

States Beating Targets On Health Site

WASHINGTON (AP) — Most states are still lagging when it comes to sign-ups under President Barack Obama's health care law, but an Associated Press analysis of numbers reported Wednesday finds a dozen getting ahead of the game. Huge disparities are emerging in how well states are living up to federal enrollment targets, and that will help determine if the White House reaches its unofficial goal of having 7 million signed up by the end of March, six weeks away. Connecticut is the nation's over-achiever, signing up more than twice the number of residents it had been projected to enroll by the end of January. Massachusetts, which pioneered the approach Obama took in his law, is at the bottom of the list having met only 5 percent of its target.

Six Republican-led states — Florida, Idaho, Maine, Michigan, North Carolina, and Wisconsin — are on pace or better. The administration said Wednesday about 1 million people signed up for private insurance under the health law in January, extending a turnaround from early days when a dysfunctional website frustrated consumers. There were fewer enrollments than in December, but a drop-off had been expected.

Sid Caesar Dead At Age 91

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Sid Caesar, the TV comedy pioneer whose rubber-faced expressions and mimicry built on the work of his dazzling team of writers that included Woody Allen and Mel Brooks, died Wednesday. He was 91.

Family spokesman Eddy Friedfeld said Caesar, who also played Coach Calhoun in the 1978 movie "Grease," died at his home in the Los Angeles area after a brief illness.

"He had not been well for a while. He was getting weak," said Friedfeld, who lives in New York and last spoke to Caesar about 10 days ago.

Friedfeld, a friend of Caesar's who wrote the 2003 biography "Caesar's Hour," learned of his death in an early morning call from Caesar's daughter, Karen.

In his two most important shows, "Your Show of Shows," 1950-54, and "Caesar's Hour," 1954-57, Caesar displayed remarkable skill in pantomime, satire, mimicry, dialect and sketch comedy. And he gathered a stable of young writers who went on to worldwide fame in their own right — including Carl Reiner, Neil Simon, Larry Gelbart ("M-A-S-H"), and Allen.

Survivor Recounts Syrian Situation

BEIRUT (AP) — Weeping children begged for food and women picked grass to eat as hunger gripped rebel-held neighborhoods of the Syrian city of Homs during a nearly two-year military blockade, according to a rare first-hand account by a man evacuated during a truce this week.

It was ultimately that hunger that caused Abu Jalal Tilawi to flee, along with around 1,300 others, mostly women, children and elderly allowed out during the truce.

"They couldn't dislodge us with the missiles they rained down on us," the 64-year-old Tilawi said of besieging government forces. "The hunger defeated us. The hunger, the hunger, the hunger. I left the city where I was born, where my father was born, where my ancestors were born. I was weeping while I was walking."

Tilawi's account in a Skype interview spotlights the suffering experienced by an estimated 250,000 civilians living in over 40 areas across Syria that have been blockaded for months. Most of the sieges are by government forces, aiming to wear down resistance, but rebels have also adopted the tactic in some areas.

Western powers at the U.N. Security Council are trying to push for more sanctions against Syria to punish the government of President Bashar Assad for the blockades, though Russia has vowed to veto a resolution.

Mass. Woman Convicted Of Murder

WORCESTER, Mass. (AP) — A woman accused of killing her pregnant friend three months after her own miscarriage was convicted Wednesday of beating and strangling her, then cutting the baby from her womb and passing the child off as her daughter.

Julie Corey sobbed as a Worcester Superior Court jury found her guilty of the 2009 murder of 23-year-old Darlene Haynes. The jurors had deliberated for 10 hours over two days. Sentencing was scheduled for Tuesday.

Prosecutors said Haynes was eight months pregnant when Corey attacked her and cut the baby out of her body. They told the jury that Corey had been pregnant, too, but had a miscarriage three months earlier and told her boyfriend and family that Haynes' baby was her own.

"It's probably the most horrific case this office has ever seen in terms of facts," District Attorney Joseph Early Jr. said in a statement after the verdict was handed down. "This woman was killed for her baby."

Corey, 39, did not testify during the trial.

Study Disputes Routine Mammograms

A Canadian study that many experts say has major flaws has revived debate about the value of mammograms. The research suggests that these screening X-rays do not lower the risk of dying of breast cancer while finding many tumors that do not need treatment.

The study gives longer follow-up on nearly 90,000 women who had annual breast exams by a nurse to check for lumps plus a mammogram, or the nurse's breast exam alone. After more than two decades, breast cancer death rates were similar in the two groups, suggesting little benefit from mammograms.

It's important to note that this study did not compare mammograms to no screening at all, as most other research on this topic has. Many groups have not endorsed breast exams for screening because of limited evidence that they save lives.

Senate Clears Debt Limit Measure

BY ANDREW TAYLOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Legislation to raise the federal debt limit and prevent a crippling government default cleared Congress on Wednesday with an awkward assist from top Senate Republican leaders who were forced into a politically treacherous vote engineered by tea party favorite Ted Cruz.

The Texas Republican's maneuver forced several GOP colleagues, including Minority Leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, into a reluctant vote against a filibuster, helping the measure along. It's a vote likely to cause grief for McConnell, who is facing a primary election challenge.

On a day of legislative drama, the key vote clearing the way for final action was held open for more than an hour — as the stock market looked on nervously — and

broke open only after McConnell and top lieutenant John Cornyn, R-Texas, unexpectedly voted "aye." Several other Republicans then switched their votes to support the measure, ultimately breaking the filibuster by a 67-31 margin.

The bill then passed the Senate by a near party-line 55-43 vote, with all of the yes votes coming from President Barack Obama's allies.

The president is now clear to sign the bill, which allows the government to borrow all the money it needs to pay bills such as Social Security benefits, federal salaries, and payments to Medicare and Medicaid providers. Failure to pass it would have likely sent the stock market — which dipped modestly as the voting dragged on — into a tailspin.

After the tally, Cruz said he had no regrets about his political maneuvers in opposition

to the bill, saying the "Senate has given President Obama a blank check."

As for forcing a difficult vote upon McConnell, Cruz said: "That is ultimately a decision ... for the voters of Kentucky."

McConnell faces a primary election challenge from tea party candidate Matt Bevin and has been under sharp criticism from outside groups who say he isn't conservative enough.

Sen. Bob Corker, R-Tenn., was among those who appeared frustrated by the political theatrics.

"A lot of people stepped up and did what they needed to do," Corker said of those who acted to let the must-pass legislation win final approval. Congress has never failed to act to prevent a default on U.S. obligations, which most experts say would spook financial markets and cause a spike in interest rates.

Cruz countered: "In my

view, every Republican should stand together against raising the debt ceiling without meaningful structural reforms to rein in our out-of-control spending."

The same bill had passed the House on Tuesday after Republican leaders gave up efforts to hold up the debt ceiling measure to win concessions from Obama on GOP agenda items like winning approval of construction of the Keystone XL pipeline.

Quick action on this latest debt limit bill stands in contrast to lengthy showdowns in 2012 and last fall, when Republicans sought to use the must-pass legislation as leverage to win concessions from Obama. They succeeded in 2011, winning about \$2 trillion in spending cuts. But Obama has been unwilling to negotiate over the debt limit since his re-election, and Wednesday's legislation is the third consecutive debt measure passed without White House concessions.



KENT D. JOHNSON/ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION/MCT
Griffin Power employees work on downed power lines during the winter storm on Maple Drive in Griffin, Ga., on Wednesday.

Ice Strikes The South Again

BY KATE BRUMBACK AND CHRISTINA A. CASSIDY
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Drivers got caught in monumental traffic jams and abandoned their cars Wednesday in North Carolina in a replay of what happened in Atlanta just two weeks ago, as another wintry storm across the South iced highways and knocked out electricity to more than a half-million homes and businesses.

While Atlanta's highways were clear, apparently because people learned their lesson and heeded forecasters' unusually dire warnings to stay home, thousands of cars were backed up on the slippery, snow-covered interstates around Raleigh, N.C., and short commutes turned into hours-long journeys.

As the storm glazed the South with snow and freezing rain, it also pushed northward along the Interstate 95 corridor, threatening to bring at least a half-foot of snow Thursday to the already sick-of-winter mid-Atlantic and Northeast.

At least 10 deaths across the South were blamed on the treacherous weather, and nearly 3,300 airline flights nationwide were canceled.

The situation in North Carolina was eerily similar to what happened in Atlanta: As snow started to fall around midday, everyone left work at the same time, despite warnings from officials to stay home altogether because the

storm would move in quickly.

"It seemed like every other car was getting stuck, fishtailing, trying to move forward," said Caitlin Palmieri, who drove two blocks from her job at a bread store in downtown Raleigh before getting stuck. She left her car behind and walked back to work.

Soo Keith, of Raleigh, left work about a little after noon, thinking she would have plenty of time to get home before the worst of the snow hit.

Instead, Keith, who is three months pregnant, drove a few miles in about two hours and decided to park and start walking, wearing dress shoes and a coat that wouldn't zip over her belly.

With a blanket draped over her shoulders, she made it home more than four hours later, likening her journey to the blizzard scene in the movie "Dr. Zhivago."

"My face is all frozen, my glasses are all frozen, my hair is all frozen," the mother of two and Chicago native said as she walked the final mile to her house. "I know how to drive in the snow. But this storm came on suddenly and everyone was leaving work at the same time. I don't think anybody did anything wrong; the weather just hit quickly."

Raleigh city spokeswoman Jayne Kirkpatrick had no estimate of how many vehicles had been abandoned and was unable to say whether motorists might be stranded on the road overnight.

"If we find anyone that is stranded that needs water or food or whatever we can do for them," city crews will help, Kirkpatrick said. "We hope it won't be too much longer before it's no longer a problem."

Forecasters warned of a potentially "catastrophic" storm across the South with more than an inch of ice possible in places. Snow was also forecast, with up to 3 inches possible in Atlanta overnight and much higher amounts in the Carolinas.

Ice combined with wind gusts up to 30 mph snapped tree limbs and power lines. More than 200,000 homes and businesses lost electricity in Georgia, South Carolina had about 245,000 outages, and North Carolina around 100,000. Some people could be in the dark for days.

As he did for parts of Georgia, President Barack Obama declared a disaster in South Carolina, opening the way for federal aid. In Myrtle Beach, S.C., palm trees were covered with a thick crust of ice.

For the mid-Atlantic and the Northeast, the heavy weather was the latest in an unending drumbeat of storms that have depleted cities' salt supplies and caused school systems to run out of snow days.

The Raleigh area could get up to 4 inches of snow. Washington, D.C., could see around 8 inches, as could Boston. New York City could receive 6 inches. The Philadelphia area could get a foot or more, and Portland, Maine, may see 8 or 9 inches.

Min. Wage Raised For Contract Workers

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Barack Obama increased the minimum wage for a few hundred thousand federal contractors on Wednesday, then pressed the divided Congress to pass broader legislation that would apply to all workers. Obama declared, "It's the right thing to do."

Obama first announced the executive order to boost some contractor wages during his State of the Union address last month. He signed the measure Wednesday in a White House ceremony where he was flanked by Americans who would make more money if lawmakers take more sweeping action.

White House officials concede that the executive order, which raises the hourly wage from \$7.25 to \$10.10, only applies to a small percentage of the more than 2 million federal contractors. But officials are hoping it generates momentum for Obama's proposal on Capitol Hill, particularly as both parties try to focus on issues like income inequality and economic mobility.

"Raising the minimum wage is good for business, it's good for workers and it's good for the economy," Obama said.

The president first called on Congress to increase the minimum wage last year, but the effort languished on Capitol Hill. White House officials say they're working with lawmakers on a legislative strategy to tackle the issue this year, but it's unclear when a bill might be voted on or whether it would pass.

The executive order for federal contractors goes into effect next year but only applies to new contracts.

OBITUARIES

Norman Jacobsen

Norman "Norm" Jacobsen, 86, of Vermillion died Wednesday, Feb. 5, 2014, at Sanford Vermillion Care Center.

Memorial service are at 2 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 15, at First Baptist Church.

Visitation will be one hour prior to the service on Saturday at the church. Burial of ashes will be in Hillcrest Cemetery in Irene at a later date.

Kober Funeral Home, Vermillion, is in charge of arrangements.

Steve Wilcox

Memorial services for Steve C. Wilcox, 60, of Yankton, formerly of Norfolk, Neb., are at 10:30 a.m. Tuesday, Feb. 18, 2014, at Westridge Methodist Church in Norfolk. The Rev. Cynthia Stewart will officiate, with burial in the Hillcrest Memorial Park Cemetery in Norfolk.

Visitation is 5-8 p.m. Monday at Brockhaus-Howser-Fillmer Funeral Home in Norfolk.

Steve died Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2014, at his home in Yankton.

Helen Thompson

Helen L. Thompson, 97, of Yankton died Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2014, at Avera Sister James Care Center in Yankton.

Memorial services are at 2 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 15, at Trinity Lutheran Church in Yankton with the Rev. David Lund officiating. Inurnment will be at the Garden of Memories Cemetery in Yankton.

The family will receive friends one hour prior to the memorial service at the church.

Arrangements are under the direction of the Wintz & Ray Funeral Home and Cremation Service in Yankton.

To send an online message to the family, visit www.wintzrayfuneralhome.com.

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