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LEARNING LESSONS



LEN WOOD, CONTRIBUTOR

Ana Huynh, shown in her Chapel Street office, is the program director for Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Project in Santa Maria.

Community seeks path to health equity as COVID retains its grip

Increasing vaccinations, supporting community groups main focus moving forward

LAURA PLACE
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Marian Regional Medical Center's 20-bed intensive care unit is unexpectedly quiet, despite being filled almost entirely with COVID-19 patients on a recent Thursday, but that's not unusual considering the majority are sedated and intubated.

Once on a ventilator, COVID-19 patients in the Santa Maria hospital receive the equivalent of 15 two-liter bottles of oxygen per minute to stay alive, and are medically paralyzed to prevent their skeletal-muscular system from using any oxygen their body can spare.

"The treatment to save their life is huge. It's one of the most severe treatments you can have," said Tim Wendling, a physical therapist at Marian. "But in this wave, I feel like they're so much more sick that they are not recovering."

Santa Maria has been a hot spot for COVID-19 spread since the beginning of the pandemic and, consequently, Marian Regional has received more COVID-19 patients than other Santa Barbara County hospitals. This month, over two-thirds of COVID-19 patients at county hospitals have been treated at Marian Regional, according to state data.

Around 40% of Santa Maria residents eligible for the COVID-19 vaccine remain unvaccinated, and since the delta variant took hold in early July, Marian Regional has seen its ICU fill with younger patients in their 20s, 30s and 40s. On that quiet Thursday, Sept. 9, all but one of the patients in the unit were unvaccinated.

"We've basically run at 110%



RANDY DE LA PEÑA, CONTRIBUTOR

Pulmonologist Zacharia Reagle, left, and respiratory care practitioner John Rios, far right, intubate a patient in Marian Regional Medical Center's intensive care unit on Sept. 9.

for the last 18 months. We've stepped up to every challenge and met every disaster head-on, but we can't run at 110% forever," said respiratory therapist Johnny Rios.

Health officials say the surge illustrates the deadly consequences of low vaccination rates, the unpredictability of COVID variants, and the need for continued partnerships to address health-care access disparities and dispel vaccine misinformation.

Of the 21 Santa Barbara County residents who died from COVID-19 in the first three weeks of September, over half resided in Santa Maria. They ranged from residents in their 70s to a football coach in his 20s, and several of them passed through Marian's ICU.

"If everybody in this community were vaccinated, we would have one person in the ICU. One," Marian Regional pulmonologist Zacharia Reagle said.

Gearing up for another surge

Santa Maria residents and Latino/Hispanic residents are the two groups that make up the

majority of cases in Santa Barbara County, while inversely experiencing disproportionately low vaccination rates.

The county's most recent COVID-19 demographic study published June 30 indicates that Latino and Hispanic residents, who comprise 48% of the county population, have made up 59% of cases, 67% of hospitalizations and 50% of deaths since the pandemic began.

Although the data was compiled just before the delta variant began to surge in early July, Santa Barbara County Public Health Director Van Do-Reynoso is confident the disparities in COVID-19 impacts are continuing for the Latino and Hispanic population.

"I would be surprised if there is anything out of whack with the proportions," she said. "Even in death, it's significantly more than what they are in the population. Sadly enough, [for] protective factors like vaccination, they are underrepresented."

To date, 45% of Latino residents are fully vaccinated compared to 51% of Whites, 49% of Asians, and 75% of Native

Editor's note

This is the final story in the series "COVID Hot Spot: an at-risk city" produced in partnership with the Center for Health Journalism, investigating the risk factors and decisions that allowed COVID-19 to spread disproportionately throughout Santa Maria over the past year and a half.



Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, highlighting the need for continued vaccine outreach and education.

"We need to stay diligent to our efforts, to our outreach, to ensure access, to ensure that community members from the Latino population are feeling protected and get the opportunity to get vaccinated, which also means education in a setting that is comfortable, that is trusted and that's convenient," Do-Reynoso said.

Mobile vaccine clinics staffed by bilingual and trilingual staff throughout the county have strived to create such an environment for vaccination in areas that are convenient for residents in underserved communities.

Santa Maria resident Janae Sixto attended one such clinic at the Good Samaritan Emergency Shelter in Santa Maria on Sept. 15, with mother Lisa Ortiz and grandmother Graciela Martinez in tow. All three women contracted the virus in August, and Martinez had to be hospitalized and intubated.

Please see **EQUITY**, Page A6

SM school sued after refusal to play football team with female player

Cuyama Valley mother says VCA violated Title IX, CIF bylaws

DAVE MINSKY
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A Santa Maria school has been accused of sex discrimination after refusing to play football against a rival team with a female player, according to a lawsuit filed Wednesday in federal court.

In a complaint filed in the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California, plaintiff Sonya Herrera accused Valley Christian Academy of violating the Title IX law after the private school changed its schedule to avoid playing Cuyama Valley High School in the coming season because her daughter is a member of the team.

The complaint was filed after Alfonso Gamino, Cuyama Joint Union High School District's superintendent, received a letter following a March 13 scrimmage with VCA, explaining that VCA won't play the Cuyama team because of the female member identified as "E.H." in the lawsuit due to her age.

"[Valley Christian Academy] made it clear to plaintiff, among others, that their refusal to play Cuyama Valley High School's football team was for no reason other than their intentional discriminatory animus against Plaintiff based on her gender," according to the lawsuit.

Title IX is the federal law that prohibits discrimination based on sex in education programs. VCA is a member of the California Interscholastic Federation, which oversees public and private high school athletics in the state, and

Please see **LAWSUIT**, Page A5

Biden: Budget talks hit 'stalemate,' \$3.5T may take a while

LISA MASCARO AND JONATHAN LEMIRE
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden said Friday that talks over his \$3.5 trillion rebuilding plan have hit a "stalemate" in Congress as he made the case for his expansive effort to recast the nation's tax and spending programs and make what he sees as sweeping, overdue investments.

Biden spoke at the White House as Democrats in the House and Senate are laboring to finish drafts and overcome differences between the party's centrist and moderate factions. Despite efforts by the president and congressional leaders to show progress, Biden cast the road ahead as long and potentially cumbersome, even with upcoming deadlines.

"We're getting down to the hard spot here," Biden told reporters at the White House. "We're at this stalemate at the moment."

Biden said the process is "going to be up and down" but "hopefully at the end of the day I'll be able to deliver on what I said I would do."

The president's acknowledgment of Democrats' disagreements — and they have serious differences over taxes, health,

Please see **BUDGET**, Page A5

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NATION

GOP review finds no proof Arizona election stolen from Trump

**BOB CHRISTIE
AND CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY**
Associated Press

PHOENIX — A Republican-backed review of the 2020 presidential election in Arizona’s largest county ended Friday without producing proof to support former President Donald Trump’s false claims of a stolen election.

After six months of searching for evidence of fraud, the firm hired by Republican lawmakers issued a report that experts described as riddled with errors, bias and flawed methodology. Still, even that partisan review came up with a vote tally that would not have altered the outcome, finding that Biden won by 360 more votes than the official results certified last year.

The finding was an embarrassing end to a widely criticized, and at times bizarre, quest to prove allegations that election officials and courts have rejected. It has no bearing on the final, certified results. Previous reviews by nonpartisan professionals that followed state law have found no significant problem with the vote count in Maricopa County, home to Phoenix.

Still, for many critics, the conclusions reached by the firm Cyber Ninjas and presented at a hearing Friday, underscored the dangerous futility of the exercise, which has helped fuel skepticism about the validity of the 2020 elec-

tion and spawned copycat audits nationwide.

“We haven’t learned anything new,” said Matt Masterson, a top U.S. election security official in the Trump administration. “What we have learned from all this is that the Ninjas were paid millions of dollars, politicians raised millions of dollars and Americans’ trust in democracy is lower.”

Other critics said the true purpose of the audit may have already succeeded. It spread complex allegations about ballot irregularities and software issues, fueling doubts about elections, said Adrian Fontes, a Democrat who oversaw the Maricopa County election office last year.

“They are trying to scare people into doubting the system is actually working,” he said. “That is their motive. They want to destroy public confidence in our systems.”

The review was authorized by the Republican-controlled state Senate, which subpoenaed the election records from Maricopa County and selected the inexperienced, pro-Trump auditors. On Friday, Senate President Karen Fann sent a letter to Republican Attorney General Mark Brnovich, urging him to investigate issues the report flagged. However, she noted the review found the official count matched the ballots.

“This is the most import-



ROSS D. FRANKLIN

Cyber Ninjas CEO Doug Logan, center, is flanked by Ben Cotton, left, founder of digital security firm CyFIR, and Randy Pullen, right, the former chairman of the Arizona Republican Party, prior to the Arizona Senate Republicans hearing review of the 2020 presidential election results in Maricopa County at the Arizona Capitol on Friday.

ant and encouraging finding of the audit,” Fann wrote.

Trump issued statements Friday falsely claiming the results demonstrated “fraud.”

Despite being widely pilloried, the Arizona review has become a model that Trump supporters are pushing to replicate in other swing states where Biden won. Pennsylvania’s Democratic attorney general sued Thursday to block a GOP-issued subpoena for a wide array of election materials. In Wisconsin, a retired conservative state Supreme Court justice is leading a Republican-ordered inves-

tigation into the 2020 election, and this week threatened to subpoena election officials who don’t comply.

None of the reviews can change Biden’s victory, which was certified by officials in each of the swing states he won and by Congress on Jan. 6 — after Trump’s supporters, fueled by the same false charges that generated the audits, stormed the U.S. Capitol to try to prevent certification of his loss.

The Arizona report claims a number of shortcomings in election procedures and suggested the final tally still could not be relied upon.

Several were challenged by election experts, while members of the Republican-led county Board of Supervisors, which oversees elections, disputed claims on Twitter.

“Unfortunately, the report is also littered with errors & faulty conclusions about how Maricopa County conducted the 2020 General Election,” county officials tweeted.

Election officials say that’s because the review team is biased, ignored the detailed vote-counting procedures in Arizona law and had no experience in the complex field of

election audits.

Two of the report’s recommendations stood out because they showed its authors misunderstood election procedures — that there should be paper ballot backups and that voting machines should not be connected to the internet. All Maricopa ballots are already paper, with machines only used to tabulate the votes, and those tabulators are not connected to the internet.

The review also checked the names of voters against a commercial database, finding 23,344 reported moving before ballots went out in October. While the review suggests something improper, election officials note that voters like college students, those who own vacation homes or military members can move to temporary locations while still legally voting at the address where they are registered.

“A competent reviewer of an election would not make a claim like that,” said Trey Grayson, a former Republican secretary of state in Kentucky.

The election review was run by Cyber Ninjas CEO Doug Logan, whose firm has never conducted an election audit before. Logan previously worked with attorneys and Trump supporters trying to overturn the 2020 election and appeared in a film questioning the results of the contest while the ballot review was ongoing.

Lawsuit

From A1

includes a condition that it must comply with Title IX.

The lawsuit alleges five causes of action, including violations of state and federal civil rights laws, and intentional infliction of emotional distress.

Additionally, the lawsuit lists First Baptist Church, which includes VCA as part of its parish, Joel Mikkelsen, the lead pastor and school’s superintendent, and Does 1-30, who are unnamed individuals that the plaintiffs believe are “responsible in some manner” for the alleged discrimination.

The plaintiffs seek a jury trial and unspecified damages over loss of educational and career op-

portunities, reputation, well-being, attorneys fees, and an injunction that prevents VCA from discriminating against high school athletes based on sex.

In a telephone statement, Mikkelsen said he had “no idea” that the lawsuit had been filed, but said he was aware of the situation outlined in the lawsuit and that he didn’t think there was a problem because Cuyama had already found a team other than VCA to play this fall.

The plaintiffs allege that VCA violated CIF bylaws, which allow females to compete on teams with males in sports like baseball or football, according to the lawsuit.

During the 2020-21 academic year, Cuyama Valley had an eight-man football team, as opposed the 11



DAVID DUBRANSKY, CONTRIBUTOR

Valley Christian’s Matthew Holihan (25) is tackled by Beacon Hill defender Cash Bacon (6) during a CIF-SS 8-man Division 2 playoff game on Nov. 9, 2019

players that are normally on the field during a game.

Plaintiff E.H. had demonstrated “exceptional talent” in male-dominated sports and stood out during varsity football tryouts, which earned her a position of

wide receiver on the team as the only female, according to the lawsuit.

“As one of only two rostered wide receivers on Cuyama Valley’s football team, plaintiff took her position seriously,” according

to the lawsuit, adding that she “trained vigorously and prepared herself” over the summer for the coming season.

During the March 13 scrimmage, Cuyama Valley’s team traveled to Santa Maria for a scheduled game against VCA.

Although no one from the VCA team knew the player was female because her helmet was on for the entire game, Cuyama Valley’s roster was publicly available online and included a name “associated with a female gendered individual,” according to the lawsuit.

The plaintiff said no issues occurred during the game until the very end.

When E.H. removed her helmet, defendant coaches and administrators glared while “shaking their heads in disbelief” as she walked

off the field, according to the lawsuit.

After the game, Mikkelsen wrote a letter to Gamino blocking future games with Cuyama Valley because of the female player, and citing a VCA policy that prohibits physical contact between boys and girls at the school.

“Football is a violent game and we understand the value of such in training our young men within the boundaries of an organized sport,” according to the undated letter, which also cited Bible verses. “We mean no ill will at all towards Cuyama Valley High School or any of its students or their families.”

The defendants have 21 days to respond upon formal notice of the lawsuit, according to court documents.

Budget

From A1

climate change and the ultimate price tag — contrasted with congressional leaders’ more upbeat tone in recent days. Using carefully chosen words, top Democrats have seemed to be trying to create a sense of momentum as House votes approach.

On Friday, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., predicted passage of both pillars of Biden’s domestic agenda. One is a still-evolving \$3.5 trillion package of social safety net and climate programs, the other a separate \$1 trillion measure financing highway, internet and other infrastructure projects that’s already passed the Senate with bipartisan support.

“We’re going to pass both bills,” she told reporters.

But she did not spell out how she and her Senate counterpart, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., would resolve disagreements and distrust between their party’s moderate and progressive wings that’s stalled both measures. And there remained confusion about the voting schedule, which will be crucial.

Pelosi promised House moderates last month that by this Monday, the chamber will consider the infrastructure bill, centrists’ top priority.

But progressives are threatening to vote to derail the infrastructure legislation until a final version of their favorite — the \$3.5 trillion social and environment

bill — passes the Senate and returns to the House. Progressives think delaying the public works bill would pressure moderates to back the larger measure.

“We’re bringing the bill up, we will have a vote when we have the votes,” Pelosi told a reporter Friday about the infrastructure bill’s timing. While she said debate would begin Monday, her remarks suggested that final passage of the public works legislation could slip.

Pelosi also told reporters that “the plan” was for her chamber to consider the \$3.5 trillion package next week as well. It remained unclear how House-Senate bargainers would solve their differences over that bill that quickly.

The president said his private meetings with some two dozen Democratic lawmakers this week in efforts to hasten progress and close the deal went well — describing the tone as collegial and with “no hollering.”

But as lawmakers raised objections over the sweep and scope of the plan, which is to be funded by higher taxes on corporations and

the wealthy, Biden said he tried to get them focused on priorities — what they can and can’t live with.

“It’s about paying your fair share, for lord’s sake,” Biden said. “There clearly is enough, from a panoply of options, to pay for whatever it is.”

In a stark reality check, Biden suggested talks could drag to the end of the year. “It’s just going to take some time,” he said.

Lawmakers are working nonstop and Biden is facing pressure to close the deal. Pelosi met Friday at the Capitol with her leadership team, and the House Budget Committee planned a rare Saturday session to take the strictly procedural step of sending the \$3.5 trillion bill, as drafted by 13 other House panels, to the full chamber without any changes.

Before the House votes on that measure, it is certain to change, perhaps more than once, to reflect compromises reached with Senate Democrats.

Biden’s big vision over his “Build Back Better” campaign promise proposes expanding health, education

and federal programs, with more services for Americans of all ages, while investing heavily in efforts to tackle climate change. All this would be paid for largely by hiking tax rates on corporations and wealthy individuals, those earning beyond \$400,000 a year, or \$450,000 for married couples.

But centrist Democrats see the overall price tag as too much, while progressive lawmakers are hesitant to compromise any further after already having dropped even more ambitious ideas.



PATRICK SEMANSKY

President Joe Biden speaks about the COVID-19 response and vaccinations Friday in the State Dining Room of the White House.

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