

'First time in a year'

Newly vaccinated grandparents reunite with family members.

BY SUSAN HOFFMAN

When his parents got their first COVID-19 shot, Jeff Chon told them, "We'll see you one week after your second dose."

On March 10 the family of four set off to visit grandparents Jay and Jawoo Chon at their Irvine home. It was the first time the elder Chons would meet and be able to hold their 2-week-old grandson, Colton.

"It felt normal again for a second," Jeff Chon said.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, people who have received the COVID-19 vaccine can gather indoors with other fully vaccinated people without wearing masks. They can also spend time indoors without wearing masks with unvaccinated people from another household, such as relatives, the CDC says, with some recommended restrictions.

Chon said until last December, wearing masks made visits a challenge between his parents and another grandchild, 3-year-old Emilia. "My dad had difficulty breathing due to

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Visitors, inmates reunite as jails reopen

BY BEN BRAZIL

After being separated from one another for a year, Johanna Diaz was finally able to visit her brother in jail last weekend.

Since the Orange County Sheriff's Department suspended visitations in March 2020 due to the pandemic, Diaz and other family members and friends of inmates haven't been able to visit their loved ones in jail. But on Friday, the department reopened limited visitations.

"It was definitely overwhelming," Diaz said of the visit with her brother, Jose Armendariz, who is at the Theo Lacy Facility in Orange.

"They have shared that it's been incredibly isolating. There's been a lot of organizing going on, a lot of folks on the inside are advocating for more contact with their loved one."

— Sarah Kahn

UC Irvine law student and member of Transforming Justice OC

"Seeing him behind bars, that never gets easy. But it was obviously nice to be able to see him and just physically see how he's doing."

Diaz said they have spoken regularly over the phone, but it was comforting to see her brother's face and get a sense of his physical health. Armendariz is a type-1 diabetic with high blood pressure and asthma, so Diaz has been worried about his health throughout the year.

But during their visit, they largely spoke about how much weight they'd gained.

"It was great to see him face to face and talk about how we've all put on a couple pounds during

See **Jails**, page R5

ABOVE: Jawoo Chon holds her new grandson, Colton, for the first time following her COVID-19 vaccination.

Courtesy of the Chon Family

BELOW: Barbara and Tom Peckenpaugh with grandkids, from left, Chloe, 8, Caleb, 14, Henry, 16, and Megan, 14, can now hug after grandparents have been vaccinated.

Photo by Susan Hoffman

Book honors businesswoman who changed pantries in U.S.

BY VERA CASTANEDA

Mushrooms, kiwi, jicama, red bananas, dragon fruit and quince are only a few of the fruits and veggies part of Frieda Rapoport Caplan's legacy.

She's credited as the "Kiwi Queen," "Mother Gooseberry" and the "Mushroom Lady" who made produce, described by some as unusual, accessible to American pantries. Frieda started working at the Seventh Street Produce Market in Los Angeles in 1956, opened her own specialty produce business on April 2, 1962, and eventually moved the company (now called Frieda's, Inc.) to Los Alamitos in 1994 where she continued to visit the office four days a week well into her mid-90s.

Frieda could feel it in her elbows when she knew what produce was going to be popular. That's a detail that Karen Caplan, her daughter, passed on to author Mara Rockliff in their conversations and email exchanges about Frieda, who died in 2020 at the age of 96.

The result was "Try It! How Frieda Caplan Changed the Way We Eat," a picture book published in January 2021 by Simon & Schuster. Rockliff, who specializes in writing children's books about true stories, took a trip to Israel organized by the nonprofit PJ Library and was inspired to alphabetically scroll through the Jewish Women's Archive online encyclopedia for potential book subjects. When she

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Long Beach State University

FRIEDA CAPLAN continued to work out of the Los Alamitos office four days a week well into her mid-90s.

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Orange County Water District works to clean up

It is currently engaged in three major projects involving polluted groundwater from decades of manufacturing.

BY BEN BRAZIL

Underneath Orange County is a hidden arterial highway that groundwater moves through before eventually finding its way into homes.

More than 70% of the water served in Orange County is from groundwater. But some of that water has become contaminated from industrial manufacturing when harmful chemicals that weren't properly disposed of seeped down into the ground.

"Any area with a large amount of industrial activity, especially when it comes to machining, metalworking or military purposes, all of which kind of play a role in Orange County's history, used a pretty significant amount of chemicals back before their disposal was particularly well-regulated," said Chapman University chemistry professor Christopher Kim. "Unfortunately, those historical industries and activities have this legacy effect of still causing contamination problems through today."

The Orange County Water District is tasked with determining the extent of the pollution, and containing it before more drinking water wells need to be shut down and contaminants spread to the principal

aquifer, which is directly pumped by production wells for drinking water.

But it's a difficult and painstaking job to calculate the scale of the contamination when the problem is underground.

"Getting your arms around a large groundwater plume takes many years," said Roy Herndon, chief hydrogeologist with the water district.

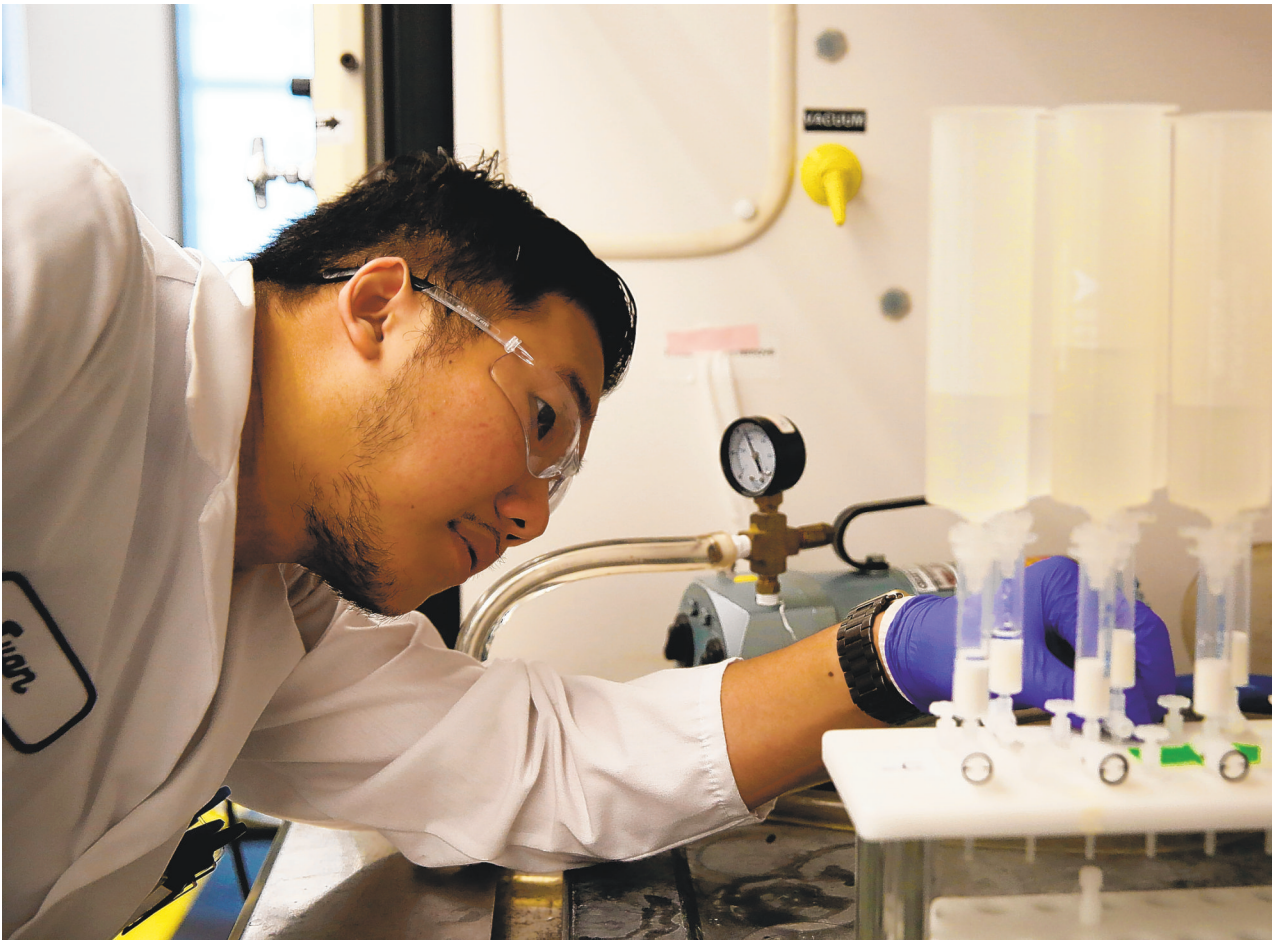
"It's a step-by-step process because everything is underground, you can't see it. You have to do a lot of water well drilling and test boreholes where we collect water samples at different depths."

The district is currently engaged in three major cleanup projects involving groundwater under the cities of Anaheim, Santa Ana, Fullerton, Tustin, Garden Grove, Orange, Villa Park, Yorba Linda, Irvine and Placentia.

INVESTIGATING CLEANUP OF SOUTH BASIN SITE

The district is currently conducting a feasibility study of a portion of the groundwater aquifer under Santa Ana, Irvine and Tustin that is contaminated from decades-old manufacturing.

The district completed a remedial investigation of the area and is now evaluating the best way to address



Dania Maxwell | Los Angeles Times

TWAN NGUYEN checks a machine that is testing surface water for contaminants at the Orange County Water District in 2019.

the cleanup.

"Now that we've kind of gotten our arms around the extent of it and the magnitude of it, it's a matter of figuring out how best to clean it up," Herndon said.

The contaminated plume extends about 2½ miles long and about a mile and a half wide in the South Basin. These are called co-

mingled plumes, or separate releases of contamination that have entered the groundwater and mixed with each other to form a single, large area of contamination.

Herndon said they are currently considering all the fundamental options of cleanup, which includes groundwater extraction,

chemical injection, biological treatment and physical barriers.

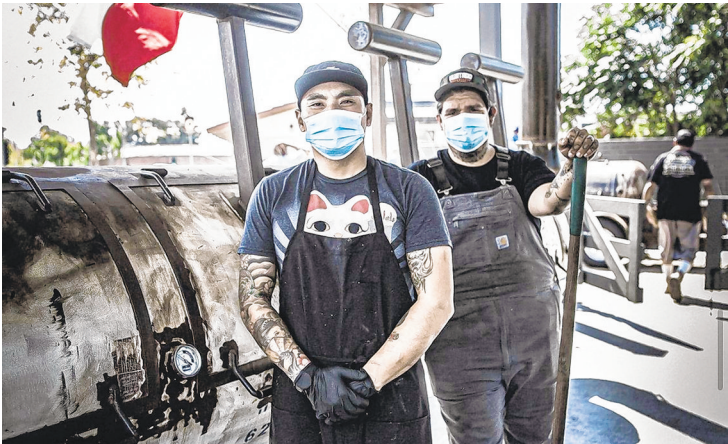
"There's a lot of different options to address groundwater contamination," Herndon said. "But again, of those we look at ones that are most suitable for the conditions that are out there in terms of the width of the plume, the location

of it and the depth of it.

"Then we narrow down the large list into a smaller list of what appear to be the most viable technologies. So that's what's being done right now, as they screen out what technologies appear to be less suitable or viable for this particular sit-

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NICK ECHAORE and Daniel Castillo of Heritage BBQ in San Juan Capistrano.



Courtesy of Heritage BBQ

Orange County businesses donate to Asian American, Pacific Islander organizations

BY BEN BRAZIL

In response to reports of increased racism and violence against Asian Americans throughout the country, 20 Orange County businesses have decided to donate to various local and national groups that advocate for the Asian American and Pacific Islander population.

Most of the donations will go toward the Orange County Asian & Pacific Islander Community Alliance, including national groups AAPI Community Fund and Asian Americans Advancing Justice.

"Although our AAPI community is going through a difficult time, I personally am just really proud of all the community collaboration happening to support the stop Asian hate campaign," said Gabby Del Barrio of OCAPICA. "We're just grateful to have various local restaurants reach out to support the cause."

Many of the businesses will donate a portion of their sales to the advocacy groups or food to local Asian American seniors.

The businesses are: Banh Xeo Boys at Rodeo 39, Beleaf Burgers at Rodeo 39, Berry Brand, Bestea at Rodeo 39, Blind Rabbit, Burntzilla + Burnt Crumbs, Dough & Arrow, Cali Dumpling Delivery, Hello Kitty Grand Cafe, Heritage

BBQ, Honey & Butter, Hotties Fried Chicken, MixMix Kitchen by Chef Ross Panglinan, Primal Cuts at Rodeo 39, Rodeo Bar at Rodeo 39, Shomi Noods, Stowaway Tiki, Sapphire Laguna, Taylor Made Cuisine and zeroUV.

"We've been seeing all this stuff on the news, and it's really disgusting," said Allan Tea, co-owner of Hello Kitty Cafe in Irvine and Cali Dumpling Delivery, which delivers in Orange County. "It really upsets me and my wife. She shows me every time I get home all these new videos of people being attacked, especially elderly people ... So we are willing to do whatever we can to help. I wish we could do more."

"I'm lucky I haven't had anything happen to any of my immediate family or even any of my friends or family. But a lot of those community centers are here in Santa Ana, where we live, so we want to make sure these people are safe and protected within our own community."

Tea said his businesses are donating 100 bags of dumplings and 100 portions of pastries to local seniors.

Tea said he's been a supporter of OCAPICA for years. His businesses work with the organization by providing food at community events.

"They're blaming Asians for COVID because it originated in China," Tea said. "And the reason AAPI and all these organizations are raising money is to educate people."

Daniel Castillo of Heritage Barbecue in San Juan Capistrano said his business will be donating all of its proceeds from its Pulled Pork Adobo Bowl to OCAPICA until Sunday.

"Diversity is very important to us, so when the Black Lives Matter movement came about, we made it known that we were into it and we were on board," Castillo said. "That being said, that can cause controversy ... But we have been those kind of people being really open-minded and we don't take it as a political standpoint but more of as being human beings."

Castillo said his staff is very diverse and the dishes at his eatery reflect the different cultures and heritage. Heritage Barbecue's executive chef Nicholas Echaore developed the dish that will raise funds for OCAPICA. Echaore is Filipino American.

"Living in a type of world where you have to be afraid of what's going to happen to you by the way you look is just not right," Castillo said.

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Chapman survey reveals views on mask-wearing and climate change taking a left-hand turn

BY SARA CARDINE

Despite its reputation as a Republican holdout with intractable views on coronavirus mask mandates, climate change and the results of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, the real viewpoints of Orange County may be more liberal than one thinks.

That was the takeaway of a survey conducted by Chapman University that assessed the impressions of 703 Orange County residents during a three-week period in February.

The survey found 83% of respondents considered the coronavirus a "real threat," while 70% favored a national mask mandate. An overwhelming majority of residents — 80% — said they'd already gotten the COVID-19 vaccine or planned to get it.

And, although much rhetoric and skepticism about government overreach during the pandemic is routinely broadcast on local conservative social media outlets, nearly three-quarters of respondents said they believed government coronavirus mandates have been "about right" or did not go far enough.

Chapman University political science Professor Fred Smoller, who crafted questions for the 2021 Orange County Annual Survey released March 1, said the study intends to gauge the populace on important matters of public policy.

"The county needs to know itself," Smoller said in an interview Monday. "Decision-makers have to know what's going on — the survey is a way of doing that."

Smoller culls data from each year's survey to find trends compelling enough to drive discussions at an annual Public Policy Conference hosted by the university's Wilkinson College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences. After a 2020 hiatus, this year's virtual event, "Fighting Climate Change," takes place Wednesday.

"Most polls are done by someone who has an agenda. My view is wanting to provide public policy makers information that is not just anecdotal," Smoller said. "And we've found the county is not nearly as conservative as its portrayal in the national media."

Orange County voter data show Democrats inched past Republicans



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

MASKED SHOPPERS attend a Corona del Mar plant sale in February. A Chapman University study showed nearly two-thirds of county residents believe government coronavirus mandates were just right or didn't go far enough.

in 2019 to claim the greatest number of registered voters by 89 individuals. That slim margin widened last year to more than 52,000 voters.

But the number of Orange County residents registered as having "no party preference" — currently standing at 436,260 voters and constituting 21% of the voting public — has historically obscured the true divide between the county's liberals and conservatives.

Chapman's survey sheds light on how independent voters stood on more partisan issues, such as the soundness of the recent presidential election and support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

A question about whether the November election was fairly conducted split Democrats, 97% of whom responded affirmatively, from Republican voters, only 33% of whom agreed. Among no-party voters, 73% said the election process was fair.

When asked whether they supported or opposed Black Lives Matter as a cause — another question that split Democrats (95% supporting) and Republicans (22% supporting) — 73% of independent voters said they did.

About 73% of no-party voters also said they favored a nationwide mask mandate, compared to 94% of Democrats and 39% of Republicans.

Respondents also shared views on reopening schools, the effort to recall Gov. Gavin Newsom and police performance, issues that returned more evenly split responses but failed to deliver an overwhelming conservative majority opinion.

Mike Moodian, a leadership studies lecturer at

Chapman, said the county has changed since the days of its association with conservative stalwarts like John Wayne and the anti-communist John Birch Society.

"O.C. today is diverse both culturally and politically," Moodian said in a release issued after the survey was publicized. "[It] is increasingly looking like the rest of the country, as opposed to being an ultra-conservative outlier among coastal California communities."

Smoller said despite that, the county's representation in national media — from newspaper editorials to TV shows like "The Real Housewives of Orange County" — continues to drive stereotypes that may no longer be true.

"The image of the extreme is something the press likes," he added. "I'm surveying, to borrow the phrase, the silent majority."

Ahead of the Wednesday policy conference on climate change, Smoller and his team found 73% of survey respondents believed actions should be taken to address global warming.

More than half supported Newsom's commitment to ban combustible fuel vehicles by 2035, and 58% favored a law requiring 100% renewable energy in California by 2045.

Smoller hopes decision-makers will consider the Orange County Annual Survey and make changes people want to see, rather than deepen political entrenchments.

"If you make public policy and don't listen to public opinion, it's like flying a plane without radar," he said.

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Courtesy of Mike Tauber

AN ARTIST paints a portrait of Main Beach in Laguna Beach.

Laguna groups team up for art demonstrations

The Laguna Plein Air Painters Assn. and LOCA Arts Education have come together to provide the community with an opportunity to learn from established artists throughout April. Demonstrations will allow participants to partake in live-streamed events, during which the artists will take those registered for the program through a step-by-step process to help them replicate the piece they are working on. The artists may work within their studio or at picturesque Southern California locations such as Crystal Cove, if the weather cooperates. Events being offered during the month include Treasure Island Beauty with Debra Huse on Tuesday, Iconic Crystal Cove with Mark Fehlman on Thursday, Coastal Vistas with Michael Obermeyer

on April 13, and Atmospheric Landscapes with Daniel Marshall on April 23. “This is a very rare opportunity to learn firsthand from Southern California’s top landscape painters,” LOCA Arts Education spokesperson Mike Tauber said. Those wishing to participate in the virtual “Paint Together” series are required to register in advance. Each session is \$40, which will grant access to a supply list, the event’s live stream, as well as a recording that will allow participants to come back to the project at a time of their choosing. For members of LOCA Arts Education or LPAPA, a discounted rate is available at \$20 per registrant. Information for the events can be found at locaarts.org/events. — Andrew Turner

FIRST

Continued from page R1

his COPD and would take his mask off whenever they played,” Chon explained. His parents “also didn’t want Emilia to think that they were sick, being only 3 years old and all of a sudden wearing masks she wouldn’t understand.” Chon, who owns Costa Mesa eateries Tabu Shabu and Oak & Coal and is tested weekly for the coronavirus due to potential exposure at work, made the decision in December to suspend visits with his parents until they were vaccinated. With the third wave of the pandemic raging, the risks involved given their age and health concerned him. Then as if to confirm his fears, his wife Melissa’s mother died due to complications from COVID-19 in January. In nearby Corona del Mar, Tom and Barbara Peckenpaugh waited more than a year before allowing their children and grandchildren inside the house. But soon after they received their second vaccine dose on Feb. 16 they gathered once again with daughter, Sally Bartz, son-in-law, Aaron, and their teenage grandchildren Henry and granddaughter Megan to celebrate February birthdays. “It was the first time in a year we sat inside the house at the dining room table,” Barbara said. “We have been far more careful because of age and my autoimmune problem. Our daughter was concerned for us and offered to do shopping.” Barbara explained that following the rules and spending Thanksgiving and Christmas on their own was difficult. Last Sunday was the first time in 13 months the entire family, including son Dave, his wife, Cindie, and their kids, Caleb, 14, and Chloe, 8, visited in honor of Grandpa Tom’s birthday. Phone calls, drop-offs and a couple of socially distanced meals outdoors weren’t a replacement for close physical contact.



Susan Hoffman

THE PECKENPAUGH FAMILY, clockwise from left, Cindie, Dave, Tom, Caleb, Barbara, and Chloe, get together for the first time since the grandparents were vaccinated.



Courtesy of the Parks family

TOM AND HAPPY PARKS with grandson Cade Parks at a Newport Harbor High School football game.

“The biggest loss was time spent in the car with the grandkids,” Tom said. “I drove Henry to his lacrosse games and Barbara drove Megan to dance class, or we’d pick them up from school. Driving them around is a time to talk with them, find out what’s going on in their lives. They’d tell us about activities, but we didn’t have that, it was hard for a year. We are close to the kids, they are comfortable hugging and being around us both.” Tom noted his grand-

kids’ development in the past year and how much they’d changed. “Megan has filled out and Henry’s voice got lower,” Tom said. “Megan speaks more like a teenage girl.” Grandparents Happy and Dick Parks noticed similar changes in their own three grandkids after a year of not seeing them. Until the pandemic hit, they hadn’t let the nearly 3,000-mile journey across the Pacific Ocean stop them from visiting several times a year. The retired teachers (he a football

coach at Newport Harbor High School, she a Newport Mesa middle school teacher), who moved to Kauai in 2000, cut their visit short last March and barely made it out of California before flights were reduced and a two-week quarantine went into effect in Hawaii. After getting vaccinated, the pair hopped on a flight and returned to Newport Beach on March 11. “When our son Tyler picked us up [curbside] at the airport, I saw someone lifting our suitcases into the car and had no idea it was our 13-year-old grandson, Hudson,” Happy said. “I didn’t recognize him at all. In the year he had grown to my height.” They headed straight to the Newport Harbor High School stadium to see grandson, Cade, a senior, play football. “We arrived at halftime, and the rest of the family, including [9-year-old grandson] Steele, came running toward us, which was really special,” d Happy said. “We are planning on seeing all of the games, with the last game in April,” Happy said. “With all the kids in sports we want to spend more time here.” A little more than a year after the pandemic began, the COVID-19 vaccines have made that possible.

SUSAN HOFFMAN is a contributor to TimesOC.

WATER

Continued from page R2

uation.” Herndon said one of the options that will likely be retained is groundwater pumping, where contaminated water is taken out of the ground, treated and then put back in the ground. The water would go back into the aquifer, where it eventually would find its way to a drinking water well. Kim said that the O.C. Water District runs the largest water purification system in the world. “It’s a really challenging problem because groundwater is hard to get to, you can’t clean it like you can clean surface water, where you can just pump all the water easily at the surface or provide some sort of surface water treatment — just purify it with a bunch of bleach,” Kim said. “It’s down at depth and you can only get to it with wells ... So, groundwater is extremely hard to treat and very expensive to treat.” The district is aiming to have a draft of the feasibility study in October. The district will then provide time for fellow agencies and the Regional Water Quality Control Board to review and provide comments. The O.C. Water District will then begin developing a remedial action plan, which is a proposed plan to implement one of the strategies analyzed in the feasibility study. The district first discovered the contamination of the South Basin in the early 2000s when contamination was detected in a drinking water well in Santa Ana. Herndon said the district tests drinking water wells regularly for all varieties of chemicals. When contamination is detected, the well is shut down. “No drinking water is being used in the area, or anywhere within Orange County Water District, that doesn’t meet drinking water standards,” Herndon said. Kim said that testing of the wells is so extensive and frequent that any levels of contamination above regulatory limits are going to be

caught and addressed before the water makes it into someone’s home. “So, I think the risk is relatively low of it is accidentally not being noticed or getting into a position where it can cause risk or harm to humans,” Kim said. “But certainly just reducing the availability of that water through the closure of wells is going to have, no pun intended, downstream impacts on the population — in terms of the cost it takes the water district to manage and still provide sufficient water to meet demand, and the cost that they’re going to have to charge for that water. “I think rather than being concerned about maybe toxic contaminants in your water, you could probably be more realistically concerned about your water bill, and your water rates, climbing as a result of these types of treatment costs.” So far, only the Santa Ana well has been shut down, but the district has detected trace levels in another well that aren’t enough to shut the well down. But it does indicate that the contamination is finding its way down into the principal aquifer. “The principal aquifer is definitely the one that we want to protect,” Herndon said. Herndon said it can be frustrating at times how long it takes to understand the scale of the contamination and then come up with an appropriate cleanup strategy. “The difficulty is trying to figure out where and how did the contamination get from the shallow aquifer into the principal aquifer,” Herndon said. “The sooner we can get a remedy in place, in terms of cleaning up the shallow aquifer then that will then take away the threat of how these contaminants are finding their way down into the principal.” Herndon said it’s difficult to determine how the contaminants are getting into the principal aquifer, but some of the sources may be through old, abandoned wells. This area of Orange County was used by farmers who irrigated their fields using agricultural



Dania Maxwell | Los Angeles Times

ENRIQUE FLORES ARTEAGA checks for contaminants at the district in 2019.

wells, and in many cases, the wells were drilled prior to current standards dictating how wells should be constructed to prevent contamination. Herndon said the district doesn’t know exactly where the wells are — freeways and other structures may be covering them up. “Unfortunately, a lot of these wells were probably not properly sealed when they were no longer needed,” Herndon said. Herndon said that dating to the 1950s, these areas in Irvine, Santa Ana and Tustin were industrial. Businesses were working with metals and electronic circuit boards and used various chemicals like chlorinated solvents and degreasers. These chemicals could be stored underground and may have been improperly disposed. The district filed a lawsuit against several companies. So far, more than a dozen businesses settled for a total of \$28.5 million. The remaining defendants in the suit include Soco West, Brenntag Pacific, GE Aviation and RadioShack, among others.

NORTH BASIN SITE MAKES THE FEDERAL ‘SUPERFUND’ LIST The district is also currently conducting a feasibility study of a 5-square-mile portion of the aquifer underneath Anaheim, Fullerton and Placentia that is

contaminated with volatile organic compounds from manufacturing in the 1950s, ‘60s and ‘70s. Herndon said the feasibility study of the North Basin site is estimated to be completed in 2022. Five water supply wells have already been shut down due to contamination, and others are threatened. The North Basin plume has spread further and deeper into the principal aquifer than the South Basin plume, Herndon said. In September 2020, the site was added to the county’s Superfund list, which makes the site eligible for cleanup funds and other benefits. The EPA, which is overseeing the project, said the basin is a “critical water resource” that supplies drinking water for 2.4 million people in 22 cities. “Superfund is good because it brings in federal authority that goes beyond even what state authority has in terms of getting parties who are responsible to implement and pay for cleanup, but it brings with it a bit of additional federal process that takes longer,” Herndon said. Russell Detwiler, UC Irvine associate professor of civil and environmental engineering, said many sites of similar magnitude on the Superfund list still end up taking decades. “That’s the cost of these things, it is easy to contam-

inate an aquifer, it’s very difficult to get it back to its pristine state,” Detwiler said. Detwiler was brought in to provide expert testimony by a law firm of a defendant in the South Basin lawsuit. He said he didn’t end up being deposed or providing any on-the-record testimony. Herndon said the district filed another lawsuit related to the North Basin site against more than a dozen companies. Raytheon and eight other businesses settled for a total of \$21.4 million. Northrop Grumman is the only remaining defendant in the case.

CONTAMINATION CLOSES MORE THAN 40 DRINKING WELLS More than 40 water wells were shut down after the O.C. Water District discovered widespread contamination from perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, which are found in consumer products like Scotchguard, flame-resistant materials, nonstick cooking surfaces and firefighting foam, among other products. The toxic chemicals, which are linked to cancer, have been found in water wells throughout California. “We started to collect a lot of data and we found these compounds in the aquifer,” Herndon said. “So it’s fairly extensive, covering

a much larger area than the North Basin plume or the South Basin plume.” Herndon said the water district is currently constructing a number of well-head treatment systems to remove and treat the compounds. The district is providing monthly updates on its PFAS-related efforts. The water district’s Philip L. Anthony Water Quality Laboratory was the first public agency laboratory in California to attain state certification to analyze for PFAS in drinking water, according to the district. The Orange County Water District, impacted cities and other local water districts filed a lawsuit in December against 3M, DuPont and other companies. The lawsuit said that 3M and Dupont “are major chemical companies that manufactured PFOS and/or PFOA and knew or reasonably should have known that these harmful compounds would reach groundwater, pollute drinking water supplies, render drinking water unusable and unsafe, and threaten the public health and welfare.” Herndon said the water district is not waiting for a settlement before implementing cleanup. He said Thursday there were no updates on the PFAS lawsuit. “We are already moving forward with partnerships with the water provider agencies, the cities and other water providers to move ahead and put in treatment systems so that we can get the wells that have been shut down back online safely and provide high-quality drinking water that meets all regulations and standards,” Herndon said. “The lawsuit will run in parallel with these actions, and certainly we hope that we can get some recovery from those responsible to help pay for all of this construction and future operation of these treatment systems so that the ratepayers don’t have to pay for all of it.” For more information about O.C. Water District projects, visit ocwd.com.

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JAILS

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the pandemic,” she said while laughing. “It was funny to see each other like, ‘Oh you weren’t exaggerating when you said you have gained weight during this.’”

Diaz was accompanied by her mother and daughter at the visit. They spoke with Armendariz through a phone, separated by a glass partition.

Diaz won’t be able to see her brother for another month, as the current rules only allow one visit per month for each inmate. She hopes the visits will soon be made more frequent.

The department said in a news release last week that it will continue to “reassess procedures” to determine when visitations can be expanded.

“We understand the value of visitation and know those in our custody and their loved ones have been impacted over the last year as we navigated the challenges of COVID-19,” Sheriff Don Barnes said in the news release. “We look forward to reinstating visiting in a way that is safe for all.”

Inmates have had access to two free five-minute calls per week since March 2020. Sheriff’s spokeswoman Carrie Braun said that’s in addition to paid phone calls they can place when they have access to phones in the day room.

Sarah Kahn, a UC Irvine law student and member of Transforming Justice OC, runs a letter-writing project with inmates in Orange County jails. She said inmates had been fighting to get more contact with their loved ones over the last year.

“They have shared that it’s been incredibly isolating,” Kahn said. “There’s been a lot of organizing going on, a lot of folks on the inside are advocating for more contact with their loved one, they were only getting five-minute calls, but folks have been isolated and haven’t been able to see the faces of their families for over a year now.

“That’s on top of really

harsh quarantine conditions. For large parts of COVID, people were in their cells and without access to day room, showers, phones for about 23½ hours a day. Some of them don’t have access to the library, so they’re not getting any escape. So it’s just been incredibly isolating and really devastating for folks who are incarcerated.”

Kahn criticized the department for not offering video visitations during the last year. She said they had the ability to do so because videos of court proceedings are offered and the Sheriff’s Department had enough funding.

Voice of OC reported that county supervisors allocated more CARES Act funding to the Sheriff’s Department than to healthcare workers.

“They easily could have done video visitation and they did not,” Kahn said.

Dolores Canales, a local inmate advocate, said her son John Martinez—who is incarcerated at Theo Lacy—had been advocating over the last year to get visitations back, at one point developing an online petition.

When Martinez contracted COVID-19, Canales said she was worried because she couldn’t get in contact with him.

“It’s long overdue,” Canales said of the visitations.

Daisy Ramirez, Orange County jails conditions and policy coordinator at the ACLU, said that maintaining relationships with loved ones on the outside plays a crucial role in the well-being of incarcerated individuals.

“It’s huge, especially given how long it’s been since they have been able to see their loved ones, so we are definitely pleased that incarcerated people will be able to see family members once again,” Ramirez said. “Many people that have called our hotline have shared that maintaining relationships with family members and loved ones is critical, not only to their emotional and mental well-being, but to trying to survive in the middle of a pandemic.

“I also think this makes it



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IMMIGRATION DETAINEES walk to pick up their lunches at the Theo Lacy Facility in Orange in 2017.

even more important for the Orange County Sheriff’s Department to take the necessary steps to keep COVID under control within the jails. Given this news, OCSJ must keep the population low, they must offer vaccine information and access to incarcerated people and they must provide the necessary medical care and products to folks on the inside, because we know that not doing so could put people at risk.”

Ramirez and many others have criticized the Sheriff’s Department over the last year for its response to the pandemic.

“It’s really just everything that could have been done wrong, it seems like has been,” Kahn said. “They shut down the kitchen, meaning there has been for most people, pretty consistently throughout the year, no hot meals. They’re getting three sack lunches a day. It’s often a bologna sandwich, sometimes they get eggs in the morning. The food is molding. So measures like that, that

cause deep harm to incarcerated people, were taken.

“But measures like taking an active role and releasing people, which Barnes resisted at every turn, could have really saved a lot of lives by allowing for more social distancing. Quarantine conditions were extremely harsh and medical care was very, very difficult to obtain. People were essentially left to their own devices when they did contract COVID.”

The American Civil Liberties Union filed a lawsuit against Barnes in April, calling for the release of medically vulnerable inmates and better safety and health protocols.

In response, a judge ordered Barnes in December to cut the county’s jail population in half. Barnes chose to fight the order, but during his appeal, an outbreak of COVID-19 in the jails spread to more than 1,000 inmates.

Barnes lost the appeal and was criticized by Judge Peter Wilson for stating that the public could be endan-

gered by the release of inmates, a comment he made while fighting the order.

Braun said over the phone that the department submitted a plan to the court in January and the judge has not issued any new orders as the hearings continue.

Braun said the average daily jail population is down to 3,300. It was 5,200 before the pandemic. She said the judge’s order to cut the population in half referred to the pre-COVID figure.

One inmate in Orange County jails currently has tested positive for COVID-19, while 2,315 have tested positive for the virus since the pandemic began.

When asked how many inmates the department has released in response to the court order, Braun responded in an email that “the Sheriff has utilized his discretion under the declaration of emergency to release inmates since the beginning of the pandemic to manage the jail population.”

“Since the beginning of the pandemic, the sheriff has released more than 1,700 inmates who qualify based on their charges and time left on their sentence,” she said.

As COVID-19 vaccination distribution widens this month, Kahn and Ramirez expressed hope that inmates’ rights are respected.

Ramirez said the ACLU is sending out mailers to inmates with information about the vaccines to ensure they are accurately informed.

“I think the important part is making sure that incarcerated people have access to reliable information,” Ramirez said.

“There is a big level of mistrust that exists between incarcerated people and jail staff. Given that, I think it’s important to make sure that people get all of their questions answered, and that they can get information from credible sources.”

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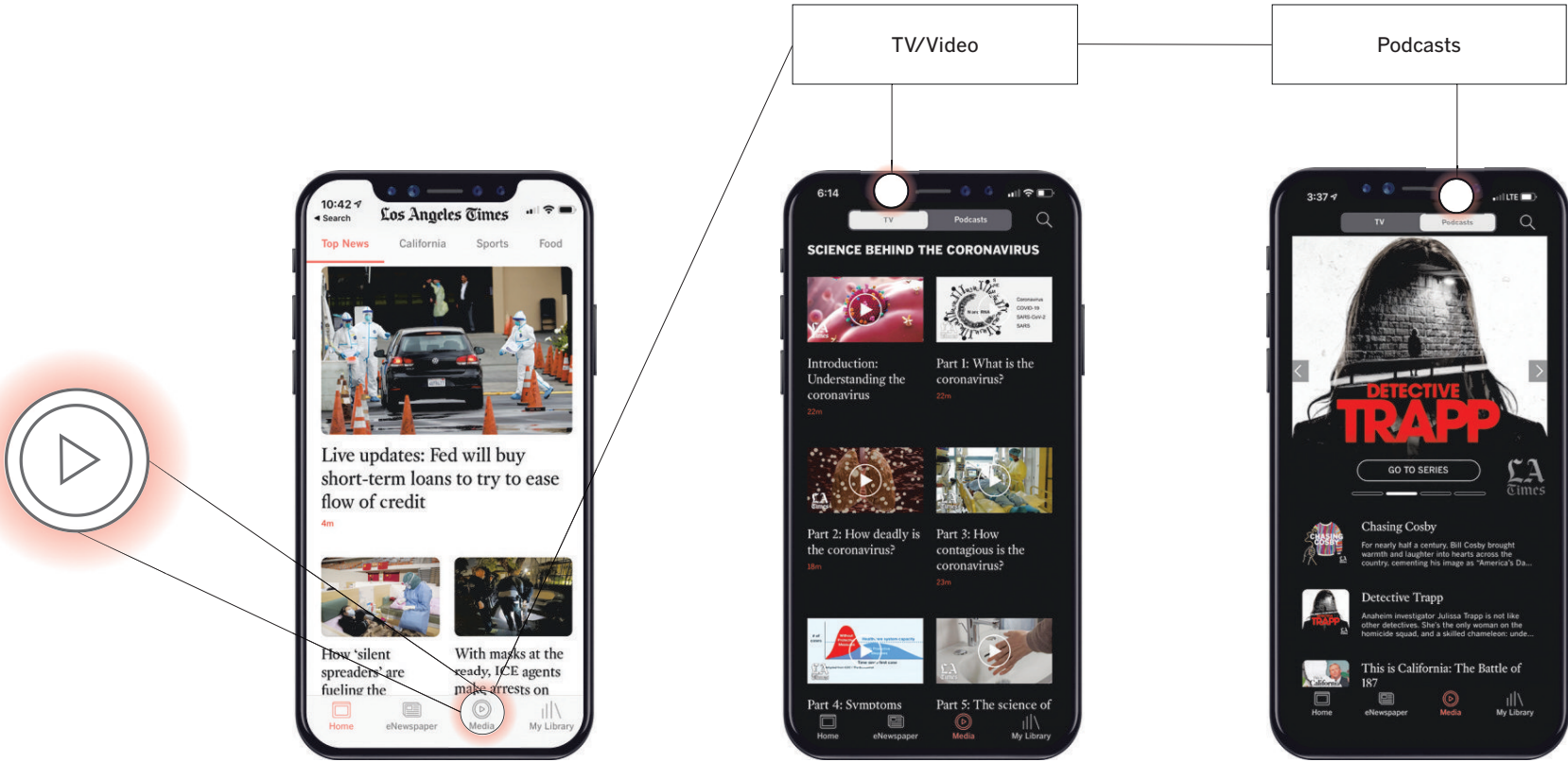
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