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Southern DAILY

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Biden scores legislative win as House passes \$1.9 trillion COVID relief plan



“I hope it will receive quick action. We have no time to waste,” Biden said, without taking questions. “The people of this country have suffered far too much for far too long.”

WASHINGTON (Reuters) - President Joe Biden scored his first legislative win as the House of Representatives passed his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package early Saturday, though Democrats face challenges to their hopes of using the bill to raise the minimum wage. Democrats who control the chamber passed the sweeping measure by a mostly party-line vote of 219 to 212 and sent it on to the Senate, where Democrats planned a legislative maneuver to allow them to pass it without the support of Republicans.

The American Rescue Plan would pay for vaccines and medical supplies and send a new round of emergency financial aid to households, small businesses and state and local governments. The bill's big-ticket items include \$1,400 direct payments to individuals, a \$400-per-week federal unemployment benefit through Aug. 29, and help for those in difficulty paying rents and home mortgages during the pandemic.

In brief remarks on Saturday from the White House's Roosevelt Room, Biden said he called House Speaker

Nancy Pelosi to thank her for her support and urged the Senate to take up the bill quickly.

“I hope it will receive quick action. We have no time to waste,” Biden said, without taking questions. “The people of this country have suffered far too much for far too long.” Democrats said the package was needed to fight a pandemic that has killed more than 500,000 Americans and thrown millions out of work.

“The American people need to know that their government is there for them,” Pelosi said in a debate on the House floor.

Republicans, who have broadly backed previous COVID-19 spending, said much of the current package was not necessary, highlighting elements such as a subway near Pelosi's San Francisco district. Only 9% of the total would go directly toward fighting the virus, they said.

“It just throws out money without accountability,” House Republican Leader Kevin McCarthy said.

Democrats pointed to a recent Quinnipiac University poll showing 68% of Americans supported the package, including 47% of Republicans, with just 37% of Republicans opposing it.

“This critical legislation has support from Americans across the country and the political spectrum, and yet Republicans in Congress are trying to stand in the way,” said Jamie Harrison, chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

The House vote amounted to a successful first test for Democrats, who hold a narrow 221-211 majority in the chamber. Progressives and moderates in the party who are often at odds will face tougher battles ahead on immigration and climate change initiatives that Biden wants to push.

The president has focused his first weeks in office on tackling the greatest U.S. public health crisis in a century, which has upended most aspects of American life.

Democrats aim to get the bill to him to sign into law before mid-March, when enhanced unemployment benefits and some other types of aid are due to expire.

The action now moves to the Senate, where

Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris may have to cast a tie-breaking vote in a chamber where Republicans control 50 seats and Democrats and their allies control the other 50.

FATE OF MINIMUM WAGE HIKE UNCLEAR

Democrats will have to sort out how to handle a proposed minimum-wage increase, which may have to be stripped from the bill due to the complicated rules that govern the Senate. The House-passed bill would raise the national hourly minimum wage for the first time since 2009, to \$15 from \$7.25. The increase is a top priority for progressive Democrats.

However, the Senate's rules expert said on Thursday that the wage hike did not qualify for special treatment that allows the rest of the bill to be passed with a simple majority, rather than the 60 votes needed to advance most legislation in the 100-seat chamber.

Pelosi predicted the relief bill will pass Congress with or without the increase, and said Democrats would not give up on the matter.

It is not clear whether the minimum-wage hike would have survived the Senate even if it were to be kept in the bill. At least two Senate Democrats oppose it, along with most Republicans.

Some senators are floating a smaller increase, to the range of \$10 to \$12 per hour, while Democrats are considering a penalty for large corporations that do not voluntarily pay a \$15 wage, according to a Democratic aide.

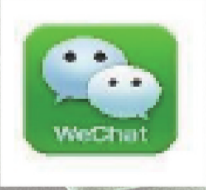
Efforts to craft a bipartisan coronavirus aid bill fizzled early on, shortly after Biden was sworn in as president on Jan. 20, following a series of bipartisan bills enacted in 2020.

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WEA LEE'S GLOBAL NOTES

02/27/2021

CORONAVIRUS DIARY

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President Biden Brought A Warm Message To Texas

President Joe Biden traveled to Houston, Texas, on Friday to survey the damage caused by the winter storm. He met with state and local officials on the recovery efforts and went to the Houston Food Bank to thank the volunteers.

The president said his visit today was for a couple of reasons. He said that, "First and foremost is to let the people of Texas know our prayers are with you in the aftermath of this winter storm, and secondly, to let you know that we will be true partners to help you recover and rebuild from the storm and the pandemic and the economic crisis."

In Harris County alone 1.5 million residents lost power and heat and 3.5 million people lost water.

Today we are also very glad to learn that the FDA approved the Johnson & Johnson coronavirus vaccine paving the way for its likely authorization to come as early as today. This would make it the third vaccine available in the United States.

We were also sad to learn that our community leader, Dr. C. C. Mao passed away because of the coronavirus. Dr.



Mao has been serving our community for almost fifty years.

challenges in this very difficult time. We really appreciate that the President came to visit our community.

Today we are still fixing the critical



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Southern DAILY Make Today Different

Editor's Choice



President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden arrive at Ellington Field Joint Reserve Base in Houston, Texas, February 26, 2021. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst



President Joe Biden speaks with Representative Sylvia Garcia upon arrival at Ellington Field Joint Reserve Base in Houston, Texas, February 26, 2021. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst



Participants wearing motorcycle helmets take a break from getting sprayed with firecrackers. REUTERS/Ann Wang



President Joe Biden and first lady Jill Biden arrive at Ellington Field Joint Reserve Base in Houston, Texas, February 26, 2021. REUTERS/Jonathan Ernst

Negative Trend: A Longer, Deadlier Pandemic?



Illustration: Eniola Odetunde/Axios

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

Mutated versions of the coronavirus threaten to prolong the pandemic, perhaps for years — killing more people and deepening the global economic crisis in the process.

The big picture: The U.S. and the world are in a race to control the virus before these variants can gain a bigger foothold. But many experts say they already expect things to get worse before they get better. And that also means an end to the pandemic may be getting further away.

- **“It may take four to five years** before we finally see the end of the pandemic and the start of a post-COVID normal,” Singapore’s education minister said last week, according to *the Wall Street Journal*.
- **Where it stands:** “There are essentially two separate COVID-19 epidemics,” Dutch officials said recently, referring to the original strain of COVID-19 and the burgeoning threat from mutated versions of the virus.
- **There’s light at the end of the tunnel for the first epidemic.** Although the virus is still spreading uncontrolled across the U.S. and much of the world, cases and hospitalizations are down from their peak, and vaccinations are steadily increasing.
- But the next iteration, **fueled by variants of the virus,** is already taking hold.
- **What’s next:** A British variant of the coronavirus

will likely become the dominant strain within the U.S. pretty soon, experts say. It’s significantly more contagious than the virus we’ve been dealing with so far, and some researchers believe it may also be about 30% more deadly.

- **“That hurricane’s coming,”** Michael Osterholm, an infectious disease expert at the University of Minnesota and Biden transition adviser, said Sunday on “Meet the Press.”
- A more contagious and more lethal strain of the virus could easily send cases, hospitalizations and deaths soaring right back to record levels, even as vaccinations continue to ramp up.

“We are going to see something like we have not seen yet in this country,” Osterholm said.

- It’s already happening in the U.K., where skyrocketing hospitalizations prompted another round of lockdown



measures — and pushback against those restrictions.

Vaccines work against the British variant, and they will help control its spread, just as they’ll help control the pandemic overall.

- But vaccinations can only ramp up so quickly. The Biden administration is trying to push doses out the door as fast as it can, but there’s a very good chance the more contagious virus is moving faster.
- The existing vaccines don’t appear to work as well against some other variants, including a particularly troubling one first identified in South Africa. They do work, and they appear to prevent serious illness and death, which are the most important things — but they may not prevent as many infections overall.
- Vaccine makers can rework their recipes and come up with booster shots to help address more resistant strains, but that will take time.

How it works: All of these problems stem from the same underlying problem — **the unchecked spread of the virus.**

- More cases mean more hospitalizations and more death. Bigger outbreaks also provide more opportunities for mutations to arise, and to spread.
- A more transmissible virus means that a greater share of the population — maybe as much as 85% — **would have to get vaccinated in order to reach herd immunity.** That’ll be a stretch, given the widespread vaccine hesitancy across the country.

Because vaccine production is still scaling up, getting things under control well enough to head off a second phase of the pandemic would have to rely heavily on social distancing and mask-wearing.

- That’s not a very promising position to be in, **especially for a country like the**



U.S.

The bottom line: Vaccines work, and they are still the key to ending this pandemic. But leaning on them almost exclusively only makes the job harder and will likely prolong this pandemic for years. (Courtesy axios.com)

Related

Shots generated an ‘inferior’ immune system response in comparison with natural infection

Merck Scraps COVID Vaccines; Says It’s More Effective To Get The Virus And Recover

Vaccine manufacturer Merck has abandoned development of two coronavirus vaccines, saying that after extensive research it was concluded that the shots offered less protection than just contracting the virus itself and developing antibodies.

The company announced that the shots V590 and V591 were ‘well tolerated’ by test patients, however they generated an ‘inferior’ immune system response in comparison with natural infection. The company stated that instead it will focus on research into therapeutic drugs labeled as MK-7110 and MK-4482. The drugs aim to protect patients from the damage of an overactive immune response to the virus.

(Photo/Chris Clor / Getty Images)

“Interim results from a Phase 3 study showed a greater than 50 percent reduction in the risk of death or respiratory failure in patients hospitalized with moderate to severe COVID-19,” the company’s statement noted of the MK-7110 drug.

Merck is to receive around \$356 million from the U.S. government to fast-track production of the potential treatments under Operation Warp Speed. Chief Marketing Officer Michael Nally recently told Bloomberg that Merck is aiming to produce some 20 million courses of the MK-4482 drug, an oral antiviral which patients will

take twice a day for five days.

Meanwhile, in related news, German scientists have claimed that the UK Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine is less than 8% effective in over 65s, prompting the vaccine developers to hit back, rubbing the claims.

AstraZeneca

The German media published the claims, alleging it had been ‘confirmed’ by ‘multiple’ unnamed senior German government sources. UK government ministers have suggested that the claim could be related to the ongoing dispute over delivery of the vaccine between the European Union and AstraZeneca. The EU, which is yet to approve the vaccine, has threatened to block exports of shots to Britain, in a move that has been branded ‘spiteful’ by British government sources.

In an effort to make sure its member states get their ‘fair share’ of vaccines, the EU has also threatened to block the delivery of Pfizer vaccines to the UK, demanding that drug companies provide detailed information on when they plan to export Covid jabs to countries outside the bloc. (Courtesy summitnews.com)

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COMMUNITY

As U.S. Hospitalizations Are Falling, COVID-19 Variants Concern Experts

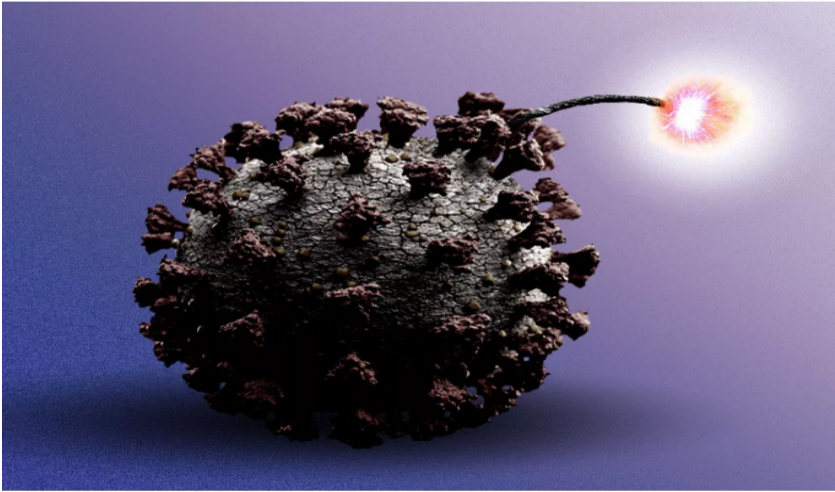


Illustration: Aida Amer/Axios

Compiled And Edited By John T. Robbins, Southern Daily Editor

COVID-19 hospitalizations in the U.S. this past week dropped below 100,000 for the first time since December, with sharp declines happening in almost all states, according to the COVID Tracking Project.

Why it matters: CNN reports that while the decrease in hospitalizations is promising, experts are concerned that new variants of the virus will increase case rates to record heights if the national vaccine rollout faces challenges.

By the numbers: 97,000 Americans remain hospitalized with the virus, which is significantly less than the 132,400 on January 6, according to CNN.

- While the current rate of infection is about the same as it was December 1, the last time hospitalizations were this low, the daily death rate is twice as high.
- The average daily death rate over the past week remains above 3,000, yet there were 1,000 deaths per day in September and October.
- The death rate could increase significantly if there is an outbreak of coronavirus variants discovered in U.K., Brazil or South Africa, which appear to be more transmissible.

Driving the news: Infectious disease expert Michael Osterholm said Sunday the U.S. needed to speed up vaccines or the

next COVID-19 surge from variants could become a “category five” hurricane.

SOUTH AFRICA MUTATION BIGGER PROBLEM

Where it stands: 29.5 million vaccine doses have been administered in the US so far, according to CDC data.

1. **Vaccine:** Infectious-disease expert urges more vaccinations ahead of potential COVID “hurricane.”
2. **Politics:** 10 Senate Republicans propose compromise with Biden on COVID relief package.
3. **Economy:** COVID-19 prompts food stamp spending increase — The state of the U.S. economy after one year of the coronavirus.
4. **World:** Science helps New Zealand avoid another coronavirus lockdown — Canada curbs travel due to new COVID-19 variants.

Cases:

1. **Global:** Total confirmed cases as of

1 p.m. ET Sunday: 102,757,569 — Total deaths: 2,223,969 — Total recoveries: 56,926,779 (no longer includes U.S. recoveries as of Dec. 15)

2. **U.S.:** Total confirmed cases as of 1 p.m. ET Sunday: 26,098,585 — Total deaths: 440,094 — Total tests: 302,791,552 — (Courtesy axios.com)

Coronavirus Variant First Found In South Africa Has Now Arrived In Maryland

The new variant of the coronavirus first found in South Africa has emerged in a Maryland resident, Gov. Larry Hogan (R) said Saturday, confirming the arrival of a highly transmissible mutation as the region struggles to meet demand for the vaccine.

The case of the new variant, which was identified by state health officials in consultation with the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, involves an adult in the Baltimore area who has not traveled outside of the country, “making community transmission likely,” the governor’s statement read. Officials are working to quickly identify the man’s potential contacts and ensure they are quarantined and tested, Hogan said.



“State health officials are closely monitoring the B.1.351 variant of SARS-CoV-2 in the state,” Hogan said. “We strongly encourage Marylanders to practice extra caution to limit the additional risk of transmission associated with this variant. Please continue to practice standard public health and safety measures, including mask wearing, regular hand washing, and physical distancing.”

The B.1.351 variant, originally discovered in South Africa and later in two dozen countries, was first identified in the United States on Thursday, in two cases in South Carolina. Maryland is the second state to report a confirmed case of the variant. The mutation appears to

spread more easily than other variants, but there is no evidence that it is more lethal or causes more severe illness.

The Baltimore-area man who contracted the new variant did not require hospitalization and is recovering at home in self-isolation, Maryland Health Department spokesman Charles Gischlar told The Post. He added the variant was discovered on Friday by “public health officials who routinely sequence specimens to identify variants.”

Scott Gottlieb, former director of the Food and Drug Administration, has suggested that this variant might be more resistant to antibody therapies. While additional research is still required, vaccines will likely still be effective against the mutation, top infectious-diseases expert Anthony S. Fauci said in January. The diagnostic coronavirus tests currently available are expected to be able to detect the B.1.351 variant, Hogan’s statement said.

Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan (R) receives the Moderna vaccine at the State House on Jan. 18 in Annapolis. (Michael Robinson Chavez/The Washington Post)

This is the second mutation of the novel coronavirus to be identified in Maryland. The Maryland Department of Health announced that it identified the mutation first found in the United Kingdom on Jan. 12. Health officials in the state have since identified seven cases of that variant, known as B.1.1.7. More than 430 cases of the three variants, including the one initially found in Brazil, have been identified in at least 31 states, according to federal data, an alarming spread that Fauci described as a “wake-up call.”

“It is an incentive to do what we’ve been saying all along: to vaccinate as many people as we can, as quickly as we possibly can,” Fauci said Friday.

The arrival of the South Africa variant comes as Maryland has struggled to robustly roll out the vaccine, and daily new coronavirus cases remain high even as they continue to decline from a mid-January peak. The state health department has confirmed 352,726 cases of the novel coronavirus in Maryland as of Saturday and a statewide positivity rate of 5.79 percent.

Maryland has administered more than 512,000 initial doses of the vaccine, but its vaccination rate ranks in the bottom quartile of all states and territories tracked by the CDC. The CDC data shows Maryland has only administered about half of the vaccine doses it has been distributed, compared to neighboring West Virginia, which has administered 86 percent of its allotted doses in one of the country’s most successful rollouts.

The CDC data, however, does not offer a complete picture of current conditions because its data lags behind data from states.

Beginning Feb. 1, severely immune-compromised people, such as those receiving chemotherapy, will be eligible for the vaccine. Maryland is now providing vaccines for seniors 65 and older, as well as teachers, firefighters, law enforcement officers, day-care providers and other essential workers.

Across D.C., Maryland and Virginia, more than 14,000 people have died of the coronavirus and more than 891,000 cases have been reported. (Courtesy washingtonpost.com)

