

Groton Daily Independent

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UpComing Events

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).

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.

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



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 27, 2022; 2:01 PM

**Decrease of 4 from
Wednesday**

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	2	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	2	9
Change	0	0	0	0	0	-1	0	0	0	0	-1	0	0	-2	-4

**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.**

Groton Prairie Mixed

Team Standings: Cheetahs 19 ½, Chipmunks 19, Jackelopes 11, Shih Tzus 8 ½, Foxes 8, Coyotes 6
Men's High Games: Brad Waage 208, 205, Brody Sombke 199, 193, Brad Larson 186
Women's High Games: Vicki Walter 201, Nicole Kassube 190, Brenda Waage 188
Men's High Series: Brad Waage 566, Brody Sombke 549, Roger Spanier 496
Women's High Series: Vicki Walter 494, Sue Stanley 461, Brenda Waage 456

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#510 in a series Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

It really does appear we're slowing down; at midday today, our seven-day new-case average is lower again at 618,315. Our pandemic total is up to 72,896,997, which means we passed 72 million a couple of days ago and are set to hit 73 million later today.

January 2 – 55 million – 3 days
January 3 – 56 million – 1 day
January 4 – 57 million – 1 day
January 6 – 58 million – 2 days
January 7 – 59 million – 1 day
January 9 – 60 million – 2 days
January 10 – 61 million – 1 day
January 11 – 62 million – 1 day
January 12 – 63 million – 1 day
January 13 – 64 million – 1 day
January 14 – 65 million – 1 day
January 17 – 66 million – 3 days
January 18 – 67 million – 1 day
January 19 – 68 million – 1 day
January 20 – 69 million – 1 day
January 21 – 70 million – 1 day
January 24 – 71 million – 3 days
January 25 – 72 million – 1 day

It appears hospitalizations are slowing down and may have peaked for this surge; most of this is influenced by the sharp declines seen in the Northeastern states over the past week or two. We're at 153,759 midday today. The Upper Midwest is showing declines as well, although west of there, things are still pretty rough. It's getting better overall in the country. Rick Pollack, president and chief executive of the American Hospital Association, did caution however against getting too far ahead of ourselves when he told the Washington Post, "That's like going from a crisis to a serious emergency. It's not exactly a good situation—hardly out of the woods." So we need to remain calm for a while yet even if this does turn out to be an actual thing. After all, 22 percent of hospitals in the West report critical staffing and another third anticipate being in that situation in the next few weeks. Some are also reporting medical supply shortages that reflect both inordinate demand and supply-chain difficulties. Still, models are projecting the first decrease in this metric since late November when Omicron burst on the scene.

The seven-day average deaths average is higher than it's been in just about a year. It's been climbing steadily since just after Christmas, and it continues to rise at a fair clip. It's at 2466, a seven-day daily average that is going to get worse before it gets better. Our total deaths are up to 874,731. The CDC's ensemble forecast is out for the week, and it predicts 62,000 more deaths over the next four weeks—that's over 2500 per day for the period with a projected trajectory of steady rise for three weeks followed by a fairly rapid drop in the fourth week. Further, it projects at least 923,000 and up to 979,000 total US deaths by February 19. I think it's easy to get sort of numb to numbers this size—as long as no one you personally know is doing the dying. If you look around you, you'll see people for whom that is not true; that should serious you up pretty quickly.

Last week, for the first time in this pandemic, new cases among children passed one million; this is almost five times more than last winter's peak according to the American Academy of Pediatrics. Children are now being reported among new cases at a proportion above their proportion of the population. We

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should note that they are still far less likely to be hospitalized for Covid-19 or to die from it than other age groups; but this increase in cases is concerning. It is linked to the low vaccination rates in children which result from fewer children being vaccinated, whether they are not eligible yet or parents are choosing not to vaccinate them.

I'm seeing questions about how you can get home tests at no cost. We've already talked about how to order a set of four per household directly from the government from www.covidtests.gov. But then there are the tests your health insurance is supposed to cover or which will be available for pick-up in your community, and these are the ones about which I'm getting questions. There's a new web page posted by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services that offers clear explanations; you can access it here: <https://www.cms.gov/how-to-get-your-at-home-OTC-COVID-19-test-for-free?fbclid=IwAR1Zw8YgR3oUB3R3LV0L4KxymRFHWbfPPpAXSZzXqTeefrOEgvYQk0CRycU>. This explains how reimbursement happens, how much you can be reimbursed, how many tests you can get, and a whole lot more. That, along with information on your insurance company's website, should provide all the information you need.

There's a data-tracking project underway in the UK that goes by the name REal-time Assessment of Community Transmission-1 (REACT-1) study which has been analyzing results from self-administered specimens from randomly-selected individuals in England monthly for nearly a year and a half. This month's data collection ended on January 22 and has now been posted online, so I had a look. Among the findings was one that overall prevalence is decreasing, but in children 5 to 17 is increasing. Some unsurprising findings are that people living in large households have increased risks of infection, that the Omicron variant shows overwhelming dominance, that there have been unprecedented levels of infection this month, and that there is a clear risk from increased rates of infection in children to the adults around them. The finding, however, that stands out to me is this: "Past infection was associated with high risk of reinfection with Omicron." Nearly two-thirds (64.6 percent) of diagnosed infections were reinfections in those with confirmed previous infection; no telling how many more were in folks with previous infections that were not confirmed. The odds ratio compared with Delta was 10.7, which means people were nearly 11 times more likely to have a reinfection with Omicron than with Delta. Given the data we have on the protective effects of a booster shot, it is clear prior infection is far less protective than vaccination with a boost, something we've known for some time. This simply provides further evidence to support that conclusion.

Moderna announced on Wednesday that they are beginning clinical trials for their recently-developed Omicron-specific booster. These will involve about 600 volunteers and be formatted somewhat differently from the Pfizer/BioNTech trials announced Tuesday; there will be just two groups, one which has received two doses and one which has received three doses.

Also on Wednesday, the New England Journal of Medicine published a letter about the results from a study of Moderna booster protection duration by neutralization assay against the Omicron variant. These neutralization assays were laboratory tests done using both live virus and pseudovirus (a non-replicating virus with the Omicron genome engineered into it), with findings that antibodies began to decline six months after the booster is administered although they were still at detectable levels at that point. We talked recently about having some evidence boosters are holding for at least four months; and now we know these look pretty good for at least six months. This is useful information.

Since October, the CDC has included in its vaccination guidelines that a fourth dose, a booster dose, of vaccine should be available to immunocompromised people who'd been authorized to receive a third dose as part of their primary vaccination series. It was a couple of weeks ago that the first of them became eligible because the required interval had been shortened from six months to five months and it had been at least five months since the third doses that were authorized in August. Now I'd been hear-

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ing from people I know that this hasn't been going so well for them; many pharmacies were refusing to give them, saying fourth doses are not authorized. Apparently, that's a more widespread phenomenon, not just something in my part of the country, despite what I read as very clear guidance on the agency's website. There has been plenty of publicity, and word is they discussed this on their weekly conference calls with pharmacy groups; so I'm not entirely clear on why there's such a disconnect on this important point. It does appear that several states have not updated their own guidelines or websites to reflect the CDC's recommendation for these additional doses, and perhaps that's where the difficulty lies. The CDC is planning to get really clear about this on its conference call this week; so let's hope it sinks in. Better yet, there's been some publicity about this with TV networks and major publications calling major retail pharmacy chains' corporate offices for comment; that seems to be getting the ball rolling too. If you've been struggling to find a fourth dose, it is possible, even likely, things will get easier soon.

Last time we talked, an aid ship with an outbreak of Covid-19 on board was headed for Tonga, an island nation in the South Pacific which has only ever reported a single case in the entire pandemic, but which now requires aid following an underwater volcanic eruption which caused a devastating tsunami (because why limit ourselves to one crisis at a time, right?). It appears the unloading will proceed in the same vein as contactless payment systems have operated, that is to say with everything done by machines and no human-to-human contact whatsoever. I imagine at some point folks will at least wave to one another as the unloading proceeds, but that's pretty much it. That is good news: The Tongans receive the supplies they need without receiving any hitchhiking virus. I wish them well in their recovery effort.

The scientific evidence for how the Omicron variant is acting in patients is starting to roll in. On Tuesday, the CDC published a study aimed at characterizing the severity of the disease it causes. The researchers at the CDC and Johns Hopkins University took a look at "disease severity indicators including length of stay, ICU admission, and death" in the periods before and after Omicron became the dominant variant in the US, outlining three periods for study: peak period in winter 2020-21 (December 2020 through February 2021); the Delta period (mid-July through October 2021); and the Omicron period (mid-December 2021 through mid-January 2022). They used data from Covid-19 aggregate case and deaths reports submitted by state and territorial health departments, emergency department visits from the National Syndromic Surveillance Program, and hospital admissions and inpatient and ICU bed use from the Unified Hospital Data Surveillance System.

Findings included that the rolling average number of cases during the Omicron period increased by 219 percent compared with peak winter 2020-21, and by 386 percent compared with the Delta period, but emergency department visits increased by only 137 percent compared with last winter and 86 percent compared with Delta. Admissions increased by 31 percent over last winter and 31 percent over the Delta period; and deaths actually decreased by 46 percent from last winter and four percent from Delta. This is a clear signal in the face of those kinds of case increases that severity is substantially less with Omicron.

They computed event-to-case ratios, finding that last winter, there were 92 emergency department visits, 68 hospitalizations, and 16 deaths per 1000 cases; during the Delta period, there were 167 emergency department visits, 78 hospitalizations, and 13 deaths per 1000 cases; and during the Omicron period, there were 87 emergency department visits, 27 hospitalizations, and 9 deaths per 1000 cases. Disease severity was associated with increasing age—no surprise there.

They then used the BD Insights Research Database to assess the percentage of Covid-19 patients hospitalized who were admitted to an ICU, received invasive mechanical ventilation (IMV), or died while hospitalized. The percentage of hospitalized Covid-19 patients admitted to ICU was 18.2 percent last winter, 25.9 percent during Delta, and 13.0 percent during Omicron. The percentage who received IMV was

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7.5 percent last winter, 6.6 percent during Delta, and 3.5 percent during Omicron. And the percentage of hospitalized Covid-19 patients who died was 12.9 percent last winter, 12.3 percent during Delta, and 7.1 percent during Omicron. And finally, mean length of hospital stay was 8.0 days last winter, 7.6 days during Delta, and 5.5 days during Omicron.

From all of this they concluded that, while case numbers soared and hospital admissions created real strains on the system due to sheer numbers, "disease severity appears to be lower than compared with previous high disease-transmission periods." They are not declaring a reason for this lowered severity; they did say the most notable factor is likely increases in vaccine coverage and the use of vaccine boosters, noting that there were 1.6 million persons fully vaccinated during the winter of 2020-21 with no boosters available, 178 million fully vaccinated and 1.6 million boosted during Delta, and 207 million fully vaccinated and 78 million boosted during Omicron. Other factors mentioned were infection-acquired immunity and potential lower virulence for this variant.

I've read another study, this one conducted by researchers at several universities and medical centers and made available in pre-publication preview on Tuesday by Cell. Studying the clinical data and patient-reported symptoms of 209 people, 18 to 89 years of age, who had SARS-CoV-2 infections in 2020 or early 2021, they sought to identify factors associated with the development of post-acute sequelae of Covid (PASC) or long-Covid, the condition of experiencing symptoms after recovery, sometimes for months. Thirty-seven percent of the patients reported at least three symptoms up to three months after recovery, and 24 percent more reported one or two.

The researchers identified four factors that showed such association: type 2 diabetes, the level of SARS-CoV-2 in the bloodstream, reactivation of Epstein-Barr virus, and the presence of certain autoantibodies. Epstein-Barr virus is the one that causes infectious mononucleosis and has long been known to lie latent in the body after recovery from that infection with some potential to reactivate. Autoantibodies are antibodies you make that interfere with your own tissues, producing an abnormal condition referred to as autoimmunity (literally immunity to yourself); autoimmune conditions include systemic lupus erythematosus, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, type 1 diabetes, and many other diseases. At least one of these four factors was seen in 95 percent of those reporting three or more symptoms. Of the factors, autoantibodies appear to be the most influential as they were associated with two-thirds of PASC cases. We will do well to remember here that association is not causation, that is, these associations are not proof these factors play a causal role in the development of PASC; more work remains to be done to demonstrate a mechanism by which these factors lead to PASC, although other scientists not involved with this study like Dr. Steven Deeks, professor of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, in who spoke with the New York Times, are finding them "biologically plausible, consistent with theories that other people are pursuing."

The work also noted particular findings which might suggest therapeutic approaches with some potential for benefit. For example, some of the patients with PASC exhibited signs of adrenal insufficiency characterized by repressed levels of cortisol and cortisone, hormones produced by the adrenal glands, a condition they mention is treatable. They also noted elevated levels of proteins associated with disruptions in regulation of sleep/wake cycles; it has been suggested this dysregulation may be related to the neurological issues seen in many PASC patients.

It has been noted that the follow-up time was relatively short in this work, only two to three months, and that over two-thirds of the patients had been hospitalized, which makes it difficult to know how well the findings will apply to those with milder cases of Covid-19. This means there is work ahead, but this research represents one of the first systematic attempts to characterize the patient population with long-Covid.

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A report from Israeli researchers is finding a slightly increased from expected risk of myocarditis in boys 12 to 15 who received a second dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. Myocarditis is inflammation of the heart muscle which has, in vaccine-associated cases, been mild and has resolved in all cases. While the CDC's estimate for this complication is 1 case per 16,129 vaccinated adolescents 12 to 17, this study yielded 1 case per 12,361 boys 12 to 15. The increase in incidence may be due to more active surveillance. The data set from which they were working had 13 cases occurring within 21 days of a second dose. Hospitalization for the complication averaged three days, and none was readmitted after discharge. The team put the incidence at 8.09 per 100,000 second doses in males. This is still a rare complication, just not quite as rare as we'd been seeing in other research. The risk among females was 0 after a first dose and 0.69 per 100,000 after a second.

Research conducted at the Oregon Health & Science University and published Tuesday in Science Immunology took a look at antibody responses in 104 vaccinated health care workers in an attempt to characterize the protective effect of what's being called hybrid immunity, that is, immune responses resulting from a combination of infection and vaccination. We have, from time to time, discussed the fact that people who had survived a prior infection seemed to have stronger protection provided by their response to vaccinations than those without a prior infection; we had our first glimmer of this here, way back in the early days of this vaccination campaign, in my Update #345 posted February 2 at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/4402333179783054>, and it's come up again and again since. The research question here is whether and how things might be different in someone who was first vaccinated and then infected instead of the other way around. Now that we have lots of vaccinated folks to look at, this sort of work becomes more relevant, so this research team set out to evaluate the effects of post-vaccination infections on humoral (antibody) responses. The short version is that there doesn't seem to be much difference made by the order of events: Whether the infection or the vaccination came first, you're far better protected than you would be by vaccination alone—which we've also established is far more protective than infection alone. Interestingly, while there was an age-related effect on antibody response to vaccination, that effect disappeared in people with hybrid immunity, that is, older people's often-weaker responses are no longer weaker when responding to the combination of antigenic stimulus presented by infection and vaccination. The conclusion stated in the paper is, "that the additional antigen exposure from natural infection substantially boosts the quantity, quality, and breadth of humoral immune response regardless of whether it occurs before or after vaccination." While no one study is definitive and this one was small, I really like the way it looks. Now, here's what this study does NOT mean: It does NOT mean it's a smart idea to go out and deliberately get infected. In fact, that's a dumb idea. Really dumb. Because some percentage of vaccinated people who get infected wind up dead, and you really don't want to be in that number. Also because, especially right now, our hospitals do not need you showing up on the doorstep having problems breathing; they have quite enough to do at the moment. And because right now supplies of antiviral therapies are tight as hell and there's no guarantee you'll get one if you need it. And because it makes zero sense to go chasing the thing this whole operation is intended to prevent. That's as smart as wisely abstaining from drinking before you get behind the wheel and then celebrating your safety by driving into a telephone pole. Surely we can do better than that.

I hope we do. That's it for the day. Take care, and I'll see you tomorrow.

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Tigers win four of five games at Northwestern

It was a five-game slate on Thursday as the Tigers traveled to Mellette to take on the Northwestern Area Wildcats in basketball action. Groton Area won four of the five games.

The Groton Area boys C team took control of the game in the fourth quarter to post a 28-20 win. Gage Sippel led Groton Area with 10 points while Keagan Tracy had seven, Ryder Johnson five, Carter Simon four and Balke Pauli and Turner Thompson each had one point.

Rennan Bruns led the Wildcats with seven points while Aaron Blachford and Dallas Stoltenberg each had four, Patrick Olson and Cordell Vitense each had two points and Jack Hansen added one.

It was a five-minute break between games and the junior varsity teams had their pre-game practice time in the auxiliary gym so it was quickly off and running in the girls junior varsity team. The Wildcats took the early lead at 5-0. Groton Area scored nine unanswered points midway in the game and took a 20-19 lead after the third quarter. The Wildcats reclaimed a 22-20 lead, but then Groton Area scored six straight points to take a 26-22 lead and hung on for the win, 26-25.

Kennedy Hansen led Groton Area with seven points followed by Brooklyn Hansen with six, Jerica Locke five, Jaedyn Penning four and Faith Traphagen and Rylee Dunker each had two points.

Ella Boekelheide led the Wildcats with eight points followed by Tara Blachford with six, Ashley Haven, Josie Sparling and Kayra Ratigan each had three points and Payton Grandpree added two.

The only loss of the day was the boys junior varsity team losing to the Wildcats, 46-28. Northwestern had two runs of 10 straight points to pull away from the Tigers. Teylor Diegel led Groton Area with nine points while Colby Dunker had eight, Cole Simon and Logan Ringgenberg each had four and Braxton Imrie added three points. Nathan Melius led Northwestern with 13 points and Lincoln Woodring added a dozen.

The girls varsity team improved to 7-5 on the season with a 52-29 win. Groton Area had a 12-point rally midway in the game to pull away for the win. Groton Area led at the quarterbreaks at 18-7, 33-11 and 48-20.

Allyssa Locke led the Tigers, making four three-pointers and finishing with 18 points, three rebounds, six assists, three steals and one block. Gracie Traphagen had a double-double with 16 points, 14 rebounds and one steal. Brooke Gengerke had seven points, three rebounds and two assists. Kennedy Hansen had six points, one rebound and one assist. Alyssa Thaler had three points, three rebounds, one assist and two steals. Jaedyn Penning had two points, one rebound and one block. Sydney Leicht had two assists and one block. Aspen Johnson had three rebounds. Jerica Locke had three rebounds, one assist and one steal. Faith Traphagen and Elizabeth Fliehs each had one rebound.

Groton Area made 14 of 31 in field goals for 45 percent, six of 14 in three-pointers for 43 percent, six of 11 free throws for 55 percent, had 32 rebounds, 19 turnovers, 13 assists, seven steals, 10 team fouls and three blocks.

Jessica Boekelheide led the Wildcats with 11 points followed by Faith Larson and Adriana Ratigan with five each, and adding two points apiece were Ella Haven, Ella Boekelheide, Ashley Haven and Emma Grandpre. The Wildcats made 12 of 45 field goals for 27 percent, four of eight free throws, had 14 team fouls and 14 turnovers.

The boys varsity team had a strong showing have being absent from the court for 10 days with a 57-42 win. The Tigers led at the quarterstops at 16-7, 31-16 and 46-25.

Four players hit double figures for the Tigers with Kaden Kurtz making four three-pointers and finished with 15 points, had one rebound, one assist and two steals. Lane Tietz had 14 points, four rebounds, three assists and four steals. Jacob Zak had 11 points, three rebounds, two assists, one steal and one block. Wyatt Hearnen had 10 points (eight in the second quarter), three rebounds, one assist and five steals. Jayden Zak had five points, one assist and two steals. Tate Larson made two free throws, had eight rebounds and had two assists. Cole Simon had one rebound, one assist and two steals. Logan Ringgenberg had one rebound and one assist.

The Tigers made 17 of 33 field goals for 52 percent, was five of 18 in three-pointers for 28 percent, was perfect from the line, making eight of eight free throws, had 21 rebounds, nine turnovers, 11 assists, 16 steals, 10 fouls and one block shot.

The Wildcats were led by Jude Ortmeier with 18 points followed by Quintin Fischbach with 12, Jamal Gallego had six, Justin Haven had four and Fatafehi Faonelua added two points.

Groton Area goes to 9-0 on the season while Northwestern falls to 5-6.

All of the games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The White House Inn sponsored the Boys C game, Gordon and Dorene Nelson sponsored both junior varsity games, and Groton Ford, Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Dacotah Bank and the John Sieh Agency were the sponsors for both varsity games.

- Paul Kosel

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.

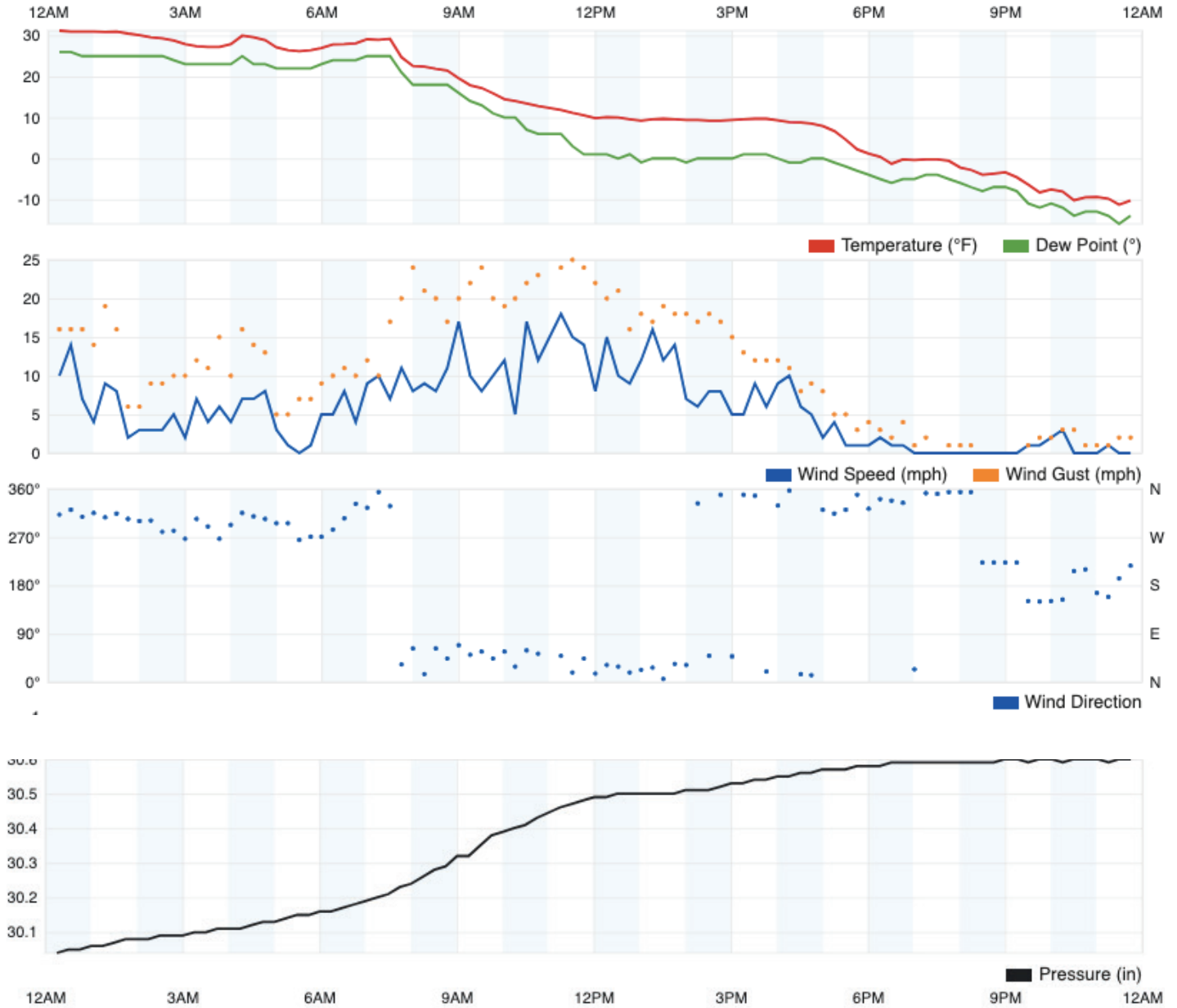


Carnival of Silver Skates performing at 2pm & 6:30pm!

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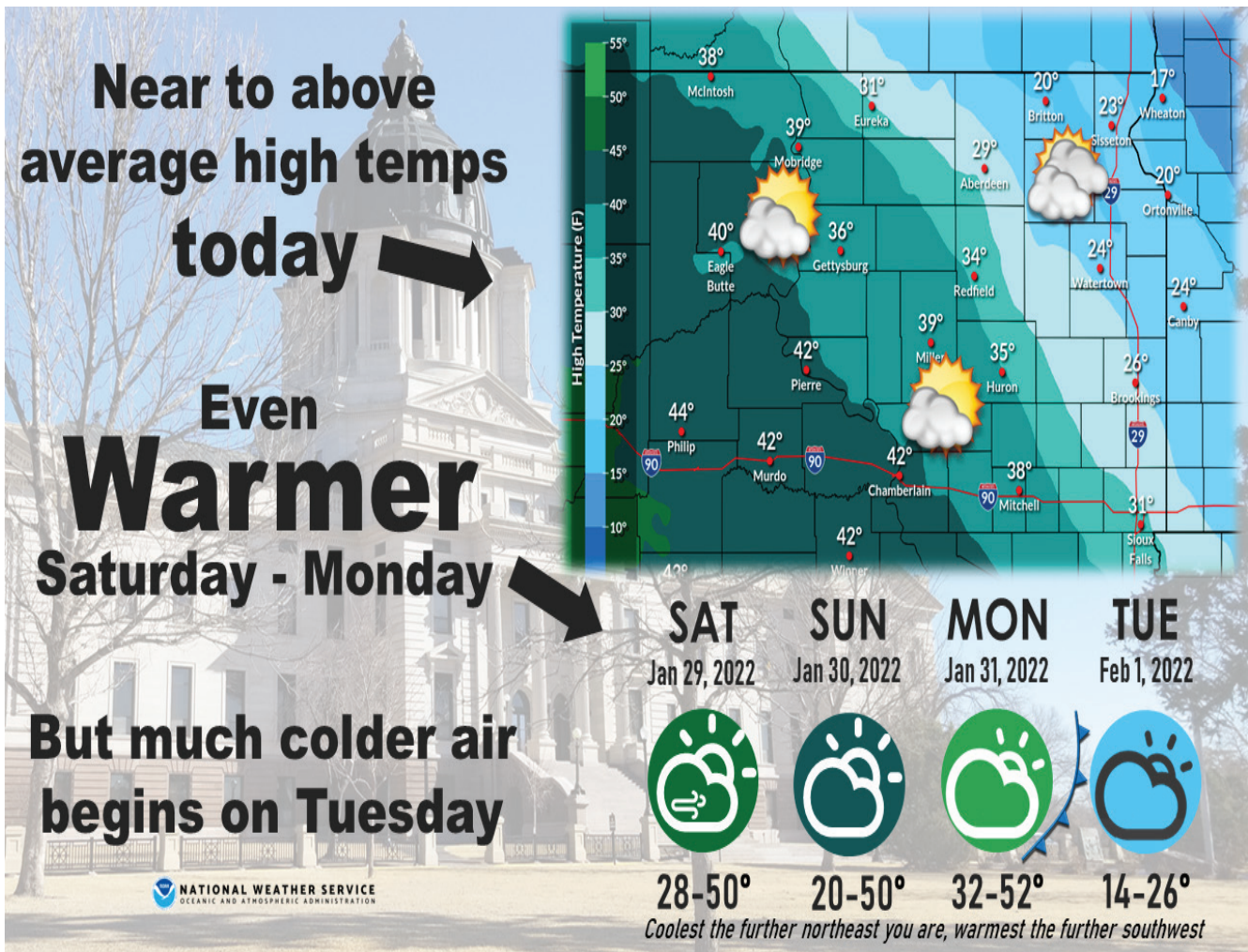
Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday
				
Mostly Sunny	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Partly Sunny
High: 27 °F	Low: 13 °F	High: 36 °F	Low: 11 °F	High: 30 °F



A warming trend begins today and peaks on Monday of next week, with much above average high temperatures especially across central South Dakota. However, a cold front will usher in much colder air from the first day of February on Tuesday through the rest of the work-week. Mostly dry meanwhile, though there may be a few snow chances next week with the colder air.

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Today in Weather History

January 28, 1983: Freezing rain coated much of eastern South Dakota with up to a half-inch accumulation before it changed over to light snow from the late evening of the 28th to the late evening of the 29th. The combination of ice, light snow, and powerful winds made travel extremely difficult. Numerous accidents and stranded vehicles resulted. Visibilities were near zero at times.

January 28, 1996: Extreme wind chills developed across central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota, and west-central Minnesota as cold arctic air moved in behind an area of low pressure. With temperatures falling well below zero and northwest winds increasing to 20 to 35 mph, wind chills dropped to 40 to 70 below throughout the night of the 28th and into the evening of the 29th. Two to five inches of snow had fallen across the area. The strong northwest winds caused areas of blowing snow, significantly reducing visibilities. Big Stone and Traverse counties experienced a blizzard for about six hours on the 29th.

January 28, 2013: A low-pressure system moving slowly across the region produced a moderate to a heavy band of snow across much of central and northeastern South Dakota. Snowfall rates exceeded one inch per hour in some locations. Several area schools and businesses were either closed or opened late on the 29th.

1887: Snowflakes "as large as milk pans" fell at Fort Keogh of Montana. The flakes, which were said to measure 15 inches across and 8 inches thick, hold the unofficial size record!

1969: Heavy rains of tropical origin that began on 1/18 ended on this day. As much as 50 inches of rain fell at 7,700 feet. 31 inches of rain fell on the south slopes of Mt. San Gorgonio, 15.5 inches at San Jacinto Peak, around ten inches at Banning, less than one inch from Indio southeast. 91 were reported dead from flooding and mudslides all over California and state-wide.

1977: The Blizzard of '77 was one of the worst winter storms to hit southern Ontario and upstate New York. With the rapid onset of the storm, about 2,000 students in the Niagara region were stranded overnight in schools.

1986: The Space Shuttle Challenger broke apart at 11:39 am EST, 73 seconds after liftoff from the Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral, Florida, on a frigid morning. Starting in the 20s, the ground temperature at liftoff was 36 degrees. Morton Thiokol recommended not launching if the liftoff temperature was below 53 degrees. The cold was blamed for causing the O-rings on the Shuttle's external booster to fail, leading to the explosion. Low-level wind shear also played a factor.

1922 - The "Knickerbocker" storm immobilized the city of Washington D.C. The storm produced 28 inches of snow in 32 hours, and the heavy snow caused the roof of the Knickerbocker movie theatre to collapse killing 96 persons. (David Ludlum)

1963 - The low of -34 degrees at Cynthiana, KY, equalled the state record established just four days earlier at Bonnieville. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - A storm moving out of the Central Rockies into the Northern Plains Region produced up to a foot of snow in the Colorado Rockies, and wind gusts to 99 mph at Boulder CO. High winds in Colorado caused 5.6 million dollars damage. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Barometric pressure readings of 30.55 inches at Miami FL, 30.66 inches at Tampa FL, and 30.72 inches at Apalachicola FL were all-time record high readings for those locations. (National Weather Summary)

1989 - Nome, AK, reported an all-time record low reading of 54 degrees below zero, and the temperature at Fairwell AK dipped to 69 degrees below zero. Deadhorse AK reported a morning low of 49 degrees below zero, and with a wind chill reading of 114 degrees below zero. In the Lower Forty-eight States, a winter storm over Colorado produced up to 15 inches of snow around Denver. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Strong and gusty winds prevailed across the northwestern U.S., and heavy snow continued over the mountains of Washington State and Oregon. In Idaho, Mullan received seven inches of snow, and winds gusted to 65 mph southeast of Burley. Heavy rain soaked coastal sections of western Oregon. Rainfall totals of 1.20 inches at Portland and 1.57 inches at Eugene were records for the date. Winds in Oregon gusting to 60 mph downed power lines in Umatilla County knocking out power to more than 13,000 homes, just prior to the kick-off of the "Super Bowl" game. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

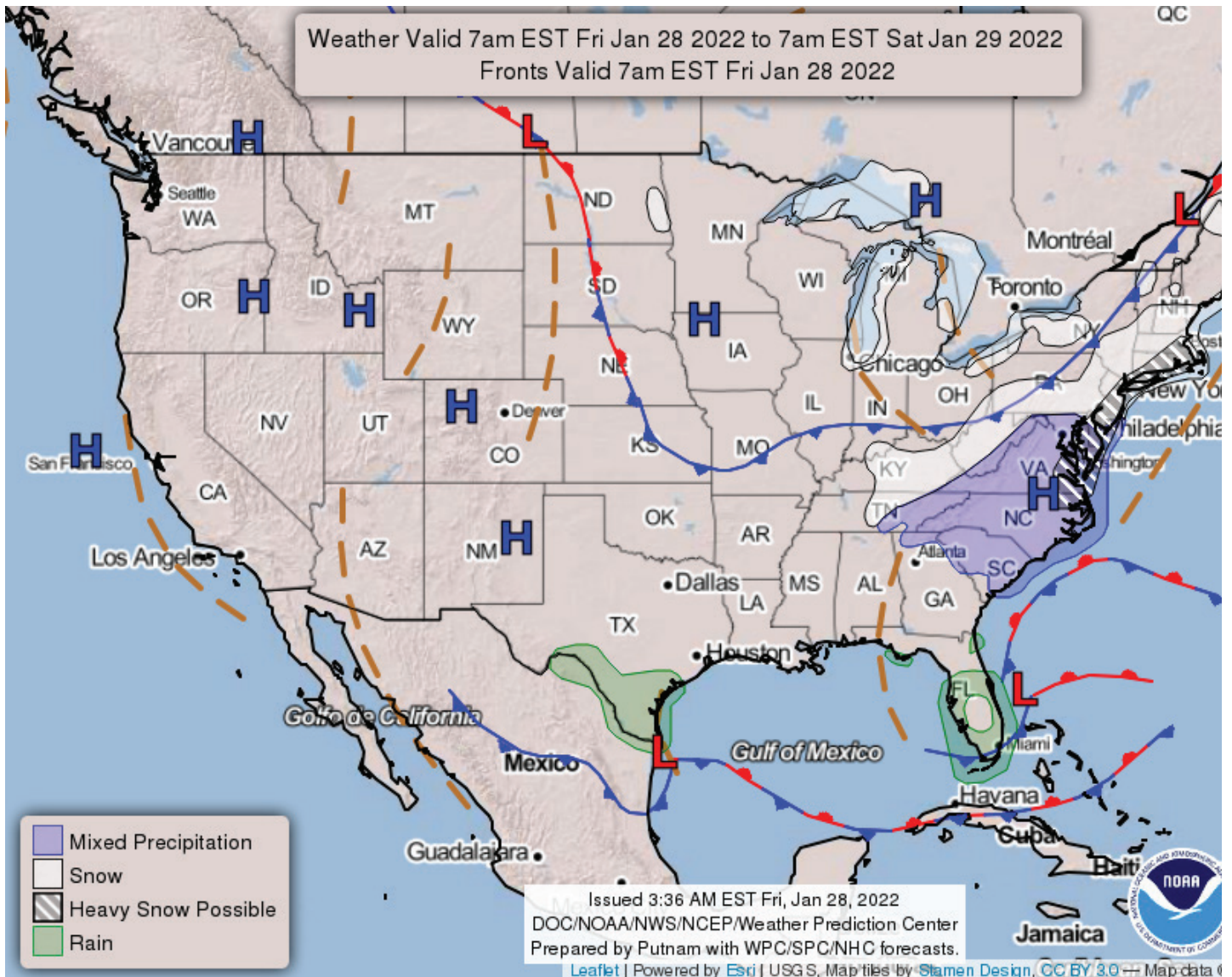
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 31 °F at 12:03 AM
Low Temp: -12 °F at 11:30 PM
Wind: 26 mph at 7:33 AM
Precip: 0.00

Record High: 53 in 1931
Record Low: -31 in 1915
Average High: 24°F
Average Low: 2°F
Average Precip in Jan.: 0.50
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.59
Average Precip to date: 0.50
Precip Year to Date: 0.59
Sunset Tonight: 5:35:01 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:54:38 AM



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IN THE NAME OF THE LORD - PEACE

Bee researchers have discovered that there are more than 20,000 species of bees. Each species of bee has its own colony or community, and bees can be found in most parts of the world. Each species has three types of bees: the queen bee, the worker bee and the drone. Bees can see all colors but red and have a strong sense of smell that helps them find flowers to gather pollen that produces honey. The honey that bees produce has been prized for years because it is a source of sweetness and energy. Recently, however, honey has been identified as a resource that may be helpful to contribute to certain types of healing.

While information about bees may be interesting to some, most of us care only about their honey or the fear that we might be stung by one. At least that was the attitude of the Psalmist. When surrounded by his enemies he said, "They swarmed around me like bees, but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns." Obviously, he was terribly threatened by those who would destroy him, but his faith and trust in God put him at ease. "In the name of the Lord I cut them - my enemies - down."

Each day we face many "enemies." They come at us from every direction. Whether our "enemies" are doubts or fears, a life-threatening disease or the loss of a loved one, financial woes or being abandoned - you name it - enemies come in all sizes and shapes and from every direction.

No one is immune from the "sting" of an enemy. But, thank God, when we Christians are besieged by the hurts that come from the "stings" of life, the Lord will heal them.

Prayer: How grateful we are Lord, to know that when we are "swarmed" by the "bees" of life, You will rescue us! We are safe, protected by Your power. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: - They swarmed around me like bees, but they were consumed as quickly as burning thorns; in the name of the LORD I cut them down. Psalm 118:12

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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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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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News from the Associated Press

Wilson propels South Dakota State past North Dakota 96-61

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Douglas Wilson scored 23 points to lead five players in double figures and South Dakota State rolled to a 96-61 victory over North Dakota on Thursday night.

Baylor Scheierman had 13 points, six rebounds and five assists for the Jackrabbits (18-4, 9-0 Summit League), who have won nine straight. Luke Appel scored 13 off the bench. Freshman Zeke Mayo pitched in with 11 points and six rebounds, while reserve Matt Mims scored 11.

Ethan Igbanugo came off the bench to score a career-high 24 for the Fighting Hawks (4-17, 0-8), who have lost nine straight. Freshman reserve Brian Mathews added 10 points. The North Dakota starters scored just 19 points.

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Roncalli 49, Sisseton 34

Belle Fourche 61, Harding County 49

Bon Homme 66, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 54

Burke 47, Boyd County, Neb. 35

Burke/South Central 47, Boyd County, Neb. 35

Castlewood 78, Lake Preston 36

Clark/Willow Lake 63, Deuel 58

Dakota Valley 60, Sioux Falls Christian 54

Dell Rapids 62, Vermillion 57

Dell Rapids St. Mary 63, Alcester-Hudson 30

Estelline/Hendricks 61, Arlington 48

Ethan 58, Mitchell Christian 26

Faulkton 51, Leola/Frederick 42

Freeman Academy/Marion 58, Irene-Wakonda 50

Hamlin 73, Webster 44

James Valley Christian 74, Miller 42

Lennox 60, Parkston 56

Lyman 63, New Underwood 20

Philip 78, Dupree 47

Potter County 72, North Central Co-Op 27

Rapid City Central 62, Spearfish 58

Redfield 52, Milbank 49

Scotland 56, Wagner 55

Sioux Falls Lincoln 83, Sioux Falls Washington 81, 30T

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 61, Sioux Falls Jefferson 54

Stanley County 51, Crow Creek 44

Sully Buttes 48, Hitchcock-Tulare 40

Tri-Valley 45, Elk Point-Jefferson 42

Wall 70, Hill City 62

Waverly-South Shore 64, Britton-Hecla 60

Yankton 52, Brandon Valley 40

Dakota Oyate Tournament=

Lower Brule 113, Takini 19

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Tiospa Zina Tribal 79, Tiospaye Topa 30
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Centerville vs. Viborg-Hurley, ppd.
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte vs. Little Wound, ppd.
Lemmon vs. McIntosh, ppd.

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=
Beresford 46, McCook Central/Montrose 42
Bon Homme 57, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 56
Brandon Valley 67, Yankton 24
Burke 30, Boyd County, Neb. 23
Castlewood 57, Lake Preston 30
Clark/Willow Lake 46, Deuel 26
Dell Rapids St. Mary 60, Alcester-Hudson 42
Dupree 63, Philip 39
Elk Point-Jefferson 41, Tri-Valley 39
Elkton-Lake Benton 58, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 43
Ethan 69, Mitchell Christian 17
Faulkton 47, Leola/Frederick 31
Flandreau 68, Parker 29
Freeman 50, Canistota 24
Garretson 75, Chester 60
Groton Area 52, Northwestern 29
Harding County 49, New England, N.D. 46
Harrisburg 44, West Lyon, Inwood, Iowa 38
Irene-Wakonda 50, Freeman Academy/Marion 26
Little Wound 63, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 39
Lyman 48, New Underwood 39
Miller 54, James Valley Christian 35
Potter County 61, North Central Co-Op 30
Rapid City Central 62, Spearfish 27
Rapid City Christian 64, Hot Springs 17
Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 57, Wessington Springs 26
Sioux Falls Christian 60, Dakota Valley 54
Sioux Falls Washington 45, Sioux Falls Jefferson 42
Sioux Valley 65, Baltic 46
St. Thomas More 58, Sturgis Brown 30
Stanley County 61, Crow Creek 34
Sully Buttes 61, Hitchcock-Tulare 34
Timber Lake 50, Faith 35
Vermillion 52, Dell Rapids 38
Wagner 55, Scotland 18
Warner 50, Langford 29
Wolsey-Wessington 66, Highmore-Harrold 53
Dakota Oyate Tournament=
Crow Creek 59, Marty Indian 35
Lower Brule 97, Takini 21
Omaha Nation, Neb. 52, Flandreau Indian 42
Tiospa Zina Tribal 55, Tiospaye Topa 49
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=

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Centerville vs. Viborg-Hurley, ppd.

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

North Dakota St. tops South Dakota 74-62 in OT

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Sam Griesel had 20 points and 11 rebounds as North Dakota State topped South Dakota 74-62 in overtime on Thursday night.

Kruz Perot-Hunt tied the game by hitting the first of two free throws to send the game into overtime, but the Bison held South Dakota scoreless for the first four minutes of the extra period, outscoring the Coyotes 14-2 to earn the win.

Griesel shot 12 for 13 from the foul line.

Tyree Eady had 17 points for North Dakota State (14-7, 6-3 Summit League). Grant Nelson added 10 points and three blocks. Rocky Kreuser had 10 rebounds.

Perrott-Hunt had 24 points for the Coyotes (12-8, 5-4), whose five-game winning streak came to an end. Mason Archambault added 19 points and six rebounds. Boogie Anderson had 10 points.

Wilson carries South Dakota State past North Dakota 96-61

BROOKINGS, S.D. (AP) — Douglas Wilson had 23 points as South Dakota State won its ninth consecutive game, routing North Dakota 96-61 on Thursday night.

Baylor Scheierman and Luke Appel each had 13 points for South Dakota State (18-4, 9-0 Summit League). Zeke Mayo had 11 points and six rebounds.

Ethan Igbanugo scored a career-high 24 points for the Fighting Hawks (4-17, 0-8), whose losing streak reached nine games. Brian Matthews added 10 points.

Dakota State announces \$90M initiative to grow state's cyber-research industry

MADISON, S.D., Jan. 27, 2022 /PRNewswire/ -- On Jan. 26, Dakota State University announced a \$90 million initiative to grow the cyber-research industry in South Dakota.

Dakota State is known for its nationally recognized programs in cybersecurity. The Beacom College of Computer and Cyber Sciences graduates address the rapidly growing demand for cybersecurity professionals. However, many leave for the east or west coast for work. DSU wants more of these graduates to stay here, right in South Dakota, to perform the types of highly specialized work for which they are qualified.

"We see this as an opportunity, a challenge," said Dakota State University President José-Marie Griffiths.

"We created a vision to expand DSU's Applied Research Lab (ARL) to stimulate a vibrant cyber-research industry in Sioux Falls which supports national security and defense, offers workforce and economic development opportunities, and establishes South Dakota as a cyber state," she said.

"But we didn't stop there. This five-year plan created includes opportunities for Madison and Sioux Falls, through a public/private partnership, which will further our cyber-research efforts," Griffiths stated.

In Madison

Continue to fill DSU's ARL in Madison to 125-150 full-time jobs. Increase DSU's capacity to double the number of graduates of The Beacom College from 200 to 400 annually by recruiting and retaining faculty, students, and staff. Expand the cyber talent pipeline and career pathways by launching the Governor's Cyber Academy to offer dual credit programs to high school students statewide. In Sioux Falls

Expand DSU-ARL with a highly specialized facility which will be owned by the State via the Board of Regents and DSU. This facility is expected to open in fall of 2025 and support 400 to 500 full-time jobs. Establish a non-profit corporation to hire DSU-ARL staff to perform and manage the applied research and lease space from DSU, both in Madison and Sioux Falls. The new non-profit corporation will also run intensive summer cybersecurity bootcamps for students from other universities in South Dakota majoring

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in cyber-related disciplines such as computer science, computer engineering, software engineering, etc. These are anticipated to start in summer 2023. The public/private partnerships

\$50 million over five years from philanthropist T. Denny Sanford to construct a highly specialized facility to house the expanded DSU-ARL in Sioux Falls with an estimated completion date of fall 2025. 10 to 16 acres of land donated by Sanford Health at the Sanford Sports Complex adjacent to Sanford's Virtual Care Center. \$10 million from the city of Sioux Falls* to create the physical, organizational, and programmatic infrastructure needed for the DSU-ARL in Sioux Falls. \$250,000 from Forward Sioux Falls for planning a Cyber/IT Park in Sioux Falls. \$30 million from the State of South Dakota proposed by Governor Noem in her FY23 budget request.* This will expand the educational capacity of The Beacom College in Madison to double the number of graduates from 200 to 400 per year and to launch the Governor's Cyber Academy statewide to all high schools. Execution of Plan will be done by Dakota State University and the South Dakota Board of Regents.* Pending approval of the governing body.

Dakota State University (DSU) is located in Madison, S.D. Founded in 1881, DSU offers undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs through its colleges of arts and sciences, business and information systems, computer and cyber sciences, and education. DSU has a special focus on the development, application, implications, and impacts of computing, information technologies and cyber security in all areas of human endeavor. DSU has received multiple Center of Academic Excellence designations in education, research and regional resource development from the U.S. National Security Agency and U.S. Department of Homeland Security. DSU is home to the Madison Cyber Labs (MadLabs®), a cyber R&D hub with labs and institutes that explore and advance technology application, workforce development, business expansion, economic growth, and policy improvement across multiple disciplines and fields. For more information, visit the DSU website at dsu.edu. #DSURising

House bill on medical pot edibles fails to pass

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A bill to bar the sale of sweetened medical marijuana products and gummies failed to pass the South Dakota House on Thursday.

The bill would have banned the sale of cannabis products with "added sweeteners, flavorings, or colorings." The Republican-controlled House has been more receptive to substantive changes to the voter-passed medical marijuana law than the Senate, but the 21 to 47 vote that killed the bill shows lawmakers are trading cautiously as they put their mark on the new law.

Republican Rep. Fred Deutsch, who sponsored the proposal, argued that it would prevent overdoses in children who "don't know the difference between candy that tastes good and candy that is spiked with THC and will land them in the emergency room."

However, a majority of lawmakers sided with opponents who argued that the Department of Health had already addressed the marketing of medical pot to children when it created rules for the program and the law proposed by Deutsch would have banned pot gummies that patients use.

"What you're trying to take here today is a medication that people need," said Democratic Rep. Oren Lesmeister, who said gummies made it easier for his grandson to use marijuana for a medical condition.

SD Speaker: Telemarketers trying to sway AG impeachment

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — South Dakota lawmakers weighing impeachment charges against the state's attorney general said Thursday that they have been pressured by a telemarketing campaign to impeach him.

House Speaker Spencer Gosch, a Republican who is leading the House committee investigating Attorney General Jason Ravnsborg's 2020 fatal car crash, said a telemarketing company this week has been calling state residents and transferring the calls to members of the committee.

"This telemarketing firm is using a nonfactual, distasteful, and inappropriate script to incite public outrage," Gosch said in a statement. "It is clear to me that whoever is behind this movement is trying to

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impede, influence, or taint the ongoing investigation of this committee. We are looking into who is behind this.”

The committee has been tasked with sifting through the investigation into the September 2020 crash, when Ravensborg struck and killed a man walking near a rural highway.

The Republican attorney general, elected to his first term in 2018, first reported the crash as a collision with an animal and has insisted that he did not realize he had killed the man, 55-year-old Joseph Boever, until he returned to the scene the next day and discovered his body.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem wants Ravensborg removed from office and has pressured the committee to move forward with its work. At a news conference Thursday she said she didn't know anything about the telemarketing calls other than what Gosch had told her.

The House committee is set to meet again Monday.

Judge halts South Dakota Gov. Noem's abortion pill rule

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A federal judge temporarily halted a South Dakota rule from taking effect that would have made the state one of the hardest places in the U.S. to get abortion pills.

U.S. District Judge Karen Schreier late Wednesday granted a request from Planned Parenthood for a restraining order on a state Department of Health rule that was set to go into effect Thursday.

Republican Gov. Kristi Noem initiated the rule change through an executive order. It would have required people seeking abortions to return to a doctor to take the second of two drugs used for a medication abortion. Women have been able to receive both drugs in one visit, taking the second medication at home.

Schreier, who was appointed under former President Bill Clinton, found that Planned Parenthood had shown the rule likely “imposes an undue burden on a person's right to seek an abortion.”

Abortion rights advocates said the rule change would have effectively ended access to medication abortions in South Dakota.

“We are relieved that South Dakotans' access to medication abortion remains unchanged for right now,” Sarah Stoesz, president of Planned Parenthood of North Central States, said in a statement. “The rule's proposed changes to medication abortion are completely unsupported by medicine and would place an immense burden on patients.”

Noem in a news conference Thursday argued that the rule was necessary for women's safety and said she is not backing down from pushing a bill to enshrine it into law.

“They can literally get on the phone or online and request a prescription and undergo this medical procedure in their home with no supervision whatsoever,” she said, although the state requires abortion-seekers to consult with a doctor twice in person before receiving the medication.

Medication abortion has been available in the United States since 2000, when the Food and Drug Administration first approved mifepristone to terminate pregnancies up to 10 weeks. Taken with a hormone blocker called misoprostol, it constitutes what's commonly referred to as the abortion pill.

Noem sought to further clamp down on abortion pills after the FDA last month permanently lifted a requirement that people seeking the drugs pick them up in person. The agency said a scientific review supported broadening access, including no longer limiting dispensing to a small number of specialty clinics and doctor's offices.

The FDA has found complications from the medication to be rare. The agency has reported 26 deaths associated with the drug since 2000, though not all of those can be directly attributed to the medication due to existing health conditions and other factors.

Opponents of Noem's rule argued that it made little sense to require patients to take the second drug at a clinic for an abortion, but allow it to be taken at home for a miscarriage.

By restricting access to the second drug, Planned Parenthood argued, the rule could actually put abortion-seekers at greater risk, pointing to a study that indicated women who skip taking the drug may be at risk of dangerous amounts of bleeding.

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During a hearing for the rule last month, two doctors opposed to abortion access argued on behalf of Noem's administration that having multiple checkups for abortion-seekers during the process was in the interest of their health.

About 40% of all abortions in the U.S. are now done through medication — rather than surgery — and that option has become more pivotal during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A hearing on Planned Parenthood's request for a preliminary injunction on the rule is set for next week.

Sioux Falls police officer completes DoorDash delivery

SIOUX FALLS, S.D. (AP) — A Sioux Falls woman was surprised by the person who showed up on her doorstep this week to deliver her DoorDash order from Arby's.

Anastasia Elsinger didn't expect he'd be wearing a badge and carrying a gun. Ring camera video showing a Sioux Falls police officer delivering the order has been viewed widely on social media.

The officer told Elsinger that he knew he wasn't the delivery driver she might be expecting, but that the DoorDash driver had been pulled over and arrested for some outstanding warrants after picking up the order, so he figured he'd complete the delivery.

Police spokesman Sam Clemens talked about the delivery at Wednesday's news briefing, KELO-TV reported.

"This isn't normal by any stretch," Clemens said. "It's not like we have officers that are out delivering food, but the little things like this, going above and beyond, helping people out. That's the things that we do. And probably more often than people realize."

The officer didn't want to be interviewed about it, which doesn't surprise his sister, Paige Martin.

"I'm sure he's not really liking all the publicity right now but, I mean, cops like him deserve to be recognized because it's the small things that matter," Martin said.

"It's those little things that officers do that can make a big difference and that's one of the reasons that we do the job," Clemens said. "Why we have such a good relationship with the community is the support that we get and we recognize that those little things make a difference."

Russia says it won't start a war as Ukraine tensions mount

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — Russia's top diplomat said Friday that Moscow will not start a war but warned that it wouldn't allow the West to trample on its security interests amid fears it is planning to invade Ukraine.

U.S. President Joe Biden warned Ukraine's leader a day earlier that there is a "distinct possibility" that Russia could take military action against its neighbor in February.

"There won't be a war as far as it depends on the Russian Federation, we don't want a war," Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in a live interview with Russian radio stations. "But we won't let our interests be rudely trampled on and ignored."

Tensions have soared in recent weeks, and the United States and its NATO allies worry that a buildup of more than 100,000 Russian troops near Ukraine signals that Moscow intends to attack the ex-Soviet state. Russia has repeatedly denied having any such plans, but has demanded that NATO promise Ukraine will never be allowed to join and that the alliance roll back deployments of troops and military equipment in Eastern Europe.

The U.S. and NATO formally rejected those demands this week, though Washington outlined areas where discussions are possible, offering hope that there could be a way to avoid war.

Russia's official response to those proposals will come from President Vladimir Putin, but the Kremlin has sounded a grim note thus far, saying there is "little ground for optimism."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that Putin could discuss his reaction to the U.S. rejection with French President Emmanuel Macron during their video call Friday. The Russian leader is also scheduled to chair a meeting of his Security Council later in the day.

Lavrov noted Friday that the U.S. suggested the two sides could talk about limits on the deployment of

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intermediate-range missiles, restrictions on military drills and rules to prevent accidents between warships and aircraft. He said that Russia proposed discussing those issues years ago — but Washington and its allies never took them up on it until now.

While he described the U.S. offers for dialogue on confidence-building measures as reasonable, he emphasized that Russia's main concerns are to stop NATO's expansion and the deployment of the alliance weapons near Russia's borders. He noted that international agreements say that the security of one nation must not come at the expense of others' — and that he would send letters to ask his Western counterparts to address that obligation.

"It will be hard for them to wiggle out from answering why they aren't fulfilling the obligations sealed by their leaders not to strengthen their security at the expense of others," he said.

As tensions build, Washington warned Moscow of devastating sanctions if it invades Ukraine, including penalties targeting top Russian officials and key economic sectors. Several senior U.S. officials also said Thursday that Germany would not allow a newly constructed pipeline — which is meant to bring gas directly from Russia — to begin operations if Russia invades Ukraine.

Asked about possible sanctions, Lavrov said that Moscow had warned Washington that their introduction would amount to a complete severing of ties.

While Moscow and the West are mulling their next steps, 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.

Russia has launched a series of military drills involving motorized infantry and artillery units in southwestern Russia, warplanes in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea, and dozens of warships in the Black Sea and the Arctic. Russian troops have also headed to Belarus for sweeping joint drills, raising Western fears that Moscow could stage an attack on Ukraine from the north. The Ukrainian capital is just 75 kilometers (50 miles) from the border with Belarus.

Despite the alarming rhetoric, Ukrainian officials have repeatedly tried to project calm.

Ukraine's Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told parliament Friday that the total number of Russian troops near Ukraine — about 130,000 — is comparable to Moscow's military buildup in the spring of 2021, when Moscow eventually pulled its forces back after massive military exercises.

"We haven't observed any events or actions of military character that significantly differ from what was going on last spring," with the exception of the deployment to Belarus, Reznikov said.

But that has so far not reassured many in the West. Biden warned Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Thursday's call that the U.S. believed there was a high degree of likelihood that Russia could invade when the ground freezes and Russian forces could attack Ukrainian territory from north of Kyiv, according to two people familiar with the conversation who were not authorized to comment publicly.

While concerns rise about an invasion, Ukraine is already beset by conflict. Following the 2014 ouster of a Kremlin-friendly president in Kyiv, Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and backed an 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.

Cases plateauing in parts of India but omicron still surges

By ANIRUDDHA GHOSAL AP Science Writer

NEW DELHI (AP) — Indian health officials said there were signs of COVID-19 infections plateauing in some parts of the country but cautioned that cases were still surging in other states, linked to a new, stealthier version of the omicron variant.

Most of the cases were concentrated in 10 states, where over 90% of patients had mild symptoms and were being treated at home, Lav Agarwal, a federal health official, said at a media briefing.

The rate of infection in Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Delhi in the north, Maharashtra on the western coast, and West Bengal, Odisha in the east has begun dipping, he said. However, cases are still rising in the southern states of Karnataka, Kerala, Tamil Nadu along with Gujarat and Rajasthan in the northwest.

"Early indication of a plateau in cases are being reported in certain geographies," Agarwal said Thursday.

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He said that the number of people who needed oxygen support or had to be hospitalized during the current surge was lower than in the one fueled by the delta variant last year, which capsized India's public health system.

There are only a few states in India where the delta variant is still circulating. Genetic sequencing indicates that the initial spike in cases in December was powered by an early version of the omicron variant. But most new cases are now linked to a different version called BA.2 — a stealthier version of the omicron, which some scientists worry may also be more transmissible.

The dip in cases has prompted some local authorities to relax restrictions. In New Delhi, restaurants, bars, and movie theaters can now run at half capacity.

Health experts cautioned that with restrictions loosening, infections were likely to increase.

"This is a balance that we always have to play with," said Dr. Jacob John, who studies viruses at the Christian Medical College in southern Vellore city.

Over half of India's population is fully vaccinated. And around 20% are waiting for a second shot. India started giving a booster shot to some vulnerable groups earlier in January, but health officials said that there has been no discussion about whether booster shots were necessary for the wider population.

The country detected over 250,000 new infections on Friday, but Dr. Vineeta Bal, who studies immune systems at the Indian Institute of Science Education Research in Pune city, warned that these were definitely an undercount.

She said that India's pandemic efforts were still being marred by chronic issues like under-reporting of infections and patchy data, but minimizing the number of people who needed to be hospitalized was key.

"And fortunately, so far, even in the good, the bad and the ugly ... it hasn't gone out of hand," she said.

Activists urge athletes to speak out at Beijing Olympics

BEIJING (AP) — Human rights activists issued a call to action against the Beijing Olympics on Friday, imploring athletes and sponsors to speak out against what they call the "genocide games."

Speaking at an online press conference organized by the rights group Human Rights Watch, activists representing Chinese dissidents and the minority Uyghur and Tibetan populations urged international attendants to voice their opposition to China's hosting of the Games, which begin next week.

"The 2022 Winter Olympics will be remembered as the genocide games," said Teng Biao, a former human rights activist in China who is now a visiting professor at the University of Chicago.

"The CCP's purpose is to exactly turn the sports arena into a stage for political legitimacy and a tool to whitewash all those atrocities," he added, referring to the ruling Chinese Communist Party.

China's crackdown under hardline ruler Xi Jinping has been felt across wide swaths of society. Hong Kong authorities crushed anti-government protests in the city in 2019, and the central government in Beijing passed a national security law aimed at stifling dissent, leading to the arrest of activists and disbandment of civil society groups.

Meanwhile, in the country's western region of Xinjiang, an estimated 1 million people or more — most of them Uyghurs — have been confined in reeducation camps in recent years, according to researchers.

An independent, unofficial body set up by a prominent British barrister to assess evidence on China's alleged rights abuses against the Uyghur people concluded in December that the Chinese government committed genocide. China has consistently denied any human rights abuses in the region and has said it carried out its actions to counter extremism in the region in order to ensure people's safety.

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Wang Wenbin has hit back at the rights group for its continued calls to boycott the Olympics, saying that "the so-called human rights group is biased against China and keen on making mischief. Lies and rumors it fabricated are unpopular. Its egregious acts that harm the Olympic cause will never succeed."

The Foreign Ministry has also said the Olympics should not be politicized. Yet the competition is already facing a diplomatic boycott led by the U.S., whose relationship with China has nosedived in the past few years.

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Activists have failed to achieve a full boycott of the games, but have continued to speak out.

"Your silence is their strength. This is what they want more than anything: that the world will play by China's rules, that we will follow China's lead, that we will look away from these atrocities and crimes for the sake of business as usual," said Lhadon Tethong, director of the Tibet Action Institute, at the press conference Friday.

She appealed directly to athletes from the U.S., UK, France and others to speak.

"I personally believe that you should use your platform and your privilege and this historic opportunity. You have to speak out against the wave of genocide," she said.

Here, kitty: Bidens welcome cat named Willow to White House

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden have finally added the long-promised cat to their pet family.

Her name is Willow, and she's a 2-year-old, green-eyed, gray and white farm cat from Pennsylvania.

"Willow is settling into the White House with her favorite toys, treats, and plenty of room to smell and explore," said Michael LaRosa, the first lady's spokesperson.

Jill Biden had said after Joe Biden was elected in November 2020 that they would bring a kitty to the White House, but her arrival had been delayed. Last month, the White House said the cat would come in January.

The first lady named Willow after her hometown of Willow Grove, Pennsylvania.

The short-haired tabby made quite an impression on Jill Biden after jumping up on stage and interrupting her remarks during a 2020 campaign stop in Pennsylvania, LaRosa said.

"Seeing their immediate bond, the owner of the farm knew that Willow belonged with Dr. Biden," he said.

The White House hasn't had a feline resident since India, President George W. Bush's cat.

Willow joins Commander, a German shepherd puppy Joe Biden introduced in December as a birthday gift from the president's brother James Biden and his wife, Sara.

The Bidens had two other German shepherds, Champ and Major, at the White House before Commander.

But Major, a 3-year-old rescue dog, started behaving aggressively after he arrived in January 2021, including a pair of biting incidents. The White House had said Major was still adjusting to his new home, and he was sent back to the Bidens' Delaware home for training.

The Bidens, after consulting with dog trainers, animal behaviorists and veterinarians, decided to follow the experts' collective recommendation and send Major to live in a quieter environment with family friends, LaRosa said last month.

Champ died in June at age 13.

UN: 'Extreme lack of food' for many in Ethiopia's Tigray

By CARA ANNA Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya (AP) — More than a third of the people in Ethiopia's embattled Tigray region "are suffering an extreme lack of food," the United Nations World Food Program said in a new assessment of a region under a months-long government blockade.

"Families are exhausting all means to feed themselves, with three-quarters of the population using extreme coping strategies to survive," the WFP said in its report released Friday, noting increases in begging and relying on just one meal a day. It called for all parties in Ethiopia's war to agree to a humanitarian cease-fire and "formally agreed transport corridors" for aid after 15 months of war.

The U.N. said no aid convoy has entered the Tigray region of some 6 million people since mid-December. Separately, the U.N. humanitarian agency said less than 10% of the needed supplies, including medicines and fuel, have entered Tigray since mid-July. All international NGOs operating in Tigray have depleted their fuel, "with their staff delivering the little remaining humanitarian supplies and services on foot, where

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possible," the agency said in its Friday update.

Ethiopia's government has been wary of allowing aid to fall into the hands of the Tigray forces who once dominated the national government and have been battling the current government of Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed since November 2020. The government in part has blamed problems with aid delivery on insecurity it says is caused by Tigray forces, including new fighting in the neighboring Afar region near the only approved road corridor for aid.

Aid workers, however, also blame bureaucratic obstacles including intrusive personal searches and confiscation of items including personal medications before visits to Tigray. The new WFP report, based on face-to-face interviews with more than 980 households across accessible parts of Tigray, cited "extraordinary operation challenges."

The war has shifted in recent weeks, with the Tigray forces retreating into their region after attempting to advance on the capital, Addis Ababa, and Ethiopia's military saying it would not pursue them further. That opened the way for fresh mediation efforts by the United States and the African Union, with humanitarian access a key goal.

Aid has begun reaching people in the Amhara and Afar regions after Tigray forces' incursions there displaced hundreds of thousands. But the new WFP report said that some 9 million people need food assistance across the three war-affected regions.

Ethiopia's foreign ministry this week said it was working with aid partners to facilitate daily cargo flights to Tigray "to transport much-needed medicines and supplies." It is not clear when the daily flights will begin, though the International Committee of the Red Cross on Wednesday announced that it had made its first delivery of medical supplies to Tigray since September, calling it "a huge relief." A second flight followed on Thursday.

The U.N. has said time is running out. "Aid organizations have warned that operations could cease completely by the end of February in Tigray," U.N. spokesman Stephane Dujarric told reporters on Thursday.

Tigray's health bureau this week reported that nearly 1,500 people died of malnutrition in just part of the region over a four-month period last year, including more than 350 young children. It cited more than 5,000 blockade-related deaths in all from hunger and disease in the largest official death toll yet associated with the country's war.

Ethiopia's government has sought to restrict reporting on the war and detained some journalists under the state of emergency, including a video freelancer accredited to the AP, Amir Aman Kiyaro. The country's Council of Ministers this week proposed ending the state of emergency now, citing the changing security situation. That needs lawmakers' approval.

Thailand adopts guidelines for declaring COVID-19 endemic

By CHALIDA EKVITTHAYAVECHNUKUL Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Thai health authorities approved new guidelines Friday outlining the parameters for declaring the coronavirus pandemic an endemic disease.

Official figures show that the country already meets the three criteria, but Ministry of Public Health spokesman Rungrueng Kitphati said it would still be between six months and a year before the government would be able to make the decision to start treating COVID-19 as an illness that is here to stay, like the flu or measles.

Among other things, he said data from all of Thailand's provinces need to be checked, and authorities need to be sure that the figures remain at the current levels or improve before it can be declared endemic.

The guidelines drawn up by the ministry's National Communicable Disease Committee are made up of three criteria: that there are fewer than 10,000 new cases per day; that the fatality rate is no higher than 0.1% of those who are admitted to the hospital with an infection; and that more than 80% of at-risk people have had at least two vaccinations.

Currently, Thailand's daily new cases range between 7,000-9,000, and the fatality rate, which was more than 3% in the beginning of the pandemic, has declined to 0.1%, and more than 80% of at-risk people

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have been fully vaccinated, Rungrueng said.

Thailand joins other countries in preparing to consider the virus endemic, though the World Health Organization has said it's currently too early to consider any immediate shift.

The organization does not have clearly defined criteria for declaring COVID-19 an endemic disease, but its experts have previously said it will happen when the virus is more predictable and there are no sustained outbreaks.

Speaking last week at a World Economic Forum panel, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the top infectious diseases doctor in the U.S., said COVID-19 could not be considered endemic until it drops to "a level that it doesn't disrupt society."

Thailand reported 8,078 new cases and 22 deaths on Friday, for a total of 2.4 million confirmed cases and 22,098 deaths since the pandemic started in 2020.

To date, it has administered 113.6 million doses of the vaccine and around 48.3 million people, or 70% of its population, are fully vaccinated.

In north Iraq, Chinese language school projects soft power

By SAMYA KULLAB Associated Press

IRBIL, Iraq (AP) — In a classroom in northern Iraq, Zhiwei Hu presides over his students as a conductor would an orchestra. He cues with a question, and the response from his students resounds in perfect, fluent Chinese.

The 52-year-old has been teaching the cohort of 14 Iraqi Kurdish students at the behest of the Chinese consulate in the northern city of Irbil.

His class is part of an experiment with the local Salahaddin University: If these students succeed in graduating, the Chinese Language Department would be officially open for enrollment, giving the growing plethora of Chinese companies in Iraq's Kurdish region their pick for hires.

Regin Yasin sits at the front. "I wanted to learn Chinese because I know China will have an upper hand in the future," the 20-year-old student said. "China will expand here, that's why I chose it."

China's interests in Iraq, anchored in energy to quench its growing needs, are expanding. Beijing is building power plants, factories, water treatment facilities, as well as badly needed schools across the country.

Dozens of contracts signed in recent years ensure China's growing footprint, even as major Western companies, including the U.S., plot their exit. While Iraqi officials say they desire a greater U.S. presence, they find appeal in China's offer of development without conditions for democracy or reform and its deft diplomacy.

"The language school is a projection of Chinese soft power, to familiarize the region with China. The more familiar they are, the more attracted they will be to Chinese goods," said Sardar Aziz, a researcher who recently wrote a Kurdish-language book about China-Iraq relations.

Chinese companies dominate Iraq's key economic sector, oil, and Beijing consumes 40% of Iraq's crude exports. But from a narrow focus on hydrocarbons, Chinese investments have grown to include other industries, finance, transport, construction and communications.

The shift was spurred following Chinese President Xi Jinping's 2013 announcement of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative, dubbed the new Silk Road, composed of a vast array of development and investment initiatives from East Asia through the Middle East to Europe. The U.S. considers it unsettling, akin to a Trojan horse for Chinese expansion.

The initiative calls for China to develop relations with states along its path through political coordination, infrastructure connectivity, trade and financial integration, and people-to-people bonds.

In 2017, the Chinese consulate approached Salahaddin University's College of Languages with the idea of a Chinese language department. Opening a school in the capital Baghdad came with security risks, but the northern Kurdish-run region was relatively secure.

At first, the university wasn't sure it would appeal to students or that it could find qualified instructors, the college's dean, Atif Abdullah Farhadi, said.

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So Farhadi required the consulate to provide and pay for teachers, textbooks, an audio lab and other classroom technologies and exchange opportunities in Beijing.

"They fulfilled all of the demands," said Farhadi. The department opened in 2019 and is set to graduate its first cohort next year. "Then we will expand."

The students said learning to write in Mandarin, the official language of mainland China, was the hardest part. Thousands of special characters had to be memorized.

And then there was pronunciation.

"Their tongues trembled," Hu said. After five hours of lessons, five times a week over three years, "They are speaking very well."

Farhadi wishes it could be the same for the English Language Department; the U.S. and British consulates have seldom offered help, he said.

"They don't support us at all," he said.

As China grows its economic footprint, Western oil firms are reducing theirs. Many have expressed discontent with Iraq's risky investment environment and unfavorable contract terms.

U.S. oil giant Exxon Mobil's exit from West Qurna 1 field last year came despite Iraqi pleas to stay, Oil Minister Ihsan Abduljabbar Ismail told The Associated Press at the time. The presence of a major U.S. company in Iraq had long served as a reassurance for other companies.

British Petroleum, operator of Iraq's largest oil field Rumaila, plans to spin off its business there with another entity jointly owned with China's CNPC. Other oil companies, including Russia's Lukoil, are demanding amendments to contract terms as a condition to remain.

Chinese companies dominate oil contracts, from operating fields to providing downstream services, and they continue to win more. Recently, Iraq finalized terms with China's Sinopec to develop Mansuriya gas field, which could produce 300 million standard cubic feet per day if approved by Iraq's next government.

Investing in Iraq is a risk that China is willing to take. With lower profit margins, Chinese firms always offer more attractive, lower-price contracts, industry officials and Iraqi officials said.

Thursday is "Chinese Corner" at the language department.

Chinese businesses -- from oil to wallpapering -- come and meet the students under the pretext of practicing language skills. Most end up with promises for future employment.

"We speak in Chinese and talk about business and the future," said one student, Hiwar Saadi. "They come to us to meet us and make a connection."

Two students are already working part-time for a Chinese telecommunications company as translators.

"It's the opposite in every other department in the university. Supply is high but the demand for jobs is low," Farhadi said. "Here, the students are turning down job offers in order to focus on study."

Lessons cover aspects of Chinese culture and history as well. Hu is always quick to remind the students of Beijing and Irbil's shared golden past: Iraq was part of the ancient Silk Road trade route, linking China's Han dynasty with the West.

A former Iraqi ambassador to Beijing, Mohammed Saber, said that during his time there, Chinese officials often recalled their shared history. Many Chinese also remembered how in the 1950s, Iraq shipped tons of dates to China to help during famine.

When Sabir began his post in 2004, Iraq-China trade stood at around half a billion dollars. When he left in 2010 it was \$10 billion. Last year it reached roughly \$30 billion.

"They need our oil, and we need to find a market to sell our oil. The road goes two ways," he said.

Yao Yan, a Beijing native selling Chinese-made goods in Irbil's Langa Market, agrees.

A small figure surrounded by mounds of handbags and shoes, she said Iraq offered her better economic prospects. She sends her earnings back home to care for her disabled teenage son.

"Even when there is an economic crisis here," she said, referring to last year's liquidity crisis spurred by falling oil prices, "The money is still good for China."

At the language school, Diaa Sherzad has just completed an oral exam.

The 21-year-old said he is always thinking about what to do next. "The most important thing is how I

can serve my people. If I know Chinese, it will help. For the future, for everything.”

Ex-cop’s trial for Taylor raid offers new chance for justice

By DYLAN LOVAN Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (AP) — When hundreds of potential jurors gather at a Louisville courthouse on Friday, they’ll find out for the first time that they could be chosen to preside over the only criminal trial to arise from the botched police raid that left Breonna Taylor dead.

The former Louisville officer facing trial, Brett Hankison, was not charged in Taylor’s shooting death. Instead, he is standing trial on three lower-level felony charges for allegedly firing his service weapon wildly into Taylor’s neighbor’s apartments during the March 13, 2020, raid.

Whatever the verdict, the trial could leave a bad taste in the mouth of protesters who took to the streets of Louisville for months to say Taylor’s name as part of racial injustice demonstrations that exploded around the country that year. “Arrest the cops who killed Breonna Taylor,” was a common refrain.

The upcoming trial may be the only criminal case that arises from the deadly raid on Taylor’s home.

“There are definitely people who want to see some form of justice and will take any piece of that,” said Shameka Parrish-Wright, a local organizer in Louisville who was arrested at one of the Taylor protests. Hankison’s trial “is a piece of that, but it’s not the original thing we set out for. We were asking for all those officers to be fired, arrested and prosecuted.”

Parrish-Wright, who is running for Louisville mayor, said many feel it was a tragedy that no officer was charged for Taylor’s death.

There have been murder convictions in two other racially charged cases that also fueled the 2020 protests, including the verdicts in November that sent three white men to prison for the killing of a Black man, Ahmaud Arbery, in Georgia, and the verdict last spring against a white former Minneapolis police officer, Derek Chauvin, who got 22 years in prison for killing George Floyd.

Despite the lack of charges over Taylor’s death, her death has led to major changes. Louisville banned the use of so-called no-knock warrants like the one used in the deadly raid, and the governor signed a law limiting the use of such warrants throughout the state. The Louisville Metro Police Department underwent regime change after the raid, and there is an ongoing, broad federal investigation looking into possible racial biases within the department. The city also paid \$12 million to settle Taylor’s mother’s wrongful death lawsuit.

But the two former officers who fired shots that struck Taylor were not charged. Myles Cosgrove, who state investigators said likely fired the fatal shot, was fired last January, months after Hankison was forced out. And Jonathan Mattingly, who was wounded in the leg by a bullet fired by Taylor’s boyfriend, retired last June.

Hankison’s trial “is not justice for Breonna,” said Amber Brown, who joined hundreds of days of protests in downtown Louisville on behalf of Taylor. Brown has since used her skills to start a nonprofit that organizes supervised safe play for children at city parks in low-income areas.

“Nothing that’s going on in that courtroom has anything really to do with Breonna,” Brown said. “He’s not being charged with the bullets that went into her body.”

She said she wouldn’t be surprised if Taylor’s name is barely mentioned at the trial.

The Louisville officers were serving a no-knock warrant at Taylor’s home as part of a series of raids that night targeting a drug dealer and former boyfriend of Taylor’s. But he wasn’t with Taylor that night, and police found no drugs or cash in her two-bedroom apartment. The warrant police used to enter her home was later found to be flawed.

During the raid, Hankison went to the rear of the apartment and fired 10 shots through Taylor’s patio door, according to an FBI ballistics report. Three of the shots went through a wall that connected to a neighbor’s apartment.

Louisville’s former interim police chief said Hankison’s actions that night were “a shock to the conscience.”

“Your actions displayed an extreme indifference to the value of human life,” Hankison’s termination letter

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said. One of Hankison's bullets allegedly whizzed by the head of a neighbor in the hallway of the neighbor's apartment, according to a lawsuit.

If convicted, Hankison faces one to five years in prison for each of the wanton endangerment counts. Those three charges were the only criminal indictments issued by a special grand jury convened by the state attorney general that finished its work in September 2020. The decision was controversial, and some members of the grand jury later complained that they were kept from considering harsher charges for the other officers.

But Attorney General Daniel Cameron, whose office took over after the local prosecutor recused himself, concluded that the use of force from Cosgrove and Mattingly was justified.

Jury selection for Hankison's trial is expected to take weeks. His attorney, Stewart Mathews, asked Jefferson Circuit Judge Ann Bailey Smith to move the trial out of Louisville because he felt the publicity surrounding the case would make it hard to seat an impartial jury. Smith denied the request.

"Given the backstory of this indictment and all then that occurred in Louisville and Jefferson County in the aftermath, I would wager there are very few citizens of Jefferson County ... who have not heard about the case, have not discussed it," Mathews said during a hearing this week.

Instead, the judge and lawyers will embark on the painstaking process of individually questioning up to 250 jurors over several weeks in February to whittle down the candidates. On Friday, the jurors will arrive and fill out a questionnaire. Smith said she would ask them to not read or discuss any news about the Taylor case.

Hankison's defense could include testimony from Mattingly and Cosgrove, along with other officers who took part in the raid, according to a motion Mathews filed ahead of the trial.

Biden's high court pledge shows growing power of Black women

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

As he struggled to survive the 2020 Democratic primary, Joe Biden made a striking pledge before voting began in heavily African American, must-win South Carolina: His first Supreme Court appointment would be a Black woman.

On Thursday, with his poll numbers reaching new lows and his party panicking about the midterm elections, Biden turned again to the Democratic Party's most steadfast voters and reiterated his vow to replace retiring Justice Stephen Breyer with the first Black woman to serve on the Supreme Court.

The striking promise is a reflection of Black women's critical role in the Democratic Party and the growing influence of Black women in society. It's also a recognition that Black women have been marginalized in American politics for centuries and the time has come to right the imbalance of a court made up entirely of white men for almost two centuries, a change Biden said Thursday is "long overdue."

Black women are the most loyal Democrats — 93% of them voted for Biden in the 2020 presidential election, according to AP VoteCast, a national survey of the electorate.

And it's Black women's reliability as Democratic voters that makes it so important for the party to respond to their priorities and keep them in the fold, said Nadia Brown, a professor of government at Georgetown University. "Democrats know Black women are going to turn out for them so they have everything to lose if they don't do this."

Black women turned out to vote for Biden in greater numbers than for Hillary Clinton in 2016, and they were vital in Biden's wins in states like Georgia, Michigan and Pennsylvania. Overall, they made up 12% of Biden's voters and reached even higher percentages in heavily African American states like Georgia, where they represented 35% of his support. In that state, which Biden won by just over 12,000 votes, he earned the backing of 95% of Black women.

Biden, in particular, owes Black voters, and especially women, a debt from the primaries. His campaign was on life support before South Carolina's primary in late February 2020, when he secured the endorsement of Rep. James Clyburn, the kingmaker of the state's Democratic political orbit, by pledging to select a Black woman for the Supreme Court.

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"His campaign was struggling," Clyburn recalled on Thursday, citing Biden's three straight losses in the early voting states of Iowa, New Hampshire and Nevada. "This was quite frankly do or die for him, and I urged him to come out publicly for putting an African American woman on the Supreme Court."

Biden already made a fundamentally important statement about the importance of Black women in his coalition by selecting Kamala Harris as his vice president. But putting a Black woman on the court is another historic step. Republican Ronald Reagan, in his 1980 presidential campaign, vowed to put the first woman on the Supreme Court and nominated Justice Sandra Day O'Connor once in office.

But Biden's pledge also responds to issues Black women care about, said Glynda Carr, president of Higher Heights For America PAC, which advocates for Black women in politics. "Black women are very in tune with knowing the court is important to our daily lives," said Carr, citing big cases on voting rights and abortion.

The decision isn't just a win for Black women but for all voters concerned with ensuring that government reflects the actual population, said Tom Bonier, a Democratic data analyst. As such, he said, it should rally Democrats of all races.

"To the extent that Biden, at this point, is suffering from lower approval ratings, part of his challenge is just reassembling his coalition and reminding those voters who sent him to the White House why that vote mattered," Bonier said.

Biden's early discussions about a successor to Breyer have focused on U.S. Circuit Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson, U.S. District Judge J. Michelle Childs and California Supreme Court Justice Leandra Kruger, according to people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss White House deliberations.

Childs is a favorite of Clyburn. The House majority whip said Thursday that she had "everything I think it takes to be a great justice."

The robust roster of Black women for the Supreme Court is a testament to their growing professional progress over the past few decades, experts say. Black women — like women of all races — have been increasingly likely to earn college degrees over the past two decades. Although they still lag in other crucial categories such as pay, the court seat is another milestone.

"We could not have imagined the sheer number of overqualified women a few decades ago," Brown said.

The nomination of a Black woman is also significant for Black men, said Adrienne Shropshire of BlackPAC, a political organization that tries to elect more Black Democrats. That's in part because the current sole African American on the Supreme Court, Justice Clarence Thomas, is a conservative Republican whose decisions often go against the desires of the heavily Democratic Black community.

While Black men are not quite as Democratic as Black women, they still overwhelmingly back the party — 87% voted for Biden in 2020, according to AP VoteCast.

Still, Shropshire warned, a Supreme Court appointment is only one step in ensuring Black voters are motivated in 2022 and beyond.

"For Black folks in the country, the thing that looms largest is, are their daily lives changed?" Shropshire said. "For the president — and the vice president — it is going to be more than this appointment."

"I don't think it's helpful for people to say, 'Well, the one thing we got is a nomination on the Supreme Court,'" Shropshire added.

How many times can I reuse my N95 mask?

By EMMA H. TOBIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — How many times can I reuse my N95 mask?

It depends, but you should be able to use N95s and KN95s a few times.

The U.S. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention says health care workers can wear an N95 mask up to five times. But experts say how often the average person can safely wear one will vary depending on how it's used.

Using the same mask to run to the grocery store, for example, is very different than wearing it all day at work.

The amount of time a mask is worn is more important than how frequently it's worn, says Richard Flagan, who studies masks and aerosols at the California Institute of Technology.

In general, he recommends limiting the use of an N95 mask to about two or three days.

With every breath you take in an N95, particles accumulate on the mask, Flagan says. That could make it more difficult to breathe if the mask has trapped a lot of particles.

"They are degrading the performance of the mask," Flagan says.

The elastic band on the mask could also get worn out and not fit around your face as snugly. It might also get dirty or wet, especially if you're using it while exercising.

If you notice any of these changes to your mask, it's time to stop using it — even if you've only used it a few hours. And since N95 masks can't be washed, they should be thrown away once you can no longer use them.

Man executed for 1996 killing after Supreme Court clears way

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

ATMORE, Ala. (AP) — Alabama executed an inmate by lethal injection for a 1996 murder on Thursday after a divided U.S. Supreme Court sided with the state and rejected defense claims the man had an intellectual disability that cost him a chance to choose a less "torturous," yet untried, execution method.

Matthew Reeves, 43, was put to death at Holman Prison after the court lifted a lower court order that had prevented corrections workers from executing the prisoner. He was pronounced dead at 9:24 p.m. CST, state Attorney General Steve Marshall said in a statement.

Reeves was convicted of killing Willie Johnson Jr., a driver who gave him a ride in 1996. Evidence showed Reeves went to a party afterward and celebrated the killing.

The inmate had no last words. After craning his neck to look around a few times, Reeves grimaced and looked at his left arm toward an intravenous line. With his eyes closed and mouth slightly agape, Reeves' abdomen moved repeatedly before he grew still.

Gov. Kay Ivey, in a statement, said Johnson was "a good Samaritan lending a helping hand" who was brutally murdered. Reeves' death sentence "is fair, and tonight, justice was rightfully served," she added.

Prison officials said some of Johnson's family witnessed the execution. In a written statement, they said: "After 26 years justice (has) finally been served. Our family can now have some closure."

Reeves was convicted of capital murder for the slaying of Johnson, who died from a shotgun blast to the neck during a robbery in Selma on Nov. 27, 1996. He was killed after picking up Reeves and others on the side of a rural highway.

After the dying man was robbed of \$360, Reeves, then 18, went to a party where he danced and mimicked Johnson's death convulsions, authorities said. A witness said Reeves' hands were still stained with blood at the celebration, a court ruling said.

While courts have upheld Reeves' conviction, the last-minute fight by his lawyers seeking to stop the execution involved his intellect, his rights under federal disability law and how the state planned to kill him.

The Supreme Court on Thursday evening tossed out a decision by the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which had ruled Wednesday that a district judge didn't abuse his discretion in ruling that the state couldn't execute Reeves by any method other than nitrogen hypoxia, which has never been used.

Reeves' attorneys criticized the Supreme Court's failure to explain its decision to let the execution proceed. "The immense authority of the Supreme Court should be used to protect its citizens, not to strip them of their rights without explanation," they said.

In 2018, Alabama death row inmates had a chance to sign a form choosing either lethal injection or nitrogen hypoxia as an execution method after legislators approved the use of nitrogen. But Reeves was among the inmates who didn't fill out the form stating a preference.

Suing under the American With Disabilities Act, Reeves claimed he had intellectual disabilities that prevented him from understanding the form offering him the chance to choose nitrogen hypoxia — a method never used in the U.S. — over lethal injection, which the inmate's lawyers called "torturous."

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Reeves also claimed the state failed to help him understand the form. But the state argued he wasn't so disabled that he couldn't understand the choice.

It was a divided court that let the execution proceed. Justice Amy Coney Barrett said she would deny the state's request, while Justice Stephen Breyer, who just announced his retirement, and Justice Sonia Sotomayor joined with Justice Elena Kagan in a dissent that said the execution shouldn't occur.

The state had previously asked the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to lift a lower court injunction and allow the execution, but the panel on Wednesday had refused. Alabama then appealed, sending the case to the nation's highest court.

Alabama switched from the electric chair to lethal injection after 2002, and in 2018 legislators approved the use of another method, nitrogen hypoxia, amid defense challenges to injections and shortages of chemicals needed for the procedure. The new method would cause death by replacing oxygen that the inmate breathes with nitrogen.

A poor reader and intellectually disabled, Reeves wasn't capable of making such a decision without assistance that should have been provided under the American With Disabilities Act, his lawyers argued. A prison worker who gave Reeves a form didn't offer aid to help him understand, they said.

With Reeves contending he would have chosen nitrogen hypoxia over a "torturous" lethal injection had he comprehended the form, the defense filed suit asking a court to halt the lethal injection. U.S. District Judge R. Austin Huffaker, Jr. blocked execution plans, ruling that Reeves had a good chance of winning the claim under the disabilities law.

A defense expert concluded Reeves had a first grade reading level and the language competency of someone as young as 4, but the state disagreed that Reeves had a disability that would prevent him from understanding his options.

An Alabama inmate who was put to death by lethal injection last year, Willie B. Smith, unsuccessfully raised claims about being intellectually unable to make the choice for nitrogen hypoxia.

Stavros Lambrinidis, the European Union ambassador to the U.S., had sent a letter both condemning Johnson's killing and asking the governor Ivey to block the execution.

US tries to name and shame Russian disinformation on Ukraine

By NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a break from the past, the U.S. and its allies are increasingly revealing their intelligence findings as they confront Russian preparations for invading Ukraine, looking to undercut Russian President Vladimir Putin's plans by exposing them and deflecting his efforts to shape world opinion.

The White House in recent weeks publicized what it said was a developing Russian "false-flag" operation to create pretext for an invasion. Britain named specific Ukrainians it accused of having ties to Russian intelligence officers plotting to overthrow President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The U.S. also released a map of Russian military positions and detailed how officials believe Russia will try to attack Ukraine with as many as 175,000 troops.

Experts credit the White House for declassifying intelligence and moving to rebut false claims before they're made — a so-called "prebuttal" that undercuts their effectiveness better than an after-the-fact explanation.

But the release of information isn't without risks. Intelligence assessments carry varying degrees of certainty, and beyond offering photos of troop movements, the U.S. and its allies have provided little other proof. Moscow has dismissed Washington's claims as hysteria and invoked past American intelligence failures, including false information put forward about Iraq's weapons programs.

There are no clear signs of change so far from Russia, which continues to move forces toward Ukraine and into Belarus, an ally to Ukraine's north. There is growing pessimism in Washington and London about ongoing diplomatic efforts and a belief that Putin will likely mount some sort of invasion in the next several weeks.

Russia is known for using disinformation as a tactic to sow confusion and discord as part of its overall

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conflict strategy. When Russia invaded Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014, it mounted a campaign to sway ethnic Russian residents of the territory. State media and social media accounts linked to Russia promoted allegations that the West was manipulating protests in Kyiv and false or unconfirmed tales of lurid crimes committed by Ukrainian forces.

This time, the U.S. says, Russia is trying to portray Ukrainian leaders as aggressors and to persuade its own citizens to support military action. At the same time, the U.S. and its allies allege, Russia has positioned operatives in eastern Ukraine who could use explosives to carry out acts of sabotage against Russia's own proxy forces and then blame Kyiv.

The White House has repeatedly highlighted what it sees as disinformation and is privately sharing additional intelligence with allies including Ukraine. The State Department recently published a fact sheet listing and rejecting several Russian claims. And the Treasury Department sanctioned four men accused of ties to influence operations intended to set the pretext in Ukraine for a new invasion.

White House press secretary Jen Psaki described a "strategic decision to call out disinformation when we see it."

"We are much more cognizant of the Russian disinformation machine than we were in 2014," she said Wednesday, adding, "We need to be very clear with the global community and the U.S. public what they're trying to do and why."

Moscow continues to make demands that NATO not accept Ukraine or further expand to any other countries. And after British intelligence accused him of being a possible Russia-backed candidate for president, Ukrainian politician Yevheniy Murayev denied the claim and told the AP that it "looks ridiculous and funny."

Meanwhile, Washington and Moscow go back and forth online. Kremlin-backed RT.com on Dec. 21 posted a video alleging "US private military companies are amassing CHEMICAL COMPONENTS in Eastern Ukraine." The State Department rejected that claim in its fact sheet on Russian propaganda. Russia's Foreign Ministry then responded with tweets "debunking @StateDept 'facts' on Russian disinformation on Ukraine."

Washington's efforts have raised questions in Kyiv, where Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has taken a different public approach of trying to tamp down public fears of an expanded war even as many Ukrainians prepare for possible combat.

Ukrainian officials privately question why the Biden administration is warning about an impending invasion but not imposing preemptive sanctions or taking action against the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, which has been criticized for giving Moscow more leverage over Ukraine and Western Europe. The Biden administration lobbied Democrats in Congress to oppose a Republican-sponsored bill that would have required the imposition of sanctions against the pipeline, which has not yet gone into operation.

The White House has threatened tough sanctions if Russia does invade and is preparing to move forces to NATO's eastern flank in the event of an invasion. The U.S. and Western allies are also sending weapons and missile systems to Ukraine.

Molly McKew, a writer and lecturer on Russian influence, said the administration's moves to counter Russia's influence efforts needed to be accompanied by a clearer statement of American goals and plans to repel any invasion.

Publicly identifying Russia's actions alone will not stop Russia from carrying them out, said McKew, a former adviser to President Mikhail Saakashvili of Georgia, which fought a war in 2008 with Russia and still is trying to regain control of separatist regions backed by Moscow.

"They're trying to apply disinformation thinking to military domains," she said. "You absolutely cannot expose away the crisis."

In both the U.S. and Ukraine, experts say, there is far more societal awareness now of state-sponsored disinformation. Russia in the past several years has continued to bombard Ukrainians with text messages and false stories during the ongoing war in eastern Ukraine in which at least 14,000 people have died. And Russia's interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election led to several investigations and years of often fractious debates.

Bret Schafer, senior fellow at the German Marshall Fund's Alliance for Securing Democracy, said that while there are risks to elevating false claims in the process of debunking them, "there is a need to head

off information threats as opposed to responding to them after they've been let out into the wild."

But publicly accusing Russia of misbehavior is ultimately a limited deterrent. "They don't care about reputational damage," he said.

Key Pa. Dems to miss Biden visit, cite scheduling conflicts

By STEVE PEOPLES and MARC LEVY Associated Press

HARRISBURG, Pa. (AP) — President Joe Biden will appear in Pittsburgh on Friday as an opening step in a broader campaign to promote the White House's achievements in key states before the midterm elections.

But two of the three leading Democrats on Pennsylvania's statewide ballot this spring who were invited to appear with Biden will not attend, their campaigns confirmed on the eve of the president's visit.

Lt. Gov. John Fetterman, a leading Senate candidate, and state Attorney General Josh Shapiro, the likely Democratic nominee in the race for governor, will be absent because of scheduling conflicts, according to their spokespeople. Another top Senate candidate, Rep. Conor Lamb, a longtime Biden supporter based in Pittsburgh, will attend, his office confirmed. All three had been invited to participate in a photo line with the president.

The high-profile absences come as Democrats in other states have begun taking modest steps to distance themselves from the first-term president, whose approval ratings have fallen sharply in recent months. And while Fetterman and Shapiro indicated that politics had no bearing on their schedules, their decisions to avoid Biden, particularly in his home state, could fuel further questions among anxious Democratic candidates elsewhere as they decide whether to embrace the struggling president.

"Josh Shapiro is running to be the governor of Pennsylvania and he's focused on the issues that matter to Pennsylvania families," Shapiro spokesperson Will Simons said.

Shapiro made three appearances with Biden last summer and fall when the president's numbers were better. But the gubernatorial hopeful has a scheduling conflict this time, Simons said, without detailing the conflict.

"Like every American should, Josh wants our president to be successful and we'll continue welcoming President Biden to his home state of Pennsylvania," Simons said.

Leading Pennsylvania Democrats who are not on the ballot this year did not have the same scheduling conflicts. Those who will appear with Biden on Friday include Gov. Tom Wolf, who is term-limited, and Sen. Bob Casey, whose current term runs through 2024.

It's been a different calculation for vulnerable Democrats who will face voters in 2022.

Earlier in the month, Georgia Democrat Stacey Abrams, a leading candidate for governor in another swing state, skipped a chance to appear with the president in the state, citing an unspecified scheduling conflict. And in the weeks since, several other notable Democrats have seemed to distance themselves from Biden as well.

Last week, Texas Democrat Beto O'Rourke said he didn't need the Democratic president's assistance in his campaign for governor.

"I'm not interested in any national politician — anyone outside of Texas — coming into this state to help decide the outcome of this," O'Rourke said, according to The Dallas Morning News. "I think we all want to make sure that we're working with, listening to and voting with one another here in Texas."

And this week, Rep. Steny Hoyer, the No. 3 House Democrat, refused to say whether vulnerable Democrats on the ballot this fall should embrace the label "Biden Democrat."

"I want every Democrat to run as Democrats who deliver," Hoyer told Politico when asked directly about "Biden Democrats."

Former Pennsylvania Gov. Ed Rendell said he's not surprised that some Democratic candidates might want to distance themselves from Biden, but he said those who do so are "stupid."

"They're stupid because things can turn around in politics pretty dramatically," Rendell told The Associated Press. "You can't hide. People end up thinking less of you for not showing up."

Fetterman, the outspoken lieutenant governor whose campaign headquarters is based in Pittsburgh, said

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he'll miss Biden's visit in that city to attend the Democratic state committee, which begins Friday evening 200 miles to the east in Harrisburg.

"It's great that President Biden is coming to Pittsburgh to talk about infrastructure," Fetterman said. But he said he'll be at the Harrisburg meeting to talk to Democrats about the midterms.

Lamb, meanwhile, one of Fetterman's chief primary opponents in the state's marquee Senate contest, is eager to hear Biden's remarks on his sweeping infrastructure bill in person.

"President Biden first announced his infrastructure plan in Pittsburgh, and Conor looks forward to welcoming him back and talking about all the good jobs that bill will create in the Pittsburgh area and all over Pennsylvania," said Lamb campaign manager Abby Nassif Murphy.

Malcolm Kenyatta, another prominent Democratic Senate contender, was not invited to Biden's appearance because he represents a different part of the state in the state Legislature. But he heaped praise on the president when given the opportunity. Like Lamb, Kenyatta traveled to early voting states during the 2020 presidential primary to campaign on Biden's behalf.

"The more he's here, the better," Kenyatta said. "I would not be offended to be called a Biden Democrat. I have always considered myself a do-something Democrat."

The White House announced Biden's trip on Monday after the president said last week he would look to get out of Washington more in the second year of his presidency.

Biden, who has seen his poll numbers sink in the midst of an unrelenting pandemic and high inflation, said it was important that he "go out and talk to the public" about what he's accomplished and about why Congress needs to get behind the rest of his domestic agenda.

While in Pittsburgh, Biden will focus on the economy, according to White House press secretary Jen Psaki.

"He'll be talking about how far we've come in getting our economy moving again, making more right here in America, and ensuring all workers benefit," Psaki told reporters at the White House on Thursday. "He'll highlight the 367,000 manufacturing jobs that our economy has created since he took office, and he'll underscore the vital role the federal government can play in bringing workers and businesses together."

The visit will take Biden, a Pennsylvania native, to a key battleground in this year's midterm congressional elections. The battle to replace Republican Sen. Pat Toomey, who is not seeking reelection, is expected to be one of the most competitive Senate races this year.

Christopher Borick, director of the Muhlenberg College Institute of Public Opinion, said diminished enthusiasm among Democrats throughout the country is a worrying sign for Pennsylvania Democrats' hopes of capturing Toomey's seat and holding on to the governor's office.

Just 28% of Americans say they want Biden to run for reelection in 2024, including only 48% of Democrats, according to an Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Along with Biden's legislative setbacks, Borick noted that the president's advanced age (he's 79) and uncertainty among voters about whether he'll run for a second term — though he has said he will — are affecting the 2022 campaign.

But Borick said Biden "could have some rallying effect for Democrats" if he notches some legislative successes closer to the election.

Casey said he's urging elected Democrats to do a better job talking about Biden's first-year accomplishments, such as the infrastructure bill, distributing vaccines, getting money to keep schools open, expanding the child tax credit and bringing down unemployment.

"We have to do a much better job, and we're starting to do it," Casey said.

China skis: Olympics brings on boom in winter sports

BEIJING (AP) — Holding his skis beside a bunny slope, Li Wei enthuses over his winter job as a farmer-turned-ski coach on the northwestern outskirts of Beijing.

The tall, tanned 36-year-old works December to March at a resort in the Yanqing district, which will host skiing, luge and other sliding events at the Winter Olympics, which open next week.

The ruling Communist Party is using the Games to promote winter sports, many of which are new to

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most Chinese, for fitness and business opportunities.

Skiing "boosted my income to another level," said Li, who charges 400 to 500 yuan (\$60 to \$80) per lesson — almost as much as his family earns in a week growing corn during warmer months. He also finds skiing relaxing.

"After a few slides down the intermediate slope, all my troubles are gone," he said.

Many in Beijing have long enjoyed winter ice skating on canals and lakes. But now, young Chinese are expanding their aspirations from basketball, football and gymnastics to sports such as hockey and skiing.

The government and private companies have built ice rinks and ski runs. Public schools are adding skating and other winter sports. Parents are opening their wallets to pay for hockey teams and skating lessons. Villages near ski slopes are building inns to serve well-heeled tourists.

"I want to be an ice hockey player in the future," said 8-year-old Guo Yuchen, who took up the sport at 4 and trains seven hours a week at a rink in Beijing. "Then I can bring glory to my country."

Wu Mengkai, 11, said hockey made him more extroverted and a "very sunny person."

"You can't be introverted when you play ice hockey," Wu said. "You have to be brave enough to fight."

The buildup to the Winter Olympics set these trends in motion, said Mark Dreyer, author of the book "Sporting Superpower: An Insider's View on China's Quest to Be the Best."

"We've also seen a more organic push from China's middle class, recognizing the value of sports not just for their children, but for themselves," Dreyer said.

The Winter Games will take place without foreign tourists or ordinary spectators under China's "zero tolerance" strategy that aims to keep the virus out of the country. Athletes, reporters and officials are required to stay within areas that isolate them from general public.

Some 106 of the 3,695 people who arrived from abroad for the Games so far tested positive for the coronavirus. Two are athletes or team officials.

The Chinese capital has tightened anti-virus measures and ordered mass testing of some 2 million people in one district following outbreaks. Some families are barred from leaving their homes.

Foreign sports brands see growth opportunities in China but are frustrated that marketing and business development are hampered by the anti-virus controls and ban on most foreigners from entering China.

"That's kind of put a damper on things," said Jeffrey Potter, president of Proskatecorner Pte. Ltd., the China distributor of American hockey equipment maker True.

If not for the virus, the marketing boost from the Olympics would have been bigger, really helping the economy and making hockey more popular, Potter said in a video conference interview from Toronto.

At the Vanke Shijinglong Ski Resort, where Li teaches, visitor Long Xuelian said she fell in love with skiing on her first try despite taking many spills.

"More and more friends of mine know how to ski," said Long, who was taking a break from skiing and chatting with her friend.

The resort's visitor numbers have risen by 15% to 20% a year since Beijing and neighboring Zhangjiakou were awarded the Winter Games in 2015, according to its marketing manager, Liu Yingkai. Liu said numbers were up 40% last year, even with the pandemic.

Zhang Xiaodong grew up in Zhangjiakou but never learned to ski, so he's taking up the sport as an adult. "I have to learn how to ski so when I bring my kid here next time, I'll know how to teach my kid," the IT engineer said.

At least 8,000 people in Beijing are on hockey teams, the Communist Party newspaper People's Daily quoted Xing He, the deputy secretary general of the Beijing Ice Hockey Association, as saying.

"Matches are held more frequently, and school teams come here for training," said Wang Yuming, general manager of the Star Hong-ao Ice Sports rink in western Beijing.

Nationwide, more than 450 ice rinks and 300 snow resorts have been built since 2015, though some have closed at times during the pandemic, said Li Sen, director of the Beijing Olympic organizing committee's General Planning Department.

Skiing and other sports have given an economic boost to villages near resorts.

"For tourists to eat, there must be restaurants around," said Jiang Xinwei of Analysys International, a

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research firm in Beijing.

Houheilong Miao, a village in Yanqing, has a view of the Olympics skiing venue in the distance. Its 20 mostly vacant traditional courtyard houses have been turned into lodgings and a cafe dubbed the "Winter Olympic Home."

Wang Haifang, a mother of two, is among local residents hired to work as baristas, butlers and cleaners. She welcomed seeing the once-rundown village cleaned up like modern urban areas of Beijing.

"In the past year, everything got into shape," she said.

Where is Peng Shuai? Australian Open T-shirts grab attention

By JOHN PYE AP Sports Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — Even as he was being ejected from the Australian Open for wearing a white T-shirt with a "Where is Peng Shuai?" slogan in black letters, Max Mok saw an opportunity to amplify the message of concern for the Grand Slam doubles champion and Olympian from China whose well-being has come into question.

Mok's plan: He'll help hand out 1,000 of the shirts Saturday to spectators attending the women's final between No. 1-ranked Ash Barty of Australia and Danielle Collins of the U.S.

Yes, this is the biggest tennis match of 2022 so far, yet someone nowhere near Melbourne Park is in the hearts and minds of players, fans and the WTA, the organization that runs the women's professional tour.

"We've seen members of the tennis community being supportive of Peng Shuai — Naomi Osaka, namely, and lots of others, including Serena Williams," Mok, an Australian of Chinese heritage, said in an interview with The Associated Press on Friday as he unpacked boxes of the shirts. "It's a good opportunity to go to the largest tennis event in a while and force (attention)."

Peng, the former No. 1-ranked doubles player who won titles at Wimbledon and the French Open, dropped out of public view in November after accusing a former high-ranking Chinese government official, vice premier Zhang Gaoli, of sexual assault.

Concerns about censorship of Peng and her subsequent disappearance from public view led the WTA to suspend all of its tournaments in China, including the season-ending championships. The head of the tour repeatedly has called for China to investigate the 35-year-old Peng's accusations and to allow the WTA to communicate directly with her.

"We are all behind her. Everybody wants to have some news and see that she is really fine," said Tatjana Maria, a 34-year-old from Germany who competed in singles and doubles at Melbourne Park. "That's what's most important — that she is doing fine and she is well. ... It's the WTA that has to put pressure (on) China to try to get some news."

Naomi Osaka, the former No. 1 singles player who won the Australian Open in 2019 and 2021, was asked a couple of times about Peng last week.

"I haven't heard any news. I'm not sure if that's concerning or not," Osaka said. "But I think the WTA, the whole organization, they handled it really well. I'm really proud of them."

Adding to the heightened attention to Peng's case: Beijing hosts the Winter Olympics starting Feb. 4. IOC President Thomas Bach has sought to offer assurances that Peng is fine by saying he has spoken to her via video.

"It is a very, very serious issue, obviously. Do I really think that us continuing to speak about it is really going to make a lot of changes in China? I mean, China is going to do what China is going to do," said Robin Anderson, a 28-year-old American who lost in the first round of the Australian Open last week. "But it is important for us to continue to keep talking about it and to keep at least trying to put pressure on them."

Mok and another human rights activist from Australia, Drew Pavlou, have been hoping to do just that at the season's initial Grand Slam tournament. They raised more than 20,000 Australian dollars (about \$15,000) to make the shirts they're distributing.

Mok was one of three people — the other two are Chinese nationals — kicked off tournament grounds last weekend for wearing shirts with "Where is Peng Shuai?" printed on them, with the aim of encouraging

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players to speak out. Citing tournament rules barring "political messaging," security and police told the trio they needed to remove their shirts or leave. So they left.

Footage of the episode went viral and sparked widespread condemnation, including from International Tennis Hall of Fame member Martina Navratilova.

"It was never planned. It was a coincidence," Mok said of a small gesture of activism that drew plenty of attention.

A few days later, Australian Open tournament director Craig Tiley told The Associated Press the rules had been revised, allowing the shirts to be worn at Melbourne Park — as long as people don't congregate in large groups or cause problems for other spectators.

"If they want to do that, that's fine," Tiley said. But "if anyone's coming on site with the express intent of disrupting the comfort and safety of our fans, they're not welcome."

Pavlou called the way the initial confrontation was handled an example of censorship and intimidation, which "made us committed to double down and get these 1,000 T-shirts out there."

"They couldn't evict 1,000 from the final," he said of Tennis Australia.

Pavlou hopes the Australian Open campaign will continue at the Olympics, even though athletes heading to Beijing have been urged by human rights activists to avoid criticizing China because they could be prosecuted.

Either way, Mok and Pavlou figure they managed to make a statement in Australia — one that could be carried around the world by TV cameras during Saturday's final.

"The tennis community has come together. Obviously we're all looking out for her safety. We all hope that she's well. We hope that she's doing OK," Barty said. "Hopefully it's not too long until we see her back out here."

Breyer leaves a court more conservative than one he joined

By JESSICA GRESKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the nearly 30 years that Justice Stephen Breyer has spent on the Supreme Court, it has been conservative, then more conservative and now much more conservative.

The court's rapid rightward shift in recent years was a change for the liberal jurist, who early in his career sat with the same group of eight other justices for more than a decade. But Breyer, who announced his retirement Thursday, said repeatedly that the court should not be seen as political. Judges, he liked to say, are not "junior-league politicians."

In recent years, as his more moderate colleagues were replaced by more conservative ones, Breyer seemed in public to maintain his good-humored nature. But there were occasional glimpses of frustration that he couldn't get conservatives to see things from his point of view, and that the court was moving too quickly to the right.

Those frustrations surfaced in 2007. It was a year after the departure of Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the court's first female justice and a moderate who was replaced by the more conservative Justice Samuel Alito. Breyer had found himself on the losing end of a string of 5-4 rulings during the term. He was grim.

"It is not often in the law that so few have so quickly changed so much," Breyer said while summarizing his dissent from a decision that invalidated public school integration plans.

In short, Breyer missed O'Connor's moderate influence.

In 2018, when she announced that she had been diagnosed with the beginning stages of dementia, he wrote in a tribute that the years they served together were "so happy for me."

Breyer enjoyed a period of incredible stability his first decade on the court with no changes in the court's makeup.

In that era, O'Connor was at the ideological center of the court and it was often her views that controlled the outcomes in close cases. But the conservative majority at the time also included Anthony Kennedy, another moderate, along with Clarence Thomas, Antonin Scalia and Chief Justice William Rehnquist. Breyer's more liberal colleagues were John Paul Stevens, David Souter and Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who like Breyer

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was nominated by President Bill Clinton.

Jonathan Molot, a clerk for Breyer during his first year on the Supreme Court, said the court then may have been divided between five conservatives and four liberals, but there was still "a little more fluidity."

It was a court where being "optimistic about human nature, being able to see the other side's perspective, being able to communicate on good terms with everyone I think made a genuine difference," he said. That was Breyer, he said, who was liked by his colleagues regardless of judicial philosophy.

The composition of the court began to change in 2005, however, when O'Connor announced her retirement. Soon after, Rehnquist died of cancer, leading to the confirmation of Chief Justice John Roberts. Kennedy became the new ideological center of the court.

While Kennedy was more conservative than O'Connor, there were still times when he was willing to join his more liberal peers to form a majority. And even Roberts sometimes joined with the court's four liberals, voting in 2012 to uphold President Barack Obama's health care law, for example. Liberals also won major gay rights cases with votes from Kennedy, culminating in the 2015 case in which the court said gay couples had a right to marry nationwide.

But deaths and retirements over the past six years have transformed the court more fundamentally.

First came the unexpected death of Scalia in Texas in 2016. Replacing a conservative justice during Obama's presidency might have been expected to make the court less conservative. But Republican senators held the seat open until after the 2016 presidential election. And instead of a Democrat selecting Scalia's successor it was a Republican, Donald Trump, who chose conservative Neil Gorsuch.

Gorsuch's confirmation didn't change the balance of the court, but Kennedy's retirement in 2018 did, when he was succeeded by the more conservative Brett Kavanaugh. The death of Breyer's friend Ginsburg in 2020 was even more consequential. The liberal justice was replaced by Amy Coney Barrett, giving conservatives a 6-3 advantage on the court.

Already in recent months the court's conservatives have let a restrictive Texas abortion law take effect and kept Biden from enforcing requirement that employees at large businesses get vaccinated against COVID-19 or test regularly or wear a mask on the job. Breyer opposed both outcomes. Before he leaves at the end of the term the court has also signaled it could overturn the nationwide right to abortion that has existed for nearly 50 years.

The American public has increasingly negative views of the court. In September, a Gallup poll found 54% said they had "a great deal" or "fair amount" of confidence in the Supreme Court, down from 67% in 2020. Only one other time in five decades has that confidence fallen below 60%.

In remarks Thursday at the White House, Breyer described America as a "complicated country" and an "experiment that's still going on." He said future generations would "determine whether the experiment still works. And of course, I'm an optimist, and I'm pretty sure it will."

Toyota heading to moon with cruiser, robotic arms, dreams

By YURI KAGEYAMA AP Business Writer

TOKYO (AP) — Toyota is working with Japan's space agency on a vehicle to explore the lunar surface, with ambitions to help people live on the moon by 2040 and then go live on Mars, company officials said Friday.

The vehicle being developed with the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency is called Lunar Cruiser, whose name pays homage to the Toyota Land Cruiser sport utility vehicle. Its launch is set for the late 2020's.

The vehicle is based on the idea that people eat, work, sleep and communicate with others safely in cars, and the same can be done in outer space, said Takao Sato, who heads the Lunar Cruiser project at Toyota Motor Corp.

"We see space as an area for our once-in-a-century transformation. By going to space, we may be able to develop telecommunications and other technology that will prove valuable to human life," Sato told The Associated Press.

Gitai Japan Inc., a venture contracted with Toyota, has developed a robotic arm for the Lunar Cruiser, designed to perform tasks such as inspection and maintenance. Its "grapple fixture" allows the arm's end

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to be changed so it can work like different tools, scooping, lifting and sweeping.

Gitai Chief Executive Sho Nakanose said he felt the challenge of blasting off into space has basically been met but working in space entails big costs and hazards for astronauts. That's where robots would come in handy, he said.

Since its founding in the 1930s, Toyota has fretted about losing a core business because of changing times. It has ventured into housing, boats, jets and robots. Its net-connected sustainable living quarters near Mount Fuji, called Woven City, where construction is starting this year.

Japanese fascination with the moon has been growing.

A private Japanese venture called ispace Inc. is working on lunar rovers, landing and orbiting, and is scheduled for a moon landing later this year. Businessman Yusaku Maezawa, who recently took videos of himself floating around in the International Space Station, has booked an orbit around the moon aboard Tesla CEO Elon Musk's Starship.

Toyota engineer Shinichiro Noda said he is excited about the lunar project, an extension of the automaker's longtime mission to serve customers and the moon may provide valuable resources for life on Earth.

"Sending our cars to the moon is our mission," he said. Toyota has vehicles almost everywhere. "But this is about taking our cars to somewhere we have never been."

EXPLAINER: Who uses Florida-Caribbean smuggling routes?

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Little is known about the 40 people believed to have been aboard a boat that capsized and was found this week near Florida's coast with just one survivor. But they were on a route often traveled by migrants trying to enter the U.S. clandestinely, and authorities suspect the trip was organized by smugglers.

Apprehensions of migrants in the Florida-Caribbean region appear to be on pace to surpass numbers from last year, with more Cubans and Haitians taking to sea despite the dangers and stricter U.S. refugee policies.

The sole survivor told a good Samaritan and authorities that the boat capsized late Saturday after he and 39 others had set out for Florida from Bimini, a chain of islands in the Bahamas about 55 miles (88 kilometers) east of Miami.

Officials say the Bahamas is a common route for smuggling migrants. Both the Coast Guard and Homeland Security say they are treating this as a human smuggling case.

WHY THE BAHAMAS?

The Bahamas is seen as a steppingstone to reach Florida and the United States.

For the most part, the migrants are from Haiti and Cuba, but the Royal Bahamas Defense Force has reported apprehending migrants from other parts of the world, including from Colombia and Ecuador.

Refugee aid groups say some migrants opt for the longer route to avoid the increasing law enforcement along the Florida Straits. "They may island hop," said Randy McGrorty, executive director of Catholic Legal Services.

The defense force said that last Friday it rescued 31 migrants who were on another overcrowded boat that also capsized. Those migrants had also departed from Bimini.

The Bahamas and nearby Turks and Caicos Islands have stepped up their anti-smuggling enforcement efforts in cooperation with the Coast Guard in recent years.

HOW MANY ARE MAKING THE JOURNEY?

From Oct. 1, 2020, to Sept. 30 of last year, the Coast Guard says that in the region that includes Florida and the Caribbean its crews apprehended 838 Cubans; 1,527 Haitians; and 742 Dominicans.

In less than four months since last October, crews have apprehended 686 Cubans; 802 Haitians and 685 Dominicans.

In May, a Canadian man was sentenced to two years and eight months in prison in U.S. federal court for his role in an operation that smuggled people from Sri Lanka by plane to Haiti, then by boat to the Turks and Caicos and the Bahamas to South Florida.

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The total number of people making the journey is impossible to know as many try to arrive undetected and thousands have died over the years.

WHY ARE THEY COMING?

Reasons vary, with some migrants seeking better economic opportunity and some escaping political turbulence or violence.

Cuba is facing an economic crisis that has been exacerbated by the pandemic, increased U.S. sanctions and cutbacks in aid from Venezuela. The crisis has led to shortages in many goods and a series of protests that shook the island on July 11.

Legal ways to leave Cuba were strained by former President Donald Trump's near-closure of the U.S. Embassy in 2017. The United States had been providing 22,000 visas a year to Cuba for two decades until 2017. And President Joe Biden has not resumed dialogue with the communist nation.

McGrorty, of Catholic Legal Services, says his office is seeing "very meritorious asylum claims."

In Haiti, violence has spiked since the July assassination of President Jovenel Moise. The political instability and a 7.2 magnitude earthquake in August have deepened a growing humanitarian crisis in the impoverished Caribbean nation.

CAN THEY STAY?

The U.S. Coast Guard often repatriates people found at sea; it did so earlier this month when it sent back 119 Cuban migrants.

At the beginning of 2017, President Barack Obama eliminated a policy known as "wet foot-dry foot" that allowed Cubans who reached U.S. shores to remain, usually as refugees, while those caught at sea were sent back.

Typically Cubans would obtain parole cards that allowed them to apply for residency a year afterward. But right now the system is in disarray, with lawsuits challenging how the government treats Cuban asylum seekers. A 56-year-old law has given Cubans a virtually guaranteed path to legal residency and eventual citizenship.

Thousands of Cubans are subject of deportation, but Immigration and Customs Enforcement still lists the communist nation as uncooperative or "recalcitrant" in accepting deportees.

The U.S. government has been called out for expelling thousands of Haitians. A U.N. report estimated about 9,000 Haitians were expelled between Sept. 19, 2021, and late November. Most had arrived at the U.S.-Mexico border in September.

Prosecutors in Floyd killing probe use-of-force training

By AMY FORLITI, STEVE KARNOWSKI and TAMMY WEBBER Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Prosecutors in the federal trial of three former Minneapolis police officers in George Floyd's killing probed the department's training on use of force, a key issue at the heart of charges that the officers violated Floyd's civil rights.

The commander of the department's training division testified Thursday that officers are trained to use the least amount of force necessary and that they have a duty to intervene against inappropriate force.

Inspector Katie Blackwell said officers are required to try to de-escalate a situation and, if force is used, to stop once the person is no longer resisting, then render any necessary medical aid they're trained to provide until medical personnel arrive.

Federal prosecutors say former Officers J. Alexander Kueng, Thomas Lane and Tou Thao failed to act to save Floyd's life on May 25, 2020, as fellow Officer Derek Chauvin knelt on the Black man's neck for 9 1/2 minutes while Floyd was handcuffed, facedown and gasping for air. Kueng knelt on Floyd's back, Lane held his legs and Thao kept bystanders back. Testimony resumes Friday.

Blackwell testified that it is critical to move someone who is being restrained from a prone position onto their side, otherwise "the concern is that they would die in custody." Body camera video shows that Lane twice asked if they should roll Floyd onto his side but was rebuffed.

Blackwell went through department policy and the training required of all officers, and noted that Thao,

who has been with the department since 2012, was certified in CPR and attended multiple hours of defensive tactics training, use-of-force training and crisis intervention training while he was on the force. Blackwell did not get into the specific training records of Lane and Kueng before testimony ended for the day.

Officers had responded to a 911 call that Floyd, 46, tried to use a counterfeit \$20 bill at a corner store. The videotaped killing triggered worldwide protests and a reexamination of racism and policing.

Whether the officers deprived Floyd of medical aid is a key element of the case, and prosecutors have sought to show jurors that responding paramedics were not given important information, and that Floyd should have been given medical attention immediately.

An emergency room physician on duty at Hennepin County Medical Center when Floyd was brought in testified Thursday that it was too late to save Floyd.

Dr. Bradford Langenfeld said paramedics told him that although they had tried to resuscitate Floyd for about 30 minutes, he never regained a pulse. He said further attempts to restart Floyd's heart at the hospital failed, and he declared Floyd dead after about a half-hour.

Kueng, who is Black; Lane, who is white; and Thao, who is Hmong American, all are charged with willfully depriving Floyd of his constitutional rights while acting under color of law. One count against all three officers says they saw Floyd needed medical care and failed to help. A count against Thao and Kueng says they did not intervene to stop Chauvin. Both counts allege the officers' actions resulted in Floyd's death.

Prosecutors have argued that the "willful" standard can be met by showing "blatantly wrongful conduct" that deprived Floyd of his rights.

During opening statements, Kueng's attorney, Tom Plunkett, said that Chauvin called "all of the shots" as the senior officer at the scene. Chauvin was convicted of murder and manslaughter in state court last year and also pleaded guilty in December to a federal civil rights charge.

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

'Tiger King' Joe Exotic set for resentencing in Oklahoma

By JILL BLEED and SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — A federal judge is set to decide a new sentence Friday for "Tiger King" Joe Exotic after an appeals court ruled last year that the prison term he's serving on a murder-for-hire conviction should be shortened.

Although supporters of Joe Exotic — whose real name is Joseph Maldonado-Passage — are seeking his release from prison, it's unlikely because federal guidelines suggest a sentence of 17 1/2 years to 22 years in prison.

Maldonado-Passage was expected to attend Friday's sentencing in Oklahoma City after a judge approved his transfer from a federal medical center in Butner, North Carolina. Last month, attorneys for the former Oklahoma zookeeper said he was delaying prostate cancer treatment until after his resentencing.

The former zookeeper was sentenced in January 2020 to 22 years in prison after he was convicted of trying to hire two different men to kill animal welfare activist Carole Baskin. A three-judge panel of the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with Maldonado-Passage that the court should have treated them as one conviction at sentencing because they both involved the same goal of killing Baskin, who runs a rescue sanctuary for big cats in Florida and had criticized Maldonado-Passage's treatment of animals.

Both were featured in Netflix's "Tiger King: Murder, Mayhem and Madness." The show was a breakout hit as people were forced to stay home in the early weeks of the coronavirus pandemic.

Prosecutors said Maldonado-Passage offered \$10,000 to an undercover FBI agent to kill Baskin during a recorded December 2017 meeting. In the recording, he told the agent, "Just like follow her into a mall parking lot and just cap her and drive off." Maldonado-Passage's attorneys have said their client — who once operated a zoo in Wynnewood, Oklahoma, about 65 miles (105 kilometers) south of Oklahoma City — wasn't being serious.

Maldonado-Passage, who maintains his innocence, also was convicted of killing five tigers, selling tiger

cubs and falsifying wildlife records. His attorneys are asking for a lesser sentence than what the guidelines call for, alleging "imperfect entrapment, sentencing manipulation, and outrageous government conduct."

"From decisions made in the initial stages of the investigation to charging decisions to overzealous sentencing recommendations, one thing remains clear: this case was about doing whatever it took to put Mr. Maldonado-Passage behind bars for as long as possible," his attorneys wrote in a sentencing memorandum.

Federal prosecutors said in court records that they would defer recommending a new sentence for Maldonado-Passage because of the allegations he raised.

"In the unlikely event that any of these claims withstand scrutiny and ultimately are determined to be credible, those developments could impact the United States' ultimate sentencing recommendation" because the prosecutors are obligated to investigate them, U.S. Attorney Robert Troester wrote.

Kyle Rittenhouse heads to court to get gun used in shootings

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — A Wisconsin judge was set to hear arguments Friday on whether prosecutors should return to Kyle Rittenhouse the assault-style rifle he used to shoot three people during a street protest.

Rittenhouse shot the men during the protest in Kenosha in 2020. He killed Anthony Huber and Joseph Rosenbaum and wounded Gage Grosskreutz in the arm. Rittenhouse argued he fired in self-defense after each of the men attacked him. A jury last year acquitted him of multiple charges, including homicide.

Rittenhouse's attorney, Mark Richards, filed a motion Jan. 19 asking prosecutors to return Rittenhouse's rifle, his ammunition, his face mask and other clothing he was wearing the night of the shooting to him. Richards and David Hancock, a spokesman for Rittenhouse, said last week that Rittenhouse wants to destroy the rifle and throw the rest of the items away so nothing can be used as a political symbol or trophy celebrating the shootings.

Conservatives across the nation have praised Rittenhouse, saying he was defending Kenosha from far-left militants. Liberals have painted him as a trigger-happy vigilante.

The motion hearing was before Judge Bruce Schroeder, the Kenosha County judge who presided over Rittenhouse's trial.

Demonstrators took to the streets for a number of nights in Kenosha in August 2020 after a white police officer shot Jacob Blake, a Black man, in the back as Blake was resisting arrest during a domestic disturbance. The shooting left Blake paralyzed from the waist down.

The protests turned chaotic at times, with people burning buildings. Rittenhouse and his friend, Dominick Black, joined a group of militia members to protect a used car lot on the night of Aug. 25.

Rittenhouse, who was 17 at time and living in Antioch, Illinois, was armed with an AR-15-style rifle that Black had purchased for him earlier that year because he was too young to buy a firearm under Wisconsin law.

According to the motion, Black had agreed that the rifle would become Rittenhouse's property on his 18th birthday, Jan. 3, 2021.

Bystander and surveillance video shows that just before midnight Rosenbaum chased Rittenhouse down and Rittenhouse shot him as he closed in on him. He shot Huber after Huber swung a skateboard at his head and Grosskreutz after Grosskreutz ran up to him holding a pistol. Everyone involved in the shooting was white.

Black pleaded no contest to two citations earlier this month for contributing to the delinquency of a minor in exchange for prosecutors dropping two felony charges of intent to sell a dangerous weapon to a person younger than 18.

Man executed for 1996 killing after Supreme Court clears way

By JAY REEVES Associated Press

ATMORE, Ala. (AP) — Alabama executed an inmate by lethal injection for a 1996 murder on Thursday after a divided U.S. Supreme Court sided with the state and rejected defense claims the man had an

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intellectual disability that cost him a chance to choose a less “torturous,” yet untried, execution method.

Matthew Reeves, 43, was put to death at Holman Prison after the court lifted a lower court order that had prevented corrections workers from executing the prisoner. He was pronounced dead at 9:24 p.m. CST, state Attorney General Steve Marshall said in a statement.

Reeves was convicted of killing Willie Johnson Jr., a driver who gave him a ride in 1996. Evidence showed Reeves went to a party afterward and celebrated the killing.

The inmate had no last words. After craning his neck to look around a few times, Reeves grimaced and looked at his left arm toward an intravenous line. With his eyes closed and mouth slightly agape, Reeves’ abdomen moved repeatedly before he grew still.

Gov. Kay Ivey, in a statement, said Johnson was “a good Samaritan lending a helping hand” who was brutally murdered. Reeves’ death sentence “is fair, and tonight, justice was rightfully served,” she added.

Prison officials said some of Johnson’s family witnessed the execution. In a written statement, they said: “After 26 years justice (has) finally been served. Our family can now have some closure.”

Reeves was convicted of capital murder for the slaying of Johnson, who died from a shotgun blast to the neck during a robbery in Selma on Nov. 27, 1996. He was killed after picking up Reeves and others on the side of a rural highway.

After the dying man was robbed of \$360, Reeves, then 18, went to a party where he danced and mimicked Johnson’s death convulsions, authorities said. A witness said Reeves’ hands were still stained with blood at the celebration, a court ruling said.

While courts have upheld Reeves’ conviction, the last-minute fight by his lawyers seeking to stop the execution involved his intellect, his rights under federal disability law and how the state planned to kill him.

The Supreme Court on Thursday evening tossed out a decision by the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which had ruled Wednesday that a district judge didn’t abuse his discretion in ruling that the state couldn’t execute Reeves by any method other than nitrogen hypoxia, which has never been used.

Reeves’ attorneys criticized the Supreme Court’s failure to explain its decision to let the execution proceed. “The immense authority of the Supreme Court should be used to protect its citizens, not to strip them of their rights without explanation,” they said.

In 2018, Alabama death row inmates had a chance to sign a form choosing either lethal injection or nitrogen hypoxia as an execution method after legislators approved the use of nitrogen. But Reeves was among the inmates who didn’t fill out the form stating a preference.

Suing under the American With Disabilities Act, Reeves claimed he had intellectual disabilities that prevented him from understanding the form offering him the chance to choose nitrogen hypoxia — a method never used in the U.S. — over lethal injection, which the inmate’s lawyers called “torturous.”

Reeves also claimed the state failed to help him understand the form. But the state argued he wasn’t so disabled that he couldn’t understand the choice.

It was a divided court that let the execution proceed. Justice Amy Coney Barrett said she would deny the state’s request, while Justice Stephen Breyer, who just announced his retirement, and Justice Sonia Sotomayor joined with Justice Elena Kagan in a dissent that said the execution shouldn’t occur.

The state had previously asked the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to lift a lower court injunction and allow the execution, but the panel on Wednesday had refused. Alabama then appealed, sending the case to the nation’s highest court.

Alabama switched from the electric chair to lethal injection after 2002, and in 2018 legislators approved the use of another method, nitrogen hypoxia, amid defense challenges to injections and shortages of chemicals needed for the procedure. The new method would cause death by replacing oxygen that the inmate breathes with nitrogen.

A poor reader and intellectually disabled, Reeves wasn’t capable of making such a decision without assistance that should have been provided under the American With Disabilities Act, his lawyers argued. A prison worker who gave Reeves a form didn’t offer aid to help him understand, they said.

With Reeves contending he would have chosen nitrogen hypoxia over a “torturous” lethal injection had

he comprehended the form, the defense filed suit asking a court to halt the lethal injection. U.S. District Judge R. Austin Huffaker, Jr. blocked execution plans, ruling that Reeves had a good chance of winning the claim under the disabilities law.

A defense expert concluded Reeves had a first grade reading level and the language competency of someone as young as 4, but the state disagreed that Reeves had a disability that would prevent him from understanding his options.

An Alabama inmate who was put to death by lethal injection last year, Willie B. Smith, unsuccessfully raised claims about being intellectually unable to make the choice for nitrogen hypoxia.

Stavros Lambrinidis, the European Union ambassador to the U.S., had sent a letter both condemning Johnson's killing and asking the governor Ivey to block the execution.

The age-old question in figure skating: How old is too old?

By DAVE SKRETTA AP Sports Writer

Tara Lipinski was a sprightly 15-year-old ballerina-on-ice when she won figure skating gold at the 1998 Nagano Olympics.

Sarah Hughes was but a year older when she did the same thing four years later in Salt Lake City.

In fact, six of the past seven Olympic champions in women's figure skating were old enough to dangle a gold medal around their neck but unable to buy a celebratory bottle of champagne — at least in the U.S. That includes reigning champion Alina Zagitova, who had yet to turn 16 when she stood on the top step of the podium in Pyeongchang.

It all raises an age-old question in figure skating: How old is too old?

Of the three American women competing at the Beijing Games next week, 25-year-old Mariah Bell and 22-year-old Karen Chen are older than every gold medalist since 1932 save one: Japan's Shizuka Arakawa, who had just turned 24 before the 2006 Turin Games. In fact, Bell and Chen are older than all three medalists from the 2018 Games.

"I remember the first time someone asked me what it felt like to be a veteran and I was so shocked," said Chen, who was 11th as an 18-year-old in Pyeongchang. "In my mind, I'm so young. I'm a 15-year-old. But I'm definitely not. I'm 22."

If that makes Chen old by figure skating standards, her teammate is positively ancient.

After barely missing out on the Olympic team four years ago, Bell continued to skate in the face of all the naysayers that tried to call her over the hill. It didn't matter that the crowd favorite would be a full decade older than Lipinski or Zagitova when they won their Olympic gold medals, only that she still had the inner passion of a teenager.

Bell was rewarded for sticking with it, too. She won her first national championship in her ninth try earlier this month in Nashville, becoming the oldest American skater to win the women's title in 95 years.

"It's ridiculous that it's been that long," Bell said, "but you know what? Age is literally a number. It means nothing. And if you have a dream, there is no limit to the time you have to achieve that dream."

That all sounds great in a self-help book. But the reality is that when it comes to figure skating, much like gymnastics in the Summer Olympics, age usually does matter. And the reason is quite simple: biology.

Over the past three decades, and especially the past three Olympic cycles, more and more focus has gone toward the ability to land gravity-defying jumps. The must-have skill for women to compete in Pyeongchang were the standard triple jumps — the salchow, loop, lutz and toe loop; the best skaters in Beijing will need to land quads.

And getting the height and spin rate required for four revolutions is a whole lot easier for a fairy-like 15-year-old yet to have a growth spurt than a 20-something who has had to balance added muscle with added weight.

"When you grow and change," Chen admitted, "it's not always difficult but it takes a little adjusting."

That might be an understatement.

Just ask Alysa Liu, the youngest U.S. champion in history when she won at the age of 13 a few years

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ago. That was shortly before Liu became the first American woman to land a quad jump in competition, and about a year before her growth spurt took the quad out of her arsenal entirely heading into the Beijing Games.

"I mean, quads are definitely important," Liu said, "but I feel like it's not just the jumps that are important. It's everything else: the spins and your programs and your other jumps. They're important, but I feel like people can get by without them as well. There's a lot of great skaters out there that don't have quads."

Yet the favorite to win gold in Beijing is 15-year-old Kamila Valieva, a 5-foot-3 Russian dynamo who packed three quads into her record-setting free skate when she won the European championship earlier this month in Estonia.

Jumping is only supposed to be one part of the equation; a separate set of component scores allow judges to reward skill, transitions, performance, composition and interpretation of the music. That's where experience, and age, can be beneficial.

But the way the International Skating Union's scoring system is currently set up, those awe-inspiring jumps make a lot more difference than beautiful choreography — much to the chagrin of many figure skating purists.

"I think there's a lot to say about experience you can tap into and really use to your advantage in a lot of situations, and I definitely have that," Chen said, "but I also don't feel like it's gotten any easier."

The oldest women's Olympic champion in history was Madge Syers, who was 27 when she won the very first gold for Britain at the 1908 Games in London. Magda Julin won the next gold medal at the 1920 Games in Antwerp, Belgium, and the incomparable Sonja Henie won the last of her three consecutive gold medals just before her 24th birthday at the 1936 Winter Games.

So you can't say it would be unprecedented for Chen — or Bell, for that matter — to somehow win gold in Beijing.

Just highly unlikely. And that probably won't change any time soon.

COVID hits one of the last uninfected places on the planet

By NICK PERRY and SAM METZ Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — When the coronavirus began spreading around the world, the remote Pacific archipelago of Kiribati closed its borders, ensuring the disease didn't reach its shores for nearly two full years.

Kiribati finally began reopening this month, allowing the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to charter a plane to bring home 54 of the island nation's citizens. Many of those aboard were missionaries who had left Kiribati before the border closure to spread the faith abroad for what is commonly known as the Mormon church.

Officials tested each returning passenger three times in nearby Fiji, required that they be vaccinated, and put them in quarantine with additional testing when they arrived home.

It wasn't enough.

More than half the passengers tested positive for the virus, which has now slipped out into the community and prompted the government to declare a state of disaster. An initial 36 positive cases from the flight had ballooned to 181 cases by Friday.

Kiribati and several other small Pacific nations were among the last places on the planet to have avoided any virus outbreaks, thanks to their remote locations and strict border controls. But their defenses appear no match against the highly contagious omicron variant.

"Generally speaking, it's inevitable. It will get to every corner of the world," said Helen Petousis-Harris, a vaccine expert at the University of Auckland in New Zealand. "It's a matter of buying enough time to prepare and getting as many people vaccinated as possible."

Only 33% of Kiribati's 113,000 people are fully vaccinated, while 59% have had at least one dose, according to the online scientific publication Our World in Data. And like many other Pacific nations, Kiribati offers only basic health services.

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Dr. Api Talemaitoga, who chairs a network of Indigenous Pacific Island doctors in New Zealand, said Kiribati had only a couple of intensive care beds in the entire nation, and in the past relied on sending its sickest patients to Fiji or New Zealand for treatment.

He said that given the limitations of Kiribati's health system, his first reaction when he heard about the outbreak was, "Oh, my lord."

Kiribati has now opened multiple quarantine sites, declared a curfew and imposed lockdowns. President Taneti Maamau said on social media that the government is using all its resources to manage the situation, and urged people to get vaccinated.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, based in the U.S. state of Utah, has a strong presence in many Pacific nations, including Kiribati, where its 20,000 members make it the third-largest Christian denomination. The church has about 53,000 missionaries serving full time around the world, working to convert people.

The pandemic has presented challenges for their missionary work, which is considered a rite of passage for men as young as 18 and women as young as 19.

As the pandemic ebbed and flowed, the church responded. It recalled about 26,000 missionaries who were serving overseas in June 2020, reassigning them to proselytize online from home before sending some back out into the field five months later.

When COVID-19 vaccines became widely available in many countries in April 2021, church officials encouraged all missionaries to get inoculated and required it of those serving outside their home countries.

Church spokesperson Sam Penrod said the returning missionaries remained in quarantine, were cooperating with local health authorities and would be released from their service upon completion of their quarantine.

"With Kiribati's borders being closed since the onset of the pandemic, many of these individuals have continued as missionaries well beyond their 18 to 24 months of anticipated service, with some serving as long as 44 months," he said.

Before this month's outbreak, Kiribati had reported just two virus cases: crew members on an incoming cargo ship that ultimately wasn't permitted to dock.

But the Kiribati charter flight wasn't the first time missionaries returning home to a Pacific island nation tested positive for COVID-19.

In October, a missionary returning to Tonga from service in Africa was reported as the country's first — and so far only — positive case after flying home via New Zealand. Like those returning to Kiribati, he also was vaccinated and quarantined.

Tonga is desperately trying to prevent any outbreaks as it recovers from a devastating volcanic eruption and tsunami earlier this month. The nation of 105,000 has been receiving aid from around the world but has requested that crews from incoming military ships and planes drop their supplies and leave without having any contact with those on the ground.

"They've got enough on their hands without compounding it with the spread of COVID," said Petousis-Harris, the vaccine expert. "Anything they can do to keep it out is going to be important. COVID would be just compounding that disaster."

In the long term, however, it is going to be impossible to stop the virus from entering Tonga or any other community, Petousis-Harris said.

Nearby Samoa, with a population of 205,000, is also trying to prevent its first outbreak. It imposed a lockdown through until Friday evening after 15 passengers on an incoming flight from Australia last week tested positive.

By Thursday, that number had grown to 27, including five front-line nurses who had treated the passengers. Officials said all those infected had been isolated and there was no community outbreak so far.

While the incursion of the virus into the Pacific has prompted lockdowns and other restrictions, there were signs that not all traditional aspects of island life would be lost for long.

"Government has decided to allow fishing," Kiribati declared on Thursday, while listing certain restrictions

on times and places. "Only four people will be allowed to be on a boat or part of a group fishing near shore."

Coast Guard suspends search for migrants off Florida

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

MIAMI BEACH, Fla. (AP) — The Coast Guard said it suspended its rescue operations at sunset Thursday after announcing earlier that afternoon that it had found four additional bodies in its search for dozens of migrants lost at sea off Florida.

Homeland Security Investigations officials have said they were actively investigating the case as a human smuggling operation.

Authorities have now found a total of five bodies, leaving 34 missing five days after the vessel capsized on the way to Florida from Bimini, a chain of islands in the Bahamas about 55 miles (88 kilometers) east of Miami.

Coast Guard Capt. Jo-Ann F. Burdian said earlier the decision to suspend the search was not an easy one.

"We have saturated the area over and over again," she told a news conference. "We've had good visibility. ... We've overflowed the vessel a number of times. ... It does mean we don't think it's likely that anyone else has survived."

The Miami office of Homeland Security Investigations has launched an inquiry, saying the migrants' journey was most certainly part of a human smuggling operation. Under federal law, a smuggler convicted of causing a death is eligible for execution.

"The goal of this investigation is to identify, arrest and prosecute any criminal or criminal organization that organized, facilitated or profited from this doomed venture," said HSI Miami Special Agent in Charge Anthony Salisbury.

Salisbury declined to give any information on the nationalities of the boat passengers but said investigators consider the lone survivor "a victim right now," not a suspect. Salisbury appealed to the public for tips to help identify who organized the boat crossing.

"Please help us bring criminals who prey on and victimize the vulnerable migrant community to justice," he said. "We don't want anybody doing this again. ... This is dangerous stuff."

The lone survivor was found hanging onto the 25-foot (7-meter) vessel about 40 miles (64 kilometers) off Fort Pierce, Florida. He told a good Samaritan and authorities that the boat capsized late Saturday after he and 39 others had set out for Florida from Bimini.

Authorities said the boat was found about 100 miles (160 kilometers) north of where it capsized, apparently pushed by the Gulf Stream, a warm, swift current that wraps around the Florida peninsula and flows along the Atlantic Coast of the United States. No one was wearing a life jacket, the rescued man told authorities.

The Gulf Stream can be treacherous even on a calm, sunny day. Throw in an overloaded boat, inexperienced mariners, stormy weather and the dark of night, and they can become deadly.

A small craft advisory had been issued on Saturday and Sunday as a severe cold front with winds up to 23 mph (37 kph) blew through the dangerous passage, creating swells up to 9 feet (3 meters).

Biden says Russian invasion in Feb. 'distinct possibility'

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV and NOMAAN MERCHANT Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The White House says President Joe Biden warned Ukraine's president Thursday that there is a "distinct possibility" Russia could take military action against Ukraine in February. The Kremlin likewise sounded a grim note, saying it saw "little ground for optimism" in resolving the crisis after the U.S. this week again rejected Russia's main demands.

Russian officials said dialogue was still possible to end the crisis, but Biden again offered a stark warning amid growing concerns that Russian President Vladimir Putin will give the go-ahead for a further invasion of Ukrainian territory in the not-so-distant future.

The White House said Biden's comments to Ukraine's Volodymyr Zelenskyy in a phone call amplified concerns that administration officials have been making for some time.

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"President Biden said that there is a distinct possibility that the Russians could invade Ukraine in February," White House National Security Council spokesperson Emily Horne said. "He has said this publicly and we have been warning about this for months."

Tensions have soared in recent weeks, as the United States and its NATO allies expressed concern that a buildup of about 100,000 Russian troops near Ukraine signaled that 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. But, as it has done repeatedly for the past several weeks, Washington also warned Moscow of devastating sanctions if it invades Ukraine. In addition to penalties targeting Russian people and key economic sectors, several senior U.S. officials said Thursday with certainty that Germany would not allow a newly constructed gas pipeline to begin operations in the event of an incursion.

All eyes are now on Putin, who will decide how Russia will respond amid fears that Europe could again be plunged into war.

In the meantime, Biden spoke to his Ukrainian counterpart Zelenskyy on Thursday to reiterate American and allied support, including recent deliveries of U.S. military aid.

Biden warned Zelenskyy that the U.S. believed there was a high degree of likelihood that Russia could invade when the ground freezes and Russian forces could attack Ukrainian territory from north of Kyiv, according to two people familiar with the conversation who were not authorized to comment publicly.

Military experts have said Russia may be waiting for optimal ground conditions to move heavy equipment into Kyiv as part of any invasion. Eight years ago, Russia invaded Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in late February.

Zelenskyy tweeted that he and Biden also discussed the possibility of additional financial support for Ukraine.

The White House said Biden told Zelenskyy he was "exploring additional macroeconomic support to help Ukraine's economy" as it comes under pressure as a result of Russia's military buildup.

Meanwhile, the United States announced that the U.N. Security Council will hold an open meeting Monday on what U.S. Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield called Russia's "threatening behavior." She said the deployment of more than 100,000 troops along Ukraine's border and other destabilizing acts pose "a clear threat to international peace and security and the U.N. Charter."

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters earlier that the response from the U.S. — and a similar one from NATO — left "little ground for optimism." But he added that "there always are prospects for continuing a dialogue, it's in the interests of both us and the Americans."

White House press secretary Jen Psaki was circumspect when asked whether the Biden administration saw a sliver of hope in that the Russians said they would keep communications open even as they said that they lacked optimism..

"We don't know if the Russians are playing games on diplomacy. We hope not," Psaki said.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said the U.S. response contained 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." Those are Moscow's demands that NATO not expand and that the alliance refrain from deploying weapons that might threaten Russia.

Lavrov said top officials will submit proposals to Putin. Peskov said the Russian reaction would come soon.

The evasive official comments reflect the fact that it is Putin who will single-handedly determine Russia's next moves. He has warned of unspecified "military-technical measures" if the West refuses to heed the demands.

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

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Ukraine's Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said Kyiv had seen the U.S. response before it was delivered to Russia and had no objections. He tweeted it was "important that the U.S. remains in close contact with Ukraine before and after all contacts with Russia."

On a visit to Denmark, Kuleba emphasized his country's need to strengthen its defenses.

"This crisis is a moment of truth, and this is why we speak about weapons," he said. "This is why we speak about economic sanctions. This is why we speak about the consolidated position of all of us, so that President Putin sees that there are no weak links in our defensive chain."

Germany's Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock said during a parliamentary debate on Ukraine that her government is closely coordinating its policy with allies, considering a range of options that could include the new Nord Stream 2 Russian gas pipeline to Germany.

While the diplomacy sputters on, so too do maneuvers that have escalated tensions. Russia has launched a series of military drills involving motorized infantry and artillery units in southwestern Russia, warplanes in Kaliningrad on the Baltic Sea, dozens of warships in the Black Sea and the Arctic, and Russian fighter jets and paratroopers in Belarus.

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.

As war fears mounted, thousands of Ukrainians expressed their resolve to stand up to the Russian pressure under the hashtag #UkrainiansWillResist on Twitter and Facebook.

"No one will force Ukrainians to accept the Kremlin ultimatum," wrote Andrii Levus, who initiated the campaign.

Ukraine's Interior Ministry has organized training on acting in emergency situations, with an emphasis on dealing with explosives.

Beyond concerns about a possible Russian offensive in Ukraine, there also has been speculation that Moscow's response could include military deployments to the Western Hemisphere.

While a senior Russian diplomat recently refused to rule out such deployments to Cuba and Venezuela, a top Putin associate expressed skepticism Thursday at that 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 happened during the Soviet times," Dmitry Medvedev, a deputy head of Russia's Security Council, told Russian media.

While he charged that the West is using Ukraine as a way to contain Russia, he somberly acknowledged that a Russia-NATO conflict "would be the most dramatic and simply catastrophic scenario, and I hope it will never happen."

While concerns about a possible Russian attack linger, a separatist conflict simmers in Ukraine. Following the 2014 ouster of a Kremlin-friendly president in Kyiv, Moscow annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula and backed an 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.

Since the conflict began, Russia has been accused of sending troops and weapons to the separatists, something it has denied. On Thursday, Peskov wouldn't comment on a proposal from the Kremlin's main political party, United Russia, which suggested that Moscow respond to the delivery of Western weapons to Ukraine by sending arms to the rebels. He added that Putin is aware of the proposal but had no immediate reaction.

Anti-mask anger forces Colorado children's museum to close

By JAMES ANDERSON Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — A Colorado children's museum is the latest casualty of harassment by people angry over mask mandates designed to curb the spread of the coronavirus.

The Children's Museum of Denver at Marsico Campus, for decades a popular downtown attraction primarily devoted to those age 8 and under, temporarily closed on Wednesday because of escalating harassment of staff by adult visitors angry over a mandate requiring anyone age 2 and older to wear a

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mask in indoor public spaces.

"We know the stress of the last two years has taken a toll on everyone in our community, but regrettably some guests who object to the Museum's mask policy have been inappropriately directing their anger toward our staff," the museum said in a statement announcing the closure, which began Wednesday.

Its doors will stay closed until Feb. 4 to give staff members a break and to evaluate how the museum can respond to aggression by visitors in the future, the statement said.

"To our members and guests who respect our mask policy and cooperate with our staff, thank you. We are sorry that the unacceptable behavior of others means you cannot enjoy the Museum at this time."

The closure was first reported by Denverite.

Museum President and CEO Michael Yankovich declined to elaborate on the incidents targeting staff. But in an emailed statement he said they have been "demoralizing and ever-increasing in their intensity and frequency." He thanked supporters from around the country for rallying behind the museum's workers.

The museum says it is following a city of Denver mask mandate requiring guests age 2 and older to wear masks without regard to vaccination status. Citing the high number of COVID-19 cases, it said it was not accepting medical exemptions for the time being.

Mask-wearing is optional when seated at tables inside the museum and in its outdoor park.

The museum offers hands-on, interactive exhibits for kids and their parents that include an art studio and a mock fire station. Annual attendance reached an all-time high of 611,000 before the pandemic but has since been about 84,000 because of capacity restrictions and reduced hours of operation, said Associate Director of Marketing and Communications Kimber Kuhl.

Across the country, anti-vaccine and anti-mask demonstrations and individual behavior often have taken scary and violent turns. Frequently the assailants are parents. Educators, medical professionals, private-sector workers and public figures have been vilified.

Roethlisberger retires at 39: Time to 'hang up my cleats'

By WILL GRAVES AP Sports Writer

PITTSBURGH (AP) — Ben Roethlisberger didn't play football like a quarterback. Not today's quarterback anyway.

He didn't run from contact as much as he welcomed it. The harder the hits, the higher the stakes, the longer the odds, the more Roethlisberger seemed to dig in during a career in which he led the Pittsburgh Steelers to a pair of championships while developing a reputation as a throwback in a city that fashions itself as one even as it has evolved into something far more modern.

Pittsburgh moved on from steel mills long ago. And the position Roethlisberger commanded so well for so long has moved on, too. The game has become quicker since the Steelers drafted him with the 11th overall pick in 2004. The quarterbacks, more versatile than the semi-dad-bodded 6-foot-5, 240-pounder known universally as "Big Ben."

No player understood this more than Roethlisberger. And what he hinted at for months became reality on Thursday when he announced his retirement, saying it was "time to clean out my locker, hang up my cleats" after 18 seasons, two Super Bowls, countless team records and a spot in the Hall of Fame all but secure.

"I don't know how to put into words what the game of football has meant to me and what a blessing it has been," Roethlisberger, 39, said in a video message. "But I know with confidence I have given my all to the game; I am overwhelmed with gratitude for what it has given me."

The announcement came less than two weeks after Pittsburgh's lopsided loss to Kansas City in the first round of the postseason, the 12th time in Roethlisberger's career the Steelers reached the playoffs.

He hinted before his final game at Heinz Field that it was time for him to move on and spend more time with his wife, Ashley, and their three children. He made it a point to embrace the moment following the Jan. 3 win over the Browns, doing a victory lap of sorts before disappearing down the tunnel surrounded by his family.

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Roethlisberger described the journey that carried him from northwestern Ohio to Pittsburgh to almost certainly the Hall of Fame in Canton, Ohio, in five years as "exhilarating."

It also was wildly successful.

The Steelers never endured a losing season during Roethlisberger's tenure and captured Super Bowls 40 and 43 — the latter coming on a touchdown pass over the outstretched hands of a sea of Arizona defenders to Santonio Holmes in the back corner of the end zone in the final seconds.

"Putting that jersey on every Sunday with my brothers will always be one of the greatest joys of my life," he said.

Roethlisberger's personal life, unlike his professional one, was more complicated. He wasn't wearing a helmet when he broke his jaw and his nose in a motorcycle crash in 2006 shortly after becoming the youngest quarterback ever to win a Super Bowl.

He was twice accused of sexual assault, once in 2009 and again in 2010. A civil case filed against him stemming from an incident at Lake Tahoe in 2009 was settled out of court. A woman in Georgia alleged he assaulted her at a bar in March 2010 but prosecutors did not formally charge him, partly out of concerns the case could not be proved beyond a reasonable doubt.

The NFL suspended him for six games at the 2010 season for violating the league's personal conduct policy, though it was later trimmed to four. He returned to lead the Steelers to the Super Bowl, a loss to Green Bay.

The second half of his career played in stark contrast to the first half, both as a player and a person. Known more for his rugged "Ben being Ben" approach to the game during his 20s, he morphed into one of the league's premier passers in his 30s. He twice led the league in yards passing and retires in the all-time top 10 in yards passing (64,088) and touchdown passes (418).

Off the field, he got married in 2011 and started a family while largely retreating from public view.

The only thing that didn't really change? Winning.

Roethlisberger posted a 165-81-1 record as a starter, the most in franchise history and fifth-most ever. The Steelers won the AFC North eight times with his familiar No. 7 behind center and Big Ben seemed to thrive when the game and sometimes the season hung in the balance. His 41 fourth-quarter comebacks rank third behind Peyton Manning (43) and Tom Brady (41).

Long regarded for his toughness and playing in considerable pain, Roethlisberger suffered only one major injury. He missed almost the entire 2019 season after tearing ligaments in his right elbow in Week 2 against Seattle.

He returned in 2020 and guided the Steelers to an 11-0 start and a division title, throwing for 3,803 yards and 33 touchdowns against just 10 interceptions. The season ended, however, with a four-interception performance in a home playoff loss to Cleveland.

While teammates and good friends Maurkice Pouncey and Vance McDonald retired, Roethlisberger returned for one last run behind an almost completely rebuilt offensive line. The Steelers sputtered for long stretches, with Roethlisberger looking his age at times.

Yet there were still flashes of the Ben of old, not Old Ben, perhaps most notably in a 20-19 win over Baltimore in early December in which he threw a pair of fourth-quarter touchdown passes to edge the rival Ravens. Despite the offense's limitations, the Steelers managed to scrap their way to a playoff berth in spite of an erratic 9-7-1 season.

Afterward, the player who flirted with retirement several times in recent years seemed to acknowledge this would be his final season in black and gold. He spoke at length in December about the need to pass along "The Steeler Way" to his teammates, almost all of them at least a decade younger, and made it a point to pass the baton to defensive tackle Cam Heyward after falling to the Chiefs.

His retirement caps a career that began when Dan Rooney insisted the Steelers take him in the 2004 draft. Pittsburgh expected to have Roethlisberger bide his time behind starter Tommy Maddox. Then Maddox went down in Week 2 against Baltimore and a raw, 22-year-old Roethlisberger took over.

The Steelers ended up losing that game. They didn't for the rest of the regular season with Roethlisberger at the controls. He was named the Offensive Rookie of the Year after guiding the Steelers to a 15-1 record. The perfect start came to an abrupt end with a loss to New England in the AFC championship game.

A year later, the Steelers won their fifth Super Bowl by ripping off three straight road victories in the playoffs, including an upset of Indianapolis in the divisional round aided by Roethlisberger's shoestring tackle of Colts defensive back Nick Harper following a late fumble by running back Jerome Bettis.

Like Bettis, Roethlisberger hoped the final year of his career would end on a confetti-strewn field with the Vince Lombardi Trophy in hand. It didn't happen, with the Steelers attempting to rebuild on the fly around a quarterback far closer to coach Mike Tomlin's age than most of the 20-somethings surrounding him in the huddle.

Roethlisberger stressed he was at peace with his decision to return in 2021 and to finally walk away: "I retire from football a truly grateful man."

Staffers complain of racism, abuse by WHO leader 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."

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 capac-

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ity 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.)"

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.

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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."

Olympic champion Lundby laments ski jumping's weight issues

By LARRY LAGE AP Sports Writer

Maren Lundby was the world's best female ski jumper for three years, starting in 2018 when she won Olympic gold in South Korea.

At the Beijing Games, the Norwegian had a chance to become the first two-time Olympic champion in her sport. Instead, she decided to skip the World Cup season and a trip to China for the Olympics in order to make her physical and mental health a priority.

"I decided to not compete because I gained some weight," Lundby said Tuesday in an interview with The Associated Press. "I feel like I can't compete on the level I want to."

Over the last few months, Lundby has emerged as an advocate for change in a sport that historically has had athletes develop eating disorders as teenagers, all in a quest to be as light as possible to squeeze a few more meters out of their flights through the air.

USA Nordic executive director Billy Demong, a five-time Olympian in Nordic combined, said ski jumping is "one of the most eating-disorder plagued sports" because of the desire to keep pounds off.

"Fat don't fly, things like that. That's not something I'm ever going to let a coach say, but the athletes talk to each other and they see it on TV," Demong said earlier this season during training in Lake Placid, New York. "Some guys took it too far, back in the day, in my era from 2000 to 2005 is when it was really bad.

"We're talking 6-foot guys that were like 105 to 110 pounds. Wildly light. Some guys could do it and somebody else would starve themselves the wrong way and they would end up in the hospital."

The 27-year-old Lundby is the latest athlete to spark conversation about the intensity of high-level competition — and what's not working anymore for athletes concerned about their health, physical and otherwise.

U.S. star gymnast Simone Biles withdrew from some events at the Tokyo Olympics for the sake of her well-being following a similar move at the French Open by Naomi Osaka. U.S. skiing stars Mikaela Shiffrin and Jessie Diggins have talked about personal struggles; the latter also wrote a book about struggles female athletes face while dealing with unrealistic pressures to have a certain body type.

"Simone Biles, Mikaela Shiffrin, Jessie Diggins — the ones that have shared their stories with mental health — have been great," said U.S. ski jumper Casey Larson, who will compete in his second Olympics. "It definitely helped us raise the awareness for the athletes that are struggling out there. It's a definitely a great story.

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"But at the end of the day, ski jumpers got to be skinny if you want to go far," Larson added.

The International Ski Federation has attempted to prod athletes to make wise choices when managing their weight.

If jumpers have a body mass index of 21 or more, they can have skis as long as 145% of their height. The more ski surface they have, the farther they fly. But FIS requires jumpers to use shorter skis if their BMI falls below 21, which is considered a relatively healthy number for men and women.

Chika Yoshida, the FIS race director for women's ski jumping, said those rule changes that were made nearly 20 years ago were necessary and have been effective.

"We had a big problem because athletes were having problems with their eating behavior," Yoshida said Thursday in a telephone interview. "At the moment, we are OK and there is no big issue. But after the season, we will also discuss this issue again.

"But aerodynamics is one of the biggest factors in our sport and the athletes must be fit, and they're like airplanes. If you're lighter, you have an advantage."

One of the sport's greats, Matti Nykanen of Finland, was listed at 5-foot-8 and 120 pounds for the 2010 Olympics; his BMI would be an "underweight" 18.5 with those numbers. Four years later, Sara Takanashi of Japan was all of 5 feet tall and barely 100 pounds but a "healthy" BMI of 19.

Lundby said she believes it is important to speak up about the issue of weight and added that it's "really good to tell all the young athletes to not make stupid decisions and to suffer."

"The changes made it easier for everybody to have the the right weight, but for some, it's still hard and quite challenging for your health in the long term," Lundby said. "I wish it was possible to jump at higher weights, but at the moment that's not how it is. I wish there could be some changes in the rules that would makes it easier for every athlete to be a ski jumper."

Ski jumpers tend to be tall and slender, taking advantage of their height to have longer skis and lighter weight to help in the battle against gravity. They're not the only athletes that face pressure to watch their weight, joining gymnasts, wrestlers and jockeys to name just a few.

"It is true fat doesn't usually end up flying very far," Larson said. "But for the most part, USA Nordic has been great in the sense of getting us the help we need."

USA Nordic, which develops American ski jumpers and Nordic combined athletes, is trying to stop eating disorders before they start. The organization has partnered with NYU Langone Health in part to educate jumpers on the dangers of cutting weight.

"There will be consequences to not fueling your body how it should fueled, maybe not right away, but over time," said Nicole Lund, a NYU Langone Health clinical nutritionist who works with USA Nordic athletes. "They're young and they may not understand that quite yet, but that is something to kind of keep in mind."

Even though Lundby is taking a break from competing, she is staying connected to the sport. She's training in the hopes of making a comeback next winter while traveling around Europe as a ski jumping TV analyst.

"I really want to be there," she said of the Games. "I'm an athlete and I want to win a gold medal. To not be there, it's hard so I am looking forward to the closing ceremony."

Lundby will have to wait another four years to have a chance to compete for Olympic gold, but some say it's time to celebrate the courage she has shown by sharing her story.

"She's a person that a lot of women, a lot of athletes, have looked up to," Demong said. "I respect her a lot for having that kind of foresight six months out from the Olympics that she was going to win, potentially."

Russian roar on Ukraine rings hollow to Latin America allies

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press Writer

MIAMI (AP) — It was a classic Russian power play with echoes of Cold War gamesmanship.

Shortly after entering into service in 2019, Russia's most advanced warship made a goodwill tour of the Caribbean, armed with cruise missiles, air defense systems and other weapons.

But when the Admiral Gorshkov sailed into the port of Havana, it was closely tailed by a Russian rescue

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tugboat — a sign to many that Moscow doubted the vessel's reliability and the visit was nothing more than a feeble effort to project power.

Russia is once again rattling its saber amid rising tensions over Ukraine, hinting that the U.S. refusal to heed its demands could spur closer military cooperation with allies in Latin America. In recent days, several senior Russian officials have warned Moscow could deploy troops or military assets to Cuba and Venezuela if the U.S. and NATO insist on meddling on Russia's doorstep.

U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan quickly dismissed Russia's tit-for-tat threats. On the heels of its massive troop buildup on its border with Ukraine, Russia's ability to mobilize troops in the Western Hemisphere, thousands of miles away, is limited at best, experts contend.

"This is pure misdirection and it's not fooling anyone," said Kevin Whitaker, a former U.S. ambassador to Colombia who also served as a diplomat in Venezuela, Nicaragua and as head of the Office of Cuban Affairs in Washington. "It's not real power projection. It's a showpiece and nothing more."

But even if talk of troop deployments is mostly bluster, Russia's strategic buildup in Latin America is real, posing national security threats in what generations of U.S. policy makers have referred to as "Washington's backyard."

In the past decade, as the U.S. influence in the region has waned, Moscow — and to a lesser extent other far-flung adversaries like China and Iran — have quietly cemented ties with authoritarian governments in Nicaragua, Cuba and Venezuela through a mix of weapons sales, financing deals and intense diplomatic engagement.

Moscow helped Venezuela design a cryptocurrency, forgave a \$35 million Cuba debt and runs a high-tech anti-narcotics compound in Nicaragua that many believe is a covert beachhead for spying across the region.

Time and again, Russia has shown a willingness to leverage its sizable military whenever it has felt threatened by the U.S.

In 2008, Moscow sent a pair of Tu-160 nuclear-capable bombers to Venezuela amid tensions with the U.S. over Russia's brief war with Georgia, a deployment followed that year by the arrival of the "Peter the Great" warship.

Russia sent more Tu-160s in 2018 as relations with the West plunged to post-Cold War lows over Ukraine, and the military even hinted it was considering setting up an air base on tiny La Orchilla Island, so small that landing military aircraft there would have been nearly impossible.

Even in countries friendlier to the U.S., like Mexico and Colombia, Russia has been accused of spying or engaging in disinformation campaigns to shape elections. A senior Colombian military official recently traveled to Washington to brief U.S. officials on Russian attempts to penetrate the communications of the country's top military command, a person familiar with the visit told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive issue.

On social media, the Spanish-language arm of the Russian state-controlled RT television network has more than 18 million followers on Facebook, 10 times as many as the Spanish-language affiliate of Voice of America, according to the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a think tank that tracks the rise of authoritarianism around the world. It also outperforms most other Spanish-language media on the platform, though it's still dwarfed by CNN en Espanol.

It's all a far cry from the height of the Cold War, when Nikita Khrushchev in 1962 briefly placed nuclear missiles in Cuba, the Kremlin maintained a listening post less than 100 miles from Florida and the Sandinista government that was fighting a U.S.-backed right-wing insurgency in Nicaragua was building an air base to accommodate Soviet fighter jets.

Nicaragua's Punta Huete airfield is today semi-abandoned and President Vladimir Putin closed the spy station in Cuba two decades ago. With the collapse of its communist sponsor in the early 1990s, Cuba spiraled into a depression marked by widespread hunger known as the "Special Period."

But Russia's more limited support has bought it friends. Recently Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega named a consul in the Crimean peninsula Russia annexed from Ukraine in 2014. It's also allowed Putin to restore some of Russia's former glory in a region that has long resented Washington's far longer history of meddling.

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As Putin now looks to repel NATO from what he calls Russia's "near abroad" in Ukraine, he's likely to take at least a symbolic poke at the U.S. in its own sphere of influence, said Evan Ellis, a researcher at the U.S. Army War College who specializes in Russian and Chinese influence in Latin America.

"I'm sure Putin will do something to project toughness on the cheap as he always does," Ellis said. "But he's not going to do anything that costs him a lot of money or get him into deeper trouble down the line like deploying nukes. He knows there are limits."

Russia's closest ally is Venezuela, which has spent billions over the past two decades of socialist rule building up its air defense with Russia's help — everything from Sukhoi fighter jets and attack helicopters to sophisticated radar and shoulder-mounted rocket launchers.

Such an arsenal gives Nicolás Maduro an ability to inflict serious damage in the event of any conflict with neighboring Colombia, the top U.S. ally in the region, said Gen. Manuel Cristopher Figuera, who was the Venezuelan president's spy chief until fleeing to the U.S. in 2019 after a failed putsch against his former boss.

"It's not an ideological relationship. It's a commercial one, but it provides Maduro with a certain amount of protection," said Figuera, who received training in Cuba and from Putin ally Belarus.

As the U.S. and its allies have taken steps to isolate the governments of Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela — what Donald Trump's former national security adviser John Bolton called the "troika of tyranny"— Putin has tried to fill the void.

In recent days, he's spoken to Maduro, Ortega and Cuba's Miguel Díaz Canel to explore ways to deepen strategic cooperation. He's also sent a planeload of medical supplies to Cuba to help it fight the coronavirus pandemic.

But the leaders, although expressing gratitude for Russia's continued aid, have so far remained silent on Ukraine — a sign they may be reluctant to be drawn into another geopolitical tussle.

"One of the fundamental legacies for Latin America from the Cold War is that they don't want to be treated as a pawn in someone else's game," said Whitaker, the former ambassador to Colombia. "What Russia is doing shows enormous disrespect for the sovereignty of governments that are supposedly their allies."

It's something even Putin loyalists are starting to acknowledge.

"Cuba and Venezuela are the countries that are close to us, they are our partners," Dmitry Medvedev, deputy head of Russia's Security Council, said in an interview with Russian media.

"But we can't just deploy things there," added Medvedev, who served as Russian president in 2008-2012 when Putin had to shift into the premier's post because of term limits. "There can't be any talk about setting up a base there as happened during the Soviet times."

Florida GOP aims to curtail school lessons on sex, gender

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE and LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. (AP) — Florida Republicans want to forbid discussions of sexual orientation or gender identity in schools with a bill that activists say endangers children and echoes a previous wave of laws that sought to squelch LGBTQ conversations in the classroom.

Activists have dubbed the proposal moving through Florida's GOP-controlled Statehouse as the "Don't Say Gay" bill, and it has attracted condemnation on social media and from Chasten Buttigieg, the husband of Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg.

If passed, the measure would "effectively silence students from speaking about their LGBTQ family members, friends, neighbors and icons," said Kara Gross of the Florida chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union.

The bill emerged amid a national debate over how U.S. schools should teach about race, gender and history. The broad reexamination of public education has often turned contentious and led to books being pulled from school library shelves.

As written, the proposal states that school districts "may not encourage classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary grade levels or in a manner that is not age-appropriate or

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developmentally appropriate for students." A parent could sue a district for violations.

In a committee hearing last week, Democrats peppered bill sponsor Rep. Joe Harding with questions about whether kids would be able to talk freely about LGBTQ people or history.

Harding repeatedly said his bill is meant to give parents more control over what their children learn. He maintained that it would not silence spontaneous discussions but instead stop a district from integrating such topics into the curriculum. He added that schools could still have lessons on Pride Month and events such as the 2016 Pulse nightclub massacre in which a gunman killed 49 people in Orlando.

"This doesn't preclude discussion and conversation that's going to happen. We're talking about a school district initiating something through a standard procedure or policy that they're doing," he said.

Critics said Harding's statements contradicted the broad text of his bill, particularly in terms of having lessons on LGBTQ history, which they argued would be barred from the curriculum. They also said the proposal does not specify what grades would be affected. Harding said it would apply to students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

"There's a lack of clarity clearly on what this bill is seeking to do. But what we do know is that LGBTQ people are a normal, healthy part of our society," Jon Harris Maurer, public policy director of Equality Florida, told lawmakers at the hearing. "We're parents, students and teachers. We are your brothers and your sisters. Conversations about us aren't something dangerous that should be banned."

Aaron DiPietro, legislative director for the conservative Florida Family Policy Council, spoke in support of the measure, telling the committee: "These are issues that parents need to be involved in."

The bill passed the GOP-controlled committee and now heads to another committee. After the hearing, state Rep. Carlos Guillermo Smith, a Democrat who is gay, posted a video to social media criticizing the proposal.

"We should and we are encouraging these types of conversations in our schools," he said.

A similar bill introduced by a Republican state senator has yet to have a hearing.

The Florida proposal has echoes of a cluster of state laws passed mostly in the late 1980s and early 1990s to restrict discussions of LGBTQ issues in public schools.

In Utah, the restrictions banning "advocacy of homosexuality" in sex education and elsewhere affected kids for years, according to a 2017 lawsuit. They hamstrung one school's response to bullying after a 7-year-old boy was beaten and burned on a hot metal slide because the laws prevented teachers from telling other kids it was OK to be gay or wear girls' clothes, his mother said in court papers.

A school district also pulled a book about a lesbian couple raising children from library shelves under those rules.

In another case, a boy was told he could not do a family-history project on an uncle who was gay, said Clifford Rosky, a law professor at the University of Utah whose research formed the basis of the lawsuit.

"Any child or any student whose parent is a member of that group feels stigmatized, like the law stigmatizes their family," he said. "We saw this very dramatically in Utah."

Utah changed the law in response to the lawsuit, as have other states such as Arizona, South Carolina and Alabama.

Rosky said the Florida measure "has a greater discriminatory effect and a greater chilling effect, because it's up to every individual parent to enforce the law," he said.

The bill "would make teachers fearful of providing a safe, inclusive classroom," said Julie Wilensky, senior staff attorney at the National Center for Lesbian Rights. "It would really harm LGBTQ students and families, and it would stigmatize them by suggesting there's something so shameful or dangerous about LGBTQ people that they can't be discussed at school."

Large majorities of LGBTQ kids in Florida reported hearing homophobic remarks in school in a 2019 survey, and 69% reported being verbally harassed based on sexual orientation.

Last year, a handful of states passed new laws requiring parents to be notified about any discussions of LGBTQ issues in schools and allowing them to opt out. Those states included Tennessee, Arkansas and Montana, where the law has a broadly written in reference to "human sexuality education." A similar measure was vetoed in Arizona.

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It was part of a record year for anti-LGBT bills, with 26 enacted in 10 states, according to Human Rights Campaign. This year, less than a month into many legislative sessions, the LGBT-rights group is opposing at least 200 bills.

Two powerful drugs now adding to US overdose crisis

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Emerging reports show that two little-known drugs are making lethal new contributions to America's drug overdose crisis.

Para-fluorofentanyl and metonitazene are being seen more often by medical examiners looking into overdose deaths, according to a government report published Thursday. They often are taken with — or mixed with — illicit fentanyl, the drug mainly responsible for the more than 100,000 U.S. overdose deaths in the last year.

Increasingly, one or the other of the two drugs is the sole reason for some overdose deaths, said Dr. Darinka Mileusnic-Polchan, one of the report authors.

Often injected or snorted, they are more powerful than fentanyl, she said.

"These (victims) just crumple and collapse. Frequently they don't even inject the full syringe" before overdosing, said Mileusnic-Polchan, who leads the medical examiner's office in Knoxville, Tennessee.

The overdose-reversing drug naloxone can still work, but more of it may be needed than when other drugs are involved, she said.

The report, published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for U.S. medical and public health professionals, is one of the first of its kind to raise alarms about the drugs. It was written by officials from the Drug Enforcement Administration; a toxicology lab at the University of California, San Francisco; and the Knox County Regional Forensic Center.

The Knoxville area recorded 770 unintentional drug overdose deaths from November 2020 through August 2021, the authors wrote. Test results for 562 of them found fentanyl, and nearly 190 of those also tested positive for methamphetamine. But 48 involved para-fluorofentanyl, and 26 involved metonitazene, according to the report.

And deaths involving those drugs have increased since the summer, Mileusnic-Polchan said.

Para-fluorofentanyl is a synthetic opioid, like fentanyl. It was invented in the 1960s and has been sold illegally in the past, sometimes under the name "China-white."

In 2020, investigators began seeing an uptick in overdoses involving the drug. Recently, it's been found in heroin packets and counterfeit pills.

Metonitazene is from a class of painkillers developed in the 1950s but never authorized for medical treatment. That drug began appearing more often in overdose autopsy reports last year.

It's not clear how widespread the drugs are. Cash-strapped medical examiner's offices and coroner's offices are not able to pay for toxicology work that looks for every conceivable drug, Mileusnic-Polchan said. Her office documented the two drugs because it participated in a DEA program that uses the UCSF lab for analysis.

U.S. overdose deaths have been rising for more than two decades, but they accelerated in the past two years — jumping more than 20% in the latest year alone, according to the most recently available CDC data, through June 2021.

Experts have said the top drivers are the growing prevalence of deadly fentanyl and the COVID-19 pandemic, which left many drug users socially isolated and unable to get treatment or other support.

Holocaust novel 'Maus' banned in Tennessee school district

ATHENS, Tenn. (AP) — A Tennessee school district has voted to ban a Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel about the Holocaust due to "inappropriate language" and an illustration of a nude woman, according to minutes from a board meeting.

The McMinn County School Board decided Jan. 10 to remove "Maus" from its curriculum, news outlets

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reported.

Art Spiegelman won the Pulitzer Prize in 1992 for the work that tells the story of his Jewish parents living in 1940s Poland and depicts him interviewing his father about his experiences as a Holocaust survivor.

In an interview, Spiegelman told CNBC he was "baffled" by the school board's decision and called the action "Orwellian."

"It's leaving me with my jaw open, like, 'What?'" he said.

The decision comes as conservative officials across the country have increasingly tried to limit the type of books that children are exposed to, including books that address structural racism and LGBTQ issues. The Republican governors in South Carolina and Texas have called on superintendents to perform a systemic review of "inappropriate" materials in their states' schools.

The minutes from the school board meeting indicate objections over some of the language used in "Maus." At first, Director of Schools Lee Parkison suggested redacting it "to get rid of the eight curse words and the picture of the woman that was objected to."

The nude woman is drawn as a mouse. In the graphic novel, Jews are drawn as mice and the Nazis are drawn as cats.

"It shows people hanging, it shows them killing kids, why does the educational system promote this kind of stuff? It is not wise or healthy," School Board Member Tony Allman said about the book, which was part of the district's eighth-grade English language arts curriculum.

Instructional supervisor Julie Goodin, a former history teacher, said she thought the graphic novel was a good way to depict a horrific event.

"It's hard for this generation, these kids don't even know 9/11, they were not even born," Goodin said. "Are the words objectionable? Yes, there is no one that thinks they aren't. But by taking away the first part, it's not changing the meaning of what he is trying to portray."

Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, which does not play a role in McMinn County, noted the timing of the news on Twitter. Weingarten, who is Jewish, pointed out that Thursday is International Holocaust Remembrance Day.

"Yes it is uncomfortable to talk about genocide, but it is our history and educating about it helps us not repeat this horror," Weingarten said.

The U.S. Holocaust Museum tweeted that "Maus has played a vital role in educating about the Holocaust through sharing detailed and personal experiences of victims and survivors.

"Teaching about the Holocaust using books like Maus can inspire students to think critically about the past and their own roles and responsibilities today."

The Tennessee school board emphasized in the minutes that they did not object to teaching about the Holocaust but some were concerned the work was not age-appropriate.

Although they discussed redacting parts of the book, that led to copyright concerns and board members ultimately decided to look for an alternative book about the subject.

The book isn't the only one banned recently amid critical race theory controversy.

Michigan school shooting suspect to pursue insanity defense

By MIKE HOUSEHOLDER and COREY WILLIAMS Associated Press

SOUTHFIELD, Mich. (AP) — A teenager charged with killing four students at a Michigan high school will pursue an insanity defense, his lawyers said in a notice filed Thursday as he, his parents and school officials faced a new lawsuit over the attack at Oxford High School.

The notice, listed in a summary of case filings, should lead to mental health exams of 15-year-old Ethan Crumbley, who is charged as an adult with murder and other crimes for the shooting, which also wounded six other students and a teacher. Experts will consider whether the teen understood the wrongfulness of his conduct on the day of the shooting.

The lawsuit, meanwhile, was announced on behalf of the parents of Tate Myre, who was slain Nov. 30, and other students who witnessed the shootings. It alleges negligence by school officials and Crumbley's

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parents over the attack.

"We're sad and heartbroken — our lives forever changed," William Myre said at a news conference. "Our family will never be the same. We're not doing good. All we do is walk around the house and think about Tate. We think about him every day. We sit in his room. We listen to his playlist off Spotify. We're not doing good, but we're going to find a way to get through it together."

The lawsuit, which seeks at least \$25,000, names Oxford High School's dean of students, two counselors and three teachers as defendants. Crumbley and his parents also are named as defendants.

The Associated Press sent an email Thursday morning seeking comment from the school district.

The suspect's parents are accused of intentional, reckless and negligent conduct that led to the mass shooting. The Oxford High School staff and teachers are accused of gross negligence that led to the shooting by not removing the shooter from the school building earlier.

The lawsuit was filed Thursday in Oakland County Circuit Court on behalf of Tate Myre's parents, William and Sheri. Also named as plaintiffs are Chad and Meghan Gregory, whose son, Keegan, was hiding in a school bathroom with Justin Shilling when Shilling was fatally shot.

The lawsuit also was filed on behalf of Lauren Aliano, whose daughters, Sophia Kempen and Grace Kempen, were hiding in classrooms during the shooting.

Ethan Crumbley is being held in the Oakland County Jail.

The notice filed Thursday by his attorneys will lead to exams by the state Center for Forensic Psychiatry and experts retained by the defense and the prosecutor's office. Judge Kwame Rowe could also order an exam by another expert.

"This is absolutely appropriate to do. I doubt anyone is surprised by it," said Margaret Raben, a Detroit-area defense attorney not involved in the case. "All of this is going to take time. The forensic center is jammed, jammed, jammed with work."

After the reports are in, it will be up to the judge to decide if an insanity defense can go forward, Raben said.

Under Michigan law, if someone is found not guilty by reason of insanity, they don't walk free. They must be referred to a state psychiatric center for custody and further evaluation.

Someone who is found guilty but mentally ill still would be sentenced to prison but with recommendations that they get treatment.

The AP left a voicemail Thursday afternoon seeking comment from Ethan Crumbley's attorney, Paulette Michel Loftin, about the insanity defense notice.

The prosecutor's office said a request for an evaluation of Ethan Crumbley's criminal responsibility from his attorney was expected and standard procedure.

School officials became concerned about Ethan Crumbley a day before the shooting, when a teacher saw him searching for ammunition on his phone. Jennifer Crumbley was contacted and subsequently told her son in a text message: "Lol. I'm not mad at you. You have to learn not to get caught," according to Oakland County Prosecutor Karen McDonald.

The day of the shooting, a teacher found a note on Ethan's desk and took a photo. It was a drawing of a gun pointing at the words, "The thoughts won't stop. Help me," McDonald said in December.

The drawing also featured a person who appeared to have been shot twice and is bleeding. "My life is useless" and "The world is dead," were written.

The gun used in the shooting was bought days before by James Crumbley and their son had full access to it, according to authorities.

McDonald has said that James and Jennifer Crumbley committed "egregious" acts, from buying a gun on Black Friday and making it available to Ethan Crumbley to resisting his removal from school when they were summoned a few hours before the shooting.

James and Jennifer Crumbley, later were charged with involuntary manslaughter.

Detroit-area attorney Ven Johnson, who is representing parents in the lawsuit filed Thursday, said Ethan Crumbley knew what he was doing and "clearly he was disturbed," but his parents did nothing.

Chad Gregory recounted during Thursday's news conference what his son witnessed during the shooting.

Keegan Gregory was texting his family from a bathroom stall where he and Shilling were hiding.

"He was in that bathroom for five minutes," Chad Gregory said. "He was in there with a shooter who had just killed, wounded, injured. Justin gave him a plan that 'if we get a chance, we will run.'"

"He called them out one-by-one and Justin happened to be the first," said Chad Gregory, adding that after Shilling was shot, Keegan was able to flee the bathroom.

Two months later, Keegan remains traumatized, Meghan Gregory said.

"He's nowhere near going back to class, let alone functioning like a normal 15-year-old child," she said. "We have to check doors. We have to check under beds."

The school, in Oakland County, is about 30 miles (50 kilometers) north of Detroit. It reopened Monday with its interior renovated since the shooting.

In December, Jeffrey and Brandi Franz filed a pair of lawsuits in federal court and county circuit court seeking \$100 million each against the district. Their 17-year-old daughter, Riley, was shot in the neck. Her 14-year-old sister, Bella, a ninth grader, was next to her at the time she was shot.

Their lawsuit says school officials and high school staff didn't do enough to prevent the shooting and protect students.

Fake poop helps evicted owls settle into new neighborhood

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

Settling into a new home can be tough for anyone. So scientists have come up with some tricks to make transplanted burrowing owls feel like they are not alone in their new digs, playing owl sounds and scattering fake poop.

The owls' grassland homes are often prime real estate, and they've been losing ground to development in fast-growing regions like Silicon Valley and Southern California. Biologists have tried moving the owls to protected grasslands but the challenge has been getting the owls to accept their new homes.

Just dropping off the owls in prime habitat wasn't enough, prior attempts showed. In a pilot program, scientists took pains to create the impression that owls already lived there so they'd stick around. And it worked.

"They like to be in a neighborhood, to live near other owls," said Colleen Wisinski, a conservation biologist at the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance, which launched the experiment with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The scientists played recordings of owl calls before and after the new arrivals were released at four locations in Southern California. Wisinski used a syringe to squirt around fake owl poop — in reality, white paint.

Their results were published Thursday in the journal *Animal Conservation*.

Burrowing owls are the rare extroverts of the raptor world. These long-legged owls with slightly cross expressions actually love company. They nest in underground burrows with many owls nearby.

Such colonies provide protection from predators, such as coyotes or hawks, that may try to snack on the robin-sized, yellow-eyed birds. When one owl sounds an alarm, the others fly away.

Federal law prohibits the killing of the birds but their habitat is not protected. Typically, they are flushed from their burrows before properties are built.

"If after eviction there's nowhere for these guys to go, it's basically a death sentence," said Lynne Trulio, an ecologist at San Jose State University who has studied burrowing owls for three decades. She was not part of the study.

The population of western burrowing owls — the subspecies that lives in California — has declined by one-third since 1965. It is considered a "species of special concern" in the state.

For their experiment, the scientists transplanted 47 burrowing owls during 2017-2018. Twenty were outfitted with GPS devices to track their movements, and the scientists also returned to the sites to check on them.

Most successfully settled into their new homes and established breeding colonies. At the primary site, Rancho Jamul Ecological Reserve in southwestern San Diego County, there were about 50 owl chicks in

2020.

The researchers also monitored owls that were left on their own to find new homes. Those owls didn't fare as well.

"These scientists are leading the pack in advancing our understanding of how to relocate burrowing owls," said David H. Johnson, director of the Global Owl Project, who was not involved in the paper.

Study: Gas stoves worse for climate than previously thought

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Gas stoves are contributing more to global warming than previously thought because of constant tiny methane leaks while they're off, a new study found.

The same study that tested emissions around stoves in homes raised new concerns about indoor air quality and health because of levels of nitrogen oxides measured.

Even when they are not running, U.S. gas stoves are putting 2.6 million tons (2.4 million metric tons) of methane — in carbon dioxide equivalent units — into the air each year, a team of California researchers found in a study published in Thursday's journal *Environmental Science & Technology*. That's equivalent to the annual amount of greenhouse gases from 500,000 cars or what the United States puts into the air every three-and-a-half hours.

"They're constantly bleeding a little bit of methane into the atmosphere all the time," said the study's co-author Rob Jackson, a Stanford University climate scientist.

That methane is on top of the 6.8 million tons (6.2 million metric tons) of carbon dioxide that gas stoves emit into the air when they are in use and the gas is burned, the study said. Methane is a greenhouse gas that is dozens of times more potent than carbon dioxide but doesn't stay in the atmosphere nearly as long and isn't as plentiful in the air.

The researchers examined 53 home kitchens in California — many in bed and breakfasts they rented. They sealed most of the rooms in plastic tarps and then measured emissions when the stoves were working and when they were not. And what was surprising was that three-quarters of the methane released happened while the stoves were off, Jackson said. Those are emissions releases that the government doesn't account for, he said.

"That's a big deal because we're trying to really reduce our carbon footprint and we claim that gas is cleaner than coal, which it is," said study lead author Eric Lebel, a scientist at PSE Healthy Energy, an Oakland nonprofit. But he said much of the benefit disappears when leaks are taken into account.

Many communities have bans on gas stove use in future new construction that will take effect in future years, including New York City and the Bay Area cities of San Francisco, Oakland, San Jose, and Berkeley, Jackson said.

"People can already choose electric appliances if they want," said Frank Maisano, a Washington policy and public relations expert who represents gas and appliance interests. "People just like gas appliances because they perform better, especially in colder climates."

"Natural gas appliances are generally more energy- and cost-effective than their electric counterparts," Maisano said.

Jackson estimated that when all natural gas use and extraction is taken into account, about 100 million tons (91 million metric tons) of gas leaks into the atmosphere. And the couple million tons from gas stoves "is meaningful. That's a substantial part and it's a part that we haven't included accurately in the past."

The leakage finding is "a very important takeaway" and fits with other work that found there are often big leaks that account for much of the emissions, said Zachary Merrin, a research engineer with the Illinois Applied Research Institute's Indoor Climate Research & Training group.

Merrin, who wasn't part of the study, said the emission of un-combusted methane is "clearly bad. From an emissions standpoint, cooking directly with gas is better than using a fossil fuel powered electric stove but worse than using a solar powered electric stove."

The methane leak isn't dangerous to human health or as a possible explosive, Jackson said. But when

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conducting the tests, researchers found high levels of nitrogen oxides, greater than 100 parts per billion. Jackson said the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency doesn't have indoor air quality standards for that gas, but the measurements they took exceed its outdoor air quality standards. While methane doesn't include nitrogen, the nitrogen oxides are byproducts of the combustion in natural gas ovens, he said.

Maisano said people should always use hood ranges and make sure they have proper ventilation. Jackson, who has a gas stove that he plans to replace, said he never used ventilation before this study, but that he now does so every time.

Dems see high court pick as chance 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 will be buoyed by the prospect of President Joe Biden naming the first Black woman to serve on the Supreme Court.

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

Democrats are trying to regroup with an eye on maintaining a tenuous grip on Congress after November's midterm elections, and picking Breyer's replacement offers a chance to pause from those bruising battles. Democrats hope that with Biden fulfilling a campaign pledge to appoint the first Black woman as a justice, 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 J. Michelle Childs in South Carolina, 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 will not ultimately change the court's 6-3 conservative majority, which has stymied Biden on major priorities including his 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 priorities.

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 in a statement. "I look forward to meeting with and evaluating the qualifications of President Biden's nominee to fill this Supreme Court vacancy."

Republicans were quick to signal that they would cast the nominee as too far to the left no matter the nominee.

"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 (Senate Democratic leader) Chuck Schumer and whoever is running the White House will force all Democrats to obey and walk the plank in support of a

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radical liberal with extremist views.”

For years, the potential of shifting the court has animated Republican voters, many of whom are motivated by the goal of eroding abortion rights. But as the court has swung to the right, it has become a priority for Democratic voters, too.

In the 2020 presidential campaign, supporters of Biden and then-President Donald Trump were about as likely to say Supreme Court nominations were “the single most important factor” in their vote, with roughly 2 in 10 saying so, according to AP VoteCast. But Biden’s voters outpaced Trump’s in saying it was an important factor, even if not the top, 62% vs. 50%.

Heading into the 2022 election, the court was most expected to play a role in the fight for the Senate majority, where Democrats have the slimmest possible edge now. Vulnerable Democratic incumbents from New Hampshire to Nevada seized on the upcoming confirmation debate, highlighting abortion rights in particular.

In December, the court’s conservative majority 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, D-Nev., 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. Maggie Hassan.

“Justice Breyer has built an impressive legacy on the Supreme Court, including key votes to uphold a woman’s right to choose her own destiny and ensure that the Affordable Care Act remains the law of the land,” Hassan said. “When the time comes, I will review President Biden’s next Supreme Court nominee as part of the Senate’s confirmation process.”

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.

US economy grew 5.7% in 2021 in rebound from 2020 recession

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. economy grew last year at the fastest pace since Ronald Reagan’s presidency, bouncing back with resilience from 2020’s brief but devastating coronavirus recession.

The nation’s gross domestic product — its total output of goods and services — expanded 5.7% in 2021. It was the strongest calendar-year growth since a 7.2% surge in 1984 after a previous recession. The economy ended the year by growing at an unexpectedly brisk 6.9% annual pace from October through December as businesses replenished their inventories, the Commerce Department reported Thursday.

“It just goes to show that the U.S. economy has learned to adapt to the new variants and continues to produce,” said Beth Ann Bovino, chief economist at Standard & Poor’s Global Ratings.

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Squeezed by inflation and still gripped by COVID-19 caseloads, the economy is expected to slow this year. Many economists have been downgrading their forecasts for the current January-March quarter, reflecting the impact of the omicron variant. And for all of 2022, the International Monetary Fund has forecast that the nation's GDP growth will slow to 4%.

Many U.S. businesses, especially restaurants, bars, hotels and entertainment venues, remain under pressure from the omicron variant, which has kept millions of people hunkered down at home to avoid crowds. Consumer spending, the primary driver of the economy, may be further held back this year by the loss of government aid to households, which nurtured activity in 2020 and 2021 but has mainly expired.

What's more, the Federal Reserve made clear Wednesday that it plans to raise interest rates multiple times this year to battle the hottest inflation in nearly four decades. Those rate increases will make borrowing more expensive and perhaps slow the economy this year.

Growth last year was driven up by a 7.9% surge in consumer spending and a 9.5% increase in private investment.

For the final three months of 2021, consumer spending rose at a more muted 3.3% annual pace. But private investment rocketed 32% higher, boosted by a surge in business inventories as companies stocked up to meet higher customer demand. Rising inventories, in fact, accounted for 71% of the fourth-quarter growth.

"The upside surprise came largely from a surge in inventories, and the details aren't as strong as the headline would suggest," Kathy Bostjancic, Oxford Economics' chief U.S. financial economist, said in a research note.

In a statement, President Joe Biden said, "We are finally building an American economy for the 21st century, with the fastest economic growth in nearly four decades, along with the greatest year of job growth in American history."

Arising from the 2020 pandemic recession, a healthy rebound had been expected for 2021. GDP had shrunk 3.4% in 2020, the steepest full-year drop since an 11.6% plunge in 1946, when the nation was demobilizing after World War II. The eruption of COVID in March 2020 had led authorities to order lockdowns and businesses to abruptly shut down or reduce hours. Employers slashed a staggering 22 million jobs. The economy sank into a deep recession.

But super-low interest rates, huge infusions of government aid — including \$1,400 checks to most households — and, eventually, the widespread rollout of vaccines revived the economy. Many consumers regained the confidence and financial wherewithal to go out and spend again.

The resurgence in demand was so robust, in fact, that it caught businesses off guard. Many struggled to acquire enough supplies and workers to meet a swift increase in customer orders. With many people now working remotely, shortages became especially acute for goods ordered for homes, from appliances to sporting goods to electronic equipment. And with computer chips in especially short supply, auto dealers were left desperately short of vehicles.

Factories, ports and freight yards were overwhelmed, and supply chains became ensnarled. Inflation began to accelerate. Over the past 12 months, consumer prices soared 7% — the fastest year-over-year inflation since 1982. Food, energy and autos were among the items whose prices soared the most.

Late last year, the economy began to show signs of fatigue. Retail sales, for instance, fell 1.9% in December. And manufacturing slowed in December to its lowest level in 11 months, according to the Institute for Supply Management's manufacturing index.

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

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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 median, 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 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 Husain 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.

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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."

In one small prairie town, two warring visions of America

By TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

BENSON, Minn. (AP) — The newspaper hit the front porches of the wind-scarred prairie town on a Thursday afternoon: Coronavirus numbers were spiking in the farming communities of western Minnesota.

"Covid-19 cases straining rural clinics, hospitals, staff," read the front-page headline. Vaccinate to protect yourselves, health officials urged.

But ask around Benson, stroll its three-block business district, and some would tell a different story: The Swift County Monitor-News, the tiny newspaper that's reported the news here since 1886, is not telling the truth. The vaccine is untested, they say, dangerous. And some will go further: People, they'll tell you, are being killed by COVID-19 vaccinations.

One little town. Three thousand people. Two starkly different realities.

It's another measure of how, in an America increasingly split by warring visions of itself, division doesn't just play out on cable television, or in mayhem at the U.S. Capitol.

It has seeped into the American fabric, all the way to Benson's 12th Street, where two neighbors -- each in his own well-kept, century-old home -- can live in different worlds.

In one house is Reed Anfinson, publisher, editor, photographer and reporter for the Monitor-News. Most weeks, he writes every story on the paper's front page. He wrote that story on clinics struggling with COVID-19.

He's not the most popular man in the county. Lots of people disagree with his politics. He deals with the occasional veiled threat. Sometimes, he grudgingly worries about his safety.

While his editorials lean left, he works hard to report the news straight. But in an America of competing visions, some here say he has taken sides.

Nowhere in the Monitor-News, for example, will you find reports that local people are dying because they've been inoculated.

"There are no alternative facts," Anfinson says. "There is just the truth."

But whose truth?

His neighbor, Jason Wolter, is a thoughtful, broad-shouldered Lutheran pastor who reads widely and measures his words carefully. He also suspects Democrats are using the coronavirus pandemic as a political

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tool, doubts President Joe Biden was legitimately elected and is certain that COVID-19 vaccines kill people. He hasn't seen the death certificates and hasn't contacted health authorities, but he's sure the vaccine deaths occurred: "I just know that I'm doing their funerals."

He's also certain that information "will never make it into the newspaper."

Wolter's frustration boils over during a late breakfast in a town cafe. Seated with a reporter, he starts talking as if Anfinson is there.

"You're lying to people," he says. "You flat-out lie about things."

"In rural Minnesota we still have a work ethic, and I'll call them Christian values, and that's not reflected in our local newspaper," said Al Saunders, a farmer and friend of Wolter's who graduated from Benson High School a couple years after Anfinson.

"I just can't stomach it anymore," said Saunders, whose family settled on part of his sprawling farm more than a century ago, and who speaks almost lovingly about the rich brown soil. Anfinson's editorials on farm subsidies and politics leave him fuming. "Trash gets thrown at you so many times and eventually you just give up."

He grudgingly subscribes to the Monitor-News, which has a circulation of roughly 2,000. But just to follow local politics.

Anfinson does cover Swift County intensely -- the city council, the county commissioners, the school board and nearly every other gathering of consequence. He's there for school concerts, community fundraisers, elections and livestock judging at the county fair. His white Jeep is often spattered with mud from the county's dirt roads.

He works relentlessly. Wednesday afternoons, after he gets that week's edition ready for printing the next morning, often count as his weekend.

Anfinson is 67 but looks at least a decade younger. A contemplative man who casually quotes Voltaire, he loves newspapers deeply, and mourns the hundreds of small-town papers that have gone under in recent years.

Still, Anfinson sometimes is surprised to find himself in Benson.

Family is a powerful force here, and this town is knitted together in ways that few Americans understand anymore. His grandfather, a poetry-loving plumber and child of Norwegian immigrants, came to Benson as a child. His father came home from World War II, became a reporter at the Monitor-News and eventually bought the newspaper with a partner.

Anfinson grew up planning on a journalism career somewhere beyond small-town Minnesota. But he found those plans upended when his father's health began declining in the late 1970s.

"I thought I'd come back here just for a little while," he said. "It turned into the rest of my life."

Not that he regrets it.

He's proud that his reporting means something here, whether it's a high-school student getting an award or an expensive building project the community rejected after he wrote about it.

Still, there are times when it's exhausting. And expensive. With declining circulation and ads, he estimates his three little local newspapers are worth at least \$1 million less than a decade ago.

"The easy part is speaking truth to power. The hard part is speaking truth to your community. That can cost you advertisers. That can cost you subscribers," he said.

It can be easy, looking around Benson, to think it is a land that time forgot.

Bartenders often greet customers by name. The town's cafes feel like high school lunchrooms, with people wandering between tables to say hello. Those in search of solitude go to the Burger King, where they sit alone at plastic tables, staring out the windows.

Benson was built in the 1870s as railways reached this part of the prairies, and trains remain the town's background music. In the cafes, people barely look up when mile-long trains roar through downtown. Few people stop talking. They've been hearing those trains for generations.

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Many farms and businesses have been owned by the same families for decades: through the droughts of the 1930s; through the thriving years around World War II; to the population decline that began in the 1950s.

But plenty has changed.

Stores closed. Little farms were bought up by more successful farmers. Families left. Swift County's population has dropped about 30 percent since 1960, and now has about 10,000 residents. Meanwhile, a county that was 98% white in 1990 has seen a stream of new minority residents, particularly Latinos. The county is now 87% white - far whiter than much of America, but far more diverse than a generation ago.

Today, longtime locals can sometimes feel unmoored.

"There are a lot of people coming through that I don't recognize," said Terri Collins, Benson's cheerful mayor, whose family has been in Benson for five generations. "I used to know all of my neighbors and now that's different. And I don't know what to blame for that."

Once, neighborliness and good manners were near-commandments here. Now anger is on the rise.

Neighborhood shouting matches are more common, a local official's car was vandalized, and a "F--- Biden" flag now flies along a school bus route. Collins and the town police chief both say they sometimes worry about Anfinson's safety.

"Ten years ago I don't think anything like this would happen," she said.

But that was then. Travel across the plains of western Minnesota and you'll find plenty of people who are bestirred by a new and often dark vision of America.

They are not on the fringes, at least by current standards. They are, for the most part, mainstream conservatives who see a nation that barely exists in traditional newspapers and mainstream TV news broadcasts.

People like the store manager, sitting at an American Legion bar drinking \$3 cocktails, who calls the billionaire financier George Soros, a Jewish survivor of the Nazis and a powerful backer of liberal causes, "one of the most evil men I've ever heard of." And the semi-retired nurse who fears teams of sex traffickers she says operate freely in countless small towns.

But it would be a mistake to think they can be categorized easily.

Some desperately want Trump to run again; others pray he won't. One farmer quietly admits he worries about the growing numbers of racial minorities; another enjoys hearing new accents at the grocery store. Many are nearly as dismissive of conservative media as they are of traditional news outlets.

While social conservatism has long run deep in Swift County -- even the former, longtime Democratic congressman was anti-abortion and pro-gun rights -- many say the presidency of Barack Obama marked a change.

Gay marriage was legalized and identity politics took hold. Growing calls for transgender rights seemed like an issue from another planet. The sometimes-violent racial justice protests that followed police killings of Black men had some here stocking up on ammunition.

Trump's cries that he loved America resonated in an area where new approaches to teaching U.S. history, with an increased focus on race, were confounding.

So in a county where Obama won with 55% of the vote in 2008, Trump won with 64% percent in 2020.

"We've seen a shift here in Swift County," said Al Saunders. "But you won't see that in the newspaper."

Anfinson's weekly column, where he writes about everything from political divisions to rural housing shortages, is a local lightning rod.

He sighed: "That editorial page will have people hate me."

Across the U.S., many smaller newspapers, already facing economic decline with the rise of the internet, have cut back or completely stopped running editorials, trying to hold onto conservative readers who increasingly see them as local arms of a fake news universe.

But Anfinson won't consider that, even if sometimes he feels like he's tilting at angry, small-town windmills. He says it's his duty to expose people to new ideas, even unpopular ideas like stricter gun control.

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The editorial page is, he says "the soul of a newspaper in a way."

"I would be a traitor to the cause of journalism, of community newspapers," by giving up on editorials, he said. "I would be cowardly."

Some would call him stubborn, and his wife and business partner, Shelly, would not disagree. It can be complicated being married to Reed Anfinson.

Like the day last spring, when Anfinson was in the bar next to the office and a man loudly told a friend that Anfinson was a communist and "somebody should do something about that guy."

Anfinson knows the man. So does Shelly. A longtime dental hygienist, she cleaned his teeth for 20 years. She still says hello when she passes the man on the street.

"I try not to create a bigger divide," said Shelly, who, after a series of intensive classes on the newspaper business, began running another of the couple's weekly papers two years ago.

"I've definitely lost sleep over some confrontations that he's had," she said. "But do you let that stand in the way of reporting the facts?"

Shelly is warm and gregarious and easy to like. And when it comes to politics, she's not who you'd expect to be married to the man often tagged as Benson's best-known liberal.

She's a pro-life Republican who voted for Trump, at least the first time. It annoys her when news outlets talk down to conservatives. She worries that there are too few Republican journalists.

She and Reed married 20 years ago, after both had been divorced. She moved in across the street and soon he was walking her home.

She is often torn between support for Reed and worries over subscriber loss.

Still, she's been pressing him to tone down the politics.

"It is a struggle. I can tell these things to my business partner. It's harder to tell them to my husband."

In the custom of small-town Minnesota, the Anfinson and Wolter families get along, at least outwardly. They wave when they see each other. When one family is out of town, the other will sometimes watch their home.

"We're still personable," Wolter says. "I just don't trust him."

"He's not going to come to church and I'm not going to buy his newspaper. But we can still treat each other as neighbors."

While he believes Anfinson is sincere in what he publishes, he does not believe his neighbor has a monopoly on truth.

Wolter also knows that plenty of people would write him off as just another conspiracy monger. But he's far more complicated.

He worries his conservative opinions color what he believes: "There are times when I've thought: 'Well, what if all my angst over this is misplaced?'" he said. "Maybe everyone else is right?"

But he worries more about America: "This is a dark time."

He criticizes conservative politicians for trying to make it illegal to burn the American flag, but worries about far-right accusations that U.S. soldiers are hunting down American conservatives.

"Maybe five or 10 years ago, I would have said 'That's crazy!'" he said. "Now I acknowledge it might be possible. I'm not saying I think it's happening, but at least I don't dismiss it the way that I would have."

Wolter, whose home library includes everything from Sophocles to "The Grapes of Wrath," is a careful reader, in his own way. He's wary of conservative news sites like Breitbart, believing it shapes its reporting to please conservative readers. Instead, he finds his news farther off the beaten path, like on Gab, a Twitter-like social media platform that has become home to many on America's far right.

"For better or for worse I don't really trust anything I read," he says. The answer, he said, is research, probing the farthest corners of the internet.

The answers are not to be found, he insists, in the Swift Country Monitor-News.

Anfinson, for his part, doesn't want to talk about Wolter, at least not directly. He's watched Benson's fragile web of community fray too much.

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Instead, he talks proudly about the Monitor-News: how it prints letters to the editor that are harshly critical of it; how he reports the truth even if it costs him; how his coverage of the pandemic goes to the heart of journalists' responsibility to keep their communities safe.

He mourns how some people see him as an enemy. His newspaper should bind people together, he says. Instead, America and Benson are growing angrier. Contentious midterm elections loom.

"It's kind of sad," he said. "But it would be foolish of me not to be aware of (my safety) with the sentiments out there."

Does he carry a weapon? This soft-spoken man says he does not.

"But I know where one is if I need it."

Entering Beijing's Olympics bubble is a surreal experience

BEIJING (AP) — For the thousands of athletes, journalists and others descending on Beijing for the Winter Olympics, China's strict pandemic measures are creating a surreal and at times anxious experience.

China is isolating everyone coming from abroad from any contact with the general public for the duration of the Games, which open next week. That means being taken from the Beijing airport in special vehicles to a hotel surrounded by temporary barricades that keep participants in and the public out.

"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," said Associated Press photo editor Yirmiyan Arthur, who arrived this week. "I'm not really going to experience China, I'm just going to experience the Olympics within the bubble."

The experiences of AP journalists who have arrived or are preparing to depart offers a glimpse into life inside the bubble.

Photographer Jae Hong said he had been warned about the bubble but seeing it in effect in Beijing was still a shock. He described seeing passengers met by workers in white, full-body protective gear. Everyone is tested for COVID-19 at the airport before being transported to their barricaded hotels, the entrances protected by round-the-clock guards.

Organizers want to keep any infections from getting out of the bubble, as well as spreading within the bubble, a heightened concern with the easily transmissible omicron variant. Everyone is tested daily — failing to get tested the previous evening means being stuck in your hotel the next day.

So far, organizers said Thursday there have been 129 positive tests among the 4,046 people who have arrived for the Games. Of those, two are either athletes or team officials. The rest are other participants such as the media. Those who test positive are taken to a hospital if they have symptoms or a quarantine hotel if they do not.

Even getting to China can be worrying, requiring multiple negative COVID-19 tests entered into an app that displays your health status. That kept Arthur on edge during her journey from New Delhi to Beijing via Tokyo. A colleague who had already arrived in Beijing helped her download the app. Then she saw the health workers in biohazard suits after she got off the plane.

"In the airport it's a bit scary, it's almost like a hospital that was treating COVID patients in the second wave," she said, referring to India's devastating surge in March 2021.

Tokyo also had strict rules for the Summer Olympics last year, but participants were allowed outside of the bubble after two weeks.

AP video journalist Johnson Lai, who has yet to depart for the Olympics, is facing stress because China has no formal relations with Taiwan, his self-governing homeland that Beijing claims as its own territory.

That meant he was unable to complete the form in the Olympics app to get a code, which requires a test conducted at a China-approved hospital. "There's a lot of uncertain matters that we can't control," he said.

Outside the bubble, Beijing authorities locked down more neighborhoods in the city's Fengtai district on Thursday as they try to snuff out a delta variant outbreak that has infected about 70 people.

China has a "zero tolerance" policy under which it quickly locks down affected areas and conducts mass testing of residents to find infections and isolate them. All 2 million residents of Fengtai are undergoing a third round of testing since last weekend.

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The Beijing outbreak has spread to neighboring provinces. After four cases were reported in the city of Langfang, just south of Beijing in Hebei province, authorities suspended travel between the cities to try to prevent further spread.

Arthur, the photo editor, could see other passengers at the airport from a bus, a view of people outside the Olympics bubble. "And you see ... oh, there's life out there," she said, "and you're like, oh my God, it's so near and yet so far."

He won a trip to space. Then he gave it away 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 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.

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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."

US weekly jobless claims fall for the first time in a month

By MATT OTT AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Fewer Americans applied for unemployment benefits last week following three straight increases amid a surge in cases of the omicron variant of COVID-19.

Jobless claims fell by 30,000 to 260,000 last week, the Labor Department reported Thursday, fewer than the 265,000 analysts were expecting.

The four-week average of claims, which compensates for weekly volatility, rose by 15,000 to 247,000, the highest in two months.

Altogether, nearly 1.7 million people were collecting jobless aid the week that ended Jan. 15, a nominal increase of 51,000 from the previous week.

A recent surge in COVID-19 cases has set back what had been a strong comeback from last year's short but devastating coronavirus recession. Jobless claims, a proxy for layoffs, had fallen mostly steadily for about a year and late last year dipped below the pre-pandemic average of around 220,000 a week. Economists expect claims to return to those lower levels as the virus fades, which is already taking place in regions that were hit first with omicron infections.

After a spike in cases across the East Coast at the end of 2021, the seven-day rolling average for daily new COVID-19 cases in the U.S. has fallen by about 25% since January 12, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. However, the seven-day rolling average for COVID-19 deaths has risen significantly, from just less than 1,800 per day to about 2,300 per day during the past two weeks.

The job market has bounced back from last year's brief but intense coronavirus recession, and companies are desperate to retain and hire workers, despite the recent uptick in jobless claims. The unemployment rate settled at 3.9% last month, a long steady decline from heights of nearly 15% in the spring of 2020 when the pandemic devastated the global economy.

Massive government spending and the vaccine rollout jumpstarted the economy as employers added a record 6.4 million jobs last year. But hiring slowed in November and December last year as employers struggled to fill job openings. Still, the unemployment rate fell last month to a pandemic low 3.9%.

Data for December will be released next week, but in November, employers posted 10.6 million job openings, the fifth-highest monthly total in records going back to 2000. A record 4.5 million workers, confident

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in their prospects for better opportunities, quit their jobs in November.

A red-hot U.S. economy has triggered inflation not seen in four decades, leading the Federal Reserve to ease its support for the economy. The Fed on Wednesday signaled that it would begin a series of interest-rate hikes in March, reversing pandemic-era policies that have fueled hiring and growth but also stubborn inflation. The downside of the Fed's expected rate hike — or hikes — is that it will make it more expensive to borrow for a home, car or business.

Also Thursday, the government reported that the U.S. economy expanded 5.7% in 2021, grew last year at the fastest pace since a 7.2% surge in 1984 after a previous recession.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Friday, Jan. 28, the 28th day of 2022. There are 337 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Jan. 28, 1973, a cease-fire officially went into effect in the Vietnam War, a day after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords by the United States, North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

On this date:

In 1547, England's King Henry VIII died; he was succeeded by his 9-year-old son, Edward VI.

In 1813, the novel "Pride and Prejudice" by Jane Austen was first published anonymously in London.

In 1915, the United States Coast Guard was created as President Woodrow Wilson signed a bill merging the Life-Saving Service and Revenue Cutter Service.

In 1916, Louis D. Brandeis was nominated by President Woodrow Wilson to the Supreme Court; Brandeis became the court's first Jewish member.

In 1922, 98 people were killed when the roof of the Knickerbocker Theatre in Washington, D.C., collapsed under the weight of nearly two feet of snow.

In 1945, during World War II, Allied supplies began reaching China over the newly reopened Burma Road.

In 1956, Elvis Presley made his first national TV appearance on "Stage Show," a CBS program hosted by Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey.

In 1977, actor-comedian Freddie Prinze, 22, co-star of the NBC-TV show "Chico and the Man," shot and mortally wounded himself at the Beverly Comstock Hotel (he died the following day).

In 1980, six U.S. diplomats who had avoided being taken hostage at their embassy in Tehran flew out of Iran with the help of Canadian diplomats.

In 1982, Italian anti-terrorism forces rescued U.S. Brig. Gen. James L. Dozier, 42 days after he had been kidnapped by the Red Brigades.

In 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds after liftoff from Cape Canaveral, killing all seven crew members, including schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe.

In 2011, chaos engulfed Egypt as protesters seized the streets of Cairo, battling police, burning down the ruling party's headquarters and defying a military curfew.

In 2020, the United States and several other nations prepared to airlift citizens out of the Chinese city at the center of a virus outbreak that had killed more than 100 people.

Ten years ago: The Arab League halted its observer mission in Syria because of escalating violence. Victoria Azarenka routed three-time Grand Slam winner Maria Sharapova 6-3, 6-0 to win the Australian Open.

Five years ago: A federal judge in New York issued an emergency order temporarily barring the U.S. from deporting people from nations subject to President Donald Trump's travel ban. Serena Williams won her record 23rd Grand Slam singles title, defeating her sister Venus 6-4, 6-4 at the Australian Open.

One year ago: A new variant of the coronavirus emerged in the United States, posing yet another public health challenge in a country already losing more than 3,000 people to COVID-19 every day. New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration confirmed that thousands more nursing home residents died of COVID-19 than the state's official tallies had previously acknowledged. Cicely Tyson, the pioneering Black actor who

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gained an Oscar nomination for her role as the sharecropper's wife in "Sounder," won a Tony Award in 2013 at age 88 and touched TV viewers' hearts in "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman," died; she was 96.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Nicholas Pryor is 87. Actor Alan Alda is 86. Actor Susan Howard is 80. Actor Marthe (cq) Keller is 77. Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., is 75. Actor-singer Barbi Benton is 72. Evangelical pastor Rick Warren is 68. Former French President Nicolas Sarkozy (sahr-koh-ZEE') is 67. Actor Harley Jane Kozak is 65. Movie director Frank Darabont is 63. Rock musician Dave Sharp is 63. Rock singer Sam Phillips is 60. Rock musician Dan Spitz is 59. Gospel singer Marvin Sapp is 55. Singer Sarah McLachlan is 54. Rapper Rakim is 54. DJ Muggs (Cypress Hill) is 54. Actor Kathryn Morris is 53. Humorist Mo Rocca is 53. Rock/soul musician Jeremy Ruzumna (Fitz and the Tantrums) is 52. R&B singer Anthony Hamilton is 51. Supreme Court Justice Amy Coney Barrett is 50. Singer Monifah is 50. Actor Gillian Vigman is 50. Retired MLB All-Star Jermaine Dye is 48. Actor Terri Conn is 47. Singer Joey Fatone Jr. ('N Sync) is 45. Rapper Rick Ross is 45. Actor Rosamund Pike is 43. Actor Angelique Cabral is 43. Singer Nick Carter (Backstreet Boys) is 42. Actor Vinny Chhibber is 42. Actor Elijah Wood is 41. Rapper J. Cole is 37. Actor Alexandra Krosney is 34. Actor Yuri Sardarov is 34. Actor Ariel Winter is 24.