1. NUMBER OF THE WEEK: 3 PERCENT (WEEKLY DECLINE IN UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFICIARIES)—UNEMPLOYMENT BENEFIT RECEIPT CONTINUES SLOW DECLINE WHILE PANDEMIC UNEMPLOYMENT PROGRAM EXPIRATIONS LOOM

Receipt of unemployment benefit programs continues to slowly fall, declining an average of 3 percent each week over the four weeks ending October 24. Estimated benefit receipt has declined by a little more than a third since peaking in late June. Nearly two-thirds of current unemployment benefit recipients are receiving either Pandemic Emergency Unemployment Compensation (PEUC) or Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA). PEUC provides extra weeks of benefits for recipients who have exhausted regular Unemployment Insurance (prior to their receiving Extended Benefits), and PUA provides either unemployment benefits for workers not typically eligible for Unemployment Insurance, or extra weeks of benefits for recipients who have exhausted Extended Benefits. Both programs were enacted in the CARES Act back in March and are scheduled to expire at the end of December.

2. AS CASELOADS INCREASE, SCHOOLS FACE INCREASED PRESSURE TO MOVE AWAY FROM IN-PERSON EDUCATION

3. AS COVID-19 CASES CONTINUE TO INCREASE NATIONWIDE, HOSPITALIZATIONS REACH RECORD HIGH

4. DEATHS FROM COVID-19 RAPIDLY INCREASING, APPROACHING AUGUST LEVELS

5. VACCINE NEWS

6. HEALTH CARE: THE FUTURE OF THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT
2. AS CASELOADS INCREASE, SCHOOLS FACE INCREASED PRESSURE TO MOVE AWAY FROM IN-PERSON EDUCATION

With uncontrolled community spread in many parts of the country, several school systems are canceling plans for in-person education or reverting to remote learning. This week, Philadelphia announced that they would delay plans for in-person learning, following similar announcements earlier this month in Boston and Washington, D.C. Detroit announced that they would be returning to fully remote learning beginning next week. New York City, one of the only large school districts to have transitioned to hybrid in-person and remote learning on a large scale, is reportedly considering a return to fully remote learning. Prior to reopening, New York City established a guideline for returning to remote learning if positivity rates city-wide increased to above 3 percent. Positivity rates in New York City were reported to have reached 2.6 percent on Wednesday.

3. AS COVID-19 CASES CONTINUE TO INCREASE NATIONWIDE, HOSPITALIZATIONS REACH RECORD HIGH

This week, the number of people currently hospitalized with COVID-19 exceeded previous peak levels recorded in April and July. At more than 65,000 Americans hospitalized on Wednesday, the number of currently hospitalized COVID patients has increased nearly 90 percent over the past month. One analysis found that 18 states—mostly in the mid-west, plains and mountain west—had more than 10 percent of hospital beds filled with COVID-19 patients.
4. DEATHS FROM COVID-19 RAPIDLY INCREASING, APPROACHING AUGUST LEVELS

Over the past week, COVID-19 killed an estimated average of more than a thousand Americans each day—a level of fatality last experienced in August (the seven-day average of daily deaths from COVID peaked at more than 1,100 on August 1, but had reached above 2,000 Americans per day back in April). The seven-day average of new daily COVID cases has increased 60 percent since the last week in October, suggesting that death rates could also rapidly climb in the near future. Improvements in treatment practices (which reduce the rate of fatalities per infection) appear likely to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of new infections.
5. **VACCINE NEWS**

In one of the best pieces of news on the coronavirus front in some time, Pfizer reported that the vaccine that it had developed in partnership with German firm BioNTech has achieved a remarkable 90 percent effectiveness. That is to say, the population of the vaccine’s Phase 3 trial has contracted a sufficient number of infections to indicate that the vaccine has been exposed to the virus, and of those infected, 90 percent were in the control or “placebo” group, while only 10 percent were in the “treatment” group that had been administered the vaccine. The trial still has a few weeks to go before it can surmount the safety hurdle, which requires a minimum of elapsed time after at least half of the population have been administered the vaccine and there have been no serious adverse reactions, but at that point Pfizer can apply for emergency use and then for full approval. This result bodes well not just for the Pfizer vaccine but also for several others that take a similar approach to inducing the human body to produce antibodies; if the Pfizer vaccine does so, the other vaccines should have a good chance to succeed as well. The Pfizer vaccine is among those that must be transported and stored at extraordinarily low temperatures (−80 degrees centigrade) and that requires two doses, but Pfizer has said that it expects to have enough doses to immunize 15 to 20 million people by the end of this year.

6. **HEALTH CARE: THE FUTURE OF THE AFFORDABLE CARE ACT**

*California v. Texas* was argued before the Supreme Court this week, putting the fate of the Affordable Care Act (ACA, or “Obamacare”) up for decision. Although court observers used to be cautioned not to attempt to read the intentions of individual Supreme Court justices by the questions that they asked, two potential opponents of the ACA stated apparently directly that they saw no cause to strike down
the entire law—as Texas, other states and the federal government contended in their suit. Those two justices, along with three who clearly support the law, would be enough to uphold it.

A previous Supreme Court decision upheld the so-called “individual mandate” in the law as an exercise of the federal government’s power to tax. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017, in an attempt to eviscerate the ACA, reduced the penalty for its individual mandate to zero dollars. A subsequent lawsuit contended that a zero-dollar tax is no longer a tax, and therefore the individual mandate is unconstitutional—and therefore, in an additional logical (or legal) step, that the entire law should be ruled unconstitutional, by the reasoning that the individual mandate is an essential component. However, five justices through their questions at the argument seemed to reason that the Congress could have repealed the entire law but chose not to (or could not), and that the law has continued to operate with at least some measure of success with the zero-dollar individual mandate penalty. Thus, they apparently see the individual mandate as “severable” from the rest of the law should it be struck down.

The apparent President-elect, Joe Biden (who was closely involved with the enactment of the ACA), has presented his own ideas for how to improve on the ACA—as did every candidate for the Democratic nomination, and as President Trump has promised to do. President-elect Biden would add a so-called “public option”—a Medicare-like federal government run health insurance program—to the choices available to American households. A brief explanatory memo provides some detail on the public option and on the other changes to the US health care system that the President-elect put forward in his campaign.