

COLUMN ONE

She fled peril, but worse lay ahead

A young Guatemalan chasing her American dream has it end in a crash near the border.

BY BRITTNY MEJIA

Yesenia Magali Melendrez Cardona told her father she wanted to follow in his footsteps.

He had made the trek from Guatemala to the U.S. 15 years earlier in search of a new life. In February, she left a job and her studies behind and headed north.

Chiquimulilla, the town where she had spent her 23 years, had been ravaged by the pandemic. Unemployment was rising. The population was desperate. The streets were too dangerous to walk at night.

On Tuesday, Yesenia found herself in a situation just as perilous as the one she had fled.

A maroon Ford Expedition bore a suspected smuggler and 24 people racing toward what they hoped would be safety.

Yesenia and her mother, Verlyn Cardona, were wedged in the back when it drove through a breach in the fence separating Mexico from California.

It was broadsided by a semi hauling two empty trailers. It came to a stop, windshield shattered, at the intersection of Highway 115 and Norrish Road.

Seventeen passengers were ejected from the SUV. When Verlyn regained consciousness in the back of the crumpled vehicle, her daughter was sprawled across her legs.

Dead.  
“El sueño Americano no se le cumplió,” said Yesenia’s father, Maynor Melendrez. She couldn’t reach the American dream.  
[See Dream, A4]



KENT NISHIMURA Los Angeles Times

TWO MONTHS, AND COUNTING

The acting chief of the U.S. Capitol Police appealed to congressional leaders Thursday to push to extend the stay of National Guard troops, who have been deployed since the Jan. 6 insurrection. **NATION, A5**

L.A. leaving federal money for homelessness on the table

City has yet to request reimbursement for using hotels as pandemic housing.

BY BENJAMIN ORESKES AND DAKOTA SMITH

The city of Los Angeles has not received millions of dollars in federal aid it may be owed for housing homeless people in hotels during the COVID-19 pandemic because, nearly a year into the crisis, Mayor Eric Garcetti’s administration hasn’t asked for the money yet.

Local, state and federal officials say the city hasn’t requested reimbursement from the Federal Emergency Management Agency for portions of the estimated \$59 million it has spent on

Project Roomkey, which has been sheltering homeless people in hotel rooms since shortly after the pandemic began last year.

The city has sharply scaled back the hotel program in recent months, leading advocates and lawyers for the homeless to say the Garcetti administration is showing a lack of political will to protect some of L.A.’s most vulnerable residents.

“There is federal money on the table — the literal FEMA response the mayor has been begging for, and yet the city has found excuse after excuse not to take advantage of it,” said Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles attorney Shayla Myers.

“If this is true, it is really disturbing and inexcusable,” said Mary Leslie, president of the Los Angeles  
[See Roomkey, A12]



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

WENDY BROWN, shown in June, is among people who were placed in a hotel under Project Roomkey.

Taking fight to COVID where it thrives

State hopes to foster equity, reopen sooner by flooding poorer areas with vaccine.

BY LUKE MONEY, SOUMYA KARLAMANGLA, MELISSA HEALY AND RONG-GONG LIN II

Months into a vaccine rollout that has been stymied by shortages and marred by persistent inequities, California is now going all in on a new strategy: flooding those communities hardest hit by COVID-19 with doses.

Officials say they hope the radical shift unveiled this week will not only slow the spread of the disease and tackle glaring inequities in who is receiving vaccines, but also speed up reopening of the economy by inoculating essential workers who are putting themselves at greater risk.

Under the new approach, the state will now provide 40% of its available supplies to underserved areas, such as in South L.A., the Eastside, Santa Ana and the heavily Latino communities along the Interstate 10 corridor between Pomona and San Bernardino — places that have experienced a disproportionate share of the pandemic’s pain, yet still lag behind more affluent neighborhoods when it comes to getting vaccines.

The dramatic change in California’s allocation strategy reflects the growing view from state officials that they  
[See Vaccine plan, A12]

School reopening plan gets approval

Lawmakers give OK to \$6.6-billion plan to resume classes for young students. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Pastors resist radicalism in pews

Some churches riven as members embrace conspiracy theories

BY JAWEED KALEEM

The congregation was in the middle of an online service when a longtime churchgoer in her 60s texted her pastor to complain that his prayer lamenting the assault on the U.S. Capitol in January was “too political.”

The woman later unloaded a barrage of conspiracy theories. The election of Joe Biden was a fraud. The insurrection was instigated by Black Lives Matter and antifa activists disguised as Donald Trump supporters. The FBI was in on it all. The day would soon come, she said, “when all the evil, the corruption would come to light and the truth would be revealed.”

Startled and moved to tears, Pastor David Rice told the woman she had been “tricked by lies.”

“You need to know how crazy this is,” he said to his congregant at Markey Church in Roscommon  
[See Pastors, A6]



CAROLYN KASTER Associated Press

A TRUMP BACKER dressed as George Washington prays Jan. 6 by the Washington Monument. Many in the violent mob that day professed to be Christians.

Democratic stars Cuomo, Newsom become liabilities

The governors once lauded for pandemic leadership are fighting for political survival.

BY EVAN HALPER AND SEEMA MEHTA

WASHINGTON — It wasn’t supposed to be like this for Democrats, who expected to honeymoon into spring as Republicans sifted through the political wreckage Donald Trump left behind.

But the bad behavior and grave unforced errors of two of the party’s biggest outside-the-Beltway stars are spoiling that reprieve, distracting from the Democrats’ work in Washington and forcing them to divert their attention to triage in parts of the country where they usually draw strength.

The missteps and aloofness that now have California Gov. Gavin Newsom facing the threat of recall from office have been overshadowed by the sexual harassment scandal that has rapidly engulfed his counterpart in New York, Andrew Cuomo. The two men took very different paths in their descent from favorites of li-

beral voters to the targets of scathing parody on “Saturday Night Live,” but both share problems so big they are stealing oxygen from a party that doesn’t have much to spare.

“I feel awful about it,” Cuomo said Wednesday of his behavior that led two women decades his junior who worked for him and a third he met at a wedding to accuse him of sexual harassment. “And frankly, I am embarrassed by it.”

He pledged at a news conference to cooperate with an investigation by the state attorney general, while still maintaining that he did not intentionally harass or inappropriately touch anyone. “I’m not going to resign,” Cuomo said, adding later: “I never knew at the time I was making anyone uncomfortable.”

Cuomo is vowing to serve out the rest of his term at the same time Newsom is battling a well-funded effort to eject him before his term ends. Political experts predict that if the recall qualifies for the ballot, by the time the election is held, voters are likely to be more forgiving of Newsom’s missteps: dining maskless at the Michelin-starred French Laun-  
[See Governors, A6]

Senate considers COVID relief bill

The \$1.9-trillion relief measure will not extend weekly U.S. jobless aid past August. **NATION, A7**

8.1 quake triggers tsunami warnings

Three temblors off New Zealand send thousands to higher ground amid global alerts. **WORLD, A3**

Pope Francis’ visit offers hope in Iraq

Iraqi Christians hope the pontiff can help rebuild trust between them and Muslims. **WORLD, A3**

Weather: Sun; warmer. L.A. Basin: 76/50. **B10**

