



Portland Protests, Pandemic Aid Ending, Arizona Spike Eases

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Body

SARAH MCCAMMON: A setback for protesters in two western cities as judges clear the way for tear gas and federal officers.

LEILA FADEL: One of those decisions could echo as far as Chicago and Albuquerque as Operation LeGend continues. I'm Leila Fadel.

SARAH MCCAMMON: I'm Sarah McCammon, and this is UP FIRST from NPR News.

LEILA FADEL: An eviction ban ends today, and the last batch of \$600 checks goes out this weekend. There's no plan yet for more pandemic aid. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi blames Republicans.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

NANCY PELOSI: They're in disarray, and their disarray is causing great, great damage to America's working families.

LEILA FADEL: We've got the latest on negotiations.

SARAH MCCAMMON: And we'll go to Arizona, where the number of COVID cases skyrocketed and now looks to be leveling off so stay with us. We'll give you the news you need to start your weekend.

LEILA FADEL: The courts are bolstering the case for a tougher response to protests in Washington and Oregon.

SARAH MCCAMMON: Last night, a federal judge in Seattle blocked the city's ban on tear gas from taking effect, giving police more leeway in confronting protests there. And in Portland, a federal judge denied the state's request to restrict federal police tactics against protesters.

LEILA FADEL: The Trump administration has been signaling plans to send more federal officers to cities with Democratic leaders where protests for racial justice continue. The administration says the move is aimed at quelling violence. NPR's Kirk Siegler is in downtown Portland, where the city just marked its 59th straight night of protests, protests that began after the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Hi, Kirk.

KIRK SIEGLER: Good morning, Leila.

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LEILA FADEL: So you were out at the protest last night in front of the federal courthouse, which has become the flashpoint between federal agents and protesters. Tell us what you saw.

KIRK SIEGLER: Well, big crowds, definitely in the thousands, Leila, protesters wearing helmets, gas masks, some of them even carrying leaf blowers, I guess to try to send tear gas back toward the police - you had the now-famous wall of moms standing as a human barrier in front of the protesters and a new addition joined by another human wall of military veterans last night. A lot of chanting, say his name for George Floyd and chanting, specific to Portland, feds get out of Portland, PDX, go home.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

UNIDENTIFIED PROTESTERS: Feds, go home. Feds, go home. Feds, go home.

KIRK SIEGLER: So just picture the federal building. There are graffiti on the walls, barricaded now with a fence around it. And like previous nights, last night late, things get heated - tear gas, explosions, some people disperse and others don't.

LEILA FADEL: Speaking of tear gas, we saw the mayor there get tear-gassed when he went to the protests. The administration claims violence in these cities is the reason for sending federal personnel, but city and state leaders say President Trump is manufacturing it in order to help his reelection.

KIRK SIEGLER: Well, right. There's a lot of anger here. You know, the inference is he's targeting this blue city, and the images, city leaders say, play well in conservative media, playing up the urban-rural divide in this country. And, you know, the size of the nightly protests had actually been starting to die down until reports came that President Trump had sent his Homeland Security and Border Patrol officers, and things started getting big again.

You know, there were two setbacks yesterday for protesters. As you said, the federal judge denied the state's attempt to get an injunction to stop all the federal police actions, and the U.S. attorney here announced federal criminal charges against 18 people. The charges include assaulting federal officers.

LEILA FADEL: These protests are about systemic racism, police violence, but it sounds like the attention has shifted quite a bit from those original demands, right?

KIRK SIEGLER: It has. You know, the - and there is some concern about that from some of the city's Black leaders, that this has sort of all turned into a spectacle, you know, distracting, like you say, from the original cause for the protests. You know, Portland is also known for having anarchists here for years. You know, they've stirred up trouble at protests in the past. This is also just a big activist town. There's been a lot of protests during the administration throughout the Trump era. It's also largely white, and you can see that in the crowds out there. They do seem to be driven by young people, though, like Sara Goldstein (ph), who I met. She's Chinese American. She was holding a sign that said Black lives over white comfort.

SARA GOLDSTEIN: People are going to be distracted by anything. I don't necessarily think that the actions that are happening with the violence toward the end of the night is avoidable.

LEILA FADEL: So, Kirk, it's been over a week now since the federal agents have been in Portland, the mood tense. Is there a sense of when this standoff ends?

KIRK SIEGLER: Not really. And, you know, it - to be clear, the mood is tense, definitely, and quite explosive in some corners, but it's also confined, I'd say, to a relatively small area downtown. It's not like this whole city is under siege. In other neighborhoods you visit, life is going on, as much as it can under a pandemic. But, you know, down here, it's pretty dicey quite a bit, especially in the evenings.

As you mentioned, Portland Mayor Ted Wheeler was tear-gassed earlier this week by federal agents when he came to meet with protesters. You know, he said he had heard credible threats. He's tweeted out that agents could be using live ammunition - that didn't happen, but he called the scene urban warfare perpetuated by President Trump.

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And, you know, I'd say, Leila, city leaders have ordered Portland police to not cooperate with federal agents, and it's a pretty weird scene. It's hard to know what's going on down here at night. You know, last night, they didn't seem to be blocking off any streets like usual so you had the public, just cars driving everywhere, and there were thousands of people on the streets. It's chaotic, and it's hard to say where this is headed.

LEILA FADEL: That's NPR's Kirk Siegler in downtown Portland, Ore. Kirk, thank you so much.

KIRK SIEGLER: You're welcome.

LEILA FADEL: Senate Republicans are still working on their latest coronavirus relief bill.

SARAH MCCAMMON: But a key program providing assistance to millions of jobless Americans and expanded unemployment payment of \$600 a week is set to end. The top Senate Republican, Mitch McConnell, made it clear the GOP bill will continue some aid, but he doesn't want to see any more \$600 checks.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

MITCH MCCONNELL: We also intend to continue some temporary federal supplement to unemployment insurance while fixing the obvious craziness of paying people more to remain out of the workforce.

LEILA FADEL: Democrats want to extend the current benefits through January. NPR congressional correspondent Susan Davis joins us to bring us up to date on a program millions of Americans are relying on. Good morning, Sue.

SUSAN DAVIS: Hey. Good morning.

LEILA FADEL: So why don't Republicans want to extend this?

SUSAN DAVIS: Well, they say it's a disincentive and that it's keeping workers from going back into the workforce. What the White House and Senate Republicans seem to be coalescing around is a proposal that Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin outlined that would cap at 70% of your pre-pandemic wages, an enhanced unemployment benefit, although they're calling this, in their words, wage replacement.

LEILA FADEL: So clearly, this will lapse, at least temporarily, right?

SUSAN DAVIS: Yeah. It seems that way. Senate Republicans were supposed to introduce their proposal last week, and they were hoping to move fast on it. But the party's been pretty divided over what to do over this unemployment program, and it's stalled progress. And McConnell said Friday back in Kentucky that he now doesn't expect a deal until at least another few weeks, which, if he's accurate there, it means for certain these benefits are going to be expired for some time, although I do want to note that it is possible, if they're included in eventual legislation, they could also be retroactive.

LEILA FADEL: So tell us about what the Republicans plan to include in their bill to help unemployed Americans.

SUSAN DAVIS: Right. It's not just about these benefits. It's a piece of a larger package that they're negotiating, and some of - not all of it is as controversial. Things that are likely to be included in it is another round of those direct payments to Americans and their families. There's going to be more money for schools, especially to try to get kids back into the classroom this fall, more money for testing and another round of aid to small businesses through a popular loan program that was approved earlier this year.

One of the big rifts that we're seeing is how big they think it should go. Democrats have already passed a bill. It is worth about \$3 trillion, and it just goes a lot further than many Republicans are willing to. It includes things like aid to renters to make sure that they don't lose their housing, more money for people to get food stamps because there's a lot of growing rates of hungry Americans out there. And they say it's all the more necessary right now because the virus is surging, and it's not better, which is what Congress has hoped it would be when they last passed a bill about two months ago.

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LEILA FADEL: So Democrats clearly see this as a political misstep by Republicans. How much of one could it actually be?

SUSAN DAVIS: You know, it really could be one. You look at the political environment right now, and neither the president nor congressional Republicans are doing well politically. The Senate is in play. The president's down in the polls. They need a win right now. They need positive things to campaign on, and fighting this has opened them up to all kinds of new political attacks from Democrats. That includes allegations of racial insensitivity, like this one from Democratic Congressman Danny Davis, who's Black.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED RECORDING)

DANIEL DAVIS: I'm not going to mince words. A Republican failure to continue the \$600 a week federal unemployment supplement would represent a racially discriminatory action, period - any way you cut it, any way you look at it.

SUSAN DAVIS: Davis's argument is basically that the pandemic has disproportionately affected Black people and other people of color, not just in terms of the health implications but also the economic ones.

LEILA FADEL: That's NPR congressional correspondent Susan Davis. Sue, thanks.

SUSAN DAVIS: You're welcome.

SARAH MCCAMMON: And for more from Capitol Hill, the White House and the campaign, check out the NPR Politics Podcast.

LEILA FADEL: Arizona has been a coronavirus hotspot for weeks. With its ICUs nearly full, doctors warned the state's health system was being stretched thin.

SARAH MCCAMMON: But now - a steady, though small decline in the number of hospitalizations. Joining us is reporter Ben Giles of KJZZ in Phoenix. Good morning, Ben.

BEN GILES: Good morning.

SARAH MCCAMMON: So sounds like some good news for Arizona. Where do things stand?

BEN GILES: Well, good news is the daily reports of new cases are on a slight decline. Friday morning, for instance, there were over 3,300 new cases reporting - still a lot, but that's less than some of the highs that we saw earlier in July. And, important for the hospitals, the number of patients hospitalized for COVID-19, that has dipped slightly as well. The state's former health director, Will Humble, he put it this way - when things have been so bad for so long, no bad news is good news.

WILL HUMBLE: We are not seeing an absolute improvement. What we're seeing is a relative improvement. What I mean by that is they're still bad, but at least they didn't get worse.

BEN GILES: So still, that's really welcome relief for a state that's rushed its reopening in May and became a hotspot for the virus.

SARAH MCCAMMON: For sure. And what do health officials think is driving this decline?

BEN GILES: Well, for most of June, there was no mask requirements of any kind in Arizona. The governor had restricted even local governments, cities, counties and towns from mandating their own masks. And in late June, he relented, and he decided to let those local governments come up with their own rules. Health officials say that worked. That was key. They also say the governor's orders earlier this month closing businesses like bars and gyms, that helped too. Broadly, Governor Ducey has said he's trying to place limits on large gatherings of people to help mitigate the spread.

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SARAH MCCAMMON: And so now that some of these key numbers are going down, Ben, do you foresee another push to reopen?

BEN GILES: Perhaps from some corners of the state, but at least for now, that's not going to come from Governor Ducey. He said on Thursday that this is still, quote, "no time to celebrate." And there was also caution from the state's health experts. Josh LaBaer, a health expert at ASU, said it's simply too early to call any of the dips in the data that we're seeing a trend.

JOSH LABAER: This is not a time to let up on the pressure. I think we need to keep what we're doing right now in place.

BEN GILES: LaBaer said it's more like a plateau at a place where the coronavirus is still spreading at an unacceptable rate.

SARAH MCCAMMON: That's Ben Giles with member station KJZZ in Phoenix. Ben, thanks.

BEN GILES: Thank you.

LEILA FADEL: And that's UP FIRST for Saturday, July 25. I'm Leila Fadel.

SARAH MCCAMMON: And I'm Sarah McCammon. Our podcast on Saturdays is produced by Hiba Ahmad, Sophia Boyd, Danny Hensel, Denise Guerra and edited by D. Parvaz, Barry Hardiman, Martha Ann Overland and Ed McNulty. Our supervising editor is Evie Stone. Sarah Oliver is our executive producer, and Jim Kane is our deputy managing editor.

LEILA FADEL: In the studio, we have Ned Wharton, Samantha Balaban, Stu Rushfield, Patrick Boyd and engineering help from Jay Siz (ph), Dennis Nielsen and Josephine Neoni (ph). UP FIRST is back Monday with news to start your week. Follow us on social media. We're @upfirst on Twitter, and stay tuned to this feed for occasional special episodes.

SARAH MCCAMMON: You can also find us on the radio. Tune in to Weekend Edition Saturday and Sunday mornings. Find your NPR station at stations.npr.org or on your smart speaker.

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