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Blue Ridge Communications would like to thank their customers and communities they serve for another successful year of collecting for the Keystone Military Families' Stockings For Soldiers program. For this year's efforts, we surpassed \$22,000 in monetary donations (to help purchase items needed and cover shipping costs), collected 3,000 pounds of stocking stuffers (including food, hygiene, and other requested personal items), and received over 17,500 signed cards with personalized Christmas greetings showing support for our military personnel.

"Even in the midst of a pandemic, our communities continue to rally around our men and women in uniform stationed in other countries who will not be home for Christmas," said Julianne Brixius, Blue Ridge Marketing/Public Relations Coordinator. "Our focus on online monetary donations was certainly different, but the response has just been amazing. We cannot say thank you enough to the many individuals, churches, civic organizations, schools, businesses and volunteers that made for another successful year."

Blue Ridge Communications has been partnering with Keystone Military Families for 11 years, coordinating with local communities to collect monetary donations and items for their Stockings For Soldiers program. Each year, KMF ships approximately 10,000 Christmas stockings and greeting cards to American service men and women stationed around the world. – *Lehighton Times-News*

AT&T Inc. got bids for its DirecTV unit valuing the satellite-TV service at more than \$15 billion including debt, said people familiar with the matter, as the widely watched auction winds toward a resolution. Among the top bidders were Churchill Capital Corp. IV, a blank-check company run by former banker Michael Klein, and private-equity firm TPG, the people said. Apollo Global Management Inc., long seen by many as the front-runner, submitted a bid valuing the business at less than \$15 billion, some of the people said. The auction is in a late stage. A deal could be reached by early next year.

That would allow AT&T to deconsolidate DirecTV's worsening financial results—a major aim of the transaction—while relinquishing control even as it maintains a majority stake in the business. The Wall Street Journal reported in August that [AT&T had tapped bankers to explore a deal](#) to take the fast-shrinking business off its books. The media-and-telecom company bought DirecTV in 2015 [for about \\$49 billion](#), or \$66 billion including debt. (Its Latin American satellite business, also acquired through the DirecTV takeover, is now held in a separate unit called Vrio.)

The pay-TV business has lost millions of subscribers in recent years as viewers switch to on-demand entertainment services like Netflix Inc. AT&T's pay-TV losses have far outpaced declines at rivals like Comcast Corp. and Dish Network Inc. The company has shed 7 million U.S. video connections over the past two years.

Those customer losses have weighed on AT&T's stock, which has barely moved over the past five years and is down about 20% so far this year. The company's market value stands at about \$220 billion. AT&T executives have said they are making progress stabilizing the domestic pay-TV unit so that its

convince Supreme Court to void the vote in Pennsylvania

customer losses fall in line with industry averages. But Chief Executive John Stankey has also said he is willing to shed any business that draws attention away from the Dallas company's core wireless, broadband and streaming-video units. "We still have opportunities to do some things around rejiggering our portfolio," Mr. Stankey said Tuesday at a UBS Group AG investor conference. "We'll continue to force ourselves to look at those hard decisions."

A large asset sale would give the company more resources to keep improving its wireless service, which still generates more than half of its pretax profits, without threatening the company's all-important credit rating. Analysts expect AT&T and its rivals to wager billions of dollars on the Federal Communications Commission's latest auction of cellular spectrum, [which launched Tuesday](#). Such auctions can saddle cellphone carriers with massive one-time bills for the licenses they win.

AT&T has amassed a large war chest—Mr. Stankey on Tuesday said it has \$10 billion of cash on hand—that it could use to bid on the wireless licenses over the coming weeks. But executives must balance that potential spending with funds marked for future debt repayments, a roughly \$15 billion annual dividend and about \$21 billion for planned capital expenditures. – *Wall Street Journal*

It's an ugly irony that the current coronavirus surge hits smack in the season of light and joy. Don't get me wrong. Pain and loss in families stricken by the disease is horrible in any season. Pandemic fatigue for others is no less frustrating in any month. And bad things are bad any time of year. But there's something extra cruel about the increased spread of a deadly virus and resultant social restrictions during our most social season.

For restaurants and the hospitality industry, already so vulnerable, always so reliant on holiday celebrations, the timing couldn't be worse. Neither could the response of our elected "leaders." No comfort there. Maybe the 400,000-plus Pennsylvanians working in restaurants and hospitality have a special holiday message for our Republican-run legislature, which passed [a state budget](#) last month ignoring their industry's crisis.

Lawmakers exceeded even their own well-known levels of spineless, self-centered governance by using \$1.3 billion in federal Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) money to fund state government, rather than for its intended purpose – direct aid to individuals in businesses hit hardest by the virus.

At the same time, our lawmakers had no problem funding themselves at the same overpriced \$352 million rate taxpayers spent on them last year. Democratic Gov. Tom Wolf signed the budget but insists he's "working on trying to find" financial aid for restaurants and others. So, that's good. If not especially comforting.

And Congress? Just our legislature on a larger scale. A \$900 billion-plus national coronavirus aid package, still stalled as of this writing, doesn't include the Restaurants Act, which would provide \$120 billion to independent restaurants as opposed to larger chains.

Meanwhile, COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths continue to spike. [State Health Secretary Rachel Levine and Wolf warn of overrun health care systems and new restrictions](#). Wolf said, "Pennsylvania's situation has

become more dire,” adding that current mitigation efforts “have not worked.” Levine said the virus “is everywhere.” And there appears to be no end in sight.

A post-Thanksgiving surge is expected to bang up against a Christmas surge to all but ensure 2020 ends on a note very far from celebratory. Wolf announced Wednesday he has tested positive for the coronavirus but he said he plans to continue his duties. When I ask our Health Department what’s coming, I’m referred to modeling the agency uses, including from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME) at the University of Washington, Seattle, founded by Bill and Melinda Gates.

It isn’t comforting. It projects coronavirus deaths in Pennsylvania will reach 27,000 by April 1. That’s *with* a rapid vaccine rollout. And it’s more than double the current state death count, which started last March.

Still, projections can be affected by many factors, and aren’t always accurate. Back in mid-March, the CDC used four scenarios to project a worst-case coronavirus impact nationally: up to 214 million cases; up to 1.7 million deaths. U.S. numbers as of this writing are 14.8 million U.S. cases, 282,700 U.S. deaths. And the IHME U.S. projected death-count, with the vaccine, is 527,700 by April 1. So, there’s some comfort in knowing a vaccine’s coming, and maybe in knowing “worst case” isn’t likely.

There’s also maybe a little comfort in CDC tracking. It shows 21 states have a higher average daily case rate per 100,000 citizens during this surge than Pennsylvania does. It shows that since the start of the pandemic, 41 states have a higher case rate per 100,000 than Pennsylvania. These include mid-Atlantic neighbors New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, New York.

Still. You perhaps can tell I’m reaching here. There’s no comfort in any aspect of the disease. Not in its numbers. Certainly not in its impact on individuals, families, the economy. And further restrictions seem likely. A COVID-19 data and policy group working with health centers at Harvard, Georgetown and Stanford (COVID Act now) tracks each state. Based on Pennsylvania’s numbers, it recommends, in addition to current restrictions, remote learning for all students and take-out or outdoor restaurant dining.

We’ll see what the coming days bring. Probably not much comfort or joy. But, no matter what, there is a vaccine, the clock keeps ticking, and, as Winston Churchill famously counseled, “If you’re going through hell, keep going.”

– John Baer’s column in *Harrisburg Patriot-News*

