These experiments created burning plasmas that lasted just a trillionth of a second, but that was enough to be considered a success, Zylstra said.

Overall, the four experiments in the Nature study — conducted in November 2020 and February 2021 — produced as much as 0.17 megajoules of energy, That's far more than previous attempts, but still less than one-tenth of the power used to start the process, Zylstra said. A megajoule is about enough energy to heat a gallon of water 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38 degrees Celsius).

Preliminary results from experiments done later in 2021, which are still being reviewed by other scientists, pushed energy output to 1.3 megajoules and lasted 100 trillionths of second, according to a government press release. But even that is shy of the 1.9 megajoules needed to break even.

"The major problem with fusion is that it is hard," said Princeton's Cowley. "Otherwise, it might be the perfect way to make energy -- sustainable, plentiful, safe and minimal environmental impact."

An opioid-ravaged West Virginia town awaits trial verdict

By JOHN RABY Associated Press

HUNTINGTON, W.Va. (AP) — Sarah Kelly recalls the fleeting moments when she reached out for help during a decadeslong opioid addiction, only to find out no residential treatment beds were available in an overloaded system in her corner of West Virginia.

In the hardest-hit county in the nation's worst-hit state for drug overdose deaths per capita, Kelly's struggles with prescription pain pills cost her custody of her two children. Her younger sister died of a heart infection from intravenous drug use in 2017.

Somehow, the Huntington resident wouldn't let her addiction win.

"I was so tired of living without them," Kelly said. "I couldn't live without them anymore."

Six months have passed since closing arguments were held in the first lawsuit over the U.S. addiction epidemic to go to trial. It blames three pharmaceutical companies for their role in the opioid crisis in the Huntington area. For Kelly and others who know the desperation that comes with addiction, the time it's taken to render a verdict seems out of step with the urgency they feel.

Kelly eventually found treatment and went to court to get her kids back. She's been in recovery since October 2019. But that nightmare of being unable to locate a bed right away comes rushing back as a decision looms in the lawsuit.

Cabell County and the city of Huntington sued AmerisourceBergen Drug Co., Cardinal Health Inc. and McKesson Corp. A federal judge must rule whether the companies created a public nuisance in distributing 81 million prescription pain pills over eight years — and whether they ignored signs that the Ohio River community was being ravaged by addiction.

The plaintiffs are seeking more than \$2.5 billion. The money would go toward prevention, treatment and education.

Kelly, 38, said the help can't come fast enough.

"There's people dying every single day," Kelly said. "So many of us are lucky to be alive and have found treatment. There's a lot of people that could really benefit from this. There's a lot of programs that could benefit from this and save lives."

From 2015 to 2020, Cabell County had 8,252 people — about 10% of its population — suffering from opioid use disorder, plaintiffs attorney Paul T. Farrell Jr. said in his closing arguments, citing expert testimony. The county has 106 Medicaid-approved beds for residential treatment of those patients, according to the state Department of Health and Human Resources.

Closing arguments were held in late July after the nearly three-month bench trial in Charleston. U.S. District Judge David Faber has yet to indicate when he might rule.

"It is worrisome that it is taking a long time, even though we know these things take time," said Kim Miller, an addiction counselor at Pretera Center, a Huntington treatment facility. "The longer it takes, the more questions arise, and the less likely it feels to get a satisfying verdict."

For many people who have abused prescription pain pills, any money from the trial "is going to come too late," Miller said.

In Cabell County last year, there were nearly 900 emergency medical responses for suspected overdoses. In 3% of the cases, the patient was pronounced dead at the scene. An estimated 1,400 emergency room visits in the county were related to overdoses, according to the DHHR.

Attorneys familiar with the trial said they're not alarmed by the months without a verdict.

"A lot of people have been waiting for a long time, and maybe people underestimate the complexity of the case and the difficulty of coming to a resolution," said Carl Tobias, a University of Richmond law professor. "I think Judge Faber is just taking the time that is needed to get it right."

West Virginia University law professor Patrick McGinley, representing the newspaper group HD Media, was instrumental in forcing the Drug Enforcement Administration to release a database of distributor pain pill shipments across the United States, including more than 1 billion to West Virginia from 2006 to 2014. The Charleston Gazette-Mail won a 2017 Pulitzer Prize for reporting on the state's opioid crisis.

McGinley, who teaches a seminar in prescription opioid litigation, said the trial in Faber's courtroom

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"would produce thousands if not tens of thousands of pages of transcripts of testimony, hundreds if not thousands of exhibits," and then Faber has to research the law.

Public nuisance claims drive some 3,000 lawsuits brought by state and local governments against drug-makers, distribution companies and pharmacies. Faber can peek at cases in other states; since the end of closing arguments, other opioid trials have come and gone.

In northern Ohio, a federal jury in November ruled that CVS, Walgreens and Walmart pharmacies recklessly distributed massive amounts of pain pills in two counties. A judge will decide by spring how much the pharmacies must pay in damages.

A jury on New York's Long Island found in late December that drugmaker Teva Pharmaceuticals contributed to the opioid crisis there. A separate trial will determine what Teva will have to pay.

Drug companies prevailed in lawsuits decided in November in northern California and in Oklahoma.

A judge rejected OxyContin maker Purdue Pharma's sweeping settlement of thousands of lawsuits in December. Another judge refused to allow litigation to move ahead against members of the Sackler family who own the company but also ordered negotiations for a reworked settlement.

The opioid crisis has been linked to more than 500,000 deaths in the U.S. since 2000, counting overdoses of both prescription opioids and illicit ones such as heroin and fentanyl.

McGinley said that although Cabell County and Huntington need resources now to deal with the opioid problem, the case likely won't end with Faber's decision.

"This is the legal process; we have to ensure fairness and compliance with the rule of law," McGinley said. "There's a saying: The wheels of justice grind exceedingly slow. That's certainly what it seems in a case like this."

EXPLAINER: Who are the kids trapped in Syria prison attack?

By ZEINA KARAM Associated Press

BEIRUT (AP) — A distressing series of voice notes sent by an injured Australian teenager from a prison in northeast Syria underscores the plight of thousands of forgotten children who remain trapped in overcrowded detention facilities in Syria and Iraq.

Hundreds of minors are believed to be holed up in Gweiran Prison, which has been at the center of a violent standoff between Islamic State group militants and U.S.-backed Kurdish fighters that began a week ago.

The Kurdish-led forces said Wednesday they took control of the last section of the prison controlled by Islamic State militants and freed a number of child detainees they said had been used as human shields. That ended a weeklong assault by the extremists on one of the largest detention facilities in Syria. But the fate of hundreds of boys remained unclear.

"We are talking about nearly 800 children who are probably some of the most vulnerable children in the world right now. The recent violence in the prison has made things for them much much worse," said Juliette Touma, Middle East regional spokesperson for the U.N. children's agency.

IS fighters stormed the prison on Thursday, aiming to break out thousands of comrades who simultaneously rioted inside. The attack is the biggest by IS militants since the fall of the group's "caliphate" in 2019.

The fighting appears to have left multiple child inmates killed or wounded, though numbers are not known.

Human Rights Watch provided The Associated Press with a series of audio messages sent by the 17-year-old Australian from inside the prison in which he appealed for help, saying he was injured in the head and was bleeding. The boy says his friends got killed and he has seen bodies of kids aged 8 to 12.

But who are these kids, and why are they there?

'CUBS OF THE CALIPHATE'

Some of the kids were children when their parents plucked them from their own countries after they decided to join the so-called Islamic caliphate declared in 2014 over parts of Syria and Iraq. Others were born there. Many attended IS-run schools where they were trained for combat.

While IS carried out massacres against residents and enslaved many of the women and girls, they also

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sought to re-educate young boys and tried to turn them into jihadi fighters. They recruited teens and children using gifts, threats and brainwashing. Boys were turned into killers and suicide bombers. IS videos showed kids carrying out beheadings or shooting captives in cold blood.

It was all part of a concerted effort to build a new generation of militants. They called them cubs of the caliphate.

Most were later captured by Kurdish-led forces during the U.S.-backed campaign that brought down IS three years ago, thrown into squalid, overcrowded detention centers and where they continue to languish.

Others were put in squalid camps in northeast Syria that hold families of suspected IS fighters, where they are exposed to violence, exploitation and abuse. Once they become teenagers deemed old enough to separate from their mothers, they are transferred to one of the detention centers where they join the fighters. The age cut-off rules are not exactly clear. Some as young as 12 were reportedly in Gweiran Prison.

Letta Tayler of Human Rights Watch estimates 600 minor boys, around half of them Iraqis and other non-Syrians, were inmates in the prison. Most are between 14 and 17 years old, though some are as young as 12, Tayler said. It is not clear how many of the boys in prison were trained by IS or whether any have committed any crimes.

WHY THEY ARE STILL THERE

Mostly because their governments have refused to repatriate them.

Kurdish authorities have asked countries to repatriate their nationals, saying keeping thousands of detainees in cramped facilities is putting a strain on their forces and creating a new generation of militants.

"None has even been brought before a judge to determine whether they should be detained," Tayler said. "These children... should never have been placed in this squalid overcrowded prison where their lives are clearly at risk to begin with. Their countries should have brought them home to help them rebuild their lives long ago."

But home governments often see the children as posing a danger rather than as needing rescue.

Some former Soviet bloc states have let some of their citizens back in, but other Arab, European and African countries have repatriated only minimal numbers or have refused.

Kurdish authorities run more than two dozen detention facilities scattered around northeastern Syria holding about 10,000 IS fighters. Among the detainees are some 2,000 foreigners, including about 800 Europeans.

In addition, some 27,500 children of 60 different nationalities are locked up at the sprawling al-Hol camp, which houses families of IS members. Most of them are Iraqis, followed by Syrians.

Most of them not yet teenagers, they are spending their childhood in limbo under miserable conditions with no schools, no place to play or develop, and seemingly no international interest in resolving their situation.

"There needs to be collective responsibility to get these children out of these prisons and out of these camps," Touma, of UNICEF, said. That responsibility, she added, lays mostly with the countries that have the highest number of children there.

"They all deserve to get out of that part of Syria and be home and safe."

German lawmakers debate possible COVID vaccine mandate

By GEIR MOULSON Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — Germany's parliament on Wednesday began a debate on a possible wide-ranging coronavirus vaccine mandate, with three main options on the table so far: obligatory vaccinations for all adults, just for everyone 50 and above, or no mandate at all.

German politicians of all stripes long insisted there would be no vaccine mandate. But the tide turned late last year amid frustration that a large number of holdouts was hampering the country's fight against COVID-19.

Shortly before becoming chancellor in December, Olaf Scholz came out in favor of a vaccine mandate, predicting that it would take effect in February or early March.

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That timetable has slipped. Scholz's new coalition government is leaving it up to lawmakers to come up with cross-party vaccination proposals and then vote according to their conscience rather than along party lines.

That has been done before to tackle ethically complicated medical questions, most recently in 2020 to decide on rules for organ donors.

On Wednesday, lawmakers kicked off proceedings with an "orientation debate." It isn't clear when any legislation will go to a vote, but it appears that it could be well into the spring before any vaccine mandate law takes effect.

Three proposals have emerged so far from lawmakers in Scholz's three-party governing coalition.

One is a call for a vaccine mandate for everyone 18 and above, which would be valid for two years and cover a maximum three shots, with fines for holdouts. A rival proposal calls for obligatory counseling meetings for the unvaccinated, followed by a vaccine mandate for people 50 and over if progress is unsatisfactory. And another group wants to prevent any vaccination mandate.

As of Wednesday, at least 73.6% of Germany's population was fully vaccinated — higher than the European Union average of 70% but lower than in countries such as Spain and Portugal — and 51.3% also had received a booster. Officials aren't satisfied with that vaccination level.

Germany is a long way from a very high vaccination rate "despite all our efforts, and so we need a general vaccine mandate for the way out of the pandemic," Dagmar Schmidt, a senior lawmaker with Scholz's center-left Social Democrats who backs the broadest proposal, told parliament.

Justice Minister Marco Buschmann didn't back any specific proposal but pointed to high constitutional requirements for a universal mandate.

"We must take the milder alternative of an age-linked, staggered vaccination mandate very seriously," he said, adding that ensuring quick and wide access to promising antiviral drugs might help relieve the pressure on intensive care units.

Green lawmaker Kirsten Kappert-Gonther questioned the sense of limiting a vaccination mandate to those 50 and over.

"There is severe illness among younger people as well, and long COVID is an additional risk," she said. And "if we sent the signal that vaccination is important above all for the over-50s, that carries the risk of readiness to be vaccinated among younger people declining."

Exactly how compliance would be checked is unclear. Germany lacks a central vaccination register.

The center-right Union bloc, the main opposition party, has insisted that the government should produce its own legislation and complained that Scholz has failed to provide leadership.

The Union's health policy spokesman, Tino Sorge, said many questions remain unanswered and called for a "pragmatic approach." He noted that the omicron variant, which is currently pushing infections to record levels, is milder and suggested that might raise questions over the need for "sweeping solutions."

"There are good reasons for vaccination, but the reasons for a vaccine mandate don't convince me," said Wolfgang Kubicki, a senior lawmaker with Buschmann's Free Democrats who opposes any mandate.

He said the German health system isn't at risk of collapse and a mandate won't help fight the current omicron wave, meaning there is no justifications for "a massive interference in fundamental rights."

Scholz attended the debate but wasn't scheduled to speak.

Last month, the German parliament approved legislation that will require staff at hospitals and nursing homes to show that they are fully vaccinated or have recovered from COVID-19 by mid-March.

Last week, neighboring Austria became the first European country to approve a vaccine mandate for all adults, which will become law on Feb. 1 and be enforced from mid-March.

Some other European countries have introduced mandates for specific professions or age groups. Greece has a mandate for those 60 and over, and Italy has one for people 50 and older.

No instant testing for toxic ski waxes at the Olympics

By MARTHA BELLISLE Associated Press

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The on-again, off-again ban on high-end but toxic waxes that help cross country skis glide smoothly over the snow is on in some places — but not the World Cup circuit or 2022 Beijing Olympics.

“It was supposed to be in effect this season,” said U.S. Ski & Snowboard cross country director Chris Grover. “But unfortunately, the technology that would give us on-the-spot testing at the beginning of races to make sure that people didn’t have fluorocarbons on their skis, the testing just hasn’t worked so far.”

Since cross country skiing officials don’t have a testing device, they’re not able to police the field to make sure everyone is playing fairly, he said. Biathlon doesn’t have a test either, so organizers require teams to sign a form saying they won’t use it and face a fine if they’re caught.

Prepping the base of a cross country ski is critical to ensuring that it encounters the least amount of resistance as the racer moves over the snow. Friction makes the skis slower and forces the athlete to work harder as they glide over the flats, climb hills and speed down the other side.

Ski waxing is a science and an art.

Before a race, teams of technicians iron on, scrape and smooth layers of special waxes onto skis. They pick the wax that best suits the day’s weather conditions, snow and air temperature, type of snow, style of course. Races have been won and lost based on ski prep. It’s common for racers to thank their wax techs after a medal-winning finish — it’s that important.

The expensive fluorocarbon waxes became critical to a racer’s success.

“The Nordic disciplines, in particular, are a place where after three decades of using fluorocarbons, we really rely on them,” Grover said. “And there’s no product that really comes close to creating the ski speed that the fluorine does.”

Sturdier waxes that last longer despite the incredible friction were highly valued and the composition of waxes is largely a secret known only to the chemists at the wax makers. The problem, according to researchers, was that the fluorocarbons involved are dangerous, part of the PFAS often called “forever chemicals.”

After it was discovered that fluorocarbon wax is toxic, the sport has been trying to move away from it.

Four years ago, European Union countries, the governing bodies of the sports and ski wax companies entered into an agreement that identified toxins found in ski racing waxes and established tolerable levels of these toxins, said Ian Harvey, a representative for Toko USA, which is owned by Norwegian ski products company Swix.

The groups agreed that starting in 2020, all ski waxes would adhere to the new standard, which includes reducing or eliminating C8 fluorine in ski waxes, he said.

But that won’t be easy.

“If you want to know the truth though, this pact is on what it being manufactured,” Harvey said. “The teams have plenty of old-technology waxes around still, and use it in many cases.”

And since the fluorine tracker is still being developed and refined, those waxes can’t be detected on the spot. It can only be confirmed at a lab and that takes time. With so much riding on the big events, an instant test must be accurate.

The Fédération Internationale de Ski announced in June that it would prohibit products containing C8 fluorocarbons because of their health risk and impacts on the environment, but it said it was postponing implementation of the on-site testing until the device is reliable.

The device will be further tested during the next winter season, without penalties involved, FIS said.

The International Biathlon Union also said it was prohibiting “possessing, applying, using, selling, giving-out or trading any products with C8 fluorocarbons.” But since a testing device is not available, they require all national federations and wax companies to sign a declaration stating they will follow the regulations.

“Moreover, the IBU plans to perform analyses of materials produced for, or used in, the preparation of skis to confirm compliance with the IBU rules,” the union said. “This includes spot checks of materials in use by teams or ski wax companies and individuals at IBU events.”

Two countries, Moldova and Lithuania, were sanctioned in January for violating those rules. The IBU fined each “several thousand Euros” and warned of a higher penalty for another violation. A third violation

would see the federation banned from the next IBU event.

Although the fluorocarbon waxes are still the gold standard for fast skiing, Toko's Harvey says the new fluorine-free waxes are "about on par in terms of performance as the old C8 chain fluorine waxes.

"The only area where the C8 chain fluorine waxes are faster is in very wet snow and longer events," he said. "Fluorine-free technology has exceeded or equaled fluorinated performance in all other conditions. Conditions in China are expected to be pretty cold and dry."

China's Olympics COVID measures test residents' patience

By KEN MORITSUGU Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — Repeated COVID-19 testing of millions of Beijing residents is starting to test the patience of some as the city clamps down on the virus ahead of the coming Winter Olympics.

A third round of mass testing that started Wednesday for the the 2 million residents of Fengtai district drew complaints online and from residents bundled up against the wind to wait in line outdoors. The skies were sunny, but the daytime high hovered around the freezing point.

"I think it is too frequent," said a woman who only gave her surname, Ma. "I just did it yesterday and was asked to do it again today. I asked the question to the staff and they said, 'Under the principle of testing everyone who should be tested, just do it since you are here.'"

As health workers set up multiple testing stations around the city, there were scattered reports of people being told their testing would be delayed because of a system issue. It was unclear what the problem was and whether it would significantly set back the effort.

Athletes and others participating in the Games are being completely isolated from the general public to try to avoid cross-infection. Thirteen people who have come for the Games tested positive on Tuesday, bringing the total to 106 among the 3,695 who have arrived. Two of the positive cases are either athletes or team officials.

Those who test positive are taken to a hospital if they have symptoms and to a quarantine hotel if they do not.

Beijing officials said Wednesday that eight people had tested positive in the 24-hour period ending at 4 p.m., bringing the total in the city's delta variant outbreak to 69. Of those, 54 have symptoms and 15 do not.

The numbers are small compared to other countries — South Korea's latest daily tally topped 13,000 — but they are a major concern for the government as it prepares to host the Winter Games in nine days.

The Chinese capital has stepped up the country's already strict pandemic response measures. Mass testing of neighborhoods and buildings is being conducted around the city, and the local government announced this week that anyone who buys fever, headache or other cold medicines would have to take a COVID-19 test within 72 hours.

At one pharmacy, anyone purchasing such medicines was required to scan a QR code before making the purchase. A notice from the government said that purchasers were required to register their name, phone number, address and official ID number.

"This is not convenient, but we should cooperate with whatever policies the government comes up with," Zhang Jianping, a salesperson at a shopping mall, said of the new cold medicine requirement. "We should protect ourselves from catching a cold so we don't become a burden on the country."

All 2 million residents in Fengtai district, where half of the cases in Beijing have been found, are being tested for the third time since last weekend. Some areas of the district have been locked down, with residents not allowed to leave their housing complex or neighborhood.

An official announcement of the testing on social media late Tuesday drew about 90 comments, mostly critical. Some said the frequent testing wastes resources, disrupts work and daily life, and burdens health care workers and community officials.

The mass testing is conducted in groups of 10 people. One of the people holds a container, and a health worker takes samples from each of the 10 people and drops the swabs into the same container. They are tested together, and if the result come back positive, than each of the 10 people is tested individually.

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"I have gotten used to it," said Tang Yupeng, a restaurant worker who was being tested in Dongcheng district. "I took my last test two days ago, and it caught us off guard, but this time we received notice beforehand so it's ok."

China's government has stuck to a zero-COVID approach, even as others have loosened restrictions on movement. Authorities snuff out any outbreak, no matter how small, with lockdowns, mass testing and travel restrictions. The policy has kept the number of cases and deaths relatively low in China but makes it challenging for the government to exit that strategy.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Thursday, Jan. 27, the 27th day of 2022. There are 338 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 27, 1967, astronauts Virgil I. "Gus" Grissom, Edward H. White and Roger B. Chaffee died in a flash fire during a test aboard their Apollo spacecraft.

On this date:

In 1756, composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was born in Salzburg, Austria.

In 1880, Thomas Edison received a patent for his electric incandescent lamp.

In 1888, the National Geographic Society was incorporated in Washington, D.C.

In 1944, during World War II, the Soviet Union announced the complete end of the deadly German siege of Leningrad, which had lasted for more than two years.

In 1945, during World War II, Soviet troops liberated the Nazi concentration camps Auschwitz and Birkenau in Poland.

In 1973, the Vietnam peace accords were signed in Paris.

In 1981, President Ronald Reagan and his wife, Nancy, greeted the 52 former American hostages released by Iran at the White House.

In 2006, Western Union delivered its last telegram.

In 2010, Apple CEO Steve Jobs unveiled the iPad tablet computer during a presentation in San Francisco. J.D. Salinger, the reclusive author of "The Catcher in the Rye," died in Cornish, New Hampshire, at age 91.

In 2013, Flames raced through a crowded nightclub in southern Brazil, killing 242 people.

In 2018, a suicide bombing in the Afghan capital of Kabul killed more than 100 people; the attacker was driving an ambulance full of explosives and raced through a security checkpoint after saying he was transferring a patient to a hospital.

In 2020, China confirmed more than 2,700 cases of the new coronavirus with more than 80 deaths in that country; authorities postponed the end of the Lunar New Year holiday to keep the public at home. U.S. health officials said they believed the risk to Americans remained low and that they had no evidence that the new virus was spreading in the United States; they advised Americans to avoid non-essential travel to any part of China.

Ten years ago: A federal judge in Seattle sentenced "Barefoot Bandit" Colton Harris-Moore to 6 1/2 years in prison for his infamous two-year, international crime spree of break-ins and boat and plane thefts. (Harris-Moore was transferred from prison to a work-release facility in September 2016.) Former Boston Mayor Kevin H. White died at age 82.

Five years ago: President Donald Trump barred all refugees from entering the United States for four months — and those from war-ravaged Syria indefinitely — declaring the ban necessary to prevent "radical Islamic terrorists" from entering the nation.

One year ago: In an effort to stave off the worst of climate change, President Joe Biden signed executive orders to transform the nation's heavily fossil-fuel powered economy into a clean-burning one, pausing oil and gas leasing on federal land and targeting subsidies for those industries. The Department of Homeland Security issued a national terrorism bulletin warning of the lingering potential for violence from people

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motivated by antigovernment sentiment. Ty Garbin, one of six men charged in an alleged plot to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, pleaded guilty to conspiracy. Europe's aviation safety agency said a modified version of the Boeing 737 Max had been approved to resume flights in Europe, following nearly two years of reviews after the aircraft was involved in two deadly crashes. Cloris Leachman, who won an Oscar for the "The Last Picture Show" and Emmys for her comedic work in "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and other TV series, died at 94.

Today's Birthdays: Actor James Cromwell is 82. Rock musician Nick Mason (Pink Floyd) is 78. R&B singer Nedra Talley (The Ronettes) is 76. Ballet star Mikhail Baryshnikov is 74. Latin singer-songwriter Djavan is 73. U.S. Chief Justice John Roberts is 67. Country singer Cheryl White is 67. Country singer-musician Richard Young (The Kentucky Headhunters) is 67. Actor Mimi Rogers is 66. Rock musician Janick Gers (Iron Maiden) is 65. Actor Susanna Thompson is 64. Political and sports commentator Keith Olbermann is 63. Rock singer Margo Timmins (Cowboy Junkies) is 61. Rock musician Gillian Gilbert is 61. Actor Tamlyn Tomita is 59. Actor Bridget Fonda is 58. Actor Alan Cumming is 57. Country singer Tracy Lawrence is 54. Rock singer Mike Patton is 54. Rapper Tricky is 54. Rock musician Michael Kulas (James) is 53. Actor-comedian Patton Oswalt is 53. Actor Josh Randall is 50. Country singer Kevin Denney is 44. Tennis player Marat Safin is 42. Rock musician Matt Sanchez (American Authors) is 36. Actor Braeden Lemasters is 26.