

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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3.3 million Americans seek jobless aid

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Nearly 3.3 million Americans applied for unemployment benefits last week — nearly five times the previous record set in 1982 — amid a widespread economic shutdown caused by the coronavirus.

The surge in weekly applications was a stunning reflection of the damage the viral outbreak is inflicting on the economy. Filings for unemployment aid generally reflect the pace of layoffs.

Layoffs are sure to accelerate as the U.S. economy sinks into a recession. Revenue has collapsed at restaurants, hotels, movie theaters, gyms and airlines. Auto sales are plummeting, and car makers have closed factories. Most such employers face loan payments and other fixed costs, so they're

cutting jobs to save money.

As job losses mount, some economists have said that the nation's unemployment rate could approach 13% by May. By comparison, the highest jobless rate during the Great Recession, which ended in 2009, was 10%.

"What seemed impossible just two weeks ago is now reality," said Nancy Vanden Houten, an economist at Oxford Economics, a consulting firm. "The U.S. economy will experience the largest economic contraction on record with the most severe surge in unemployment ever."

The economic deterioration has been swift. As recently as February, the unemployment rate was at a 50-year low of 3.5%. And the economy was growing steadily, if modestly.

Yet by the April-June quarter

of the year, some economists think that the economy will shrink at its steepest annual pace ever — a contraction that could reach 30%.

In its report Thursday, the Labor Department said that 3.283 million people applied for unemployment benefits last week, up from 282,000 during the previous week. Yet many people who have lost jobs in recent weeks have been unable to file for unemployment aid because state websites and phone systems have been overwhelmed by a crush of applicants and have frozen up.

The logjam suggests that Thursday's report actually understates the magnitude of job cuts last week. So does the fact that workers who are not on company payrolls — gig workers, freelancers, the self-employed — aren't currently

eligible for unemployment benefits even though they're no longer able to earn money in many cases.

With layoffs surging, a significant expansion of unemployment benefits for the millions who will lose jobs as a result of the coronavirus outbreak was included in an economic relief bill nearing final approval in Congress. One provision in the bill would provide an extra \$600 a week on top of the unemployment aid that states provide. Another would extend 13 additional weeks of benefits beyond the six months of jobless aid that most states offer.

The new legislation would also extend unemployment benefits, for the first time, to gig workers and others who are not on company payrolls.

Aircraft carrier diverts to Guam with more cases

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON— Five more sailors have tested positive for the coronavirus on the USS Theodore Roosevelt, forcing the ship to travel to Guam to conduct widespread testing of the crew, the acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly said Thursday.

"We found several more cases on board the ship," Modly told reporters in a news briefing from the Pentagon. "We are in the process now of testing 100% of the crew of that ship to ensure that we're able to contain whatever spread might have occurred there on the ship. But I also want to emphasize that the ship is operationally capable and could do its mission if required to do so."

The new cases bring the total confirmed cases on the ship to eight. But Modly said that several more sailors are in isolation.

A defense official, who spoke on the con-

dition of anonymity, said that the cases on the Roosevelt are increasing and the ship is focused now on doing testing and more deep cleaning in accordance with Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines.

The Wall Street Journal reported Thursday that there are at least 23 cases on the aircraft carrier, according to an unnamed defense official.

There are 800 coronavirus test kits on the ship and more being flown there Thursday, Modly said. The Roosevelt can do limited testing and processing of tests on the ship, but most tests will be sent to Defense Department laboratories for processing. The testing of the 5,000 crew members will be a mix of swab tests and surveillance tests.

While the ship is at a pier in Guam, no sailor will leave the area, according to Modly.

The Navy seems to have the highest number of positive coronavirus cases at

133, or one-third of cases in the Defense Department, he said. But Modly also said he was uncertain why that is and would not speculate on any causes. He said that more analysis needed to be done to determine the reason for the higher number of cases.

A Reuters story Thursday reported that the Pentagon would no longer provide detailed data about the coronavirus cases in the department, such as locations of people who are infected. The Navy has been sending out daily updates on new cases across the service, and Modly said Thursday that while they have to consider operational and privacy concerns, he wanted to continue to share how the virus is impacting the service.

"We will follow the direction of the secretary of defense in terms of this, but from our perspective — from my perspective, being as transparent as possible is probably the best path," he said.

Services seek balance on grooming procedures

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Sailors will get to grow out their locks while Marines will keep their high-and-tight haircuts as military services take different approaches to grooming as they adhere to social distancing to help stop the spread of the coronavirus.

The Navy Exchange Service Command, which runs barber shops and salons on Navy installations, directed the closure of all its shops worldwide except for those at the Recruit Training Command in Great Lakes, Ill., so recruits have access to haircuts, according to a statement issued Monday.

The closures are expected to last for at least 14 days.

The announcement follows Navy guidance issued March 18 about relaxed standards for hair lengths, though not facial hair. However, longer hair cannot interfere with wearing protective personal equipment such as helmets and masks, according to the guidance.

Marine Corps Community Services is allowing barber shops and exchanges to remain open on installations, according to a statement by Bryan Driver, a spokesman for Marine Corps Community Services.

The Army is still following its grooming policies, however, it is trusting installation commanders to make exceptions if necessary to protect their soldiers.

Some installations have taken actions in regard to base grooming services. Barber shops, salons and spas at some Army and Air Force Exchange Services facilities have been closed by the installation commands, according to a statement by Chris Ward, a spokesman for AAFES.

New regulations change ships' return to Yokosuka Naval Base

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Daisy Morales was heartbroken Thursday when her husband, Ensign Matthew Morales, finally arrived back in port aboard the guided-missile cruiser USS Antietam after weeks at sea.

Morales, like other Navy spouses, discovered there would be no welcoming kisses. No hugs. No holding hands or hoisting children and babies.

The U.S. military at home and abroad over the past two days has heightened restrictions on the movements of service members and their families, access to bases and warships and other measures, to curb the spread of coronavirus, now a global pandemic.

Nonetheless, Morales and other spouses came to the pier Thursday afternoon to sneak a peek at their loved ones aboard the Antietam. Sailors came out to the bow to wave to their families and talk to them via cellphone.

"The whole virus thing is hard enough without family out here," Morales said.

Restricting sailors to their vessels puts a "bubble" around incoming ships to halt the virus' spread, base commander Capt. Rich Jarrett said Thursday during a virtual town hall on the official base Facebook page. It was unclear Thursday whether other ships at Yokosuka were given similar orders.

Morales said she had stocked up on snacks and groceries at the base commissary the night before in anticipation of her husband's arrival.

Looking for a silver lining, she and other members of the ship's family readiness group took shopping lists from sailors on board who were looking forward to visiting the Navy Exchange after weeks at sea.

Throughout the afternoon, families dropped off grocery bags and packages for the sailors in a large container at the gate where the ship is berthed. The words "ANTIETAM DROP BOX" were handwritten in large letters on the side.

Pentagon halts all overseas travel, increases military base restrictions

By COREY DICKSTEIN,
CAITLIN M. KENNEY
AND KAT BOUZA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Mark Esper has issued orders barring nearly all official movement for Defense Department personnel overseas and instituted new health protection measures worldwide as the Pentagon attempts to slow the spreading coronavirus, which has sickened at least 600 people in the military community.

Esper's stop-movement order applies to all service members, DOD civilians and sponsored family members serving in any location overseas, the Pentagon announced late Wednesday. The order halts almost all travel for at least 60 days related to "exercises, deployments, redeployments and other global force management activi-

ties," according to a Pentagon memorandum.

The order came just hours after Esper had elected to raise the health protection condition level at military bases worldwide to its second-highest threat level, HPCON Charlie. That decision places restrictions on large gatherings, adds temperature checks for personnel at building access points and largely limits base access to mission-essential individuals.

Air Force Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs, the Joint Staff surgeon, told reporters Wednesday that he expected military-related cases of the virus to continue to increase for the foreseeable future.

"Our curve is not flattening," Friedrichs said during a Pentagon news briefing. "... We think the best way to limit that growth or mitigate that growth are the measures that we've been talking about."

Thursday morning, Pentagon officials announced an increase of 163 coronavirus cases worldwide among its service members, their dependents, DOD civilian workers and defense contractors. Pentagon officials said 600 individuals linked to the military had now tested positive for the virus worldwide. One person, a defense contractor, died of the disease Saturday.

The largest increase was among military troops with 73 new cases reported, marking the biggest single-day jump of cases among troops announced during the outbreak. As of Thursday, 304 service members had tested positive for the virus in recent weeks. Among them, 24 had recovered from the disease and 15 were hospitalized, DOD reported.

Stars and Stripes staff member Joseph Ditzler contributed to this report.

Pelosi says House will OK Senate's aid bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said the massive \$2.2 trillion coronavirus economic relief bill approved by the Senate will pass the House on Friday with “strong bipartisan support.”

Pelosi spoke to reporters at the Capitol on Thursday, a day after the Senate unanimously approved the measure. President Donald Trump is expected to sign the legislation immediately.

The pandemic's toll continued to increase across the United States, with almost 70,000 confirmed cases and more than 1,000 on Thursday afternoon, according to Johns Hopkins University's tally.

The package comes to the House as fresh evidence emerges that the economy is in a recession. The government reported 3.3 million new weekly unemployment claims, four times the previous record.

“We will have a victory tomorrow for America's workers,” Pelosi said, praising the bill's expansion of unemployment benefits. She encouraged companies battered by the pandemic to keep paying their workers, even those who are furloughed.

“Tomorrow we'll bring the bill to the floor,” she told reporters. “It will pass. It will pass with strong bipartisan support.”

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell said in a TV interview the economy “may well be in a recession.”

The unanimous Senate vote late Wednesday came despite misgivings on both sides about whether it goes too far or not far enough and capped days of difficult negotiations as Washington confronted a national challenge unlike any it has faced.

The 880-page measure is the largest economic relief bill in U.S. history. Majority Leader Mitch McConnell appeared somber

and exhausted as he announced the vote — and he released senators from Washington until April 20, though he promised to recall them if needed.

“Pray for one another, for all of our families and for our country,” said McConnell, R-Ky.

“The legislation now before us now is historic because it is meant to match a historic crisis,” said Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y. “Our health care system is not prepared to care for the sick. Our workers are without work. Our businesses cannot do business. Our factories lie idle. The gears of the American economy have ground to a halt.”

The package is intended as relief for a sinking economy and a nation facing a grim toll from an infection that's killed more than 21,000 people worldwide.

Number of virus infections worldwide nears 500,000

Associated Press

MADRID — The number of coronavirus infections closed in on a half-million worldwide Thursday, with Italy on track to surpass China.

Health care systems in Europe buckled under the strain, with Spain's death toll climbing to more than 4,000.

At least 2.8 billion people, or more than one-third of the Earth's population, are under severe travel restrictions. But the head of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, scolded world leaders for wasting precious time in the fight against the virus that has already killed more than 22,000 people and infected over 480,000, thrown millions out of work and ravaged the world economy.

“The time to act was actually more than a month ago or two months ago,” he said Wednesday. “We squandered the first window of opportunity. ... This is a second opportunity, which we should not squander and do everything to suppress and control this virus.”

In Brazil, the country's governors are defying President Jair Bolsonaro over his call to reopen schools and businesses, dismissing his argument that the “cure” of widespread shutdowns is worse than the disease. As of Thursday, the country had more than 2,500 cases and 59 deaths.

Spain has become the country in Europe where the outbreak is spreading the fastest. On Thursday, the Health Ministry reported nearly 8,600 new infections and 655 deaths, bringing the total cases to over

56,000 and more than 4,000 fatalities — second only to Italy's death toll of about 7,500.

Health Minister Salvador Illa sought to assure Spaniards that government measures to slow the virus were working, telling Parliament that the rises had been smaller than in previous days and “indicate a changing trend that brings us to think that we are entering a phase of stabilization.”

In Italy, doctors and nurses begged the government to provide more masks, gloves and goggles and urged the public to understand how important onerous social distancing measures really are. Scientists say stopping just one person from getting the virus means scores of others will not become infected down the road.

AAFES: Hang on to cash, pay with credit or debit cards

By NANCY MONTGOMERY

Stars and Stripes

The Army and Air Force Exchange Service is asking customers to pay with credit and debit cards, not cash, saying it will help protect people from the coronavirus.

Some stores might “transition to a cards-only environment” and others might not provide cash back and check-cashing transactions, the statement emailed to customers Wednesday said.

“Studies show that paper money and

coins can harbor bacteria and viruses long after they change hands,” said the statement, which asked customers to rely on plastic.

Historically considered filthy, cash is under increased suspicion and many stores are going cashless to try to prevent the spread of the coronavirus. The Federal Reserve is enforcing a holding period of seven to 10 days before processing currency shipments from Asia and Europe.

Swipe-and-dip machines have reduced the need for store clerks to touch consum-

ers' cards.

But credit cards, payment tablets and ATM keypads also carry a variety of germs, in some cases more than cash, a 2018 study said.

The study by CreditCards.com and the University of Texas at Austin found that some cards carried staph and salmonella bacteria.

Another study published March 17 in the New England Journal of Medicine suggested the coronavirus could live up to three days on plastic.

Deaths rise as states struggle to contain

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New York authorities mobilized to head off a public health disaster Wednesday, with the city's emergence as the nation's biggest coronavirus hot spot a warning flare — and perhaps a cautionary tale — for the rest of the country as U.S. deaths from the pandemic topped 1,000.

A makeshift morgue was set up outside Bellevue Hospital, and the city's police, their ranks dwindling as more fall ill, were told to patrol nearly empty streets to enforce social distancing.

Gov. Andrew Cuomo, again pleading for help in dealing with the onslaught, attributed the cluster to the city's role as a gateway to international travelers and the sheer density of its population, with 8.6 million people sharing subways, elevators, apartment buildings and offices.

"Our closeness makes us vulnerable," he said. "But it's true that your greatest weakness is also your greatest strength. And our closeness is what makes us who we are. That is what New York is."

Alabama

MONTGOMERY — Alabama on Wednesday reported its first coronavirus death as the total number of confirmed cases in the state reached nearly 400, officials said.

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey and the Alabama Department of Public Health confirmed that the Jackson County resident died from the COVID-19 disease. The governor said that she extends, "my prayers and deepest sympathies to the family and loved ones during these extraordinary circumstances."

The patient had underlying health problems and passed away in a facility outside the state of Alabama, the Health Department said. The Jackson County Commission said that the person was a part-time employee at the county court-

house, and they are having the area cleaned before employees return to work.

Arizona

PHOENIX — Officials from Arizona's health department and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spent hours Wednesday scouring a shuttered Phoenix hospital to see how quickly it could be running if an expected surge of coronavirus cases hits.

The state is looking to reopen two closed Phoenix hospitals and convert a specialty hospital. The review of the closed St. Luke's Medical Center is part of an effort to nearly double hospital capacity from the current 16,900 to the nearly 30,000 officials said might be needed by May.

Maryland

ANNAPOLIS — The Maryland Board of Elections is planning to do away with polling stations for the state's already delayed primary. Voters would instead be required to mail in or drop off their ballots in an effort to limit coronavirus infections.

If approved, the move would eliminate any need for Maryland's more than 4 million registered voters to cast their ballots in person on June 2, according to a draft presented by elections officials at their Wednesday meeting, held by teleconference.

The board, citing advice from health officials, said that it could not guarantee poll workers the gear necessary to protect them against exposure to the virus, The Baltimore Sun reported.

Michigan

DETROIT — Michigan hospitals braced Wednesday for a surge of coronavirus cases, as the number of cases in the state rose to at least 2,294 and the number of deaths nearly doubled, from 24 to 43. Most of the cases — 85% — were reported

in Wayne, Oakland and Macomb counties, but more than half of the state's 83 counties have been affected.

Beaumont Health and Henry Ford Health System in southeastern Michigan said that they were caring for more than 1,000 COVID-19 patients at their 13 hospitals. Operating rooms were being converted into intensive care units and clinics had been turned into rooms for patients needing other medical care.

"The numbers are changing and increasing even in two-hour intervals," said Bob Riney, chief operating officer at Henry Ford, whose flagship hospital is in Detroit.

Nevada

LAS VEGAS — A 524-bed Catholic Charities homeless shelter in Las Vegas closed and health officials began screening untold numbers of people who used it and a nearby city relief facility after a homeless person was diagnosed with the new coronavirus, health officials said Wednesday.

The Southern Nevada Health District said that the closure was prompted by a discovery that a man who used it and the nearby city Homeless Courtyard services center had COVID-19 but had recovered. He was no longer considered a risk to others, officials said.

Pennsylvania

HARRISBURG — Gov. Tom Wolf's administration reported more coronavirus-related deaths in Pennsylvania on Wednesday and ordered residents of Lehigh and Northampton counties to stay home, with few exceptions, as more of the state is put under the directive in an effort to slow the virus' spread.

Wolf's office said the order will take effect at 8 p.m. for the two counties that are home to more than 670,000 people.

Before Wednesday, Wolf's orders covered eight counties, including Philadelphia, Allegh-

eny County and Philadelphia's four heavily populated suburban counties. The 10 counties account for half of Pennsylvania's 12.8 million residents and are home to nearly 80% of the state's confirmed coronavirus cases, as of Wednesday.

Texas

AUSTIN — Planned Parenthood joined other abortion providers Wednesday in suing Texas over moving to ban abortions during the coronavirus outbreak, including one clinic owner saying that Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's weekend order has already resulted in more than 150 canceled appointments.

That was followed by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, a Republican, saying that the order banned "any type of abortion that is not medically necessary to preserve the life or health of the mother."

"Abortion is essential health care, and it is a time-sensitive service," said Amy Hagstrom Miller, president of Whole Woman's Health. She said that the 150-plus cancellations across her three clinics in Texas left some women "begging for the abortions they needed."

West Virginia

CHARLESTON — A West Virginia nursing home with at least 20 coronavirus cases has become "ground zero" for the state's growing caseload, officials said Wednesday.

Carl Shrader, medical director for the Sundale nursing home in Morgantown, said that 16 residents and four staffers have tested positive for the virus. Seventy-six tests were pending, he said.

West Virginia's total cases have hit at least 52, with the largest number in Monongalia County, where the nursing home is located. The grim tally at Sundale also came on a day when officials moved to extend tax deadlines and the statewide school closures.

Afghan, Taliban prisoner release nearer

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Thousands of prisoners in Afghanistan could start being released by early next week, fulfilling a key condition of the nearly month-old U.S.-Taliban deal to bring peace to the country, government and Taliban officials said.

The two sides agreed on the prisoner release Wednesday, days after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the U.S. would cut \$1 billion in aid to Afghanistan after he wasn't able during a lightning visit to Kabul to resolve an impasse between President Ashraf Ghani and his political rival, Abdullah Abdullah, over who won last year's presidential election.

The rift between the two men has been

blamed for stalling the peace process by delaying the naming of a government delegation to hold talks with the Taliban, another key condition of the Feb. 29 deal between the U.S. and Taliban.

But on Wednesday the government published the names of its delegates to the intra-Afghan talks with the Taliban. Shortly before that, the Taliban and the government said they'd reach a compromise on the prisoner release, which was supposed to start more than two weeks ago, after holding a four-hour video conference facilitated by Washington.

The government agreed to release 100 Taliban prisoners by the end of March, the National Security Council said in a statement released after the video conference. Details of further releases would be an-

nounced in the coming days, the statement said.

"It was decided in the virtual meeting that the process of the prisoner release will practically start on March 31," Taliban spokesman Suhail Shaheen said in a tweet.

Members of the Taliban would visit Bagram prison — near the largest U.S. military base in Afghanistan — to identify detainees from their side that would be released, Shaheen said. He did not provide a timetable or number of Taliban prisoners who would be freed.

The U.S.-Taliban deal called for up to 5,000 Taliban and up to 1,000 detainees held by the insurgents to be freed by March 10, when intra-Afghan talks were supposed to begin.

US hands Q-West base over to Iraq

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

Iraqi military leaders, clad in camouflage and surgical masks, accepted the handover of the U.S.-occupied side of Qayara Airfield West, known as Q-West, on Thursday.

The long-planned transfer of the base, 40 miles south of Mosul, and about \$1.7 million in equipment, took place amid a pause in the U.S.-led coalition's training of Iraqi forces and a temporary withdrawal of some foreign forces from the country because of coronavirus fears.

Despite those concerns, U.S. and Iraqi officials shook hands — the Iraqis with gloves.

Q-West "served as a strategic launching point" for Iraqi and coalition forces during the Battle of Mosul, said Brig. Gen. Vincent Barker, director of sustainment for the U.S.-led Operation Inherent Resolve mission helping battle Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, also known by the Arabic acronym Daesh.

With two main runways over 11,000 feet long and 30 hardened aircraft shelters, "the base serves as a hub for the Iraqi air force, who continue to deliver lethal strikes on Daesh bed-down locations," he said in a statement.

It was the second base transfer this month, as coalition forces consolidate their footprint in the country.

The U.S. had previously occupied the base during the Iraq War from 2003 to 2010. Early in the war, 101st Airborne Division soldiers worked with local villages to bolster security, building clinics and

schools to assist the locals, some of whom became targets of insurgent violence.

As ISIS swept across Iraq in 2014, some of those troops feared villages like Jaddalah Ismail, near Q-West, would be destroyed and the people killed for having helped the Americans.

That fall, Q-West fell to the militants, who leveled much of it before it was retaken and rebuilt in late 2016 during the Iraqi military's drive toward Mosul, the country's second-largest city and the terrorist group's Iraqi capital at the time.

U.S. rocket artillery, cannons and helicopters at the base aided in the grueling nine-month campaign to retake the city, which ended in the summer of 2017. Since then, U.S. howitzers have continued to pound militant targets, including an "ISIS island" in the Tigris River used as a hideout after the group's territorial defeat.

Locals who had fled Jaddalah Ismail returned and restarted their lives. When Stars and Stripes met with them in 2017, they remained proud of their bond with the Americans, showing off letters of appreciation, photos and challenge coins they'd saved.

Coalition troops resumed their connection with the locals, officials said in December, but the threat of attacks from Iranian proxy groups forced the troops to halt visits to the villages.

The Americans and other coalition troops will soon depart the base, once equipment transfers to the Iraqis finish, Inherent Resolve said this week.

State orders some to leave Iraq after Green Zone attack

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

The State Department has ordered some U.S. government employees at diplomatic facilities in Iraq to leave the country, the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad said Thursday, hours after two rockets hit the Green Zone.

"Designated U.S. Government employees" were ordered to depart the embassy and the diplomatic support center in Baghdad, as well as the U.S. Consulate General in the northern city of Irbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, the embassy said in an alert sent to U.S. citizens. Security concerns and restricted travel options resulting from the global coronavirus pandemic were cited as reasons for the guidance.

The alert encouraged U.S. citizens to depart Iraq as quickly as possible. A second message issued minutes later said diplomatic officials were working to find options for U.S. citizens to leave "on the next available commercial flight opportunity," citing travel disruptions caused by the coronavirus.

Hours before the messages were sent out, two rockets struck near an operations center that coordinates Iraqi security forces, just a few hundred yards from the U.S. Embassy inside the heavily fortified Green Zone, The Associated Press reported, citing a military statement. Thursday's attack followed one last week when three rockets hit near the American Embassy, and a deadly attack earlier this month on a U.S.-occupied base north of Baghdad.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Squirrel sparks power loss near mansion

AK JUNEAU — An squirrel knocked out power to residences near the state governor's mansion, Alaska electric company officials said.

The squirrel was interfering with equipment when the temporary loss of electrical service happened in Juneau on Monday, The Juneau Empire reported.

"Our crews were on site very quickly, and found it not alive," said Debbie Driscoll, Alaska Electric Light and Power vice president of consumer affairs.

The squirrel generated a problem with fuses and sparked the power outage experienced by 15 customers.

Police: Another truck damages covered bridge

VT LYNDON — Another truck has damaged a historic covered bridge in northern Vermont that had been closed for months for repairs last spring after it was hit by a produce truck, police said.

The Miller's Run Covered Bridge in Lyndon was damaged at both ends early Monday by a tractor-trailer and closed to traffic for several hours, the Caledonian Record reported.

The truck driver from Laval, Quebec, did not stop after hitting the bridge's facade with the top of trailer, police said. Police Chief Jack Harris said he later found the truck in Lyndonville as the driver was waiting to make a delivery. The driver was issued a ticket and a \$12,295 fine for being 71,000 pounds overweight on the bridge.

The bridge reopened later in the day after the town crew made some repairs but more extensive work is necessary, Lyndon Town Administrator Justin Smith said.

New Veterans Memorial Park planned

NM TAOS — Volunteers and veterans are helping lead an effort to build a new Veterans Memorial Park in Taos.

The Albuquerque Journal reported the nonprofit group Not Forgotten Outreach Inc. is taking the lead in a coalition that plans to begin work this spring.

Earlier this year, the nonprofit received a \$23,000 grant from the Christopher & Dana Reeves Foundation. The grant will underwrite the construction of an Americans with Disabilities Act-accessible walking trail crossing over a spring-fed drainage waterway.

Taos County has a population of more than 3,000 veterans.

Postal worker accused of running over woman

GA WOODSTOCK — A U.S. postal worker was in custody Tuesday and accused of running over a woman in Georgia with her mail truck and lying about it.

The Cherokee Sheriff's Office said Jaynie Underwood, 38, of Acworth, was arrested on charges of improper backing, failure to exercise due care and giving false statements to authorities about the incident, which happened March 18.

According to the sheriff's office, Underwood told deputies Barbara Daniels, 60, was standing in grass near her mailbox as she passed by. She said when she looked back, Daniels was lying in the road. Deputies asked if her truck hit Daniels; she said it had not.

Investigators later found camera footage that shows the truck backing up and hitting Daniels, of Woodstock, who is being treated at an area hospital for a serious head injury

FBI agent charged with stalking ex-girlfriend

MT HELENA — A Montana FBI agent has been charged with stalking his ex-girlfriend and obstructing officers investigating the case.

Lewis and Clark County Sheriff Leo Dutton said Ricky James Shelbourn was arrested on the misdemeanor charges on March 16, the Independent Record reported Monday.

Shelbourn, the supervisory senior resident agent in Montana, was released on his own recognizance. He is not allowed to possess or have access to any firearms.

The FBI branch did not immediately respond to calls.

An arrest affidavit by the Montana Department of Justice Division of Criminal Investigation said a woman described "substantial emotional distress" in 2019 after she ended an "intermittent, intimate relationship" of about three years.

Arson suspect charged in 5 trash bin fires

NV RENO — Reno police have arrested a 62-year-old arson suspect accused of starting five fires in trash cans and dumpsters in less than an hour, including one that damaged a downtown motel.

Morris Snead was booked into the Washoe County Jail on Monday on seven counts of third-degree arson.

Police say they received reports of five small fires downtown on Monday between 3:30 a.m. and 4 a.m. One forced the evacuation of a motel and caused damage to the building.

Police say Snead was arrested shortly after he was identified through surveillance video.

Police: 2 men stole over \$380K in equipment

NJ HAMILTON — Two men have been arrested after hundreds of thousands of dollars worth of landscaping equipment was stolen, police in New Jersey said.

According to Hamilton Police, Clint Riley, 39, and Kevin Cedeno-Ruiz, 24, stole equipment worth more than \$380,000 over the span of a year, NJ Advance Media reported.

Riley and Cedeno-Ruiz, both of Trenton, allegedly sold the leaf blowers, lawnmowers, edgers and weed whackers on Facebook Marketplace and in person. Police executed a search warrant Thursday on a farm owned by Riley in Hamilton where he stored some of the stolen property, authorities say.

Deputies seize cocaine worth estimated \$3.5M

NC DURHAM — Deputies in North Carolina say they've seized cocaine worth an estimated \$3.5 million from a storage locker and related searches.

A news release Monday from the Durham County Sheriff's Office said the busts that netted 35 pounds of uncut cocaine were coordinated with the Craven County Sheriff's Office and state and federal investigators.

Authorities said that the seizure was preceded by a tip in Craven County that led to a traffic stop on March 19. Information gleaned from that traffic stop led Durham County deputies using a search dog to a storage locker where they found most of the cocaine.

In Craven County, deputies seized a smaller quantity of cocaine, firearms and \$175,000 in cash. Two men were charged.

From wire reports

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'Opening Day' on hold due to pandemic

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — There will be no hot dogs on the grill, no beer on tap, no vendors in the stands selling peanuts and Cracker Jack.

The shiny new stadium deep in the heart of Texas will still be waiting for its first Rangers game. Instead of warming up for his debut with the New York Yankees after a record \$324 million, nine-year contract, Gerrit Cole is playing catch with his wife at home.

With the start of the Major League Baseball season indefinitely on hold because of the coronavirus pandemic, ballparks were empty Thursday on what was supposed to be opening day.

"You're used to seeing people run all over the place. We have over 200 people (who work) at the park," said Roger Bossard, the groundskeeper in his 54th year with the Chicago White Sox. "Certainly, it's eerie when no one's around. You walk around the hallways or underneath the stands there, and there's nobody there — but understandably."

From Baltimore to Miami in the east, San Diego to Seattle in the west — and 11 other cities that would have hosted season openers Thursday — there will be no games, or at the remaining 15 MLB stadiums, for at least a couple more months.

By then, when the weather will be warmer, the Rangers will be able to stay out of the heat by closing the retractable roof at their \$1 billion-plus stadium, the only new major league ballpark opening this season.

After the postponement of a Chris Stapleton concert that was to be the inaugural event at Globe Life Park on March 14, only three days after an open house that went on as scheduled, the Rangers were supposed to play an exhibition game there this

week. Their home opener was set for next Tuesday after a season-opening series in Seattle.

"The stadium was 100% ready to go," said Casey Rapp, GM of the new Rangers stadium for Delaware North Sportservice, which also oversees concessions for 10 other MLB ballparks. "It's the little things that we were trying to make perfect."

While there was plenty of time to finish construction of Globe Life Park, Rapp and his group haven't yet been able to serve people during a full-scale event at the stadium.

Concessionaires start planning months in advance of the openers. That means a lot of products, such as hot dogs, bottled beverages and frozen foods, had already been delivered to many ballparks before the season was put on hold.

"It's definitely different. It's kind of unheard of (that) all the major sports inside the United States would be closed at the exact same time," said Ken Gaber, vice president of operational excellence for Delaware North Sportservice. "Personally, it's difficult. I think everybody feels the exact same way."

Delaware North has donated to local charities more than 41,000 pounds of food, including perishable items already sent to MLB stadiums it operates, and concessions from its other venues, including some NBA and NHL arenas suddenly shut down in the middle of those seasons. There were also several spring training venues at the peak of their schedules.

The World Series champion Washington Nationals have reduced staff at Nationals Park, where a facilities group is still maintaining the ballpark and putting on the finishing touches for the season.

"Prior to every baseball season, you're always working very aggressively to get

ready for opening day. That's a fixed date and time and you just have to be ready," said Frank Gambino, Washington's senior vice president of ballpark operations. "We had been working very diligently, and continue to work diligently, to try and get as close as we can to ready for whenever opening day eventually comes."

Gambino said the Nationals were able to defer many of the concession deliveries and stocking of the stadium while monitoring the COVID-19 situation.

There have been no reports of any MLB players testing positive for the coronavirus. Two minor leaguers in the Yankees system did, and the Red Sox closed down their entire spring training complex in Fort Myers, Fla., this week after saying that one of their minor league players had tested positive.

For most people, the coronavirus causes mild or moderate symptoms, such as fever and cough that clear up in two to three weeks.

The Baltimore Orioles were scheduled to open at home Thursday against the Yankees, likely with a clean-shaven Cole on the mound for the visitors. Camden Yards will be ready whenever the season finally starts, and the Orioles hope to maintain the enthusiasm that was whipped up for the team throughout a now-extended offseason.

"The bright spot in this sort of cloudy day is that our fans will be craving baseball," said Jennifer Grondahl, the Orioles vice president of community development and communications. "If we can put together a season and the entertainment that we have planned and add to that, I feel like we'll be able to continue that momentum."

AP sports writers David Brandt in Phoenix; Howard Fendrich in Washington; David Ginsburg in Baltimore; and Andrew Seligman in Chicago contributed to this report.

MLB will have to get creative with schedule

Associated Press

TORONTO — If Major League Baseball needs to squeeze more games into a condensed season without exhausting pitching staffs, perhaps this idea could get tossed into play: seven-inning doubleheaders.

"Maybe that's something we have to consider," Toronto Blue Jays general manager Ross Atkins said on a conference call Wednesday.

Opening day has been post-

poned until at least mid-May because of the novel coronavirus pandemic. The regular season had been scheduled to begin Thursday.

Minor league teams and college teams typically play seven innings in each game of a doubleheader. But twinbills are rarely planned in the majors — only a handful were originally scheduled over the last decade.

The final total of big league doubleheaders, most of them

caused by makeup games, ranged from a low of 14 in 2014 to a high of 34 in both 2011 and 2018, according to the Elias Sports Bureau.

Colorado Rockies manager Bud Black said last week that frequent doubleheaders might be necessary to help fit more games into a shorter window.

Extending play into November could lead to neutral-site games in warm weather cities and ballparks with roofs.

"It is an opportunity probably to be creative or to try some things that people think could stick a little bit or could be kind of a segue to something different down the line," New York Yankees manager Aaron Boone said. "But it's certainly probably an opportunity to try some things that you wouldn't otherwise try in a normal 162-game setting where everything's kind of going off according to plan."

Deal could allow Betts, others to go free in fall

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Mookie Betts and all the players set to be free agents after the 2020 season would still get that chance if there is no baseball this year, part of a broad deal being negotiated by the commissioner's office and the players' association.

If there's no season because of the coronavirus, the agreement would credit major leaguers with the same service time this year that they earned in 2019, a person familiar with the talks told The Associated Press on Wednesday. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because talks were ongoing.

Trevor Bauer, Marcus Stroman, George Springer and JT Realmuto also would be eligible for free agency, even if the season is canceled.

Betts, the 2018 AL MVP, was acquired by the Dodgers from Boston last month for outfielder Alex Verdugo and two prospects. In a pair of deals at last July's trade deadline, Cincinnati obtained Bauer from Cleveland and the Mets received Stroman from Toronto.

Service time affects a player's status for free agency, salary arbitration and the pension plan. The likely service time agreement was first reported by The Athletic.

Major League Baseball and the union would agree to try to play as many regular season games as possible, the person said. They also would agree to explore one-time changes to the postseason, which would create the possibility of expanded playoffs this year.

They would consider multiple schedule options that would take into account player health and safety, economics and ballpark availability. Possible changes might include increased doubleheaders, extending the regular season into October and even November and using neutral sites with warm weather and roofs if needed for the postseason.

"A World Series week would allow for a great trial to open up an avenue of sponsorship,"

said agent Scott Boras, a longtime proponent of a neutral-site World Series. "It would give players the ability to be in one place for seven games and lessen the travel after what is going to be a very difficult schedule to get to the World Series."

If less than a full regular season takes place, a player would receive only a proportional share of his salary.

Management would have the right to delay the amateur draft from its scheduled June 10 start and to shorten it from its current 40 rounds. Teams also could push back the start of the international amateur signing period, which usually is July 2.

As part of a deal, management would advance money that would be given to players on the lower-end of the salary scale. Opening day was scheduled for Thursday but has been pushed back to mid-May at the earliest due to the new coronavirus. A full service year usually is 172 days, and the season was set to be 186 days long. No matter how many games are played this season, a player on the active roster or injured list for the entire season would receive a full season of service.

Players need six years of big league service to become free agents, and they did not want their eligibility to be pushed back in the event the entire season is canceled. Service time also determines when players become eligible for salary arbitration, which is about 2 years, 120 days.

Formats for the regular season and postseason will be decided later, when it becomes more clear when the season can start. Management already has made proposals for changing the postseason format in 2022, including one plan that would expand the playoffs from 10 teams to 14.

"It is an opportunity probably to be creative or to try some things that people think could stick a little bit or could be kind of a segue to something different down the line," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said.

Tokyo Olympics seek new date for opening, closing

Associated Press

TOKYO — The Tokyo Olympics need new dates for the opening and closing ceremonies in 2021.

Nothing much can get done until those dates are worked out by the International Olympic Committee, the Japanese government and Tokyo organizers.

"We must decide this soon, otherwise it will be hard to decide on other things to follow," Toshiro Muto, the CEO of the organizing committee, told his 30 senior directors — all men but one — seated in a large meeting room on Thursday.

Two days after the unprecedented postponement was announced, the group gathered for the first meeting of what is being called the "Tokyo 2020 New Launch Task Force." They must put the Olympics back together after they were torn apart by the coronavirus pandemic.

Muto and the president of the organizing committee, Yoshiro Mori, each gave pep speeches. Mori, an 82-year-old former Japanese prime minister, drew on war memories from his youth to summon the resolve to redo in a few months what was seven years in the planning.

He talked of his father going "to the war in the Pacific" and leaving a rugby ball and a baseball glove behind for his young son.

"I'm sorry, I'm an old person and I talk about the old days," Mori said. "I'm comparing this to the old days and I might be criticized by the media. However, this is the emotion I have inside me and this is the emotion I have as we face the predicament in front of us."

Muto ran off a condensed string of issues to be resolved: ticketing, security, venues, merchandise, accommodation, the

Athletes Village, transportation and lining up unpaid volunteers. He added he was looking at "thousands of contracts" and the interests of broadcasters, sponsors, the IOC, world sports federations and national Olympic committees.

"I didn't imagine at all we'd be tested to this degree," he acknowledged.

He also voiced another reality.

"Additional expenses are going to be quite massive we assume," Muto said.

The Japanese financial newspaper Nikkei has estimated added costs due to the delay of \$2.7 billion. This would go on top of an official budget of \$12.6 billion. A Japanese national audit agency, however, says the actual amount of spending is about twice that size.

IOC President Thomas Bach said Wednesday that "all options are on the table" for new dates. He said next year's Olympics don't have to be restricted to summer in the Northern Hemisphere and might occur sooner.

Two of the marquee Olympic events — track and swimming — have already scheduled their own world championships for July and August of 2021.

If the Olympics are moved into spring, when it's cooler in Tokyo, they clash with the end of the European soccer season. In North America, they would bump into Major League Baseball, NBA basketball, NHL hockey and possibly even college basketball. That's assuming normal sports schedules resume by then.

"The postponed Olympic Games will need sacrifices," Bach said.