

103 Marines discharged for vaccine refusal

By **CAITLIN DOORNBOS**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Six active-duty Army leaders have been fired and 103 Marines have been discharged for refusing to receive the coronavirus vaccine that the Pentagon mandated in August, the services said Thursday.

Two Army battalion commanders are among the six soldiers relieved of duty, the service said in a statement, without naming the leaders. However, they have not been discharged. The Army's vaccination deadline was Wednesday and the service is giving extra time for soldiers to change their minds before starting the separation process next month.

"To those who continue to refuse the vaccine and are not pending a final decision on a medical or administrative exemption, I strongly encourage you to get the vaccine," Army Secretary Christine Wormuth said. "If not, we will begin involuntary separation proceedings."

The Army has issued 2,767 written reprimands to soldiers who continue to refuse the vaccine order. In total, about active-duty 3,864 soldiers, which is less than one percent of the active force, have refused the vaccine without a pending or approved ex-

emption.

Now that the Army's deadline has passed, the National Guard is the only force still awaiting its deadline. Guard members have until June 30 to receive their vaccines, unless called upon to deploy with active-duty forces, in which case they must already be vaccinated.

However, Oklahoma and Texas have refused to enforce the vaccine mandate for their Guard troops after the governors of those states have argued they should be able to control the mandate while Guard members are under a Title 10 status, which means on a mission controlled by state officials.

"If the federal government keeps threatening to defund the Texas National Guard, I will deploy every legal tool available to me as governor in defense of these American heroes," Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said in a Thursday letter to the Pentagon announcing his refusal to enforce the mandate.

Additionally, the governors of Wyoming, Iowa, North Dakota, Alaska, Nebraska and Mississippi sent a letter Tuesday asking Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to cancel the Pentagon's mandate for Guard members operating under state authority.

The deadlines to be vaccinated for the Marine Corps, Navy and Air Force passed last month and those services have already begun the process of forcing out vaccine refusers. The Marine Corps is the second service branch to announce separation totals after the Air Force on Monday announced it had discharged 27 airmen for refusing the vaccine.

The Navy on Wednesday instructed commanders to begin processing separations, but so far none have been reported.

While some critics have argued separating service members could cause a readiness issue, chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby on Thursday urged the public to consider the "perspective" on vaccine refusal discharges.

"The Air Force noted that 27 were initially being processed for administrative discharge, but 1,800 [airmen] had been administratively discharged throughout the year [of] 2021 for any number of other reasons," Kirby told reporters Thursday at the Pentagon.

Still, separation and vaccine refusal rates are comparatively low. Across the active-duty force, more than 97% of troops have had at least one shot and 90.7% are fully vaccinated, Kirby said.

Service members killed in Kabul blast to be honored

By **COREY DICKSTEIN**
Stars and Stripes

The 13 U.S. service members killed in a bombing at Kabul's airport as they worked to evacuate thousands of Americans, Afghans and allies ahead of the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan will receive the highest honor from Congress, the White House said Thursday.

President Joe Biden signed into law a bill awarding the Congressional Gold Medal to the sailor, soldier and 11 Marines killed Aug. 26 from an Islamic State suicide blast at Hamid Karzai International Airport,

the White House announced. The bill was passed in the House in October and in the Senate last month without opposition in either chamber.

In a brief statement marking his approval of the bill, Biden thanked Rep. Lisa McClain, R-Mich., for introducing the bill Aug. 31, just hours after the final American ground troops left Afghanistan after some two decades of war. Biden also thanked Sens. Steve Daines, R-Mont., and Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., for their leadership in assuring the fallen service members were awarded the

medal.

"Today's a great day!" McClain wrote in a Facebook post after Biden signed the bill. "I'm glad to see these brave men and women honored and remembered in a bipartisan fashion."

It was not immediately clear Thursday when the medals would be presented to the loved ones of Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class Max Sowiak, 22, Army Staff Sgt. Ryan Knauss, 23, and Marines Lance Cpl. Kareem Nikoui, 20, Lance Cpl. David Espinoza, 20, Lance Cpl. Rylee McCollum, 20, Lance Cpl. Jared

Schmitz, 20, Cpl. Hunter Lopez, 22, Staff Sgt. Taylor Hoover, 31, Cpl. Daegan William-Tyler Page, 23, Sgt. Nicole Gee, 23, Cpl. Humberto Sanchez, 22, Lance Cpl. Dylan Merola, 20, and Sgt. Johanny Rosario Pichardo, 25.

The 13 perished in a massive suicide attack near one of the gates at HKIA, where thousands of Afghans had flocked in a desperate attempt to flee their home country as the Taliban returned to power in a lightning offensive in the weeks ahead of the U.S.-announced Aug. 31 withdrawal.

Russia sets tough demands for NATO

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia on Friday published draft security pacts demanding NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other ex-Soviet countries and to roll back its military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe—bold demands that the U.S. and its allies already have rejected.

The documents, which have been submitted to the U.S. and its allies earlier this week, also call for a ban on sending U.S. and Russian warships and aircraft to areas from where they can strike each other's territory and demand a rollback on alliance drills

near Russia.

The tough demands appear certain to be rejected by the U.S. and its allies, which have emphasized that Russia doesn't have a say in NATO's enlargement. The alliance's secretary-general warned that any security talks with Moscow would need to take into account NATO concerns and involve Ukraine and other partners.

The publication of the draft pacts come amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has drawn Ukrainian and Western fears of an invasion. Moscow has denied plans to attack its neighbor,

but demanded the West provide a set of legal guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine and other Russian neighbors and the deployment of the alliance's weapons there, a demand NATO has rejected.

Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said that Russia's relations with the U.S. and its NATO allies have approached a "dangerous point," noting that alliance deployments and drills near Russia have raised "unacceptable" threats to its security.

Ryabkov told reporters that Moscow proposed that the U.S. immediately start the talks on the proposed drafts in Geneva.

Biden promises \$2T package will pass in 2022

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden has all but acknowledged negotiations over his sweeping domestic policy package will likely push into the new year, as he does not yet have the votes in the Senate to lift the roughly \$2 trillion bill to passage.

Biden issued a statement Thursday evening as it became increasingly apparent the Democratic senators would not meet their Christmas deadline, in large part because of unyielding

opposition from one holdout: Sen. Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

The president said that in their recent discussions, the West Virginia senator has reiterated his support for the framework he, the president and other Democrats had agreed to on the flagship bill. Biden said he also briefed House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer earlier Thursday about the most recent round of talks with Manchin.

"I believe that we will bridge our differences and advance the Build Back Better plan, even in the face of fierce Republican opposition," Biden said in the statement.

Biden said he and his team will continue to have discussions with Manchin next week. The White House and the congressional leaders plan to work "over the days and weeks ahead" to finish up the details, he said. Both he and Schumer are determined, he said, to bring the package to

the Senate floor for votes as early as possible.

"We will — we must — get Build Back Better passed," Biden said.

At the same time, Democrats were rushing to show progress on another jammed-up priority: voting rights legislation that, Biden acknowledged, also faces hurdles. "We must also press forward on voting rights legislation, and make progress on this as quickly as possible," Biden said.

Jet downs drone near Syria base that houses Americans

By CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

A British fighter jet shot down a drone in Syria this week near a base used by the U.S.-led coalition forces and its partners, the first midair destruction of a hostile aircraft by a U.K. counterpart in decades.

A Royal Air Force Typhoon fired an advanced short-range air-to-air missile, or ASRAAM, on Tuesday to take out the small unmanned aircraft near the al-Tanf garrison, the British military said Thursday in a statement.

About 200 U.S. troops are typically based at the garrison, which is situated along a

main route between Baghdad and Damascus.

The British military statement called the remotely piloted craft a "terrorist drone" but did not say who was believed to be flying it. The U.S.-led coalition declined to provide further details Friday.

It's the first downing of an enemy aircraft by the British military since the Falklands War about 40 years ago, the BBC reported.

"This strike is an impressive demonstration of the RAF's ability to take out hostile targets in the air which pose a threat to our forces," British Defense Secretary Ben

Wallace said in the statement.

The base, near the borders of Iraq and Jordan, is used by coalition forces training and supporting Syrian forces fighting Islamic State. It was previously targeted two months ago in an attack involving drones and rockets.

This week's incident is the first time an RAF Typhoon has conducted an operational air-to-air engagement, the British military said.

It's also the first time the RAF has fired an air-to-air missile during its involvement in the anti-ISIS fight, which Britain calls Operation Shader.

Schools boost security amid viral trend

Associated Press

Educators announced plans to increase security in response to TikTok posts warning of shooting and bomb threats at schools around the country Friday as officials assured parents the viral posts were not considered credible.

The social media threats had many educators on edge as they circulated in the aftermath of a deadly school shooting in Michigan, which has been followed by numerous copycat threats to schools elsewhere.

School officials in states including Arizona, Connecticut, Illinois, Montana, New York and Pennsylvania said Thursday there would be an increased police presence because of the threats.

The vague, anonymous posts circulating online warned that multiple schools would receive shooting and bomb threats.

“We are writing to inform you and not alarm you,” Oak Park and River Forest, Ill.,

school administrators said in an email to parents. “We have been made aware of a nationwide viral TikTok trend about ‘school shooting and bomb threats for every school in the USA even elementary’ on Friday, December 17.”

The administrators said local police departments would increase their presence around schools “out of an abundance of caution.”

In a statement on Twitter, TikTok said it was working with law enforcement to investigate.

“We handle even rumored threats with utmost seriousness,” the statement said, “which is why we’re working with law enforcement to look into warnings about potential violence at schools even though we have not found evidence of such threats originating or spreading via TikTok.”

At least a few districts announced plans to close school buildings Friday, including

Gilroy High School in northern California. Gilroy police said they had found threats on social media not to be credible, but school officials said final exams scheduled for Friday, the last day before winter break, would be postponed to January out of an abundance of caution.

The posts follow a disturbing trend that has had students acting out in response to social media challenges. In September, students across the U.S. posted videos of themselves vandalizing school bathrooms and stealing soap dispensers as part of the “devious licks” challenge.

In October, students were challenged to slap a teacher, prompting the National Education Association to call on the leaders of Facebook, Twitter and TikTok to intervene.

The Michigan State Police, among law enforcement agencies responding to the posts, said in a statement Thursday it was unaware of any credible threats.

Alaskan crowned Miss America in streamed show

Associated Press

UNCASVILLE, Conn. — The contestant from Alaska was crowned Miss America at an event Thursday marking the competition’s 100th anniversary.

What began as a 1921 Atlantic City beauty pageant has evolved away from the empha-

sis on looks alone — contestants are no longer judged on physical appearance — with a new focus on leadership, talent and communication skills.

Emma Broyles from Alaska claimed the centennial crown and a \$100,000 college scholarship. She emerged as the winner out

of 51 contestants representing the 50 states and the District of Columbia at the competition at a Connecticut casino.

The finale that historically has been featured in a prime-time television broadcast was available only to stream this year via NBC’s Peacock service.

FDA lifts rule on in-person pickup of abortion pills

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Food and Drug Administration on Thursday permanently removed a major obstacle for women seeking abortion pills, eliminating a long-standing requirement that they pick up the medication in person.

Millions of American women will now be able to get a prescription via an online consultation and receive the pills through the mail. FDA officials said a scientific review supported broadening access, including no longer limiting dispensing to a small number of specialty clinics and doctor’s offices.

But prescribers will still need to undergo certification and training. Additionally, the agency said dispensing pharmacies will have to be certified.

The decision is the latest shift in the polarized legal battle over medication abortion,

which has only intensified amid the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is certain to spur legal challenges and more restrictions in Republican-led states.

Earlier this year the FDA stopped enforcing the in-person requirement because of the pandemic. Under Thursday’s decision, the agency permanently dropped the 20-year-old rule, which has long been opposed by medical societies, including the American Medical Association, which say the restriction offers no clear benefit to patients.

The FDA’s latest scientific review stems from a 2017 lawsuit led by the American Civil Liberties Union, which argued that the agency’s restrictions block or delay medical care, especially for people in low-income and rural communities.

The ACLU hailed the elimination of the strictest requirements but said regulators

should have gone further and allowed prescribing by any physician and broader pharmacy dispensing. Abortion opponents said the FDA decision would result in more drug-related side effects and complications for women.

Physicians who prescribe the drug, mifepristone, will have to certify that they can provide emergency care to deal with potential adverse effects, including excessive bleeding, FDA officials said Thursday.

The change still means many more doctors will be able to write prescriptions and American women will be able to fill their orders at far more pharmacies, including via online and mail-order services.

The effect will vary by state. More than a dozen Republican-led states have passed measures that limit access to the pills, including outlawing delivery by mail.

COVID fears dash holiday hopes — again

Associated Press

Lines again stretch around blocks at some COVID-19 testing sites. Refrigerated mobile morgues are on order, and parts of Europe are re-tightening borders amid a winter spike in coronavirus infections.

This year's holiday season was supposed to be a do-over for last year's subdued celebrations. Instead it's turning into a redux of restrictions, cancellations and rising angst over the unending pandemic.

"This year, more than ever, everyone needed a holiday," said John McNulty, owner of Thief, a Brooklyn bar that had to close for a day earlier this week because of an infected employee.

As Christmas and New Year's approach, a pall lingers over the season. Infections are soaring around the world, and the quickly spreading omicron variant has triggered new restrictions on travel and public gatherings reminiscent of the dark days of 2020.

The accelerating cancellations seem "to have thrown us back into that sort of zombie world of the first week of March of the pandemic last year," said Jonathan Neame, the chief executive of Shepherd Neame, Britain's oldest brewery and chain of pubs.

New York Mayor Bill de Blasio said Thursday that the city would "watch very carefully" whether to press ahead with plans to welcome a fully vaccinated crowd back to Times Square on New Year's Eve, a celebration that was canceled last year. It's a go for now, the mayor said.

Multiple Broadway shows, including "Hamilton," "Mrs. Doubtfire" and "Harry Potter and the Cursed Child," called off performances in recent days because of virus cases in

their all-vaccinated casts and crews. California and New York brought back indoor mask mandates.

In Philadelphia, Health Commissioner Cheryl Bettigole urged residents not to go to indoor holiday parties, calling them "just too dangerous." She ruefully advised against even getting together with other households for Christmas.

"It's hard, and it feels impossible, and it feels unfair," she acknowledged, but "I have to say it."

Many Americans have spent nearly two years on an emotional seesaw as the pandemic worsened and waned in cycles and the hoped-for return to normal was repeatedly pushed back. A recent poll by MTV Entertainment Group and The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that nearly half of American adults said the pandemic made it harder to maintain their mental health.

"I think for a large number of people, there was this hopefulness that this holiday season was going to be different. So if you went in with that expectation, and you weren't adjusting it over the last couple of months, I think you're going to be all the more disappointed," said Dr. Vaile Wright, a clinical psychologist who works for the American Psychological Association.

Her advice? "Try to get to a place where the expectation is that this is going to continue on for a while, and if you're feeling stuck, try to find ways to make your life meaningful right now."

The world has been on edge over the omicron variant, which could become the dominant strain of the coronavirus in weeks in

many nations. Adding to that anxiety is the fact that hospitals in many U.S. states are already slammed with patients infected with the delta variant. The military and the National Guard have been enlisted to help at hospitals.

Refrigerated mobile morgues, a grim symbol of the early pandemic, are making a comeback. In Arizona, one county voted this week to spend \$65,000 on a mobile morgue because virus deaths have far exceeded capacity. A hospital in Akron, Ohio, brought in a trailer to more than triple its morgue space, Cleveland television station WKYC reported.

Some people are striving to keep fears in check.

Yvonne Sidella, a "50-something" from Orwigsburg, Pa., views the steep rise in cases and the looming threat of omicron with equanimity. She does not plan to let it alter holiday plans that include spending time with her elderly parents, her four children and her eight grandchildren.

"I'm not going to let this blow my spirit," said Sidella, a manufacturing supervisor. "I'm going to continue to live my life. I'm not going to let this here thing have me afraid to go places or to do things or to touch people."

April Burns, a bill collector for New York City, said things are far from being back to normal. But she considers the worst to be over.

"Last year, everybody was shut down. At least now, things are open, you know. You can get out more, and you still get to see people," said Burns, who is unvaccinated and was standing in line Thursday near Wall Street to comply with city rules that require her to be tested weekly.

CDC backs Pfizer and Moderna vaccines over J&J's

Bloomberg News

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended messenger RNA vaccines made by Moderna Inc. and Pfizer Inc. for use in adults over Johnson & Johnson's shot, which has been linked to rare but serious blood clots.

All 15 members of the CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices voted in favor of the recommendation Thursday after U.S. regulators announced revisions to the shot's fact sheet to warn of the rare clotting syndrome. CDC Director Rochelle Walensky signed off on the advice.

"Today's updated recommendation emphasizes CDC's commitment to provide real-time scientific information to the American

public. I continue to encourage all Americans to get vaccinated and boosted," she said.

Vaccines and boosters are becoming increasingly important as omicron spreads across across the world. While delta remains the dominant strain in the U.S., omicron has now been detected in 33 states, and has quickly risen to account for an estimated 3% of cases nationally, although it may be far more prevalent in New York and New Jersey, the CDC has said.

The risk of the vaccine-linked condition, called thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome or TTS, may be higher than previously thought. The rate among women with TTS as of early December was 5.84 per million J&J doses administered, compared with

4.85 in mid-June, according to a presentation at the meeting.

Women ages 30 to 49 were at the highest risk of the syndrome and resulting death, according to the presentation from Isaac See of the CDC's COVID-19 Vaccination Safety Task Force. Men of all ages who received the vaccine had a lower risk of the complication.

However, the risk of rare forms of blood clotting is exponentially greater from COVID-19 itself than from a single dose of the J&J vaccine, said Penny Heaton, the head of vaccines for the company's Janssen pharma unit. Citing research from the University of Oxford, Heaton said COVID-19 causes more than 400 cases of the rare events per 1 million people.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Ex-auto tech gets prison for parts scheme

MA BOSTON — A former auto technician for Boston police has been sentenced to two months in prison for defrauding the agency out of \$260,000 in auto parts, Acting U.S. Attorney Nathaniel Mendell said Wednesday.

Bahram Gharony, 36, of Boston, was sentenced Tuesday after pleading guilty two counts of wire fraud in August. His sentence also includes three years of supervised release and restitution of \$256,432.

Prosecutors say Gharony used his position to order auto parts that were purportedly for the Boston Police Department but that he then sold to others.

Parish to require neutering of pets

LA SHREVEPORT — Beginning in July, pet owners in a north Louisiana parish could see their dogs or cats impounded if they don't get them spayed or neutered.

The Shreveport Times reports that the Caddo Parish Commission approved a spay and neuter mandate Thursday. The vote was 10-1.

The law, which does not include a monetary penalty, will take effect July 1. It will expire in 2024 unless the commission decides to extend it.

Under the law, dogs must be sterilized by 52 weeks old and cats by 26 weeks old.

Supporters said the new law is meant to reduce the rising number of stray and unwanted animals in the parish that have to be euthanized. Exceptions are made for pets registered

with officially recognized pedigree or kennel club associations such as the American Dog Breeding Association.

Sonic blasts being used to scare geese away

SD SIOUX FALLS — Sioux Falls is using pyrotechnics and sound cannons to scare Canada geese that are migrating into the city as temperatures drop and ponds freeze in rural areas.

City officials say the geese are creating a safety hazard for airplanes near the Sioux Falls Regional Airport. The geese can strike a plane's windshield or get sucked into its engines.

Sioux Falls Animal Control and the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks began using pyrotechnics and sound cannons Thursday to scare geese from ponds east of the Sioux Empire Fairgrounds and at Elmwood golf course.

Animal control officials say the sound cannons are a humane method of scaring geese, instead of using chemicals or poisons. They create a sonic blast with no projectiles.

Schools set mark for guns on campus

NC CHARLOTTE — North Carolina's second largest school system says it has surpassed its previous 10-year high for the amount of guns on campuses after just three months of the 2021-22 academic year.

The previous highs of 19 guns found or confiscated in the 2016-17 school year, and 22 in the 2018-19 school year, are figures from complete years, based on annual reports from the school

district to the N.C. Department of Instruction, The Charlotte Observer reported. By comparison, from August to Dec. 13, a total of 23 guns have been found in CMS schools.

The number of guns and other weapons found on students during a school day has varied in recent years. In 2017-18, nine guns were reported by CMS to state officials. During the 2020-21 school year, when students missed much of their normal class time because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the district reported six guns.

A dozen elk fall through ice at lake and perish

MI GRAYLING — A dozen elk fell through ice in northern Michigan and died, despite a desperate rescue effort by hunting guides, authorities said.

"This is a very tragic and unfortunate event," said Dan Eichinger, director of the Department of Natural Resources.

The elk, a group of bulls, females and calves, died Tuesday at Crapo Lake, a private lake in Otsego County, about 20 miles northeast of Grayling.

A hunting party saw the elk heading down a slope and onto the ice. Two hunting guides in a rowboat tried to cut a path through the ice with a chainsaw but didn't make much progress, the DNR said.

City to pay woman \$2.9M over police raid

IL CHICAGO — The Chicago Council on Wednesday voted to pay nearly \$3 million to a woman who was handcuffed while naked by police officers during a 2019 raid

of her home.

The unanimous vote to pay Anjanette Young \$2.9 million was widely expected, coming two days after a council committee voted to recommend that the full council accept the settlement and after the city's law department said Young's attorney had agreed to the amount.

Boyfriend poisoned to shut him up

FL JACKSONVILLE — A Florida woman told deputies she gave her boyfriend "just enough" poison in his lemonade to shut him up and then called law enforcement "so he wouldn't die," according to a police report.

Deputies with the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office said Alvis Parrish, 54, put a psychotic drug in the lemonade of William Carter, with whom she had been living with for nine years, on Dec. 7. She then called authorities.

When deputies arrived at her home, she was on the front porch and said she did it because he wouldn't shut up, according to an arrest report.

"I gave him just enough to shut him up and called y'all so he wouldn't die," said Parrish, according to the arrest report.

A deputy put her in handcuffs and Parrish continued talking. "Do whatever you want. If you don't take me, I will kill him," she said, according to the arrest report. The deputy reported she was speaking with a slur, as if she was intoxicated.

Carter at first didn't want to go to a hospital, but he was taken to an emergency room after he collapsed to the floor, saying he was not feeling well.

— From Associated Press

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Kelce, Chiefs hold off Chargers in OT

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Travis Kelce, Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs have faced their share of challenges this season. The two-time defending AFC champions are peaking at the right time for another playoff push.

Kelce had a career-high 191 receiving yards and scored on a 34-yard pass from Mahomes in overtime as the Chiefs rallied for a 34-28 victory over the Los Angeles Chargers on Thursday night.

Kelce caught a tying 7-yard touchdown pass with 1:16 left in the fourth quarter, then ended the game with his catch-and-run in overtime. On first-and-10, Kelce pulled in Mahomes' pass at the 30 and eluded two tackles en route to the end zone, where he was swarmed by teammates.

"I don't think I've ever been part of a walk-off touchdown or anything like that, so to be in that moment, find him underneath and him making such a dynamic play where, I mean, he cut back, ran by people," said Mahomes, who completed 31 of 47 for a season-high 410 yards with three touchdowns and an interception. "You think he's old. He can't run by people. But he's still running by people. And he got in the end zone."

The Chiefs were 3-4 at the end of October but have won seven straight to improve to 10-4 and go up by two games in the AFC West.

Kelce had been held to six total recep-

tions the past two games, but he broke out in a big way. He had five of his 10 catches for 142 yards in the fourth quarter and overtime. He also had a 69-yard reception that led to Tyreek Hill's 1-yard touchdown and a two-point conversion that tied it at 21.

"Everybody is talking about him losing a step. He looked fast to me," Chiefs coach Andy Reid said after the 32-year-old Kelce had his sixth career game with at least 10 catches. "His endurance down the stretch for an elder statesman — he's not over the hill — his acceleration is something."

Mahomes bounced back after a fourth-quarter interception led to Austin Ekeler's touchdown and gave the Chargers a 21-13 advantage. He was 10-for-16 for 197 yards and three TDs after the turnover.

"Obviously it (stinks) in the moment. I mean, I promise you I felt as bad as anyone about that throw and that situation, and knew how bad it looked. But you will get another chance and you better be ready for that moment," Mahomes said.

Justin Herbert gave the Chargers a 28-21 lead with 2:19 remaining on an 8-yard TD pass to Keenan Allen, but couldn't make it hold up. It is the second straight season the Chiefs have come to the Chargers' Hollywood Park home and won in overtime.

"The goal is always to score. We needed to put up points, and we got in the end zone, and that was our mission," Herbert said. "We would have loved to have been able to run the clock down and not have any time,

but this is the NFL, and you have to get in the end zone."

Los Angeles' defeat came after a terrifying injury to tight end Donald Parham. The 24-year-old appeared to lose consciousness after slamming his head on the turf in the first quarter. He was helped off on a stretcher and taken to a hospital, where the team said he is in stable condition.

Herbert threw two touchdowns and ran for another score, but the Chargers (8-6) came up empty on three red-zone drives. Herbert completed 22 of 38 passes for 236 yards and an interception.

"I really liked the way we managed the entire game tonight. It didn't go down for us today, but we gave ourselves an opportunity. We just didn't finish the game off defensively," Chargers coach Brandon Staley said.

The Chargers fell behind 10-0 early in the second quarter before scoring on two straight drives to take a 14-10 lead at half-time. Herbert scored on a 1-yard keeper off left end and then connected with Jalen Guyton for a 4-yard TD on the next drive.

The Chiefs benefited off Chargers mistakes for their first 10 points. After Los Angeles turned it over on downs, Kansas City went 95 yards in 11 plays, culminating in Michael Burton's 7-yard run up the middle.

The Chiefs then turned Anthony Hitchens' interception of Herbert into points on Harrison Butker's 30-yard field goal.

League updates virus protocols, pushes booster shots

Associated Press

In moves reminiscent of the environment for the 2020 season, the NFL has updated its protocols and advocated for booster shots in reaction to an increase in COVID-19 cases around the league.

As part of its protocol changes, it is requiring masks regardless of vaccination status, and remote or outdoor meetings. It also is stopping in-person meals, adding restrictions on activities outside the facility, prohibiting outside visitors during team travel, and limiting the amount of people in team weight rooms.

"Finally, and based on expert advice, we will adjust the return-to-participation re-

quirements for those who have recovered from COVID-19," the league said in a statement. "All of these changes are grounded in our data and science-backed approach, with safety our No. 1 goal for the entire NFL community."

The updated protocols will be enforced through Week 15 games, but are likely to continue or even be strengthened after that point.

Dr. Allen Sills, the league's chief medical officer, said the omicron variant of the coronavirus is "in many ways (like) addressing a new disease." Omicron is responsible for the significant uptick in positive COVID-19 cases, according to Sills, which are emanating

from within team facilities. That is the opposite of where previous positives had come from right after Thanksgiving.

The league and the players' union, advised by independent infectious disease officers, have developed a mechanism in the protocols that might lead to shorter stints on the sidelines for people testing positive.

Previously, a vaccinated person — players, coaches, executives and staffers — who tests positive must then have two negative tests 24 hours apart and be asymptomatic before being cleared to return. Beginning immediately, the new protocols relax that requirement a bit, allowing for two PCR tests

or two Mesa tests — or one of each — being negative. The logistics for that could speed up the return of sidelined players.

"We have to think differently about this phase of the pandemic," Sills said. "We are facing a different set of challenges and in some ways almost a different disease ... and it is going to require a different (strategy) from us."

The 32 teams also were told Thursday that they may continue current media policies that include media wearing masks at all times in a club facility. But the teams can also shift to virtual interviews for the rest of this week, something a few of them already have done.

Balanced Suns cruise past Wizards

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Chris Paul and Deandre Ayton had a good time in the fourth quarter, celebrating dunks and three-pointers, high-fiving teammates and generally taking it easy.

The Phoenix Suns have won a lot of games in a lot of ways this season, but blowouts have been few and far between. That changed Thursday night with a 118-98 victory over the Washington Wizards.

“We actually put a team away today,” center JaVale McGee said.

McGee scored 17 points and Ayton added 15 as the combo dominated the interior, pushing the Suns to 58 points in the paint. All five starters and eight total players scored in double figures. Landry Shamet had 16 points and made four three-pointers, and Paul had 12 points and six assists.

The Suns pulled even with Golden State for the NBA lead at 23-5. They have won 22 of 24

games dating to Oct. 27. The way the two teams have won this season is quite different: The Warriors are outscoring teams by nearly 12 points per game while the Suns have about a seven-point margin.

Suns coach Monty Williams said he was particularly impressed with the victory because it came just two days after a physical 111-107 overtime win at Portland. He could sense that his team was a little tired at the morning shootaround, but pushed through any discomfort.

“We were ready,” Williams said. “That was pretty cool. The outcome was the residual of the focus and determination we showed on defense, holding that team to 98 points and having eight guys in double figures.”

Nets 114, 76ers 105: Kevin Durant scored 34 points, making a four-point play with the game tied and 1:46 left, and host Brooklyn beat Philadelphia on

Thursday for another short-handed victory.

The Nets were missing seven players because of coronavirus health and safety protocols but still had Durant, the NBA’s leading scorer who added 11 rebounds and eight assists.

Blake Griffin and Nic Claxton both added a season-high 17 points for the Nets, who had just nine players available. Patty Mills scored 14 points in Eastern Conference-leading Brooklyn’s fourth straight victory.

Joel Embiid had 32 points, nine rebounds and six assists in the 76ers’ third straight loss. Seth Curry scored 29 points.

It was Brooklyn’s second straight game without starters James Harden, LaMarcus Aldridge and DeAndre’ Bembry, along with reserves Bruce Brown, Paul Millsap, Jevon Carter and James Johnson.

Knicks 116, Rockets 103: Immanuel Quickley hit seven three-pointers and scored 24 points to help visiting New York

beat Houston.

New York snapped a four-game losing streak, winning for just the second time in its last nine games. Houston has lost four of five since a seven-game winning streak.

The Knicks had four players out because of the NBA’s health and safety protocols — R.J. Barrett, Obi Toppin, Quentin Grimes and Kevin Knox. On top of that, Derrick Rose started the game but left with a sore right ankle after playing just 12 minutes.

Daniel Theis led Houston with 22 points and 10 rebounds.

Pacers 122, Pistons 113: Caris LeVert scored 20 of his 31 points in the first half and host Indiana handed Detroit its 13th straight loss.

LeVert was 12-for-18 from the field. Justin Holiday added 17 points for Indiana, shooting 5-for-15.

Saddiq Bey led the Pistons with 28 points and 10 rebounds. Detroit is an NBA-worst 4-23.

League, players agree to additional COVID protocols

Associated Press

The NBA and its players have agreed to enhanced health and safety protocols through the holiday season in response to rising virus numbers, with additional testing coming and a return to mask usage in many situations.

The upgraded mask rules will be in place “until agreed otherwise by the NBA and Players Association,” according to a memo shared with teams Thursday night and obtained by The Associated Press. Masks need to be worn again in almost all circumstances during team activities — including travel, when on the bench during games, in meetings and locker rooms, weight rooms and training room settings.

The exceptions: during on-court basketball activities for players, and for head coaches during games.

Testing will be increased from Dec. 26 through Jan. 8, the league said. The league also told teams that more requirements and recommendations would be coming in the next few days, “to help reduce the risk of COVID-19 spread within the team environment.”

The memo was released on the same day that Russell Westbrook entered the health and safety protocols, joining Milwaukee’s Giannis Antetokounmpo and Brooklyn’s James Harden as past league MVPs currently sidelined by coronavirus concerns.

As of Thursday evening, there were at least 39 players

— roughly 8% of the league’s total player roster — from at least 13 different teams known to be in the league’s protocols. Chicago had a league-high eight players in protocols, one more than Brooklyn. Harden and Antetokounmpo both entered the protocols earlier this week.

Washington coach Wes Unseld Jr., speaking to reporters in Phoenix before the Wizards’ game there Thursday, said the rise in numbers — in the NBA, other leagues and around the country — is “a huge concern.”

“Protocols are put in place,” Unseld said. “We’ve been testing for some time now with the cases that we’ve had. It’s not unusual. It’s not unique to our team. Obviously, look around the landscape of the league and

this country; there’s been a dramatic uptick in cases. Knock on wood, the severity of those cases and the rate of hospitalizations don’t appear to be as dramatic. But it’s still very real.”

There was a bit of good news Thursday when the Bulls revealed that two of their 10 players who entered protocols have since been cleared for a return.

The Bulls had two games this week postponed because of a player shortage. For now, they’re scheduled to return to play Sunday at home against the Lakers.

“We got hit really hard with all this and we lost a lot of players,” Bulls coach Billy Donovan said. “Other teams have maybe been hit a little bit, but not as much.”

Playing in empty arena, Habs top Flyers

Associated Press

MONTREAL — Jonathan Drouin was the only scorer in the shootout, and the Montreal Canadiens beat the Philadelphia Flyers 3-2 on Thursday night in a mostly empty Bell Centre because of the rise of COVID-19 cases.

Quebec public health officials asked the Canadiens to play without fans in their home arena earlier Thursday to help slow the spread of the virus. The Canadiens agreed to the provincial government's request, making the game the first at Bell Centre without spectators since Game 4 of the 2021 North Division semifinals against the Toronto Maple Leafs on May 25.

Artturi Lehkonen and Laurent Dauphin scored in regulation for Montreal. Cayden Primeau, the son of former Philadelphia player Keith Primeau, allowed two goals on 38 shots. He saved every shootout attempt.

Lightning 2, Senators 1: Andrei Vasilevskiy set an NHL record for wins in a calendar year, Steven Stamkos picked up his

900th career point and host Tampa Bay beat Ottawa.

Vasilevskiy made 25 saves to get his 63rd win in 2021 regular-season and playoff games. He broke the record of 62, established by Pittsburgh goalie Marc-Andre Fleury in 2009.

Kings 4, Panthers 1: Anze Kopitar and Dustin Brown scored in the second period and Jonathan Quick made 41 saves to help visiting Los Angeles defeat short-handed Florida.

Olli Maatta scored for the first time in 75 games and Arthur Kaliyev added a third-period goal for the Kings, who improved to 3-0-1 in their last four games.

Hurricanes 5, Red Wings 3: Nino Niederreiter broke a tie with his second goal of the game 18 seconds into the third period to send depleted Carolina past visiting Detroit.

Tony DeAngelo and Jack Drury, who made his NHL debut, joined Niederreiter with first-period goals, and Vincent Trocheck added an empty-netter for the Hurricanes, who played with 16 skaters due to

COVID-19 protocols.

Golden Knights 5, Devils 3: Nicolas Roy scored the last of his team's four straight goals, Robin Lehner made 23 saves and visiting Vegas beat New Jersey for its third straight win.

Dylan Coghlan, William Carrier and William Karlsson also scored for the Golden Knights, who have won six of seven and are 5-1-1 all-time against the Devils.

Islanders 3, Bruins 1: Cal Clutterbuck scored twice and Semyon Varlamov stopped 40 shots for his first win of the season as host New York topped depleted Boston.

Anthony Beauvillier also scored to help the Islanders get their second straight win at home after opening 0-5-2 at new UBS Arena.

Predators 5, Avalanche 2: Filip Forsberg had two goals and an assist to lead host Nashville over Colorado in a game between rosters wrecked by COVID-19 outbreaks.

Tanner Jeannot added a goal and an assist, and Roman Josi and Mattias Ekholm also

scored.

Sabres 3, Wild 2 (SO): Tage Thompson scored the only goal in a shootout, lifting visiting Buffalo over Minnesota.

After the first five shooters came up empty, Thompson ended the game when he beat Minnesota goalie Cam Talbot with a forehand.

Oilers 5, Blue Jackets 2: Jesse Puljujarvi had two goals and an assist, and host Edmonton snapped a six-game skid with a win over Columbus.

Derek Ryan, Brendan Perlini and Warren Foegele also scored for the Oilers, who ended a five-game losing streak at home.

Canucks 5, Sharks 2: Brock Boeser scored twice and visiting Vancouver won its sixth straight game since coach Bruce Boudreau took over, beating San Jose.

Bo Horvat, J.T. Miller and Jason Dickinson also scored as the Canucks extended their resurgence since Boudreau replaced the fired Travis Green less than two weeks ago.

No. 2 Duke pulls away from Appalachian State

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Wendell Moore Jr. scored 21 points as No. 2 Duke pulled away for a 92-67 victory over Appalachian State on Thursday night.

Moore made 8 of 11 shots and had five rebounds and six assists. Paolo Banchero scored 16 points, AJ Griffin and Trevor Keels had 11 apiece and Jeremy Roach scored 10 for the Blue Devils (9-1).

Duke ended the first half on a 20-9 run and led by 13 points at intermission. App State (6-6) had led 24-23 midway through the first half.

"That was a really good game for us. They play hard and they're a veteran team," Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski said.

"They were tough. I think the score is not indicative of the game."

The Mountaineers trimmed the deficit to five points early in the second half, but Duke then connected on three straight three-point attempts to push its lead to double digits again.

Leading the Mountaineers was Michael Almonacy, who scored all of his 17 points in the first half. Justin Forrest had 16 points for App State.

Big picture

Appalachian State: The Mountaineers brought back 92% of their scoring from a team that made the NCAA Tournament a year ago, the third ever App State team to do so. The

Mountaineers hung with Duke for a while, but couldn't keep pace with the Blue Devils in the second half. Still, App State should have enough firepower to compete for the Sun Belt championship again.

Duke: The Blue Devils played well enough to win by a comfortable margin. Duke took care of the ball, racking up 21 assists to just nine turnovers. Duke entered this game with the third-best assist-to-turnover ratio in the country at plus-1.95.

Highlight reel

Moore had two dunks that brought the crazy out of the fans at Cameron Indoor Stadium. The first was a fast-break toma-

hawk slam at the 3:02 mark in the first half that came amid a 14-5 run for the Blue Devils. On the second, at the 5:55 mark in the second half, Moore charged down the lane through traffic for a one-handed jam that gave Duke a 20-point lead.

"He's having, right now, an All-American year. He's played as well as anybody. And he's been a leader," Krzyzewski said of Moore. "With all of the work he did in April and May, he completely changed his athletic ability."

Entering this game, Moore was the only player in the country averaging better than 17 points, six rebounds and five assists per game while shooting better than 50% from the floor.