



COMING SOON
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SPORTS » C1

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SUNDAY, March 7, 2021

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Senate OKs \$1.9T virus relief bill

Package now heads back to House for final passage

BY ALAN FRAM
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An exhausted Senate narrowly approved a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief bill Saturday as

President Joe Biden and his Democratic allies notched a victory they called crucial for hoisting the country out of the pandemic and economic doldrums.

After laboring all night on a mountain of amendments — nearly all from Republicans and rejected — bleary-

eyed senators approved the sprawling package on a 50-49 party-line vote. That sets up final congressional approval by the House next week so lawmakers can whisk it to Biden for his signature.

The huge measure — its cost is nearly one-tenth the size of the entire U.S.

economy — is Biden's biggest early priority. It stands as his formula for addressing the deadly virus and a limping economy, twin crises that have afflicted the country for a year.

"This nation has suffered too much

See **RELIEF**, Page A5

INSIDE

» Highlights of the \$1.9T COVID bill nearing final passage. **A5**

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COVID-19 PANDEMIC

LOCATION	#CASES	#DEATHS
Worldwide	116,466,900+	2,586,890+
United States	11,192,800+	524,200+
Virginia	584,537	9,519
Tennessee	782,206	11,543

#VACCINATED IN VIRGINIA: 1,438,512
#VACCINATED IN TENNESSEE: 1,605,795

SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

INSIDE



1996 30T classic resonates 25 years later in SW Va. » C1



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Weather » A10



EVELYN BOSWELL CASE

MYSTERY REMAINS

One year later: Little known about Sullivan toddler's death

DAVID ORIGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER FILE PHOTO

Members of the community gathered to pray a year ago after Evelyn Boswell's body was found at a home on Muddy Creek Road in Sullivan County.

BY ROBERT SORRELL
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

One year after the massive search for missing toddler Evelyn Boswell ended with the discovery of her body on family property in Blountville, Tennessee, little is known about how and why she died.

No information about her manner of death, the circumstances surrounding it or a possible motive has been released to the public.

Law enforcement officials remain tight-lipped. Recent requests for interviews about the case to Sullivan County Sheriff Jeff Cassidy and District Attorney General Barry Staubus were denied.

Sullivan County Judge Jim Goodwin placed all evidence, including the autopsy report, under seal, keeping the public from knowing the circumstances leading to her death. Staubus has declined releasing additional details and confirmed the autopsy report is still under seal this month.

Indictments, a criminal affidavit and a few public statements provide few details into the case, which began in February 2020, when Evelyn's grandfather reported her missing.

Meanwhile, the 15-month-old's mother, Megan Boswell, 19, remains in custody on multiple felony charges, including two counts of felony murder.

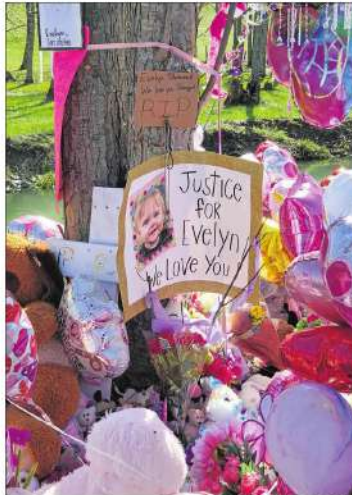


Megan Boswell looks around General Sessions Court in Bristol, Tennessee during a court appearance last year.

ONLINE
Watch now: Video details the Evelyn Boswell case at **HeraldCourier.com**.

INSIDE
» A look at the charges against Megan Boswell. **A4**
» A timeline of events in the Boswell case. **A4**

See **BOSWELL**, Page A4



DAVID ORIGER/BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Signs, balloons and flowers are placed at a memorial last year.

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- John Johnson, MD
- Alan McCart, MD
- Peter Lemkin, OD

Timeline of events



Sullivan County Sheriff Jeff Cassidy discusses the missing 15-month-old Blountville girl, Evelyn Mae Boswell, who became the subject of an Amber Alert in early 2020.

» **Dec. 10 or 11, 2019** – The last confirmed sighting of Evelyn by a babysitter
 » **Feb. 18, 2020** – Evelyn was reported missing by a family member
 » **Feb. 19, 2020** – The public is informed of the missing child and an Amber Alert issued
 » **Feb. 25, 2020** – Evelyn's mother, Megan Boswell, arrested on false reporting charge



An Amber Alert was issued for Evelyn Boswell in February 2020.



Several prayer vigils and memorial services were held during the search for Evelyn Boswell.

» **March 6, 2020** – Evelyn's body found



Investigators worked late Friday into Saturday after remains believed to be those of missing toddler Evelyn Boswell were found at a home on Muddy Creek Road in Sullivan County.

» **May 20, 2020** – Megan Boswell charged with 11 counts of false reporting
 » **Aug. 19, 2020** – Megan Boswell charged with murder in daughter's death
 » **May 14, 2021** – Next court date



A memorial was set up in Sullivan County across from the site where remains believed to be Evelyn Boswell were found.

Boswell

From Page A1

THE INVESTIGATION

The case began Feb. 18, when Sullivan County Sheriff's Office Detective Tracy Haraz said she received a Tennessee Department of Children's Services referral stating that Evelyn had not been seen since before Christmas, an affidavit filed in Bristol General Sessions Court states. Haraz and a DCS case worker went to a home on Sandy Point Drive to speak with Megan Boswell.

The mother told them that Evelyn was with the child's father, Ethan Perry. But Haraz said she discovered that Perry, 20, was actively enlisted in the Army, stationed at Fort Polk, Louisiana, and did not have Evelyn.

Initially, the public became aware of Evelyn's disappearance Feb. 19, when the SCSO announced it was looking for information to help find the girl. Later in the day, the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation issued a statewide Amber Alert — which ultimately led to nationwide interest in the case.

The following day, the SCSO said it was looking for the occupants of a 2007 BMW and investigators wanted to speak with its occupants because they might have information about Evelyn.

On Feb. 21, a Wilkes County Sheriff's Office detective in North Carolina found the BMW. The occupants, William McCloud, 34, and Evelyn's grandmother, Angela Boswell, 43, were arrested and charged with a fugitive warrant for theft charges related to the car in Tennessee — a grand jury later returned a no true bill in that case, dismissing the charges, according to Assistant District Attorney Teresa Nelson.

Tips took investigators to North Carolina and Virginia, where searches were conducted, including at a pond in Wilkes County adjacent to McCloud's grandmother's home.

Mary McCloud told the Bristol Herald Courier that she did not believe her grandson was involved in the child's disappearance and she had not seen the child. Authorities said they found nothing in either North Carolina or Virginia.

Locally, authorities wrote multiple search warrants in the case, but they have remained under seal and are not available to the public. The TBI confirmed it conducted a search at a mobile home on Sugar Hollow Road in Blountville, but provided no additional information.

Finally, authorities said they had information that led them to Tommy Boswell's property along Muddy Creek Road on March 6, 2020. The child's body was found in an outbuilding.

TBI Agent Brian Fraley said Evelyn was found in the "exact" clothing that she was last seen wearing. Investigators also found diapers, toys and other clothing in the outbuilding, he said.

Sheriff Cassidy said that since the child's body was found, the county's detectives, as well as agents from the TBI and FBI, worked tirelessly to investigate. Authorities said they determined Megan Boswell was the sole suspect in the case and eventually took the case to a grand jury.

The indictments claim Megan Boswell committed abuse and neglect that caused serious bodily injury to Evelyn in December 2019, although they do not cite specific injuries. The charges also claim the abuse and neglect was "other than by accidental means."

COMMUNITY REACTION

Prayer vigils and gatherings were held throughout the height of the Boswell case, from the time the Amber Alert was issued until after her body was discovered. Large memorials, filled with flowers, photographs and stuffed animals, were established at the Muddy Creek site and the Sullivan County Justice Center in Blountville.

One year later, the community continues to grieve for Evelyn.

Kandis Crook, a mother of two, is one of six administrators for Evelyn's Army — May She Rest In Peace, a Facebook group established early on in the case.

"We are all mothers and much like the rest of the community when we got the Amber Alert we all worried and hoped for a good outcome and as the story unfolded it just broke our hearts for Evelyn so we started the group as a way of help the Sheriff's Office in the search for Evelyn," said Crook, a Bristol, Tennessee resident.

Evelyn's Army, which has nearly 5,000 members, fed detectives every day during the investigation.

"Then, when we got the horrible news about Evelyn we wanted to do something to bring light and love to her memory and that is how we came up with Evelyn's comfort bags," she said. "They are little bags with toys and coloring books and snacks and a note of love and support that the officers can give to children they encounter on

domestic violence calls or just kids in scary situations to bring them some comfort in Evelyn's name."

Anyone who wants to help can join Evelyn's Army on Facebook, where they regularly post updates and upcoming events. There is also a GoFundMe page and a PayPal link where donations can be made for the group's efforts.

"We are still very active," Crook said. "We are currently still putting together Evelyn's comfort bags and giving them to the Sullivan County Sheriff's Office. We plan on doing some fundraisers to help with that once it warms up outside."

An online petition on Change.org to ask the Sullivan County government to build a playground in Blountville in Evelyn's honor has garnered nearly 10,000 signatures.

"I feel it only right to have the playground built there in remembrance of her," said Diane Barnett, who created the petition.

The playground would feature activities for children ages 3 months and older and include an area for disabled children "so that all children can have a place to play and have fun," the petition states.

Sullivan County Mayor Richard Venable said last week that no one has contacted him about the playground project.

EVELYN'S LAW

After stalling in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and budget discussions, local legislators have reintroduced Evelyn's Law, which would require parents to report a missing child to law enforcement within 24 hours after learning the child is missing.

Legislators note that Evelyn hadn't been seen for more than two months when she was reported missing in February 2020.

State Rep. John Crawford, R-Kingsport, submitted House Bill 384 on Jan. 22, and state Sen. Jon Lundberg, R-Bristol, introduced Senate Bill 327 on Jan. 25. It has been placed on the House Criminal Justice Committee's calendar for Wednesday and is to be considered by the Senate Judiciary Committee.

Cassidy said he fully supports the legislation.

"Evelyn's Law is important legislation that would give law enforcement the tools necessary in holding parents or guardians accountable for their inaction," Cassidy said. "This law would increase the penalties against parents who fail to report their children missing within two days. I appreciate the continued work in strengthening state laws so we can hold those with no regard for the well-being or safety of their children accountable for their reckless behavior."

The legislation would require that, when a parent knows, learns or believes that a child 12 years of age or younger who is under their care is missing, they report it to a law enforcement agency or the TBI within 24 hours after determining that the child is missing. It would create a Class A misdemeanor offense for failure to do so, according to the General Assembly's fiscal review committee.

According to the 2002 National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway and Throwaway Children report, approximately 420,300 children under the age of 11 go missing each year nationwide. Of those, 310,000 are reported to law enforcement.

In 99.8% of all unreported missing children cases, the missing children were returned home or located, the report states. It can be reasonably assumed the vast majority were within the 24-hour window, pursuant to the legislation, the committee said.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Megan Boswell's case continues to evolve in Sullivan County Criminal Court.

The case in Judge Goodwin's courtroom has been reset for May 14. She previously pleaded not guilty to the charges and maintains her innocence. If convicted, Staubus, the chief prosecutor, has decided to seek life in prison without the possibility of parole.

Staubus recently told the court that he decided against the death penalty due to a similar case in which the Tennessee Supreme Court overturned capital punishment. In that case, Bobby Godsey, who had no criminal history, like Boswell, was sentenced to death. Godsey was convicted in 1997 of murder in the death of his girlfriend's child. His attorneys appealed the sentence and the Supreme Court overturned it.

Defense attorney C. Brad Sproles said he continues to review the evidence in the Boswell case, which includes recorded interviews with his client. He has also told the court he plans to seek a change of venue due to pretrial publicity in the region.

Boswell continues to be held on \$1 million bail in the Sullivan County jail.

Charges against Megan Boswell explained

A Sullivan County grand jury returned a 19-count indictment against

15-month-old Evelyn Boswell's mother on Aug. 19, 2020.

Megan Boswell, 19, has pleaded not guilty to all charges. She is scheduled to appear in Judge Jim Goodwin's court on May 14.



Megan Boswell

» Two counts of felony murder

The grand jury approved two counts of felony murder. Each count states that in December 2019, Boswell "did unlawfully and feloniously kill" her daughter. One count states that the killing was committed in the perpetration of aggravated child abuse and the other in the perpetration of aggravated child neglect.

» Aggravated child abuse

The grand jury claims Boswell treated her daughter in December 2019 in such a manner as to inflict serious bodily injury, resulting in the aggravated child abuse charge.

» Aggravated child neglect

The grand jury also claims that in December 2019 Boswell neglected her daughter so as to adversely affect the child's health and welfare, and the act resulted in serious bodily injury to Evelyn. The claims resulted in the aggravated child neglect charge.

» Tampering with evidence

In December 2019, Boswell altered, destroyed or concealed evidence with the intent to impair its availability or legibility as evidence in the investigation into her daughter's death, the grand jury claimed. The jurors also claimed Boswell knew that an investigation was pending or in progress, which resulted in a charge of tampering with evidence.

» Abuse of a corpse

In December 2019, Boswell mistreated her daughter's corpse, the grand jurors said. A TBI agent told the court during one hearing that Evelyn's body was found in an outbuilding on family property along Muddy Creek Road in Blountville.

» Failure to report a death under suspicious, unusual or unnatural circumstances

Boswell failed to report the death of her daughter, Evelyn, to the county medical examiner, local police, district attorney general or sheriff, the grand jurors said. Authorities didn't know Evelyn was missing until her grandfather reported it in February 2020, leading to a statewide Amber Alert.

» 12 counts of false reports

Sheriff Jeff Cassidy said Boswell provided a number of false claims during the investigation, impeding detectives in finding Evelyn. The grand jury handed down 12 counts of false reports. The jurors said Boswell provided false information to hinder or obstruct officers investigating her daughter's disappearance and death. In one count, she claimed Evelyn was with her father, who was serving in the military in Louisiana. On another occasion, Boswell claimed her daughter was with the child's grandmother. Authorities said the claims were false.



Our Democratic non-Democracy

'Good Government in 2021' series » A6



'An incredible day'

Celebrations erupt as controversial Lee statue removed in Charlottesville

REGION » B1

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School boards become battle zones

BY STEPHEN GROVES

RAPID CITY, S.D. — Local school boards around the country are increasingly becoming cauldrons of anger and political division, boiling with disputes over such issues as COVID-19 mask rules, the treatment of transgender students and how to teach the history of racism and slavery in America.

Meetings that were once orderly, even boring, have turned ugly. School board elections that were once uncontested have drawn slates of candidates galvanized by one issue or another.

A June school board meeting in Loudoun County, Virginia, that dealt with transgender students and the teaching of "critical race theory" became so unruly that one person was arrested for disorderly conduct and another was cited for trespassing.

In Rapid City, South Dakota, and Kalispell, Montana, non-partisan school board races devolved into political warfare as conservative candidates, angered over requirements to wear masks in schools, sought to seize control.

See **SCHOOL**, Page A7

COVID-19

PANDEMIC

LOCATION	#CASES	#DEATHS
Worldwide	186,418,900+	4,025,000+
United States	33,847,200+	607,100+
Virginia	682,423	11,450
Tennessee	809,757	12,590

% FULLY VACCINATED IN VA: 51.7%
% FULLY VACCINATED IN TENN.: 37.9%
SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

Thank you, **Curtis Thomas**, for subscribing to the Bristol Herald Courier.

84/67
Weather » A10



Drug Overdose Deaths

	Virginia	Tennessee
2016	1,428	1,631
2017	1,537	1,776
2018	1,486	1,818
2019	1,627	2,089
2020	2,297	NA

Drug overdoses (prescription, heroin, cocaine, fentanyl, etc.) in Tennessee and Virginia have risen in recent years, according to the state health departments.

'PURE HAVOC'

Pandemic pushes up drug overdose deaths, local officials say

BY ROBERT SORRELL
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Drug overdose deaths increased in several areas of the Mountain Empire during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic — including a 53% jump in deaths in Sullivan County, Tennessee, statistics show.

The numbers, however, plateaued or even decreased in a few counties in Southwest Virginia.

Local officials and experts believe isolation and social distancing, canceled classes and closed resources, lost jobs and extra funds from stimulus money have led to a nationwide increase in drug overdose deaths.

In Sullivan County, a total of 56 people died of a drug overdose in 2020, according to the county prosecutor's office. Forty-three of those deaths involved heroin, cocaine, methamphetamine, fentanyl or a combination, the office's data shows. There were 30 overdose deaths in 2019.

As of the first week of May 2021, the latest figures available, Deputy District Attorney General Gene Perrin said 23 people have already died of overdoses in Sullivan County and he expects that number to climb by the end of the year. That's half of last year's death count in Sullivan County before the year was even half over.

While Sullivan County saw an increase in deaths, some places in Southwest Virginia stayed about the same in 2020 compared

See **OVERDOSES**, Page A3

Overdose survivor now works helping drug addicts

BY ROBERT SORRELL
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

Two-time drug overdose survivor Polly Jessen, a Kingsport, Tennessee, native, now dedicates her time to helping others battling drug addiction at Frontier Health.

Jessen's addiction to opiates began after her mother died from breast cancer, she recently told the Bristol Herald Courier. She was barely 18 years old and was already abusing alcohol and marijuana.

"I eventually discovered my mother's leftover pain medication," she said.

See **SURVIVOR**, Page A3



Polly Jessen is a two-time overdose survivor and currently helps others at Frontier Health in Johnson City.

Need Help?

- » Crisis line: 877-928-9062.
- » National Suicide Prevention Line: 800-273-8255;
- » Sullivan County Anti-Drug Coalition (SCAD Coalition): 423-742-5819;
- » Frontier Health Turning Point 24/7 walk-in assessment center for treatment referrals and resources: 208 E. Unaka Ave., Johnson City, Tennessee, 423-926-0940

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Overdoses

From Page A1

to previous years. The Virginia Department of Health reports that two people have died of drug overdoses in the city of Bristol in 2018, 2019 and 2020 — but 2020 numbers are preliminary and could increase.

Washington County, Virginia, reported four deaths in 2020, four less than the eight deaths reported in 2019, the state's health department said. There were seven deaths in 2018. Investigators are concerned the number will increase in 2021.

"The Sheriff's Office has suspected a substantial increase in overdose deaths in 2021," Washington County Sheriff Blake Andis said. "This is due to the age of deceased persons and evidence found at death scenes."

Smyth County, Russell County, Scott County and Tazewell County all saw increases in drug overdose deaths during the pandemic, VDH data shows. Tazewell County had 22 overdose deaths in 2020, by far the most in Southwest Virginia. There were 17 deaths in 2019 and nine in 2018.

Wise County, Buchanan County and Dickenson County saw decreases in deaths. Buchanan County's count dropped from 10 in 2018 to five in 2019 to two in 2020.

The states of Tennessee and Virginia have both seen large increases in overdose deaths in recent years. Virginia increased from 1,627 deaths in 2019 to 2,297 deaths in 2020. In Tennessee, no numbers are available for 2020, but there were 2,089 deaths in 2019 compared to 1,818 deaths in 2018, data from the two state health departments show.

Drug epidemic

Over the past decade, drug overdose counts across the country have increased, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control. Data shows overdose deaths peaked nationwide in 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Between November 2019 and November 2020, a total of 90,722 people died in the United States, CDC data shows. That's compared to 70,357 who died between November 2018 and November 2019.

Sullivan County Coroner Hunter Locke said the county's drug overdose rate has been increasing for a few years. The county began seeing a spike about two to three years ago, he said. Overall call volume for police and emergency management services for overdoses has spiked as well, long before the pandemic.

Locke said he doesn't believe the pandemic solely contributed to overdose increases.

"[The] drug issue has been an issue here for many years prior of the pandemic," Locke said. "Until we get more state dollars to stop the drug problem here it will always remain an issue due to lack of funding by the state of Tennessee."

In 2020, there were 1,748 deaths in Sullivan County. A large number of those were COVID-19-related deaths and overdose deaths.

Data regarding drug overdose deaths for 2020 may change as investigations continue, Perrin said. "I have been doing this for 41 years," Perrin said. "I never thought we would be dealing with what we are dealing with."

Perrin, who previously worked as a prosecutor in Florida, receives regular reports of drug overdoses, including fatal and non-fatal incidents. Heroin, fentanyl and methamphetamine are the most common drugs that lead to overdoses in Sullivan County and elsewhere in North-east Tennessee and Southwest Virginia, according to data.

Numbers calculated in Sullivan County typically come from forensic autopsy reports, which include toxicology analysis, as well as law enforcement and first-responder reports. Non-fatal overdoses are more difficult to calculate, Perrin noted. Oftentimes, victims and those who resuscitate them do not report the incidents.

"These drugs are creating pure havoc in our communities," he said.

Several years ago, Perrin said investigators were concerned

Drug Overdose Deaths

United States

► 90,722 people died between Nov. 2019 and Nov. 2020.

► 70,357 people died between Nov. 2018 and Nov. 2019.

► 68,102 people died between Nov. 2017 and Nov. 2018.

Sources: Tennessee Department of Health; Virginia Department of Health; Centers for Disease Control

Local numbers

► Sullivan County: 30 in 2019, 56 in 2020, 23 at beginning of May 2021

► Bristol, Virginia: 2 each in 2018, 2019 and 2020

► Norton: 1 each in 2018, 2019, 2020

► Smyth County: 4 each in 2018 and 2019, 8 in 2020

► Tazewell County: 9 in 2018, 17 in 2019, 22 in 2020

► Wise County: 11 in 2018, 12 in 2019, 8 in 2020

► Russell County: 1 in 2018, 3 in 2019, 4 in 2020

► Scott County: 3 in 2018, 2 in 2019, 7 in 2020

► Buchanan County: 10 in 2018, 5 in 2019, 2 in 2020

► Dickenson County: 3 in 2018, 6 in 2019, 5 in 2020

about local physicians over-prescribing drugs. Laws then clamped down on over-prescribing, which led to a demand for other drugs. At that point, Perrin said cartels and drug trafficking organizations stepped in and seized the opportunity.

"[Cartels and other organizations] moved right in and offered a drug that was cheaper and more potent and became very desirable," Perrin said. "That was heroin."

Heroin and other drugs then began to mix. Fentanyl, heroin and meth use in the region has continued to ramp up.

"We are seeing larger and larger amounts of methamphetamine coming into the area," Perrin said. "The area has become a hub. We are seeing methamphetamine coming in in unprecedented numbers, because it's much cheaper."

One drug dealer even advertised that because two deaths had been linked to his drugs, his were the best, Perrin said.

"They are not fearful of the fact that it kills people" he said. "They want the dope because it's really good dope."

Then the pandemic came.

Pandemic adds to problem

COVID-19 began to spread across the United States in early 2020, closing schools, churches and businesses. People lost jobs. Most Americans went into isolation for months, many working from home if they could. Social distancing became the norm.

As a result, the U.S. government approved stimulus funds to assist individuals and families hit by job losses, inflation and other problems that arose due to the pandemic. Perrin said he supports money that went toward legitimate purchases that were intended to boost the economy.

But not all stimulus funds were used to buy legitimate items. A lot of money went to illegal narcotics, he said.

"The taxpayers' dollars that went to funding the stimulus packages, it's not just going to extra TVs, people going out to dine, these addicts are taking that extra money, and they are using it to continue to buy and consume drugs," Perrin said. "It's a perfect storm."

While stimulus funds helped many families, Perrin said it also helped feed addiction and overdoses.

Polly Jessen, a two-time overdose survivor who now works at Frontier Health in Johnson City, Tennessee, said she's seen the pandemic's effect on drug addiction and overdoses. She, too, has been concerned that people addicted to drugs have used stimulus funds to purchase narcotics.

"We have definitely seen an increase in overdoses in the past year, both fatal and non-fatal," said Jessen, who has been in recovery since 2012.

The pandemic has resulted in cancellations of various community support meetings, alterations and unavailability of in-person mental health services, as well as individuals feeling isolated and having difficulty navigating the changing resources.

"We are certainly tracking on this unfortunate increase in both fatal and non-fatal overdoses

Survivor

From Page A1

She began swallowing and snorting pills, which eventually led to intravenous use of more dangerous street drugs, such as heroin.

"I quickly lost control over my addiction, which amplified my depression and caused me to begin having suicidal thoughts," Jessen said.

During this time, she experienced her first overdose, which she described as a suicide attempt. Emergency medical technicians were able to revive her, and she was given psychiatric treatment at a local behavioral health hospital.

But Jessen was unable to stop using during that time, she said, which led to another overdose. She described the second overdose as unintentional.

She said she struggled for years with mental illness, depression, anxiety, legal issues, a lack of motivation, self-harm and addiction — issues that many face in the region. Eventually, after her third driving-under-the-influence charge, she finally got help. Through the court system, she was offered assistance in a residential treatment program

at Frontier Health back in 2006.

The program helped, and she managed to stay clean and sober for a few years, but she eventually relapsed. She went back to treatment, again at Frontier Health, in 2012, and she has remained in recovery ever since.

She celebrated nine years of recovery last Thursday.

"Through a process of figuring out what worked and what didn't, I was able to find a long-term way to manage my mental health and abstain from drugs," Jessen said. "I became part of a supportive recovery community, and my goal became to eventually work in the field and be able to give back what was so freely given to me."

Despite her past, Jessen was hired in 2013 as a residential tech at Frontier Health. She later obtained a certification through the Tennessee Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services to become a certified recovery specialist. In 2018, she became a peer recovery navigator on the Frontier Health Crisis Team. Her job consisted of assessing people who had experienced an overdose or been to the emergency room seeking help.

Jessen now serves as the staff development coordinator at Turning Point, a Frontier Health facility.

"My entire life was out of control, and I knew I was going to die if I didn't get help," she said, recalling her battle with addiction.

The region has been in the midst of an epidemic of deadly fentanyl and synthetic analogues for years, Jessen said. Many of these substances have been found in heroin and pressed or fake pills, methamphetamine and other drugs.

"In my opinion, the drugs are much more deadly now," she said. "Each use includes a chance of overdose, and that is not just limited to heroin and prescription pills anymore. We have seen staggering amounts of methamphetamine users being positive for fentanyl, and I have personally heard instances of fentanyl being present in some batches of marijuana."

Jessen has been actively working with others during the COVID-19 pandemic. Frontier Health paired its COVID-19 crisis counselors with the recovery navigators to host two drive-thru Narcan and resource events. The medicine is used to treat those who are overdosing. She said they were able to get more than 200 Narcan kits into the community. Everyone should obtain and be trained to use Narcan, she said.

both from opioids, stimulants and other substances to include alcohol-related deaths," said Angela Hagaman, director of operations at the Center for Prescription Drug Abuse Prevention and Treatment at East Tennessee State University.

Hagaman said she's concerned that overdoses may continue if the community does not follow recommendations put forward by experts in the field.

Quoting Dr. Nora Volkow with the National Institute on Drug Abuse, Hagaman said COVID has presented several challenges, including access to medication for opiate use disorders, limited access to peer support groups and the stress that social distancing generates. In addition, "people taking opioids alone is much harder to actually reverse with naloxone (Narcan) if no one is observing" it happening. Job losses, homelessness and despair also contribute to drug use and overdoses, she said.

Some governments have stepped in to help during the pandemic, according to Volkow. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and the Drug Enforcement Administration changed policies on two of the medications that are most widely used for treating people with an opioid use disorder. Requirements for access to methadone, which is used to treat addiction, were relaxed.

Community efforts

Local organizations, such as Frontier Health and the Appalachian Substance Abuse Coalition for Prevention and Treatment, have been working to fight addiction and overdoses during the pandemic in the Mountain Empire.

"It's of great concern," said ASAC Executive Director Linda Austin. "For our opioid overdoses to increase is heartbreaking, especially when you consider the ripple

effect. That's a lot of children without their parents, and a lot of parents without their children."

ASAC, a Southwest Virginia coalition intended to inform and assist the community to better understand the drug epidemic, has helped many people during the pandemic.

"The most important thing we've done is push Narcan out in the communities in the region," Austin said. "We partnered with many of the food banks to train people as they sat in their cars and pulled through the food lines. We've trained thousands and gave them Narcan."

The organization met virtually during the pandemic, connecting people to resources.

Frontier Health launched a team of COVID-19 crisis counselors, which are available as a free resource and referral service to those affected by the pandemic. Jessen said Frontier Health assisted with debriefings, assessments and maintained a phone answering service. The organization also paired the counselors with the recovery navigators to host two drive-thru Narcan and resource events. In total, the effort got more than 200 Narcan kits into the community.

Narcan is used to treat individuals suffering from an overdose. Jessen said she believes everyone should obtain and be trained to use Narcan. Individuals with a substance use disorder, families and emergency medical service members are recommended to have Narcan on hand in case of an overdose. Jessen described it as a safe, effective over-the-counter nasal spray that can reverse an opioid overdose.

Perrin said he is thankful most local first-responders carry Narcan, which has been reported to have saved many residents from overdoses. But Narcan can't save every person. The prosecutor recalled a Sullivan County man

who died from an overdose.

"Narcan helped him once, twice, three times. Ultimately, he went too far the fourth time," Perrin said.

Perrin said he's also aware of times when overdose victims become upset and angry that they've been treated with Narcan because the treatment decreases the high.

"Instead of being grateful for being saved, they are angry," Perrin said.

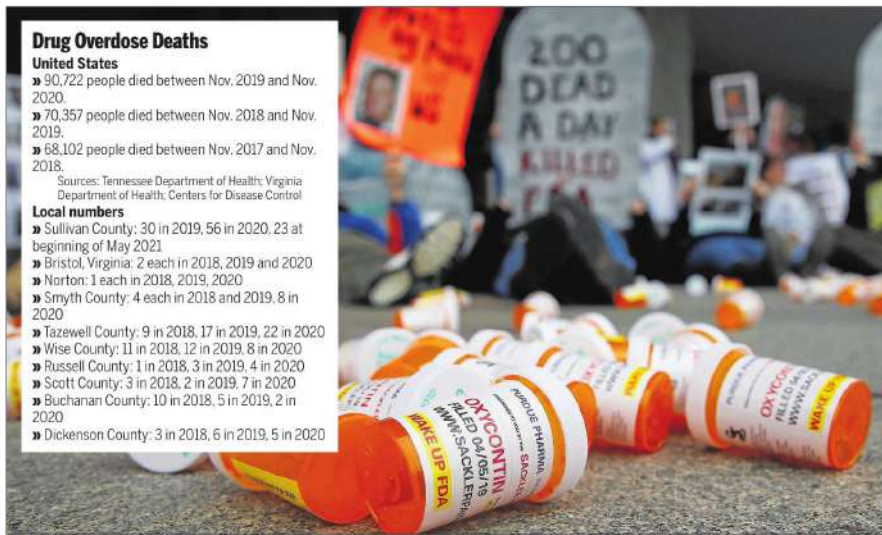
Jessen said it's also important to decrease the stigma associated with addiction and mental illness, which is why she has worked hard to share her story. She has shared her story at length on the Frontier Health Foundation's podcast called "Impact Stigma" for Episode 3.

"I think the most important thing we can do is continue this conversation, educate ourselves and each other about available treatment options, and remove the shame and stigma from asking for help," Jessen said.

Know someone who might suffer from an addiction? Frontier Health's crisis line is available 24/7 by calling 1-877-928-9062 or going to Turning Point, which is at 208 E. Unaka Ave. in Johnson City. The facility's walk-in assessment and referral center is always open.

Jessen said the first step is to make a call or simply reach out. Perrin and others worry the increase in overdoses will continue once the pandemic subsides.

Although the number of COVID-19 cases has decreased locally, Perrin said drug use that increased during the pandemic won't go away. When asked whether there is light at the end of the tunnel, Perrin simply said, "no." He added that a lack of funding for law enforcement makes the situation worse because police are unable to siphon off drug distribution in the region.



AP PHOTO



Historic house in Abingdon to be moved Wednesday

REGION » B1



Elizabethton spoils home opener for State Liners

SPORTS » C1

BRISTOL HERALD COURIER

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EPA will begin sampling air quality in Bristol

BRISTOL HERALD COURIER
The Environmental Protection Agency will be in Bristol this week to begin sampling air quality as the Twin City continues to receive odor complaints. Bristol Virginia City Manager Randy Eads said the EPA notified him this past week that the agency will be in the city on Monday evening through Wednesday. EPA staff will set up air sampling canisters throughout the community to do continuous air sampling monitoring.

The EPA is expected to monitor the air for at least two weeks. If necessary, Eads said the monitoring will be extended. The city began receiving complaints about unusual odors on both sides of the state line in October 2020. In December, the Bristol, Virginia, landfill, which city officials say is responsible for at least some of the area's odor issues, began gathering and analyzing air samples at the facility and in surrounding neighborhoods. Both city and Virginia Department of Environmental Quality staff began separately collecting and analyzing air samples at the landfill, as well as in some neighborhoods where the smells were occurring. Sampling locations were set up along Booher Road and Taylor Avenue, locations where complaints have been made about the odors. Ernie Hoch — who manages solid waste and environmental services for Draper Aden Associates and has been consulting for the city on the landfill — previously told the Bristol Herald Courier that some of the city's samples tested for methane, oxygen, carbon monox-

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UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFITS FRAUD



PHOTOILLUSTRATION / DAVID CRISGER, BRISTOL HERALD COURIER
Since the beginning of the pandemic, the Virginia Employment Commission has paid \$12 billion in jobless claims, including \$50 million in fraudulent claims.

LATEST EPIDEMIC

Dozens of people in Southwest Virginia have been indicted for unemployment fraud this year

BY ROBERT SORRELL
BRISTOL HERALD COURIER
As COVID-19 began spreading across the country last spring and schools, businesses and communities locked down and closed, inmates at one Southwest Virginia jail devised a plan to make some extra money in an illegal conspiracy to collect unemployment benefits, according to court records. The scheme, based out of the Regional Jail in Duffield, is just one of several conspiracies involving unemployment fraud, and this one resulted in a half-million dollars going to ineligible conspirators, prosecutors said. Since the beginning of the

pandemic in 2020, the Virginia Employment Commission has paid approximately \$12 billion in unemployment claims, according to a news release. The Associated Press reports that the VEC has admitted to paying more than \$50 million in fraudulent claims, including to inmates ineligible to receive benefits. "Unemployment insurance fraud is a national issue that every state is struggling with and Virginia is not immune," VEC Commissioner Ellen Marie Hess said. "Fraud takes many forms, including identity theft, filing under false pretenses and on a larger scale, organized fraud conducted by malicious actors from across the globe."

As a result of the pandemic, the government made it easier to file for claims, including self-certification and the lifting of other traditional requirements. Twenty-four people have been indicted in connection with the scheme, which was headed by Leelyn Danielle Chytka, Greg Tackett and Jeff Tackett, according to federal prosecutors. "Over the past year, Virginians have endured one of the worst pandemics our country has ever seen," Acting U.S. Attorney Daniel Bubar said in a new release regarding Chytka's plea agreement. "During this time, jobless claims in

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Concerned about **unemployment fraud**? Reach out to your state unemployment office to report the fraud. It's possible you could be a victim of fraud in several states.

MORE INFORMATION
» For more information on unemployment benefits in Virginia, go to www.vec.virginia.gov/unemployed.

Thank you, **Charlie Smith**, for subscribing to the Bristol Herald Courier.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC

LOCATION	#CASES	#DEATHS
Worldwide	172,856,200+	3,718,300+
United States	33,356,800+	597,300+
Virginia	976,586	11,229
Tennessee	863,840	12,476

% FULLY VACCINATED IN VA: 45.4%
% FULLY VACCINATED IN TENN.: 34%

SOURCES: Johns Hopkins, Virginia and Tennessee Departments of Health, AP

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» Read the latest news about COVID-19 in your community.

Republicans aim to revive Fauci attacks after email trove released

BY JILL COLVIN and ZEKE MILLER
Associated Press
WASHINGTON — Dr. Anthony Fauci has been a political lightning rod since the early days of the pandemic, lionized by the left and villainized by the right. But with the release of a trove of Fauci's emails this past week, Republicans' political attacks on the nation's top government infectious-diseases expert have gone into overdrive.

On conservative news channels, President Joe Biden's pandemic adviser has been baselessly pilloried as a liar who misled the American people about the origins of COVID-19 to protect the Chinese government. There's no

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Fraud

From Page A1

the commonwealth dramatically increased, as unemployment spiked. While some struggled to make ends meet, this defendant and her co-conspirators worked to defraud an unemployment system which exists as a safety net for those in need."

Over the course of nine months, Chytka filed fraudulent claims for at least 37 individuals, with a total actual loss to the United States of at least \$499,000, according to prosecutors.

In May 2020, Chytka developed the scheme to file fraudulent claims for pandemic unemployment benefits via the Virginia Employment Commission website, according to court records. The scheme was to submit claims for various individuals, including Chytka, Greg Tackett and Jeff Tackett, who were each ineligible to receive pandemic unemployment benefits, records show.

To file for benefits, the individuals made false statements about unemployment based on COVID-19, using a fictitious employer as the name of the last employer, and claiming that the applicant was actively seeking full-time employment.

Because pandemic unemployment benefits were paid on a weekly basis, the scheme was continuing, Chytka and the others agreed to file weekly recertifications for the claims they submitted.

At the time Chytka developed the scheme, court records say Jeff Tackett was incarcerated at the Regional Jail in Duffield and was not capable of accessing a computer system to file his own fraudulent claim. Inmates are ineligible to receive unemployment benefits.

Jeff Tackett provided all of his personal information required to file his claim to Chytka, who would then file on his behalf, court records state.

The scheme expanded and began to include other inmates — all ineligible to obtain benefits — at the Duffield facility. They also made claims for other friends and family members, court records show.

Jeff Tackett approached inmates at the jail and told them he had a way to make money by submitting claims for pandemic unemployment benefits on their behalf, prosecutors said in court records. Fifteen inmates, most of them in the same jail pod, are said to have provided their information to Tackett, who then passed it on to Chytka so she could file claims.

Some conspiracy members agreed that in exchange for filing claims, Chytka and others could keep a portion of the money. Some people gave them drugs. Others gave them money, according to court records.

Chytka and Greg Tackett used the address of a residence in Lebanon, where they lived, for all of the applications. Benefits were then sent to the address on pre-paid debit cards, records show. Thirty-nine pandemic unemployment benefit claims used the Lebanon address.

On 12 of the claims, they used the name "Walls," which is Chytka's maiden name, records show. Seventeen claims used Chytka's cell phone number.

Chytka, who pleaded guilty to fraud charges in March, confessed to filing fraudulent claims during an interview with investigators while incarcerated at the Lincoln County Detention Center in North Carolina. She admitted to being employed at the time, but still filed for unemployment, records show. She received not less than \$18,000 for her personal claim.

Individuals indicted

A total of 24 individuals were indicted in the conspiracy involving Leelynn Chytka on a number of charges, including conspiracy to defraud the government, emergency relief fraud, mail fraud conspiracy, mail fraud, aggravated identity theft, obstruction of justice and making false statements.

Those indicted were:

- ▶ Jeffrey R. Tackett, 29
- ▶ Jimmy W. Barnette, 28
- ▶ George L. Buckles, 31
- ▶ Joshua S. Carroll, 31
- ▶ Darrell D. Davis, 66, of Lebanon, Virginia
- ▶ Melinda R. Davis, 58, of Lebanon
- ▶ Eugene A. Grizzle, 19
- ▶ Joseph N. Hall, 42
- ▶ Wesley W. Hickman, 24
- ▶ Jacob B. Hicks, 35
- ▶ Timothy H. Hieman, 29, of Castlewood, Virginia
- ▶ Ajay Johnson, 25
- ▶ John C. Johnson Jr., 33
- ▶ John C. Johnson Sr., 57
- ▶ Randall D. Johnson, 41
- ▶ Marissa L. Kiser, 26
- ▶ Curtis E. Mullins, 25
- ▶ Danny L. Mullins, 49
- ▶ James B. Mullins, 31
- ▶ Steven J. Mullins, 33
- ▶ Veronica S. Mullins, 47
- ▶ Patrick A. Payne, 42
- ▶ Jeffery D. Wiseman, 27

Source: U.S. Attorney's Office

During the conspiracy, Chytka even attempted to start a business called "D&R Accounting" to facilitate the scheme. She wanted to make the scheme appear "legit," court records show. She also planned to charge people a fee for her service of filing fraudulent claims.

To distribute benefits to inmate co-conspirators, Chytka occasionally sent money to the commissary accounts in jail, as directed by Jeff Tackett.

Chytka, who faces up to 48 years in prison, and Greg Tackett are awaiting sentencing in U.S. District Court in Abingdon. Jeffrey Tackett's charges are still pending.

BACKGROUND

On March 13, 2020, President Donald Trump declared the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic an emergency under the Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Act. Five days later, the president signed the Families First Coronavirus Response Act. The act provided flexibility for state unemployment insurance agencies and additional administrative funding to respond to the pandemic.

The COVID-19 Aid, Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES) was signed into law on March 27, 2020. The CARES Act expanded states' ability to provide unemployment insurance for many workers impacted by COVID-19, including those ordinarily ineligible for unemployment benefits.

The CARES Act created three new unemployment insurance programs: Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA), Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation (FPUC) and Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC). The states, including Virginia, administer the programs.

The Pandemic Unemployment Assistance program provides up to 39 weeks of benefits for individuals who are self-employed, seeking part-time employment or otherwise did not qualify for unemployment insurance benefits. Coverage includes individuals who have exhausted all rights to regular unemployment insurance benefits or extended benefits under state or federal law, according to the U.S. Department of Labor.

The second program, Pandemic Emergency Unemploy-

ment Compensation, is a state-federal program that provides up to 13 weeks of benefits to individuals who have exhausted regular unemployment insurance under state or federal law, have no rights to regular benefits under any other state or federal law, and are able to work, available for work, and actively seeking work.

Under this program, states, including Virginia and Tennessee, must offer flexibility in meeting the "actively seeking work" requirement if individuals are unable to search for work because of COVID-19, including because of illness, quarantine or movement restriction.

The third program, Federal Pandemic Unemployment Compensation, provides individuals who are collecting regular unemployment benefits with an additional \$600 per week.

In total, more than \$300 billion in federal funds for unemployment insurance were appropriated in 2020.

Individuals are only eligible for pandemic unemployment benefits if they are unemployed for reasons related to the COVID-19 pandemic and are otherwise available to work and are seeking employment.

Once an applicant is on the Virginia Employment Commission website, he or she is required to enter personally identifiable information including name, date of birth, Social Security number, email address, phone number and physical address. An applicant is then required to answer a series of questions to determine eligibility and payment amount. An applicant must then attest, under penalty of perjury, that the information provided in the claim application is true and accurate.

If approved, the applicant can choose whether to have the pandemic unemployment benefits deposited directly into a bank account of their choosing, or the funds can be loaded on a prepaid debit card then shipped to the applicant.

In Virginia, the recipient receives an access code so they can recertify their unemployment status.

The Virginia Employment Commission reported that it obtained a list of about 39,000 inmates housed by the Virginia Department of Corrections and cross-matched the unemployment claims to people who were on the inmate list. The analysis revealed more than 6,000 claims filed on behalf of inmates in Virginia, totaling more than \$85 million in paid claims.

PROCESSING

Authorities have only recovered \$43,000 from the Chytka conspiracy, court records show. As part of her plea agreement, Chytka will have to repay the remaining \$456,000.

In May 2020, Travis Kilgore and Brittany McReynolds discovered they could make money by applying for pandemic unemployment benefits via the VEC website. The couple from St. Paul sought to obtain benefits even though they were not eligible to receive such benefits, court records show.

On May 25, 2020, the pair filed individual claims for benefits with the VEC from cell phones. The claims were processed and approved. The VEC then sent confirmation information to the pair via email and they elected to receive payments to their bank accounts. They then made weekly recertifications that they were unemployed — even though they were not eligible.

As a result, Kilgore was paid at least \$18,162 and McReynolds was paid \$17,562, records show. The pair expanded their

scheme, filing claims for 21 others. For most of the claims, they used fictitious addresses in Wise County for fictitious employers.

In exchange for filing claims, Kilgore and McReynolds received cash payments and illegal drugs, court records show. The pair's scheme resulted in \$182,474. The VEC recouped \$18,004.

Kilgore and McReynolds pleaded guilty in April and face years in prison. Both have previously also been convicted on drug charges in Wise County.

In May, Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam directed the VEC to invest \$20 million to expand the agency's ability to process unemployment insurance claims. His directive requires the agency to add 300 new adjudication staffers, make immediate technology upgrades and complete a full modernization of the system by Oct. 1.

Northam said the state ranks sixth in the nation for the timely payment of benefits to eligible applicants. The governor's action could speed up the resolution of cases flagged as potentially fraudulent or ineligible, Northam said. The cases represent about 4% of all claims.

If an individual's initial claim is flagged for potential ineligibility or fraud, federal law requires the VEC to adjudicate the claim before proceeding with payment. Most individuals that are placed in the adjudication process are ultimately found ineligible for benefits — despite funds going to ineligible individuals.

VICTIMS

While Chytka and others used the identities of real people, but fictitious employers, some scam artists have used stolen information and identities. Criminals have been seizing the opportunity created by the pandemic. Using data stolen from prior data breaches, they make a claim using someone else's identity to access an increased pool of benefits.

The problem can lead victims, those who have had their information stolen, to have trouble getting their legitimate benefits. Experts say everyone should be on alert, the Associated Press reports.

"We are nowhere near the end of this particular fraud," said Eva Velasquez, president and CEO of the Identity Theft Resource Center, a nonprofit that helps victims of identity theft.

Anyone can be a victim, Velasquez said. Retired individuals may find out they are a victim when the Social Security Administration alerts them their benefits are being reduced.

Some homeowners have even found their address tied up in a scam after they put their home up for sale.

Velasquez urges everyone to be alert to any suspicious mail, phone calls, email or social media requests. These could be attempts to gather personal information or a sign of existing fraud.

It's often difficult to know whether you are a victim.

People typically find out about the problem when they receive benefits-related paperwork in the mail, a call from their employer or when they try to file a legitimate claim for benefits and are denied. In some cases, a criminal may initiate the false claim, but the money itself is sent to the victim's account or home. The fraudsters may also build on a legitimate claim by requesting further benefits and nabbing those.

States are required to mail out a 1099-G form, which reports income from unemployment benefits, the Associated Press said.

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Fauci

From Page A1

evidence of wrongdoing, but Republican calls for his resignation have grown louder, as have demands for new investigations into the origins of the virus.

"Given what we know now, I don't know how anyone can have confidence that he should remain in a position of public trust and authority," said Republican Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri, a potential presidential hopeful who is calling for Fauci's resignation and a full congressional inquiry.

The political moves by Republicans represent a new effort to find a reliable foil in the first few months of the Biden administration, as they have struggled to turn public sentiment against the new president. So far, Biden has enjoyed widespread job approval, buoyed by the public's broad backing of his handling of the pandemic, which 71% of Americans support, according to a recent Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll.

Fauci, who has a security detail because of ongoing threats and who did not respond to a request for comment for this story, has repeatedly defended his work, saying he received thousands of emails and has never ruled out any theory.

"I still believe the most likely origin is from an animal species to a human, but I keep an absolutely open mind that if there may be other origins of that, there may be another reason, it could have been a lab leak," Fauci said Thursday on CNN.

The doctor's newly released emails, which span the early days of the pandemic and were obtained by BuzzFeed News and The Washington Post, show no evidence of any kind of cover-up about the origin of the virus.

In one email, from Feb. 1 of last year, Kristian Andersen, a researcher at the Scripps Research Institute, wrote to Fauci, the longtime director of the U.S. National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, about ongoing efforts to decipher the origin of the novel coronavirus.

At the time, the lab leak hypothesis was largely dismissed by experts. It has recently gained traction, though the origins of the virus remain unknown.

"The unusual features of the virus make up a really small part of the genome (0.1%) so one has to look really closely at all the sequences to see that some of the features (potentially) look engineered," Andersen wrote. He said he and his colleagues "all find the genome inconsistent with expectations from evolutionary theory. But," he added, "we have to look at this much more closely and there are still further analyses to be done, so those opinions could still change."

By the next month, it turned out, they had. He and his colleagues published an article in Nature Medicine in which they concluded that it was "improbable that SARS-CoV-2 emerged through laboratory manipulation of a related SARS-CoV-like coronavirus."

EPA

From Page A1

ide, ammonia and hydrogen sulfide. All are gases commonly produced by landfills, he said.

Hoch said that those air samples, taken over a few days in late December in various neighborhood spots that seemed to be problem areas, didn't yield any unusual levels of those gases.

His team did find a spot at the actual landfill leaking high levels of carbon monoxide and low levels of oxygen and methane — something Hoch said they're now investigating, since it suggests some kind of chemical release could be occurring below the surface.

Since beginning the investigation, the city has developed plans to fight the odors and fix any problems at the landfill.

Eads said he will meet with members of the community on June 22 at 5:30 p.m. in City Council Chambers to answer any questions or concerns about the landfill.

"I will not know all of the answers, but I will answer what I can and get the answer to the questions I do not know," Eads said.

He added that he will speak with community members be-

fore every council meeting beginning June 22.

Local residents concerned about the odors and air pollution can comment on the Bristol City VA/TN Air Pollution Community Page on Facebook.

"We are residents of Bristol VA and TN who fight to ensure that our community has access to clean air and clean water," the page states. "Many of us have experienced first-hand the physi-

cal and financial impacts of living in an area impacted by pollution. We strive to publicly communicate the current state of the environment around us, support those impacted, and take steps to keep our community safe."

Eads and others have posted updates about local efforts on the page. Responding to a question about air sampling this week, Eads said the EPA will decide where to place canisters.