

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 1 of 73

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [4- City Council Story](#)
- [6- Transit Holiday Bake Sale ad](#)
- [6- Merry Jo Ball Card Shower Ad](#)
- [7- SD SearchLight: Defense bill passed by US Senate includes \\$282 million for Ellsworth construction](#)
- [8- SD SearchLight: What the reaction to a tragic shooting tells us about health care](#)
- [9- SD SearchLight: In win for biofuels, stopgap spending bill allows year-round sales of E15 gas nationwide](#)
- [10- SD SearchLight: Fed drops its key rate but projects fewer cuts in 2025](#)
- [11- SD SearchLight: Chances for government shut-down escalate after Trump and GOP reject stopgap spending bill](#)
- [13- SD SearchLight: First severe case of bird flu in a human in the U.S. reported in Louisiana](#)
- [14- SD SearchLight: U.S. Senate passes defense bill that bars gender-affirming care for service members' kids](#)
- [16- SD SearchLight: Members of Congress rolled a pay raise for themselves into big must-do spending bill](#)
- [18- Weather Pages](#)
- [23- Daily Devotional](#)
- [24- Subscription Form](#)
- [25- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [26- Upcoming Groton Events](#)
- [27- News from the Associated Press](#)

Thursday, Dec. 19

Senior Menu: Baked pork chop, sweet potato, Catalina blend, chocolate pudding with banana, whole wheat bread.

School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.

School Lunch: Chicken nuggets, tater tots.

JH GBB at Aberdeen Roncalli

NEC Boys and Girls Wrestling at Groton Area, 4 p.m.

Holiday Light Contest

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460



Friday, Dec. 20

Senior Menu: Bean and ham soup, egg salad sandwich, tomato spoon salad, fruit.

School Breakfast: Egg bake.

School Lunch: Cheese pizza, green beans.

End of Second Quarter

Elementary Christmas Program, 1 p.m., in the Arena.

Early Dismissal, 2 p.m.

Basketball hosts West Central: Gym: Boys C at 4 p.m.; Girls C at 5:15 p.m.; Arena: Girls JV at 4 p.m., Boys JV at 5:15 p.m.; followed by girls varsity and boys varsity.

Saturday, Dec. 21

FIRST DAY OF WINTER

Girls Varsity Wrestling vs. South Border at Ashley, N.D., 9 a.m.

Boys Varsity Wrestling at Sioux Valley Tourney, 10 a.m.

Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

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Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 2 of 73

1440

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.

TikTok Heads to SCOTUS

The US Supreme Court has agreed to hear TikTok's challenge to a federal law banning the video-sharing app unless its US operations separate from Chinese parent company ByteDance. Arguments are set for Jan. 10, nine days before the law takes effect.

The high court will review a lower-court ruling upholding the legislation over national security concerns and rejecting TikTok's argument that it violated the First Amendment. Congress enacted the measure in April over concerns from US officials China could access the personal data of Americans using the app, including browsing history, location, and biometrics. TikTok, which became available in the US in 2018, boasts roughly 170 million active US users.

ByteDance said it won't sell its US operations. If banned, federal law will prevent app stores from letting users download or update TikTok, and internet hosting services won't be able to support it. While using TikTok won't be illegal, it could become inoperable.

Federal Reserve Cuts Rates

Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell announced a quarter-percentage-point cut in benchmark rates yesterday, bringing the range to between 4.25% and 4.5%. The central bank also lowered rate cut projections for 2025, anticipating two cuts, down from four.

Yesterday's announcement marks the third and final rate cut of 2024, following a half-point cut in September and a quarter-point cut last month. Since a hiring slowdown in the early fall, the job market appears to have stabilized, reducing the case for aggressive cuts. Inflation has also proved stubborn, with consumer prices up 2.7% year-over-year last month, above the Fed's 2% target—another reason the central bank appears positioned to slow its pace of interest rate cuts.

US stock markets saw steep drops (S&P 500 -3.0%, Dow -2.6%, Nasdaq -3.6%) after yesterday's revised outlook. The Dow experienced its first 10-day losing streak since 1974.

Syphilis Origins Study

The modern form of the bacteria causing syphilis likely originated in the Americas within the last 8,000 years, according to research published yesterday. The discovery furthers a centuries-long debate around the curable—and now resurgent—condition, countering a long-held belief that the disease arrived in the Americas after European colonization.

Researchers identified early versions of the affliction-causing microbe, *Treponema pallidum*, on bacterial DNA extracted from the remains of five sick individuals from pre-Columbian Central and South America. Analysts cautioned the limited number of ancient DNA specimens of the bacteria worldwide minimizes any conclusions from the study, with one scientist suggesting the proto-bacteria may have first traveled with humans from Eurasia to the Americas.

Syphilis is a sexually transmitted infection that is often initially asymptomatic but can develop into significant brain and cardiovascular issues. Roughly 8 million new infections of syphilis occur annually. The infection is treatable with a round of antibiotics.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 3 of 73

\Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Disney becomes only studio to top \$2B at the 2024 domestic box office, including three of the top five grossing films.

Academy Awards release shortlist of top contenders in 10 categories.

UK court rules police can seize \$3.4M from social media influencer Andrew Tate amid dispute over alleged unpaid taxes on \$26.5M in revenue from Tate's businesses.

Milwaukee Bucks top Oklahoma City Thunder 97-81 to win the second annual NBA Cup, the NBA's new mid-season tournament; Bucks star Giannis Antetokounmpo named tournament MVP.

Science & Technology

OpenAI launches free phone service (1-800-CHATGPT), allowing anyone in the US to call and talk to its ChatGPT chatbot for up to 15 minutes at no cost.

Popular 2020 paper suggesting the malaria drug hydroxychloroquine could treat COVID-19 retracted more than four years after publishing; work is the second most-cited paper ever to be withdrawn.

Lithocholic acid, a type of bile acid produced in the liver, has been found to have anti-aging effects similar to caloric restriction.

Business & Markets

Grubhub to pay \$25M to settle Federal Trade Commission lawsuit over allegedly misleading customers about delivery costs and drivers about their earnings.

Merck signs \$2B licensing deal to develop weight loss pill with Chinese drugmaker Hansoh Pharma in bid to compete with other obesity drugs on the market.

Cloud AI startup Vultr raises \$333M, with chip giant AMD and hedge fund LuminArx Capital Management leading the round; Vultr now valued at \$3.5B.

Politics & World Affairs

House Ethics Committee votes in secret to release report on its investigation into ex-Rep. Matt Gaetz (R, FL-1); release expected in the coming days.

Senate passes \$895B defense bill raising pay for Congress members and junior enlisted service members, cutting transgender care for children of service members.

President-elect Donald Trump selects former Senate candidate and NFL star Herschel Walker as US ambassador to the Bahamas.

Russia says it has detained a 29-year-old Uzbek man in relation to the killing of Igor Kirillov, head of Russia's biological and chemical weapons defense program.



City employees Landon Johnson and Paul Kosel were caught on a camera flooding the skating rink on Wednesday. The skating rink is ready but no opening date has been set yet.

(Photo by Jodi Schwan)

City Council addresses infrastructure, community projects at Tuesday's meeting

by Elizabeth Varin

The Groton City Council tackled a range of important issues during its Tuesday evening meeting, including public infrastructure, repairs to city facilities and safety.

The council held a public hearing to discuss the wastewater improvement project, though no members of the public attended. Representatives from engineering consultant IMEG Corp. and the Northeast Council of Governments went through the project and potential funding from the state Department of Natural Resources.

The council then authorized an application for financial assistance to be submitted to the state agency to see whether loans or grants would be available to assist with the improvement project.

"It sounds like we need this to get the ball rolling on this," said Mayor Scott Hanlon. "So you guys (the council) need to give me approval to sign and authorize NECOG and IMEG for everyone to continue with this process."

The council approved the authorization with a unanimous vote.

Electric meter discussion stalled as city looks for best option moving forward

The council held off on deciding on an electric metering system to see what other options are available.

The council has been discussing new electric meters for months, with a decision needed this month on whether to move forward with Eaton, a power management company the city already works with for its system. However, questions remained on whether it was the best system for the city, if the city should move forward with a dual meter system that would run both electric and water meter service and what the city would do in the future once current staff who know the systems retire.

Electric Utility Supervisor Todd Gay told the council he was against moving forward with Eaton as he doesn't want to sign up with a vendor utilizing a system that is currently failing.

Gay said that while Technology Specialist Paul Kosel had asked the board to move forward on getting new meters from Eaton, Gay wants to get a system that is easier to work with. While Kosel has been

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 5 of 73

working on Eaton meters for year and knows the system well, Gay said eventually both he and Kosel will retire, and those taking their place need to be able to work with the electric metering system too.

Council members agreed, with councilmen Jason Wambach, Jon Cutler and Brian Bahr pointing out it wasn't worth the savings by going with a system that might not be best for the city.

"We're not going to rush this decision," Bahr said.

The council asked Gay to look into other options, some of which could incorporate a dual water/electric meter system.

Railroad crossing closure request denied

In a move to maintain access to city facilities, the council denied a request to close the railroad crossing at Aspen Avenue, citing the potential impact on access to the city's rubble site.

BNSF submitted a request to close the crossing, offering the city \$100,000 to do so. City Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich said the city has received requests before to close that crossing from the railroad service, but he brought it to the council for them to decide because of the money being offered.

That crossing is used quite a bit, with 10,000 trips to the rubble site recorded since February, Heinrich said. That would be 20,000 times vehicles have gone through there since the beginning of the year.

If that crossing were closed, it would leave people having to head to Highway 37 to get to the rubble site, said Mayor Scott Hanlon. That would be a lot of additional traffic that could cause safety issues. And there has not been an accident at the railroad crossing.

"I guess my opinion is nope," he told the council.

Councilman Brian Bahr moved to deny the request, with Councilwoman Shirley Wells seconding the motion. The request was denied by a unanimous vote.

Hail damage repairs coming to city facilities

The council executed an agreement to address hail damage sustained earlier this year on several city-owned properties, including the community center, city hall, swimming pool and park.

The agreement is needed by the insurance company and will allow the city to move forward with bidding out projects and repair the facilities, said City Finance Officer Douglas Heinrich. The city will receive nearly \$99,000 from the insurance company, less a \$500 deductible. Because the damage was caused by a single event, the city will only need to pay the deductible once, not per project.

- The council set salaries for skating rink attendants for the coming season. Leah Jones will receive \$12.75 per hour, which includes 25 cents added for each year of service. She will also receive \$250 per month for being the skating rink manager. Addison Hoffman, Claire Schuelke, Sydney Locke, Abby Fjeldheim and Jamie Mitchek will receive \$11.50 per hour.

- The council reminds people that dog licenses for 2025 are due by December 31, 2024.
- The council reminds residents of Thursday's holiday lighting contest. Utility bill credits will be given to the top three residences.

- The council announced city offices will be closed on January 1, 2025 for New Years Day. The council had previously announced offices would also be closed December 23 through 25 for the holiday.

- The City Council approved reducing the amount the Legion needs to reimburse the city for the baseball program. The original amount was \$11,711.43, which was a more than \$2,000 increase from last year. That was due to how public works hours utilized at the baseball complex were recorded, as well as an increase in those hours in general. The Legion's reimbursement dropped 20 percent to \$9,369.14.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 6 of 73



Groton Community Transit
205 E 2nd Ave., Downtown Groton
invites you to its
Holiday Bake Sale
Friday, Dec. 20, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Coffee, cider and Christmas goodies will be served.
Groton Transit wishes you all a Merry Christmas and a Blessed Year!
If you would like to donate baked goods, please contact
the Groton Transit dispatch office at 605-397-8661.
Any and all donations are welcome!



Card Shower
Merry Jo Ball will be celebrating her
on December 24, 2024.



Greetings may be sent to
915 Arbor Lane Apt 37
Aberdeen SD 57401



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Defense bill passed by US Senate includes \$282 million for Ellsworth construction

BY: JOHN HULT - DECEMBER 18, 2024 4:47 PM

The National Defense Authorization Act passed Wednesday by the U.S. Senate includes \$282 million for construction at Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City.

The construction will prepare the base for B-21 Raiders, aircraft meant to serve as replacements for the B-1 bombers that were designed in the 1970s. The B-21 bombers are expected to arrive in South Dakota at some point before 2030, alongside thousands more military members and families.

The base's commander told the Black Hills Forum and Press Club last year that the base's population is set to grow by about 4,000 people, to nearly 12,000. That anticipated growth has sparked legislative discussions on ways the state might financially support entities like the Douglas School District, which serves Ellsworth.

The \$282 million for Ellsworth in Wednesday's defense authorization bill is only part of what's expected to be \$1.5 billion in B-21-related construction at the base. Separate from that construction is the cost of procurement: Each of the at least 100 B-21 aircraft the Air Force expects to purchase — to be spread among Ellsworth and other bases — will cost about \$700 million.

The bill also includes \$2.6 billion for B-21 procurement.

In a news release on the legislation, South Dakota Republican John Thune praised the 83-12 vote as a win for the state. The construction money will support the building of environmental shelters, a B-21 weapons generation facility and a B-21 squadron operations center.

"The men and women of Ellsworth Air Force Base carry out a critical mission in service to America's national defense, and South Dakotans have cause to celebrate with this year's National Defense Authorization Act," Thune said in the news release. "The B-21 mission will be supported by the authorization of key infrastructure and facilities, and service members everywhere will receive sizable salary increases, particularly junior enlisted members."

The defense bill also includes a controversial clause that bars service members from using their military insurance to cover children's "medical interventions for the treatment of gender dysphoria that could result in sterilization."

Wisconsin Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin, the Senate's first openly LGBTQ member, voted against the bill and accused Republicans of seeking "cheap political points" by barring gender-affirming care coverage.

But that clause drew praise from South Dakota Republican Rep. Dusty Johnson when the bill passed the U.S. House last week.

Like Thune, Johnson lauded the bill's support for the B-21 program, but his news release on the vote bore the headline "Johnson Votes to End Woke Policies, Strengthen Military, Get Tough on China."

"Politically 'woke' culture has infiltrated our military, but this bill puts an end to some of those policies like paying for gender transition treatments for youth," Johnson said in the release.

He also praised the bill for moving the military away from "promoting critical race theory," for preventing military members from being required to use electric vehicles, and for authorizing a study on China's use of the Shanghai Shipping Exchange to engage in "unfair trade practices."

Johnson pushed to include the China clause in the defense bill in May.

Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, called out pay raises for service members in a news release sent over the summer, when the Senate Armed Services Committee passed the bill. Rounds, a member of the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 8 of 73

committee, also supported the bill in the full Senate on Wednesday.

"This year's NDAA includes a 4.5 percent pay raise for our men and women in uniform, as well as back pay for our military members whose promotions were impacted by holds in the Senate," Rounds said in a news release. "We never want our men and women in uniform entering a fair fight, we always want them to have the advantage.

John is the senior reporter for South Dakota Searchlight. He has more than 15 years experience covering criminal justice, the environment and public affairs in South Dakota, including more than a decade at the Sioux Falls Argus Leader.

COMMENTARY

What the reaction to a tragic shooting tells us about health care by Tom Dean

In spite of all the glitter, the dramatic headlines about stunning accomplishments and life-saving interventions as well as the raving of some politicians about the "best health care system in the world," the U.S. health care system is, at its core, fundamentally dysfunctional.

How can I make such a provocative statement? The U.S. spends nearly twice as much per capita on health care as does any other developed country. In spite of this expenditure, 8-10% of Americans still have no health care coverage while most comparable countries provide health care coverage to all citizens.

Spending at this level would perhaps be acceptable if the population was in fact benefiting with better health outcomes. Here too we fall short. If we look at any of the usually cited metrics of population health such as life expectancy or infant mortality, the U.S. results are worse. Especially concerning is the fact that the U.S. rate of maternal mortality — women dying related to childbirth — is among the highest in the developed world and is getting worse.

U.S. residents increasingly express their dissatisfaction with the health care system. The Gallup organization recently reported that approval ratings on the quality of American health care are the lowest they've been in more than two decades.

All this has come to the fore with the recent tragic shooting of the CEO of UnitedHealthcare in New York. Though details continue to emerge, it appears the assassination-style killing was carried out by a young man intent on sending a message of both anguish and hostility toward the health insurance industry. He reportedly wrote in his notebook, "What do you do? You wack the CEO at the annual parasitic bean-counter convention."

As disturbing and troubling as are the events surrounding the murder, the public reaction to it is similarly distressing. There has been a huge outpouring of support for the shooter almost as though he is being glorified as a folk hero. Additionally, online, there has emerged a range of merchandise (T-shirts, etc.) seeming to applaud the event. These reactions appear to confirm the broad-based unhappiness with health care services and how they are financed.

How can we understand or make sense of these developments? In the U.S., unlike many other developed countries, we have largely treated health care as a commodity to be bought and sold on a capitalistic, free-market model. In my view, this arrangement underlies many of the problems we have encountered.

I am not anti-capitalist. For a large part of the economy, this model has served us well. At the same time, I believe there are sectors of the economy where it does not work as well. We need to be smart enough — and tough enough — to sort out which is which.

In the classic capitalist model, profit and/or market share increase when the perceived value of the product or service increases. What we have too often seen in the health insurance industry is that in order to push up profits, the industry has restricted the services covered or, alternatively, has increased the barriers to receiving those services. This has been highly successful from an industry perspective in that profits have soared, but for many patients who are all too often in a captive market, it has restricted or denied needed care.

What to do? There is no immediate, simple answer. It would seem, though, that the events of the last several weeks should serve as a wake-up call. We have serious problems that demand serious thinking and open-minded discussions.

The fundamental lesson from these events, I believe, is that when profit drives health care decisions, investors win and patients lose. We can and must do better.

Tom Dean is a retired family physician who grew up on a farm west of Wessington Springs. He graduated from Wessington Springs High School, Carleton College in Minnesota and medical school in Rochester, New York. He completed a family medicine residency at the University of Washington in Seattle. He returned to Wessington Springs to practice in 1978 along with his wife, Kathy, a certified nurse midwife. He retired after 43 years of practice and still lives in Wessington Springs.

In win for biofuels, stopgap spending bill allows year-round sales of E15 gas nationwide

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - DECEMBER 17, 2024 7:39 PM

A spending bill U.S. House appropriators released Tuesday evening to keep the government open into next spring includes a provision to allow sales of a gasoline blend that includes up to 15% ethanol nationwide throughout the year.

After years of prohibiting the blend, known as E15, from being sold at gas stations during the summer months, the Environmental Protection Agency this year allowed year-round sales in eight Midwestern states. The provision in the stopgap funding bill would allow E15 sales in all states throughout the year.

The provision is a major win for corn producers and their allies in Congress from both parties. Supporters of ethanol, which is derived from corn, say it boosts U.S. production and lowers gas prices.

Sen. Deb Fischer, a Nebraska Republican who sponsored a bill to make the blend available all year, said the move was part of the GOP agenda to “unleash American energy.”

“My bill puts an end to years of patchwork regulations and uncertainty — year-round, nationwide E15 will now be a reality,” Fischer said. “This legislation also delivers on the mandate we received in November to unleash American energy. Not only will my bill lower gas prices and give consumers more choices, but it will also create new opportunity for American producers, who are especially hurting right now from lower prices.”

House Energy and Commerce ranking Democrat Frank Pallone of New Jersey applauded inclusion of the measure, saying it would help reduce gas prices and bolster U.S. energy production.

“By allowing for a higher blend of ethanol in our gasoline, Americans can rely more on homegrown biofuels that save drivers money at the pump and help insulate Americans from dramatic global price fluctuations,” Pallone said in a statement.

U.S. Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb., one of a handful of farm-state House Republicans pushing for the E15 provision, said in a statement, “Year around E-15 is the most important policy we can embrace for Midwestern farmers and ranchers. I was glad to advocate for this on the Agriculture Committee and to our Speaker, and glad to see it embraced. I also know our entire Nebraska delegation was pulling for this. It is a team win.”

At a U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee hearing last year, Sen. Debbie Stabenow, a Michigan Democrat who chairs the Senate Agriculture Committee, and Sen. Pete Ricketts of Nebraska promoted E15 availability as a way to lower greenhouse gas emissions and lower prices.

The EPA issued a waiver in May 2022 to allow the blend to be available nationwide throughout the year, as President Joe Biden’s administration sought to tame gas prices.

The stopgap measure, known as a continuing resolution, would keep the government funded at current levels through mid-March. It includes a few additional provisions, including funding to rebuild the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Maryland.

The House and Senate are expected to pass the catch-all measure before members depart for their

holiday break on Friday. Biden is expected to sign the bill.

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

Fed drops its key rate but projects fewer cuts in 2025

BY: CASEY QUINLAN - DECEMBER 18, 2024 5:08 PM

The Federal Reserve signaled that it will move more slowly and cautiously next year as it considers further rate cuts.

The Fed cut its benchmark rate one-quarter of 1 percentage point on Wednesday, to between 4.25% and 4.5%, in line with economists' expectations, despite measures of inflation moving up in recent months. Cleveland Fed President Beth Hammack dissented in favor of a pause in rate changes.

The Fed's economic projections for the rate next year changed from 3.4% in September to 3.9%, and the central bank revised its expectations for inflation from 2.1% to 2.5%, suggesting it sees a tougher battle ahead over inflation in 2025. The Fed makes its next rate announcement on Jan. 29.

"The slower pace of cuts next year reflects both higher inflation readings we had this year and the expectation readings will be higher," Fed Chair Jerome Powell said during a news conference on Wednesday.

Some economists and policy analysts argued earlier this year that the Fed should continue cutting rates in response to cooling inflation after raising them aggressively in a campaign that began in March 2022. This key rate influences credit card rates and mortgage rates, which have an effect on business growth and individuals' economic security. The Fed raised rates 11 times until the latter half of 2023.

But inflation — the Consumer Price Index, or CPI, in particular — has stalled a bit in its progress toward the Fed's goal of 2% inflation. On Dec. 11, the Bureau of Labor Statistics released the November CPI, which rose 2.7% over the past year compared to 2.6% in October and 2.4% in September. Food prices also rose in November, while the rate of shelter price increases fell slightly over the month.

The Fed's preferred gauge of inflation, the Personal Expenditures Consumption index, or PCE, will be released on Friday, giving the Fed more information on the state of inflation. The PCE fell three consecutive times until October, when it rose to 2.3%.

Kitty Richards, senior fellow at the Groundwork Collaborative, a left-of-center think tank, said changes in inflation don't justify a major change in course for the Fed. It should focus on normalizing rates, she said, which would make it easier for people to buy homes or get car loans.

"The Fed thankfully did not throw millions of people out of work with its historic rate-hiking campaign, but it slowed the labor market and taxed away worker's wage growth through higher borrowing costs," she said in an emailed statement.

The incoming Trump administration's policy agenda will eventually help shape Fed policy, including tariffs and deportation of immigrants, which some experts say will raise prices from lumber to tech. In November, Powell said he wouldn't "speculate" on Trump's likely policy decisions. However, the Fed did consider the possible effects of the first Trump administration on the economy eight years ago.

On Wednesday, Powell said some Fed officials considered possible policy changes as part of their economic forecast. "Some did identify policy uncertainty" and "more uncertainty around inflation," he said.

Powell compared the path forward for the Fed to "driving on a foggy night" and said it makes sense to move slower when there are more unknowns.

Andrew Korz is an executive director in investment research at FS Investments, a global alternative asset manager headquartered in Philadelphia. He said the Fed emphasized caution, which means a slower path for cutting rates.

"If you listen to Powell he keeps using the words 'cautious' and 'careful' moving forward ... I think he made it pretty clear uncertainty is higher, because we expect some big sea changes," he said.

Mark Zandi, chief economist of Moody's Analytics, said on Tuesday that potential policy changes from the Trump administration are going to be a factor in the Fed's consideration of future rate cuts.

"If economic policy next year wasn't an issue, I don't think the Fed would change policy as a result of these sticky inflation numbers because the service side of the economy, which is where they've been most focused, is actually improving," Zandi said. "You can see that in the cost of housing that has moderated more significantly."

Korz said although today's Fed announcement and press conference isn't necessarily bad news for people looking to buy a home, it isn't really good news either.

"By and large, the Fed sees it taking longer to get inflation to where it needs to be, and the rate-cutting cycle is going to take longer because of that and will stay higher for longer, which will keep mortgage rates elevated," he said. "That is going to keep housing affordability tough, and I think is going to put a cap on the amount of construction we can do both in single-family and multi-family [homes] which is the crux of how we can get out of this affordability crisis we're in."

Economists say the strong November jobs report, in which employers added 227,000 jobs, shouldn't be an issue for the Fed to start rethinking interest rate cuts, because the growth doesn't look like it would spur inflation.

"I think the labor market is strong for full employment," Zandi said. "But I think it has cooled off meaningfully from where we were 12 to 18 months ago, and I don't sense any re-acceleration in job growth or wage growth or other things that they would be looking at."

Powell echoed this in Wednesday's press conference.

"Downsides to the labor market do appear to have diminished, and the labor market is now looser than pre-pandemic, so far in a gradual and orderly way. We don't think we need further cooling in the labor market to get to 2%," Powell said.

Casey Quinlan is an economy reporter for States Newsroom, based in Washington, D.C. For the past decade, they have reported on national politics and state politics, LGBTQ rights, abortion access, labor issues, education, Supreme Court news and more for publications including The American Independent, ThinkProgress, New Republic, Rewire News, SCOTUSblog, In These Times and Vox.

Chances for government shutdown escalate after Trump and GOP reject stopgap spending bill

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 18, 2024 5:00 PM

WASHINGTON — Efforts to prevent a partial government shutdown from starting this weekend fell apart Wednesday when numerous Republicans, on and off Capitol Hill, expressed their frustration with the many extraneous provisions added to a short-term funding package.

Complicating the situation, Vice President-elect J.D. Vance posted on social media that he and President-elect Donald Trump believe Republicans should leverage the two days left before a shutdown to get Democrats to raise or suspend the debt limit.

The catch-all, year-end spending legislation released Tuesday would not only fund the government through March 14, but provide an extension of the agriculture and nutrition programs in the farm bill through Sept. 30. The 1,547-page package also holds tens of billions in emergency aid for communities recovering from natural disasters.

But it includes several sections that have angered far-right members of the Republican Party as well as Trump and his allies. They argue the extra provisions that don't relate to essential programs should be scrapped, throwing a wrench in weeks of negotiations between the Republican House and Democratic Senate.

How a shutdown works

Congress must pass a short-term spending bill before midnight on Friday when the current stopgap spending bill expires, otherwise every single federal department and agency would be required to shut down.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 12 of 73

That would mean federal employees categorized as exempt would have to work without pay and employees categorized as non-exempt would be furloughed.

Unlike the 35-day partial government shutdown that took place during Trump's first administration, this shutdown would affect larger swaths of the federal government.

Congress had approved several of the full-year appropriations bills ahead of the 2018-2019 shutdown insulating the departments of Defense, Education, Energy, Health and Human Services, Labor and Veterans Affairs.

Lawmakers had also approved the Legislative Branch spending bill, ensuring members of Congress and their staff were paid throughout the shutdown.

This time around, failing to pass some sort of stopgap spending bill ahead of the Friday midnight deadline would mean cutting off U.S. troops from pay, not to mention dozens of other national security agencies like Customs and Border Protection and Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

It could also wreak havoc on the numerous federal departments and agencies assisting communities with response and recovery efforts stemming from natural disasters, including hurricanes Helene and Milton.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency, Department of Agriculture and Small Business Administration would all be affected by a funding lapse, as would anyone who receives funding from those programs.

Debt limit

The debt limit was not part of the spending negotiations until Wednesday when Vance insisted it be included in any type of stopgap spending bill.

The current suspension of the debt limit is set to expire Jan. 1, but lawmakers will likely have a few months where the Treasury Department can use accounting maneuvers called extraordinary measures before the country would default.

Vance, however, doesn't seem inclined to deal with the country's borrowing authority next year.

"The most foolish and inept thing ever done by Congressional Republicans was allowing our country to hit the debt ceiling in 2025," Vance wrote in his social media post. "It was a mistake and is now something that must be addressed."

Vance wrote that addressing "the debt ceiling is not great but we'd rather do it on Biden's watch."

"If Democrats won't cooperate on the debt ceiling now, what makes anyone think they would do it in June during our administration?" Vance wrote. "Let's have this debate now. And we should pass a streamlined spending bill that doesn't give Chuck Schumer and the Democrats everything they want."

Elon Musk, a billionaire whom Trump has tasked with trying to make the federal government more efficient through steep spending cuts, wrote on social media that no legislation should move through Congress until Jan. 20, after Trump's inauguration.

That would create havoc for hundreds of government programs, including the agriculture and nutrition assistance programs within the farm bill.

"Any member of the House or Senate who votes for this outrageous spending bill deserves to be voted out in 2 years!," Musk wrote.

While every member of the House who chooses to run for reelection will campaign during the 2026 midterm elections, just one-third of the Senate will be up for reelection since they are elected to six-year terms.

North Carolina Republican Sen. Thom Tillis posted on social media that any short-term spending bill, sometimes called a continuing resolution or CR, must carry disaster aid to help his home state recover from a devastating hurricane.

"If Congressional leaders intend to leave DC before the holidays without passing disaster recovery, they should be prepared to spend Christmas in the Capitol," Tillis wrote. "I'll use every tool available to block a CR that fails Western North Carolina communities in need of long-term certainty."

West Virginia Republican Sen. Shelley Moore Capito said during a brief interview she wants to see disaster aid remain in a stopgap spending bill.

"I went down and saw the Asheville disaster," she said "I think we need to get the disaster aid to those affected areas, some of which are in West Virginia, believe it or not."

White House reaction

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre released a written statement Wednesday evening saying that "Republicans need to stop playing politics with this bipartisan agreement or they will hurt hardworking Americans and create instability across the country."

"President-elect Trump and Vice President-elect Vance ordered Republicans to shut down the government and they are threatening to do just that—while undermining communities recovering from disasters, farmers and ranchers, and community health centers," she wrote. "Triggering a damaging government shutdown would hurt families who are gathering to meet with their loved ones and endanger the basic services Americans from veterans to Social Security recipients rely on. A deal is a deal. Republicans should keep their word."

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

First severe case of bird flu in a human in the U.S. reported in Louisiana

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - DECEMBER 18, 2024 2:27 PM

WASHINGTON — A Louisiana resident has contracted the country's first severe case of highly pathogenic avian influenza in a human, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced Wednesday.

The unidentified person is believed to have been infected with the virus through sick or dead birds on their property that were not part of a commercial poultry flock, though federal public health officials declined to provide more details on a call with reporters, citing patient confidentiality. The virus is also called bird flu, or H5N1.

"Previously, the majority of cases of H5N1 in the United States presented with mild illness, such as conjunctivitis and mild respiratory symptoms, and fully recovered," Demetre Daskalakis, director of the National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases at the CDC, said during the call.

"Over the 20-plus years of global experience with this virus, H5 infection has previously been associated with severe illness in other countries, including illnesses that resulted in death in up to 50% of cases," Daskalakis said. "The demonstrated potential for this virus to cause severe illness in people continues to highlight the importance of the joint, coordinated U.S. federal response, the One Health response, to address the current animal outbreaks in dairy cows and poultry and limit the potential of transmission of this virus to humans through animal contact."

Despite the Louisiana case, Daskalakis said on the call, the CDC believes the threat to the general public remains low.

The Louisiana Department of Health wrote in a press release posted Friday that the person lives in the southwestern region of the state and was hospitalized, but didn't provide additional information.

Emma Herrock, communications director for the Louisiana Department of Health, told States Newsroom in an email Wednesday the "patient is experiencing severe respiratory illness related to H5N1 infection and is currently hospitalized in critical condition."

The patient, she said, "is reported to have underlying medical conditions and is over the age of 65."

61 confirmed cases in humans

The CDC has confirmed 61 human cases of H5N1 throughout nine states this year, but the Louisiana patient is the first severe case of bird flu in someone within the United States.

Daskalakis declined to say during the call why the Louisiana case is considered severe when a Missouri

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 14 of 73

resident who was hospitalized due to bird flu was not classified the same way.

The Missouri patient, who was admitted to a hospital in August, had significant underlying medical conditions, according to public health officials. That person experienced "acute symptoms of chest pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and weakness," according to the CDC.

The CDC declined to say Wednesday what symptoms the Louisiana patient was experiencing, citing privacy concerns.

Bird flu has affected wild birds and poultry flocks throughout the United States for years, but it wasn't until March that dairy cattle began becoming infected with the virus.

The dairy outbreak has affected 865 herds through 16 states this year, according to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. There have been 315 new cases in dairy cattle during the last month, with the vast majority of those diagnoses in California, while one herd each tested positive in Nevada and Texas.

Bird flu has affected nearly 124 million poultry throughout 49 states, according to USDA.

Milk testing

Eric Deeble, deputy under secretary for marketing and regulatory programs at USDA, said on the call the nationwide milk testing strategy launched earlier this month has expanded to several states.

The program requires anyone responsible for a dairy farm — such as a bulk milk transporter, bulk milk transfer station, or dairy processing facility — to share unpasteurized or raw milk samples when requested.

California, Colorado, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Vermont and Washington are the 13 states currently enrolled in the program, he said.

In California, Gov. Gavin Newsom on Wednesday proclaimed a state of emergency "to further enhance the state's preparedness & accelerate the ongoing cross-agency response efforts," the governor's press office said.

"These states represent a geographically conversant list of states, some of which have been affected by H5N1 in dairy cows, and some of which have never detected the disease," Deeble said. "Additionally, these first two groups of states represent eight of the top 15 dairy-producing states in the country, accounting for nearly 50% of U.S. dairy production. We anticipate continuing to enroll additional states in the coming weeks."

The USDA also continues to have a voluntary bulk milk testing program for any farms planning to ship dairy cattle across state lines to provide an easier pathway to establishing the herd is negative for H5N1, instead of having to test each cow individually.

Jennifer covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include congressional policy, politics and legal challenges with a focus on health care, unemployment, housing and aid to families.

U.S. Senate passes defense bill that bars gender-affirming care for service members' kids

South Dakota's Thune and Rounds both vote yes

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - DECEMBER 18, 2024 2:19 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Senate on Wednesday cleared a national defense authorization bill celebrated for troop pay raises but condemned by Democrats for targeting transgender children in military families, sending the bill to President Joe Biden's desk.

Senators voted 85-14, with one, Vice President-elect J.D. Vance, not voting, to approve the \$884.9 billion National Defense Authorization Act that received bipartisan praise for the pay bump, upgrades to military housing and investments in artificial intelligence and other advanced technology.

But the annual legislation drew ire this year from Democrats for a provision banning the military's health program from covering certain treatments for youth experiencing gender dysphoria, defined by doctors as the mismatch between a person's sex assigned at birth and the gender they experience in everyday life.

The U.S. House passed the defense package Dec. 11 with a bipartisan 241-180 vote.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 15 of 73

The White House has not released its position on the bill, as it generally does with legislation ready for the president's signature.

Wednesday's Senate vote marks the 64th year in a row Congress has passed the defense package, a historically bipartisan process.

This year's vote breakdown did not stray far from the Senate tallies for the defense legislation over the last five years.

The bill does not release funding for the Pentagon, but rather it outlines how any defense money will be spent. Congress will need to approve allocation of dollars in separate appropriations legislation.

Gender care

A short section tucked in the 1,800-page policy roadmap for 2025 bans military TRICARE health insurance coverage for service members' children who seek "medical interventions for the treatment of gender dysphoria that could result in sterilization."

Democrats maintain the ban will affect thousands of military families, though the Pentagon has declined to comment on any figures. The Pentagon also did not respond to a second inquiry from States Newsroom about whether the Defense Department tracks numbers of service members' transgender children.

Treatment for gender dysphoria can include mental health measures, hormone therapy and surgery.

The provision comes as more than 20 states have banned or limited gender-affirming care for transgender minors, according to the Association of American Medical Colleges. The UCLA School of Law Williams Institute found that 113,900 youths aged 13 to 17 live in states that ban such treatments.

While the bill does not specifically delineate the types of interventions it intends to prohibit, a publicly available summary from the GOP-led House Armed Services Committee named "hormones and puberty blockers." The summary, titled "Restoring the Focus of Our Military on Lethality," also highlighted language in the legislation to ban certain race-related education in Defense institutions and a freeze on any Pentagon diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, hiring.

Sen. Jack Reed, chair of the Senate Committee on Armed Services, said he shared his Democratic colleagues' frustrations and characterized the ban on care coverage for transgender youth, which he voted against during the committee process, as "misguided."

"Ultimately, though, we have before us a very strong National Defense Authorization Act. I am confident it will provide the Department of Defense and our military men and women with the resources they need to meet and defeat the national security threats we face now," Reed, of Rhode Island, said on the floor ahead of the vote.

Sen. Roger Wicker, the committee's ranking member, praised the "immense accomplishments" in the defense package, including the 4.5% pay bump for all service members, plus an extra 10% raise for the most junior enlisted troops.

"We made investments in Junior ROTC and recruitment capabilities, both of which will help solve the military's manpower crisis. This bill stops the Department of Defense from paying for puberty blockers and hormone therapies for children. We blocked the teaching of critical race theory in military programming, and we froze diversity equity and inclusion hiring," the Mississippi Republican said before voting commenced.

'Cheap political points'

Sen. Tammy Baldwin, the first openly LGBTQ person elected to the Senate, said on the floor Tuesday that for the first time in her 12 years in the Senate, she would oppose the annual defense bill.

The Wisconsin Democrat, who voted against the bill Wednesday, said the commitment to the historically bipartisan exercise was "broken because some Republicans decided that gutting the rights of our service members to score cheap political points was more worthy."

"Some folks estimate that this will impact between 6,000 and 7,000 families in the military. I, for one, trust these service members and their families to make their own decisions about health care without politicians butting in," she continued.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 16 of 73

Majority Leader Chuck Schumer asked to withdraw Baldwin's amendment to strip the language from the legislation. The request was approved immediately before Wednesday's vote without a challenge. The leader's office did not respond to a request for comment on the withdrawn amendment.

Twenty Democratic senators initially co-sponsored the amendment. They include Alex Padilla of California, John Hickenlooper of Colorado, Richard Blumenthal and Chris Murphy of Connecticut, Mazie Hirono and Brian Schatz of Hawaii, Dick Durbin of Illinois, Chris Van Hollen of Maryland, Ed Markey and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith of Minnesota, Cory Booker and Andy Kim of New Jersey, Martin Heinrich of New Mexico, Ron Wyden and Jeff Merkley of Oregon, John Fetterman of Pennsylvania, Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island and Patty Murray of Washington.

Kim, a former U.S. representative who was sworn in as a senator on Dec. 9, said House Speaker Mike Johnson's insistence on the transgender provision in the bill "undermines trust in negotiations and sets a dangerous precedent for what is widely considered the last true space of traditional bipartisan legislation."

"We are putting politics into a bill where it simply does not belong," Kim said on the floor Tuesday.

Kim ultimately voted in support of the bill.

The chair of the GOP-led House Armed Services Committee, Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, told Capitol Hill reporters last week that Johnson did not consult him before keeping the language in the final version.

Ashley Murray covers the nation's capital as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include domestic policy and appropriations.

Members of Congress rolled a pay raise for themselves into big must-do spending bill

BY: JACOB FISCHLER - DECEMBER 18, 2024 1:55 PM

Members of Congress are in line for their first pay raise since 2009 if they pass a massive stopgap spending measure that would avert a partial government shutdown.

A 1989 law created automatic annual cost-of-living adjustments for Congress, but every spending bill since 2009 has included a provision blocking the raises from going into effect, according to a September report by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service.

The 1,500-page bill to fund the government through mid-March, released Tuesday evening, does not include such a provision.

Bloomberg Government first reported on the absence of the provision in the most recent spending bill.

Members of Congress earn salaries of at least \$174,000, with more allocated for some leadership positions. A cost-of-living increase is calculated based on private-sector wages. The maximum allowed for next year is 3.8%, which would bring the base salary to \$180,600, according to the CRS report.

Members have seen an effective 31% pay decrease since 2009 when accounting for inflation, CRS said.

But the reason most Congresses have passed laws to block an automatic raise is that it's unpopular with voters.

The lack of a block on the pay raise and another provision in the spending bill that would allow members access to the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program led Maine Democrat Jared Golden, who has projected a populist image to win elections in a swing district, to say he would oppose the entire funding bill, known as a continuing resolution, or CR.

"Congress should be working to raise Americans' wages and lower their health care costs, not sneaking new member perks into must-pass legislation behind closed doors," Golden said in a Wednesday statement. "If members can't get by on our already generous salaries and benefits, they should find another line of work. As long as these provisions are in the CR, I will vote against it."

The raise comes as Republicans, who are poised to take unified control of the elected branches of government next year, have tasked billionaires Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy with recommending \$2 trillion in cuts to federal spending, which, if enacted, would lead to job losses among the federal workforce

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 17 of 73

and related industries.

Musk and Ramaswamy have both urged members to oppose the stopgap bill, with Musk highlighting the pay increase — while misstating its size — as one reason.

“How can this be called a ‘continuing resolution’ if it includes a 40% pay increase for Congress?” Musk wrote in a post to X, which he owns.

While keeping most federal spending constant, the bill also includes \$100 billion for relief efforts from natural disasters over the past two years, full funding to rebuild the Francis Scott Key Bridge in Maryland and a provision to allow year-round sales of a gasoline blend that includes up to 15% ethanol.

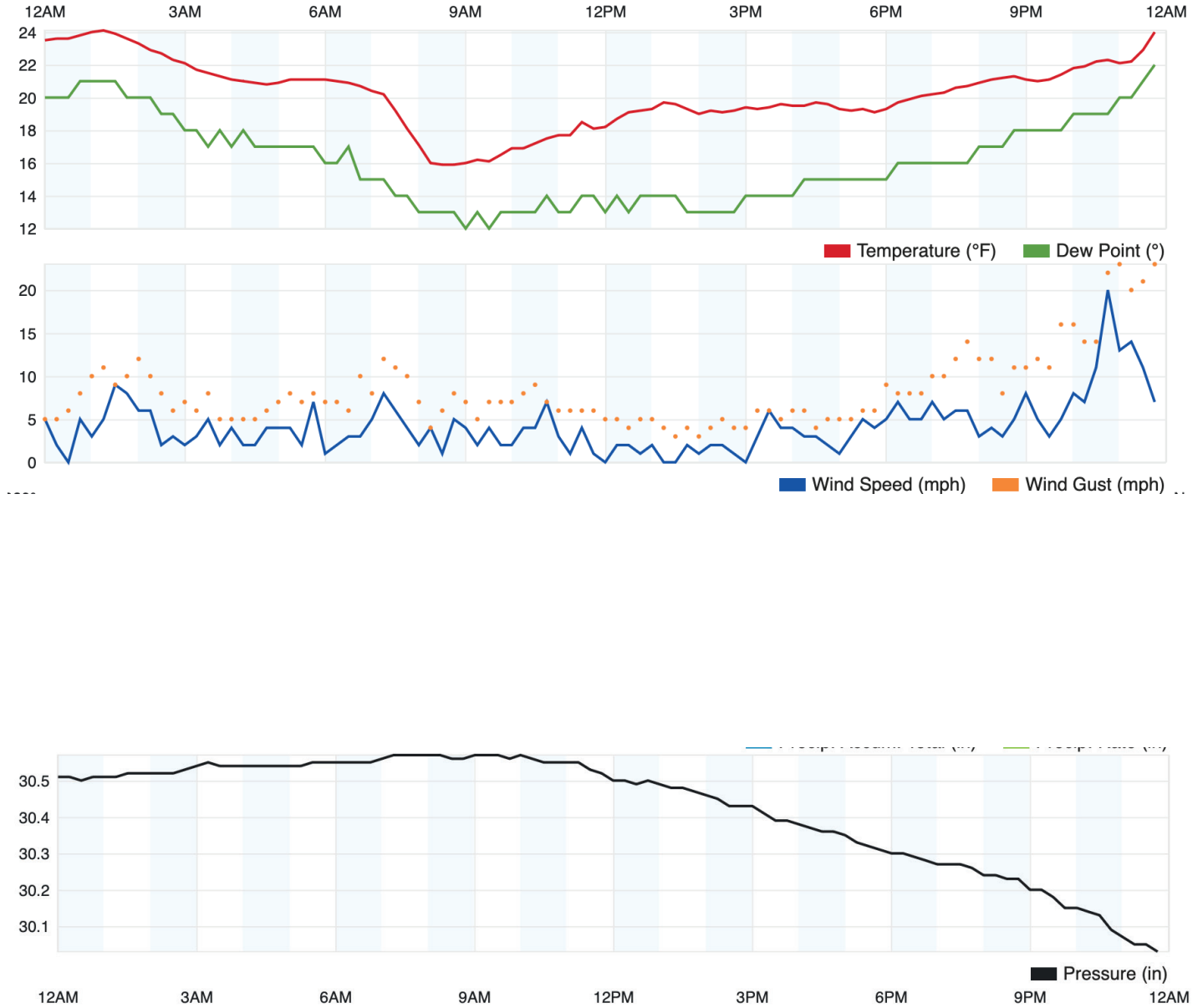
Lawmakers must pass a funding bill before midnight Friday to avoid a partial shutdown.

Jacob covers federal policy as a senior reporter for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.

Groton Daily Independent






Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 18 of 73

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 19 of 73

Wind Adv...	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
					
	50%				
	High: 27 °F ↓	Low: -3 °F	High: 15 °F	Low: 7 °F	High: 23 °F
	Chance Snow and Patchy Blowing Snow	Mostly Cloudy and Blustery then Partly Cloudy	Increasing Clouds	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Sunny

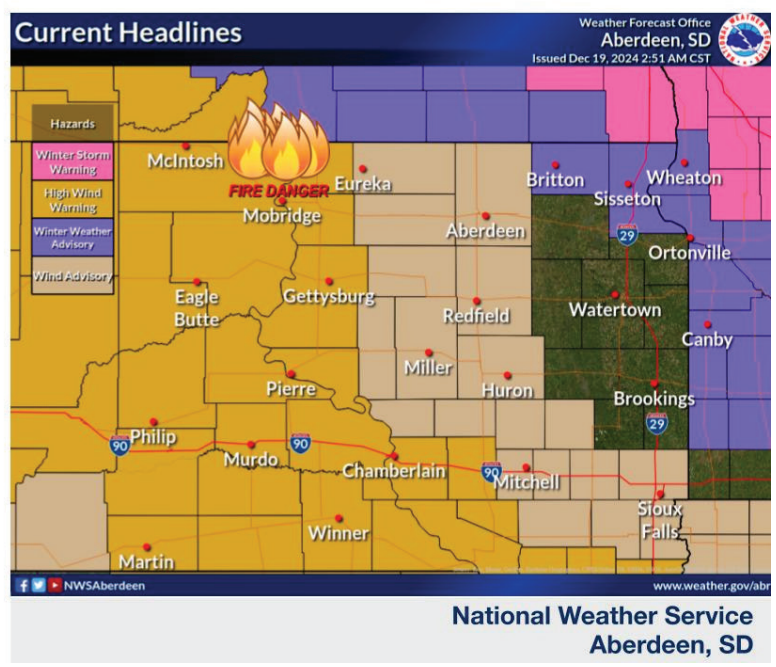
Light Snow and Strong Winds Continue Today December 19, 2024 3:34 AM

Key Messages

- Periods of snow will continue over northeastern SD and west central MN this morning with snow diminishing through the afternoon
 - **Additional snowfall amounts of 1 to 2 inches** confined to Marshall and Day Counties and eastward into west central MN
- **High winds** will continue to spread eastward behind the departing system. Gusts of 45+ mph likely, with **55+ mph gusts across central SD**
 - These winds in combination with ongoing dry conditions leads to **elevated fire weather concerns over north central SD**

What Has Changed NEW

- **Brown and Spink Counties** have been added to the **Wind Advisory** that **continues** for portions of northeastern SD until 3 PM CST
- **High Wind Warning** **continues** from north central to south central SD until 3 PM CST
- **Winter Weather Advisory** **continues** over far northeastern SD into west central MN until 6 PM CST



Periods of snow will continue over northeastern SD into west central MN this morning with snow diminishing through the afternoon. Additional snowfall amounts of 1 to 2 inches are possible over far northeastern SD into west central MN. High winds with gusts of 45-55+ mph will continue to spread eastward over the area before diminishing tonight.

Broton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 20 of 73



Additional Snow Totals Today

December 19, 2024
3:37 AM

What & When

- Periods of snow will continue over northeastern SD and west central MN this morning and diminishing through the afternoon
 - Additional snowfall totals of 1 to 2 inches expected over far northeastern SD into west central MN



Impacts

- Plan on slippery road conditions. The hazardous conditions may impact travel today, especially the morning commute



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Additional 1-2 inches of snow possible over northeastern SD into west central MN.

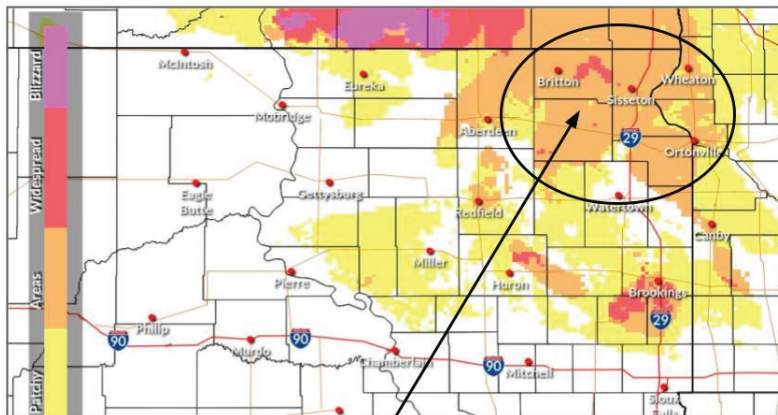


High Winds and Blowing Snow

December 19, 2024
3:40 AM

High Winds Expected Over the Area With Blowing Snow Over Northeastern SD/Western MN

Maximum Blowing Snow Forecast Valid 6am CST today-6 AM CST Friday



The combination of falling snow and wind gusts of 45 mph, will lead to **Areas to Widespread blowing snow** over portions of northeastern SD into west central MN

- Especially over and along the Sisseton Hills. This may lead to a drop in visibility, to possibly under a mile at times
- Wind gusts of 40 to 45 mph over northeastern SD/west central MN
- Wind gusts of 50 to 60 mph over central SD

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)

	12/19 Thu						12/20 Fri		Maximum
	6am	9am	12pm	3pm	6pm	9pm	12am	3am	
Aberdeen	30	38	41	40	28	23	16	12	41
Britton	23	33	38	40	29	24	16	12	40
Brookings	40	43	47	40	38	29	23	20	47
Chamberlain	45	54	54	48	39	25	16	10	54
Clark	26	39	44	41	31	26	21	16	44
Eagle Butte	60	62	60	51	28	21	12	9	62
Ellendale	31	44	45	44	29	24	17	13	45
Eureka	45	58	58	51	29	23	15	10	58
Gettysburg	41	52	51	45	28	22	15	10	52
Huron	43	47	51	44	35	26	20	15	51
Kennebec	44	56	59	55	32	25	17	12	59
McIntosh	56	60	56	45	23	16	8	7	60
Milbank	18	31	37	37	29	25	23	20	37
Miller	40	49	49	47	30	24	16	12	49
Mobridge	43	48	48	40	26	21	12	7	48
Murdo	46	54	58	51	29	22	15	10	58
Pierre	45	54	54	45	25	18	12	6	54
Redfield	31	45	45	44	28	24	17	14	45
Sisseton	24	33	39	38	29	26	23	18	39
Watertown	24	35	39	37	31	28	22	17	39
Webster	23	35	39	38	32	28	22	17	39
Wheaton	24	29	35	38	29	25	23	20	38

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 21 of 73

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 24 °F at 1:11 AM

Low Temp: 16 °F at 8:25 AM

Wind: 24 mph at 10:52 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 8 hours, 46 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 57 in 1893

Record Low: -29 in 1916

Average High: 27

Average Low: 7

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.36

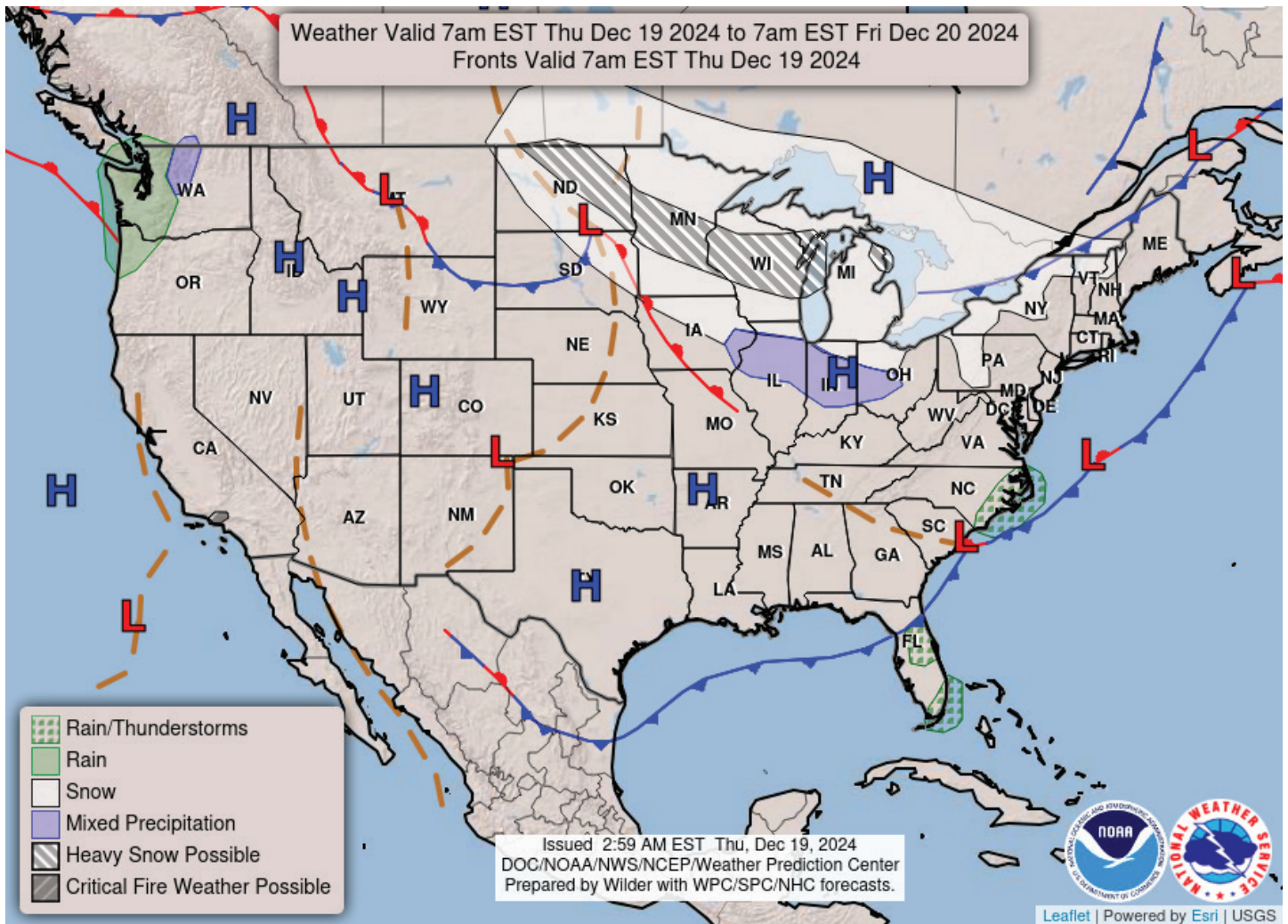
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 21.57

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 4:52:59 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:07:14 am



Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 22 of 73

Today in Weather History

December 19, 1968: Snow and near-blizzard conditions existed across west-central Minnesota, with 5 to 7 inches of new snow reported. Heavier snowfall amounts were reported further to the southeast in Minnesota. Six inches of snow was reported in Artichoke Lake in Big Stone County.

December 19, 1990: Snow began to fall over the northwest part of Minnesota by early afternoon on the 19th, and fell heavily during the night into the early afternoon of the 20th, spreading over the entire northern 2/3 of the state and into some of northeastern South Dakota overnight. By mid-morning, a swath of snow of 6 inches or more was deposited over much of the northern half of the state, or north of a line from Elbow Lake to Garrison to near Two Harbors. In west-central Minnesota, Wheaton received 6 inches, Browns Valley received 4 inches, and Artichoke Lake received 3 inches. In South Dakota, Webster reported 8 inches, Britton reported 7 inches, Sisseton reported 5 inches, and Aberdeen reported 4 inches.

1777: George Washington led his hungry and weary from long marches men to Valley Forge on this day. The winds greeted the 12,000 Continentals as they prepared for the winter.

1924 - The Riverside Ranger Station in Yellowstone Park, WY, reported a low of 59 degrees below zero, a December record for the U.S. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1957 - A tornado, 200 yards in width, killed two persons along its 15-mile path from near Waldo to near Bueana Vista in southwestern Arkansas. People from one house were carried 250 yards, and cars were said to have been carried 600 yards. (The Weather Channel)

1967 - A record 83 inches of snow covered the ground at Flagstaff, AZ. The heavy snows inflicted great hardships on reservations. (David Ludlum)

1988 - Low pressure and a trailing cold front in the central U.S. brought snow and high winds to parts of the Rocky Mountain Region. Winds in Colorado gusted to 67 mph at La Junta. Thunderstorms along the same cold front produced wind gusts to 65 mph at Kansas City MO. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - High winds and heavy snow plagued the northern and central Rockies. Snowfall totals in Montana ranged up to 12 inches at Lincoln, and wind gusts in Colorado reached 97 mph at Squaw Mountain. Twelve cities in the north central U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date, including Dickinson ND with a reading of 26 degrees below zero. Bismarck ND was the cold spot in the nation with a morning low of 35 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2009: Snowfall totals from 1 to 2 feet were commonplace in what will go down as one of the biggest snowstorms in history on the East Coast and the first of four snowstorms for the Mid-Atlantic during the winter of 2009-10. The 15 inches of snow measured at Reagan International Airport on Dec. 19th was the third-highest daily snowfall on any calendar day at Washington, DC, since snowfall records began in 1884. The total storm snowfall of 16.4 inches on Dec 18-19 2009 marks the 6th highest two-day snowfall record for Washington, DC putting it just below the second President's Day storm in 2003 and ahead of the Jan 1996 storm. Baltimore Washington Airport saw 20.5 inches of snow and went down as the fifth-highest daily snowfall on any calendar day in Baltimore since snowfall records began in 1893. The total storm snowfall of 21.0 inches on Dec 18-19 2009 marks the 6th highest two-day snowfall record for Baltimore. The daily snowfall records for Dec 19 were smashed for the most snowfall for any calendar day during December at the following stations. Reagan National Airport's new record was 15.0 inches, old record 11.5 in 1932. Baltimore Washington Airport's new record was 20.5 inches, old record 11.5 in 1932. This was the biggest December snowstorm on record and setting a record for the snowiest December for Baltimore, MD. Dulles Airport's new record was 16.0 inches, old record 10.6 in 1982. Richmond International Airport had a total of 6.4 inches. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, reported its second greatest daily snowfall total on record with 22.9 inches. It also was the single most significant December snowfall for the city of Philadelphia, PA. Roanoke, Virginia, recorded 17.8 inches setting a record for the greatest 24-hour snowfall in December. Washington, DC, reported 16.4 inches of snowmaking 2009 the snowiest December on record, all in one storm. In New York, Upton on Long Island recorded 26.3 inches, the biggest snowstorm on record.



No Room, But...

The annual church Christmas program was rapidly approaching, and Mrs. Adams was assigning roles to the children in her Sunday school class. "Albert," she said, "I'd like you to be the innkeeper this year."

"No way, not me, absolutely not!" said Albert. "I'm not going to be the one who turned Mary and Joseph away from a good night's rest."

"Oh, please," she begged. "I really need you to do this. We won't be able to have the play without you," she pleaded. Finally, he agreed.

On the night of the performance, Joseph went to the door and knocked. "Who's there?" he asked.

"My name's Joseph, and Mary and I need a place to sleep," was the reply.

"I'm sorry," he said politely. "We have no rooms available." And then added kindly, "But if you'd like you can rest awhile, and I'll get you some cookies and milk."

There are many, like Albert, who would gladly give our Lord some "cookies and milk" but would never allow Him to come into their hearts and change their lives. It's enjoyable to visit the manger, sing a few carols, read the story of His birth, and then exchange gifts. But to make Him a permanent resident? Not likely!

See Him now: Patiently standing. Gently knocking. Carefully listening. Waiting hopefully. Wanting desperately to save us and give us eternal life.

Prayer: We thank You, Father, for wanting to be our Savior and to fellowship with us. Come, dwell within us and make our hearts Your home. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Revelation 3:20 Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

We all need the encouragement, comfort, and peace that comes through God's grace. Our daily devotionals, known as Seeds of Hope, have been a means through which thousands of people have experienced this grace. Each devotional comes from God's Word and we pray this good "seed" finds good soil in your heart. Our aim is that the Seeds of Hope will be a great source of daily encouragement to you and that God will use them to draw you near to Him

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 24 of 73

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Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 25 of 73



WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.17.24

56 66 67 68 69 18

MegaPlier: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$825,000,000

NEXT 1 Days 17 Hrs 21
DRAW: Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

5 10 35 39 47 5

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$17,920,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 36
DRAW: Mins 21 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

19 26 30 31 41 16

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT 16 Hrs 51 Mins
DRAW: 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

3 12 23 25 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$164,000

NEXT 2 Days 16 Hrs 51
DRAW: Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

41 45 52 56 67 6

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 20
DRAW: Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.18.24

6 15 18 33 49 7

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$88,000,000

NEXT 2 Days 17 Hrs 20
DRAW: Mins 20 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 26 of 73

Upcoming Groton Events

07/04/2024 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/09/2024 FREE SNAP Application Assistance 1-6pm at the Community Center
07/14/2024 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
07/17/2024 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
07/17/2024 Pro Am Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/25/2024 Dairy Queen Miracle Treat Day
07/25/2024 Summer Downtown Sip & Shop 5-8pm
07/25/2024 Treasures Amidst The Trials 6pm at Emmanuel Lutheran Church
07/26/2024 Ferney Open Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
07/27/2024 1st Annual Celebration in the Park 1-9:30pm
08/05/2024 School Supply Drive 4-7pm at the Community Center
Cancelled: Wine on 9 at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/08/2024 Family Fun Fest 5:30-7:30pm
08/9-11/2024 Jr. Legion State Baseball Tournament
08/12/2024 Vitalant Blood Drive at the Community Center 1:15-7pm
09/07/2024 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/07-08/2024 Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
09/08/2024 Sunflower Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 10am
10/05/2024 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/11/2024 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am
10/31/2024 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/31/2024 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/16/2024 Groton American Legion "Turkey Raffle" 6:30-11:30pm
11/28/2024 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm
12/01/2024 Groton Snow Queen Contest, 4:30 p.m.
12/07/2024 Olive Grove 8th Annual Holiday Party with Live & Silent Auctions 6pm-close
12/14/2024 Santa Day at Professional Management Services, downtown Groton
04/12/2025 Lion's Club Easter Egg Hunt at the City Park 10am Sharp
05/03/2025 Lion's Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
05/26/2025 Memorial Day Services Groton Union Cemetery with lunch at Legion Post #39, 12pm
07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary Salad Luncheon
07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
09/20/2025 NSU Gypsy Day
10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 27 of 73

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Wednesday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Custer 46, Todd County 18
Lakota Nations Invitational=
Lakota Tech 78, Tiospaye Topa 46
Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 67, Dupree 18
McLaughlin 68, Little Wound 53
Omaha Nation, Neb. 58, Crow Creek Tribal School 39
Rapid City Christian 58, Marty 29
Wall 51, Lower Brule 20
White River 61, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 38
Challenge Games=
Oelrichs 50, Crazy Horse 29
Santee, Neb. 54, Wakpala 46
St. Francis Indian 63, Takini 14
Tiospa Zina 40, Pine Ridge 36

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Lakota Nations Invitational=
Custer 58, Omaha Nation, Neb. 40
Lakota Tech 47, Todd County 45
Little Wound 58, Lower Brule 50
Mahpiya Lúta Red Cloud 62, McLaughlin 26
Pine Ridge 100, Tiospa Zina 23
Rapid City Christian 80, Santee, Neb. 34
St. Francis Indian 80, White River 45
Wall 58, Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 55
Challenge Games=
Crow Creek Tribal School 63, Oelrichs 29
Marty 94, Takini 24
Wakpala 63, Tiospaye Topa 43

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Central Missouri's Zach Zebrowski among 4 repeat first-team picks on AP Division II All-America team

By ERIC OLSON AP College Football Writer

Central Missouri quarterback Zach Zebrowski is among four players who were repeat first-team selections to The Associated Press Division II All-America team announced Wednesday.

Joining Zebrowski were Wingate defensive lineman Marquise Fleming, Augustana (South Dakota) defensive back Peyton Buckley and Colorado Mines punter Blake Doud.

Zebrowski, who won the 2023 Harlon Hill Trophy as Division II's most outstanding player, threw for 40 touchdowns in 12 games and averaged 393.7 yards passing per game.

Ferris State dual-threat quarterback Trinidad Chambliss was named first-team all-purpose player. Chambliss has thrown for 23 touchdowns and run for 23 more heading into Saturday's national championship

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 28 of 73

game against Valdosta State in McKinney, Texas.

Zebrowski and Chambliss are among six finalists for the Harlon Hill who are on the first team. The others are Charleston (West Virginia) running back Chavon Wright, Virginia Union running back Jada Byers, Valdosta State quarterback Sammy Edwards and CSU Pueblo wide receiver Reggie Retzlaff.

The All-America team is selected for the AP by a panel of sports information directors representing the four Division II super regions.

First-team offense

Quarterback — Zach Zebrowski, Central Missouri, senior, 6-2, 208, Woodbury, Minnesota.

Running backs — Jada Byers, Virginia Union, senior, 5-7, 185, Bridgeton, New Jersey; Chavon Wright, Charleston (W. Va.), junior, 5-8, 200, Opa-Locka, Florida.

Linemen — Jaheim Bassham, California (Pa.), senior, 6-2, 280, Erie, Pennsylvania; Gabe Brown, Grand Valley State, senior, 6-4, 320, Grand Rapids, Michigan; Will Flowers, Valdosta State, graduate, 6-3, 283, LaGrange, Georgia; Jake Gannon, Bemidji State, senior, 6-2, 285, Franklin, Wisconsin; Nic Van de Graaf, Colorado Mines, senior, 6-3, 305, Houston.

Tight end — Gabe Hagen, Minnesota State, senior, 6-4, 255, Blooming Prairie, Minnesota.

Wide receivers — Terrill Davis, Central Oklahoma, 6-0, 180, Choctaw, Oklahoma; Tyler Kahmann, Emporia State, graduate, 6-3, 206, Haysville, Kansas; Reggie Retzlaff, CSU Pueblo, senior, 6-3, 212, Corona, California.

All-purpose player — Trinidad Chambliss, Ferris State, junior, 6-1, 200, Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Kicker — Anthony Beitko, California (Pa.), senior, 6-0, 195, White Oak, Pennsylvania.

First-team defense

Linemen — Marquise Fleming, Wingate, senior, 6-1, 240, Charlotte, North Carolina; Ricky Freymond, Western Colorado, junior, 6-5, 265, Chino, California; Todd Hill, Slippery Rock, graduate, 5-10, 240, Homestead, Pennsylvania; Gage Price, Harding, senior, 6-3, 283, Hamburg, Arkansas.

Linebacker — Benari Black, Johnson C. Smith, senior, 6-2, 215, Charlotte, North Carolina; Clark Griffin, Harding, senior, 5-9, 195, Mountain Brook, Alabama; Colin Stuhr, Colorado Mesa, junior, 6-0, 215, Littleton, Colorado.

Defensive backs — Peyton Buckley, Augustana (S.D.), senior, 6-1, 207, Rice Lake, Wisconsin; Larry Elder, Valdosta State, graduate, 6-0, 200, Richmond, Virginia; Andrew Pitts, Angelo State, junior, 5-9, 156, McKinney, Texas; Lashon Young, Miles, freshman, 5-11, 175, Sweet Water, Alabama.

Punter — Blake Doud, Colorado Mines, junior, 6-5, 215, Parker, Colorado.

Second-team offense

Quarterback — Sammy Edwards, Valdosta State, 6-2, 188, St. Augustine, Florida.

Running backs — Ronald Blackman, Tiffin, junior, 5-11, 190, Gahanna, Ohio; Shane Watts, Fort Hays State, senior, 5-9, 195, De Soto, Kansas.

Linemen — Jaelon Brown, Delta State, senior, 6-5, 310, Montgomery, Alabama; Gabe Clark, Central Missouri, senior, 6-6, 320, Lawrence, Kansas; Joe Cooper, Slippery Rock, junior 6-7, 310, East Berlin, Pennsylvania; Jake Duggar, Harding, senior, 6-3, 300, Searcy, Arkansas; Bryce George, Ferris State, junior, 6-5, 300, Detroit.

Tight end — Cameron Woods, Northeastern State, junior, 6-3, 225, Las Vegas.

Wide receivers — Cam Abshire, Emory & Henry, sophomore, 6-4, 185, Roanoke, Virginia; Flynn Schiele, Colorado Mines, junior 6-4, 205, West Linn, Oregon; Reginald Vick Jr., Virginia Union, sophomore, 6-3, 185, Wendell, North Carolina.

All-purpose player — Drew Nash, Western Colorado, junior, 6-2, 215, Torrance, California; Shea Ruddy, Hillsdale, sophomore, 5-11, 185, Temperance, Michigan.

Kicker — Joseph Carlson, Midwestern State, senior, 6-1, 180, Frisco, Texas; Ben Rudolph, Tiffin, freshman, 6-2, 200, Indianapolis.

Second-team defense

Linemen — Isaac Anderson, Virginia Union, senior, 6-3, 280, Gifford, Florida; Jamair Diaz, Glenville State, sophomore, 6-1, 235, Passaic, New Jersey; Jake Fisher, Northwest Missouri State, senior, 6-5, 260, Smithville, Missouri; Marcus Hansen, Bemidji State, junior, 5-11, 240, Waseca, Minnesota; Traevon Mitchell, West

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 29 of 73

Florida, junior 6-0, 265, Waldorf, Maryland.

Linebackers — Jake Adams, Northern State, sophomore, 6-0, 220, Pulaski, Wisconsin; Wilfredo Diaz, Edinboro, sophomore, 6-0, 215, Miami; Eric Rascoe, Angelo State, senior, 6-2, 215, San Antonio.

Defensive backs — Daniel Bone III, CSU Pueblo, senior, 6-0, 195, Colorado Springs, Colorado; Rashan Murray, California (Pa.), junior, 6-2, 185, Pittsburgh; Josh Stokes, Slippery Rock, senior, 5-10, 180, Huntingtown, Maryland; Tanner Volk, Central Washington, senior, 6-1, 189, Portland, Oregon.

Punter — Brenden Lach, Michigan Tech, senior, 6-1, 185, South Lyon, Michigan.

France's Macron visits cyclone-wrecked Mayotte as residents urge for water, food and other aid

By SAM MEDNICK, ADRIENNE SURPRENANT and SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

MAMOUDZOU, Mayotte (AP) — France's President Emmanuel Macron traveled Thursday to the Indian Ocean archipelago of Mayotte to survey the devastation that Cyclone Chido wrought across the French territory as thousands of people tried cope without the bare essentials such as water or electricity.

"Mayotte is demolished," an airport security agent told Macron as soon as he stepped of the plane.

The security agent, Assane Haloi, said her family members, including small children, are without water or electricity and have nowhere to go, after the strongest cyclone in nearly a century ripped through the French territory of Mayotte off the coast of Africa on Saturday.

"There's no roof, there's nothing. No water, no food, no electricity. We can't even shelter, we are all wet with our children covering ourselves with whatever we have so that we can sleep," she said, asking for emergency aid.

Macron went on an helicopter for an aerial appraisal of the damage. He then headed to the hospital in Mamoudzou, Mayotte's capital, to meet with medical staff and patients.

Wearing a traditional Mayotte scarf on his white shirt and tie, sleeves rolled to the elbows, the French president listened to people asking for help. A member of the medical staff told him some people hadn't had a drink of water for 48 hours.

Some residents also expressed their agony at not knowing about those who have died or are still missing, partly because of the Muslim practice of burying the dead within 24 hours.

Mayotte's lawmaker Estelle Youssoufa said "we're dealing with open-air mass graves. There are no rescuers, no one has come to recover the buried bodies."

Some survivors and aid groups have described hasty burials and the stench of bodies.

Macron acknowledged that many who died haven't been reported. He said phone services will be repaired "in the coming days" so that people can report their missing loved ones.

French authorities said at least 31 people have died and more than 1,500 people were injured, more than 200 critically. But it's feared hundreds or even thousands of people have died.

Macron was later expected to visit a destroyed neighborhood.

Abdou Houmadou, 27, said it's emergency aid that's needed, not Macron's presence. "Mr President, what I'd like to tell you... is I think the spending you made from Paris to Mayotte would have been better spent to help the people," he said.

Another resident, Ahamadi Mohammed, said Macron's visit "is a good thing because he'll be able to see by himself the damage."

"I think that we'll then get significant aid to try and get the island back on its feet," the 58-year-old said.

Macron's office said four tons food and medical aid as well as additional rescuers were aboard the president's flight.

A navy ship was due to arrive in Mayotte on Thursday with 180 tons of aid and equipment, according to the French military.

People living in a large slum on the outskirts of Mamoudzou were some of the hardest hit from the cyclone. Many had lost their houses, some had lost friends.

Nassirou Hamidouni sheltered in his house when the cyclone hit.

His neighbor was killed when his house collapsed on him and his six children. Hamidouni and others dug through the rubble to reach them.

The 28-year-old father of five is now trying to rebuild his own house, which was also destroyed.

He believes the death toll is much higher than what's officially being reported given the severity of what he lived through.

"It was very hard," he said.

Mayotte, located in the Indian Ocean between mainland Africa's east coast and northern Madagascar, is France's poorest territory.

The cyclone devastated entire neighborhoods as many people ignored the warnings, thinking the storm wouldn't be so extreme.

Mayotte has more than 320,000 people according to the French government.

Most residents are Muslim and French authorities have estimated another 100,000 migrants live there.

Mayotte is the only part of the Comoros archipelago that voted to remain part of France in a 1974 referendum.

The French territory has seen in the past decade a massive arrival of migrants from the neighboring islands — the independent nation of Comoros, one of the world's poorest countries.

Some other migrants come from as far as Somalia, with, for some, the hope to be able to reach the European continent.

Gisèle Pelicot's ex-husband found guilty of rapes, sentenced to 20 years in prison in France

By JOHN LEICESTER, TOM NOUVIAN and MARINE LESPRIT Associated Press

AVIGNON, France (AP) — A court in France on Thursday sentenced the ex-husband of Gisèle Pelicot to 20 years of imprisonment for drugging and raping her and allowing other men to rape her while she was unconscious, in abuse that lasted nearly a decade.

The sentence against Dominique Pelicot was the maximum possible under French law. He was declared guilty of all charges against him. At age 72, it could mean that he spends the rest of his life in prison.

Roger Arata, the lead judge of the court in the southern French city Avignon, told Pelicot to stand for the sentencing. After it was delivered, he sat back down and cried.

Arata read out verdicts one after the other against Pelicot and the 50 other men tried in the shocking case that stunned France and spurred a national reckoning about the blight of rape culture.

"You are therefore declared guilty of aggravated rape on the person of Mme. Gisèle Pelicot," the judge said as he worked his way through names on the list.

Gisèle Pelicot was seated on one side of the courtroom, facing the defendants and sometimes nodding her head as verdicts were announced. Delivering the guilty verdicts and sentences took Arata just over an hour.

Of the 50 accused of rape, just one was acquitted but was found guilty of aggravated sexual assault. Another man was also found guilty on the sexual assault charge that he was tried for — meaning all 51 of the defendants were found guilty in one way or another.

In a side room where family members of the defendants watched the proceedings on television screens, some burst into tears and gasped as the sentences were revealed.

Protesters gathered outside the courthouse followed the proceedings on their phones. Some read out the verdicts and applauded as they were announced inside. Some were carrying oranges as symbolic gifts for the defendants heading to prison.

Dominique Pelicot admitted that for years he drugged his then wife of 50 years so that he and strangers he recruited online could abuse her while he filmed the assaults.

The appalling ordeal inflicted over nearly a decade on Gisèle Pelicot, now a 72-year-old grandmother, in what she thought was a loving marriage and her courage during the bruising trial have transformed the retired power company worker into a feminist hero of the nation.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 31 of 73

Stretching over more than three months, the trial galvanized campaigners against sexual violence and spurred calls for tougher measures to stamp out rape culture.

Prosecutors had asked that Dominique Pelicot get the maximum penalty of 20 years and for sentences of 10 to 18 years for the others tried for rape.

But the court was mostly more lenient than prosecutors had hoped, with many sentenced to less than a decade in prison.

The defendants were all accused of having taken part in Dominique Pelicot's sordid rape and abuse fantasies that were acted out in the couple's retirement home in the small Provence town of Mazan and elsewhere.

Dominique Pelicot testified that he hid tranquilizers in food and drink that he gave his then wife, knocking her out so profoundly that he could do what he wanted to her for hours.

One of the men was found guilty, not for assaulting Gisèle Pelicot but for drugging and raping his own wife — with help and drugs from Dominique Pelicot, who was also found guilty of raping that man's wife, too.

The five judges voted by secret ballot in their rulings, with majority votes for the convictions and sentences.

Campaigners against sexual violence were hoping for exemplary prison terms and view the trial as a possible turning point in the fight against rape culture and the use of drugs to subdue victims.

Gisèle Pelicot's courage in waiving her right to anonymity as a survivor of sexual abuse and successfully pushing for the hearings and shocking evidence — including videos — to be heard in open court have fueled conversations both on a national level in France and among families, couples and groups of friends about how to better protect women and the role that men can play in pursuing that goal.

"Men are starting to talk to women — their girlfriends, mothers and friends — in ways they hadn't before," said Fanny Foures, 48, who joined other women from the feminist group Les Amazones in gluing messages of support for Gisèle Pelicot on walls around Avignon before the verdict.

"It was awkward at first, but now real dialogues are happening," she said.

"Some women are realizing, maybe for the first time, that their ex-husbands violated them, or that someone close to them committed abuse," Foures added. "And men are starting to reckon with their own behavior or complicity — things they've ignored or failed to act on. It's heavy, but it's creating change."

A large banner that campaigners hung on a city wall opposite the courthouse read, "MERCİ GISELE" — thank you Gisèle.

Dominique Pelicot first came to the attention of police in September 2020, when a supermarket security guard caught him surreptitiously filming up women's skirts.

Police subsequently found his library of homemade images documenting years of abuse inflicted on his wife — more than 20,000 photos and videos in all, stored on computer drives and catalogued in folders marked "abuse," "her rapists," "night alone" and other titles.

The abundance of evidence led police to the other defendants. In the videos, investigators counted 72 different abusers, but weren't able to identify them all.

Although some of the accused — including Dominique Pelicot — acknowledged that they were guilty of rape, many didn't, even in the face of video evidence. The hearings sparked wider debate in France about whether the country's legal definition of rape should be expanded to include specific mention of consent.

Some defendants argued that Dominique Pelicot's consent covered his wife, too. Some sought to excuse their behavior by insisting that they hadn't intended to rape anyone when they responded to the husband's invitations to come to their home. Some laid blame at his door, saying he misled them into thinking they were taking part in consensual kink.

Israeli airstrikes hit Yemen's rebel-held capital and port city after Houthi attack targets Israel

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — A series of intense Israeli airstrikes shook Yemen's rebel-held capital and a port city early Thursday and killed at least nine people, officials said, shortly after a Houthi missile targeted central Israel.

Thursday's strikes risk further escalating conflict with the Iranian-backed Houthis, whose attacks on the Red Sea corridor have drastically impacted global shipping. The rebels have so far avoided the same level of intense military strikes that have targeted Palestinian militant group Hamas and Lebanon's Hezbollah, fellow members of Tehran's self-described "Axis of Resistance."

Israel's military said that it conducted two waves of strikes in a preplanned operation that began early Thursday and involved 14 fighter jets. The military said the first wave of strikes targeted Houthi infrastructure at the ports of Hodeida, Salif and the Ras Isa oil terminal on the Red Sea.

Then, in a second wave of strikes, the military said its fighter jets targeted Houthi energy infrastructure in Sanaa.

The Houthi-controlled satellite channel al-Masirah said that some of the strikes targeted power stations in the capital, posting videos of flames engulfing one structure, as civil defense workers doused it in water, trying to extinguish the fire.

The strikes on the two power plants will worsen the electricity crisis faced by Sanaa, where those who can afford it run gas generators or get power from private providers because of the city's long-failing infrastructure.

"Approximately one quarter of Sanaa — particularly shops, stores and commercial facilities — will face immediate and severe disruptions," said Mohammed al-Basha, a Yemen analyst. "In a city already staggering under a profound economic crisis, 2025 is set to be exceptionally challenging."

The al-Masirah channel, citing its correspondent in the port city of Hodeida, said that at least seven people had been killed at Salif, while another two had been killed at the Ras Isa oil terminal. Others suffered wounds at the Hodeida port as well, it said.

An Israeli military statement offered no damage assessment.

Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, an Israeli military spokesman, said the strikes hit energy and port infrastructure, which he alleged the rebels "have been using in ways that effectively contributed to their military action."

"I suggest the leaders of the Houthis to see, to understand and remember: Whoever raises a hand against the state of Israel, his hand will be cut off, whoever harms us — will be harmed sevenfold," Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz said.

Rebel-held Hodeida, about 145 kilometers (90 miles) southwest of Sanaa, has been key for food shipments into Yemen as its decade-long war has gone on. There's also longstanding suspicion that weapons from Iran have been transferred through the port.

The strikes happened just after Israel's military said that its air force intercepted a missile launched from Yemen before it entered the country's territory. The waves of strikes on Yemen early Thursday weren't a direct response to the missile hit, said a military official, but rather a preplanned response to months of Houthi aggression. Israel's fighter jets were already in the air when the missile was launched.

"Rocket and missile sirens were sounded following the possibility of falling debris from the interception," the Israeli military said. Sirens sounded near Tel Aviv and the surrounding areas, and a large explosion was heard overhead at the time.

In Ramat Gan, a suburb of Tel Aviv, a large piece of shrapnel from the missile collapsed a school building there, without causing any injuries.

The military official said that the Houthis have fired more than 200 missiles and UAVs, or unmanned aerial vehicles, at Israel since Oct. 7, 2023.

Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, a Houthi military spokesman, claimed the attack hours later in a prerecorded video statement, saying the rebels fired two of its "Palestine" ballistic missiles at Israel.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 33 of 73

Israel previously struck Hodeida and its oil infrastructure in July after a Houthi drone attack killed one person and wounded 10 in Tel Aviv. In September, Israel struck Hodeida again, killing at least four people after a rebel missile targeted Israel's Ben Gurion airport as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was arriving back to the country.

American forces have also launched a series of strikes on the Houthis over nearly a year because of Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea corridor. On Monday, the U.S. military's Central Command said that it hit "a key command-and-control facility" operated by the Houthis in Sanaa, later identified as the al-Ardi complex once home to the government's Defense Ministry.

But Israel appears to have carried out Thursday's strikes alone. A U.S. military official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the attacks, said that Washington had no part in them. While the U.S. has carried out strikes on the Houthis in the past, it's also balancing the desires of Saudi Arabia to reach a permanent ceasefire in its stalemated war with the rebels.

The Houthis have targeted about 100 merchant vessels with missiles and drones since the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip started in October 2023 after Hamas' surprise attack on Israel that killed 1,200 people and saw 250 others taken hostage.

Israel's grinding offensive in Gaza has killed more than 45,000 Palestinians, local health officials say. The tally doesn't distinguish between combatants and civilians.

The Houthis have seized one vessel and sunk two in a campaign that has also killed four sailors. Other missiles and drones have either been intercepted by separate U.S.- and European-led coalitions in the Red Sea or failed to reach their targets, which have also included Western military vessels.

The rebels maintain that they target ships linked to Israel, the U.S. or the United Kingdom to force an end to Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza. However, many of the ships attacked have little or no connection to the conflict, including some bound for Iran.

The Houthis have battled the Saudi-led coalition in the wider Yemen war, which has killed more than 150,000 people, including civilians. The conflict also has created one of the world's worst humanitarian disasters that's believed to have killed tens of thousands more.

But the Houthis are still standing even as Israel's campaign against Hamas and Hezbollah has decimated those militant groups. Meanwhile, Israel and Iran have exchanged direct fire while the government of Syria, an enemy of Israel since its founding in 1948, collapsed in the face of a rebel advance as the region's wars have upended Iran's network of allied proxy groups.

Man accused in UnitedHealthcare CEO killing expected to appear at hearing on extradition to New York

By MARK SCOLFORO and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

HOLLIDAYSBURG, Pa. (AP) — The suspect charged with shooting to death a health insurance company chief executive on a Manhattan street will be taken Thursday morning to hearings on related Pennsylvania criminal charges and efforts to extradite him to New York.

The preliminary hearing on forgery and firearms charges and consideration of a fugitive from justice complaint against Luigi Mangione may not take long.

He is expected to waive extradition, clearing the way for his return to New York, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press. The person was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the case and spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity.

Court officials said Mangione will attend the early morning proceedings at the Blair County Courthouse in Hollidaysburg. If a judge authorizes his extradition, Mangione would then be brought to New York, where he could appear in state court for arraignment Thursday afternoon or Friday.

The district attorney in Blair County, Pennsylvania, Pete Weeks, has said he was willing to put the Pennsylvania charges on hold while New York authorities prosecute Mangione for the Dec. 4 killing of UnitedHealthcare chief executive Brian Thompson. Mangione faces charges of murder as an act of terrorism in New York.

Weeks said he would not talk about what might happen at the Thursday hearings or if evidence will be presented. Mangione is accused of giving police a fake New Jersey identification and having a gun and silencer in his bag.

"Those are decisions that rest exclusively with Mr. Mangione and the rights afforded to him," Weeks wrote in a news release sent out Tuesday.

In a court filing last week, Mangione defense attorney Tom Dickey argued prosecutors hadn't shown there's sufficient evidence to hold Mangione, that he was in New York when Thompson was killed or that he is a fugitive from justice.

Mangione, 26, of Towson, Maryland, was arrested on Dec. 9 when police were called to a McDonald's restaurant on a commercial strip in Altoona, Pennsylvania, after he was reported to match the description of Thompson's killer.

Thompson was gunned down on the street as he walked to the hotel where his Minnesota-based company was holding an investor conference. The shooting was captured on security video, but the suspect eluded police before Mangione was captured about 277 miles (446 kilometers) west of New York.

Authorities say Mangione was carrying the gun used to kill Thompson, a passport, a fake ID and about \$10,000 in U.S. and foreign currency. His lawyer, Dickey, has questioned the evidence for the forgery charge and the legal basis for a gun charge. He had previously indicated Mangione would fight extradition to New York while being held in a Pennsylvania state prison.

Mangione, an Ivy League computer science graduate from a prominent family, was carrying a handwritten letter that called health insurance companies "parasitic" and complained about corporate greed, according to a law enforcement bulletin obtained by The Associated Press last week.

Teamsters say Amazon workers will strike at multiple facilities as union seeks labor contract

By HALELUYA HADERO AP Business Writer

The International Brotherhood of Teamsters said workers at seven Amazon facilities will begin a strike on Thursday morning, an effort by the union to pressure the e-commerce company for a labor agreement during a key shopping period.

The Teamsters say the workers, who authorized strikes in the past few days, are joining the picket line after Amazon ignored a Dec. 15 deadline the union set for contract negotiations. Amazon says it doesn't expect an impact on its operations during what the union calls the largest strike against the company in U.S. history.

The Teamsters say they represent nearly 10,000 workers at 10 Amazon facilities, a small portion of the 1.5 million people Amazon employs in its warehouses and corporate offices.

At one warehouse, located in New York City's Staten Island borough, thousands of workers who voted for the Amazon Labor Union in 2022 and have since affiliated with the Teamsters. At the other facilities, employees - including many delivery drivers - have unionized with them by demonstrating majority support but without holding government-administered elections.

The strikes happening Thursday are taking place at one Amazon warehouse in San Francisco, California, and six delivery stations in southern California, New York City; Atlanta, Georgia, and Skokie, Illinois, according to the union's announcement. Amazon workers at the other facilities are "prepared to join," the union said.

"Amazon is pushing its workers closer to the picket line by failing to show them the respect they have earned," Teamsters General President Sean M. O'Brien said in a statement.

The Seattle-based online retailer has been seeking to re-do the election that led to the union victory at the warehouse on Staten Island, which the Teamsters now represent. In the process, the company has filed a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the National Labor Relations Board.

Meanwhile, Amazon says the delivery drivers, which the Teamsters have organized for more than a year, are not its employees. Under its business model, the drivers work for third-party business, called Delivery

Service Partners, who drop off millions of packages to customers everyday.

"For more than a year now, the Teamsters have continued to intentionally mislead the public – claiming that they represent 'thousands of Amazon employees and drivers'. They don't, and this is another attempt to push a false narrative," Amazon spokesperson Kelly Nantel said in a statement.

The Teamsters have argued Amazon essentially controls everything the drivers do and should be classified as an employer. Some U.S. labor regulators have sided with the union in filings made before the NLRB. In September, Amazon boosted pay for the drivers amid the growing pressure.

Two highway crashes in southeastern Afghanistan kill 50 people and injure 76

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS undefined

Two highway crashes in southeastern Afghanistan have killed a combined total of 50 people and injured 76, a government spokesman said Thursday.

One was a collision between a passenger bus and an oil tanker on the Kabul-Kandahar highway late Wednesday, said Hafiz Omar, a spokesman for the governor of Ghazni province.

The other was in a different area of the same highway, which connects the Afghan capital with the south. "The injured have been taken to hospitals in Ghazni and authorities are in the process of handing over the bodies to families," said Omar. Patients in a more serious condition were transferred to Kabul. Women and children are among the casualties, he added.

Crash survivor Abdullah Khan, who was being treated in a Ghazni hospital, said he didn't know how many people had either died or were injured.

"I got out from the bus myself and heard the sound of moaning. There was blood everywhere. Some people had head injuries and others had hurt their legs."

Traffic accidents are common in Afghanistan, mainly due to poor road conditions and driver carelessness.

Separated for decades, Assad's fall spurs hope for families split by Golan Heights buffer zone

By ELENA BECATOROS Associated Press

MAJDAL SHAMS, Golan Heights (AP) — The four sisters gathered by the side of the road, craning their necks to peer far beyond the razor wire-reinforced fence snaking across the mountain. One took off her jacket and waved it slowly above her head.

In the distance, a tiny white speck waved frantically from the hillside.

"We can see you!" Soha Safadi exclaimed excitedly on her cellphone. She paused briefly to wipe away tears that had begun to flow. "Can you see us too?"

The tiny speck on the hill was Soha's sister, Sawsan. Separated by war and occupation, they hadn't seen each other in person for 22 years.

The six Safadi sisters belong to the Druze community, one of the Middle East's most insular religious minorities. Its population is spread across Syria, Lebanon, Israel and the Golan Heights, a rocky plateau that Israel seized from Syria in 1967 and annexed in 1981. The U.S. is the only country to recognize Israel's control; the rest of the world considers the Golan Heights occupied Syrian territory.

Israel's seizure of the Golan Heights split families apart.

Five of the six Safadi sisters and their parents live in Majdal Shams, a Druze town next to the buffer zone created between the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights and Syria. But the sixth, 49-year-old Sawsan, married a man from Jaramana, a town on the outskirts of the Syrian capital, Damascus, 27 years ago and has lived in Syria ever since. They have land in the buffer zone, where they grow olives and apples and also maintain a small house.

With very few visits allowed to relatives over the years, a nearby hill was dubbed "Shouting Hill," where

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 36 of 73

families would gather on either side of the fence and use loudspeakers to speak to each other.

The practice declined as the internet made video calls widely accessible, while the Syrian war that began in 2011 made it difficult for those on the Syrian side to reach the buffer zone.

But since the Dec. 8 fall of Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime, families like the Safadis, are starting to revive the practice. They cling to hope, however faint, that regime change will herald a loosening of restrictions between the Israeli-controlled area and Syria that have kept them from their loved ones for so long.

"It was something a bit different. You see her in person. It feels like you could be there in two minutes by car," Soha Safadi, 51, said Wednesday after seeing the speck that was her sister on the hill. "This is much better, much better."

Since Assad's fall, the sisters have been coming to the fence every day to see Sawsan. They make arrangements by phone for a specific time, and then make a video call while also trying to catch a glimpse of each other across the hill.

"She was very tiny, but I could see her," Soha Safadi said. "There were a lot of mixed feelings — sadness, joy and hope. And God willing, God willing, soon, soon, we will see her" in person.

After Assad fell, the Israeli military pushed through the buffer zone and into Syria proper. It has captured Mount Hermon, Syria's tallest mountain, known as Jabal al Sheikh in Arabic, on the slopes of which lies Majdal Shams. The buffer zone is now a hive of military and construction activity, and Sawsan can't come close to the fence.

While it is far too early to say whether years of hostile relations between the two countries will improve, the changes in Syria have sparked hope for divided families that maybe, just maybe, they might be able to meet again.

"This thing gave us a hope ... that we can see each other. That all the people in the same situation can meet their families," said another sister, 53-year-old Amira Safadi.

Yet seeing Sawsan across the hill, just a short walk away, is also incredibly painful for the sisters.

They wept as they waved, and cried even more when their sister put their nephew, 24-year-old Karam, on the phone. They have only met him once, during a family reunion in Jordan. He was 2 years old.

"It hurts, it hurts, it hurts in the heart," Amira Safadi said. "It's so close and far at the same time. It is like she is here and we cannot reach her, we cannot hug her."

Number of dead and missing still unclear as first aid arrives in quake-hit Pacific nation of Vanuatu

By CHARLOTTE GRAHAM-McLAY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — Amid the havoc wrought by a violent earthquake two days earlier, Ivan Oswald and his staff at Nambawan Cafe on an idyllic stretch of Vanuatu's waterfront prepared on Thursday for lunchtime service.

The menu for the usual lunchtime rush was replaced with defrosted sausages, readied for emergency workers who are sifting through rubble for those trapped alive or killed in flattened buildings when the massive, 7.3 jolt hit Port Vila, Vanuatu's capital 48 hours earlier. Search crews were joined Thursday by specialists arriving in waves from Australia, New Zealand and France.

Earthquakes are normal for the South Pacific nation made up of 80 islands and home to 330,000 people, but Tuesday's terrifying shake was like nothing they had felt before. Centered 30 kilometers (19 miles) offshore, at a depth of 57 kilometers (35 miles), the quake has been followed by hundreds of rattling aftershocks.

Death toll remains uncertain

The death toll was still unclear and official information remained scarce.

The government initially confirmed 14 deaths. On Wednesday, it said nine had been verified by the hospital -- but officials expected the number would rise. More than 200 injured people were treated, an official figure not updated in more than a day.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 37 of 73

On Thursday, telecommunications -- though piecemeal and patchy -- were more widely restored after a near total blackout following the quake. It offered residents of Vanuatu answers about the scale of the damage and about how many people were missing.

As word got around that Nambawan had power and an independent internet source, rescuers, tourists and locals visited to charge devices and attempt to locate their relatives.

"We've had a few tears," said Oswald, the cafe's owner. "I can't help with the rescue, but I can help with this."

Damage concentrated in the capital

The extent of the havoc became clearer on Thursday. The worst-hit area was Port Vila's downtown, busy with lunchtime shoppers on Tuesday. Some outlying islands and villages near the quake's epicenter have experienced landslides.

Infrastructure damage was extensive — including to hospitals, roads, buildings, two major water reservoirs and gas pipes — the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs said late on Wednesday. Response efforts were hampered by access problems.

A massive landslide has blocked the sea port, limiting the transport of essential supplies and personnel, the UN agency said. The airport was open only for humanitarian use on Thursday, but the runway has been deemed operational and the resumption of commercial flights will be considered on Friday.

Fears over water and damage to buildings

Aid agencies told The Associated Press on Wednesday that their biggest worries were about drinking water and shelter for those unable to return home. The main utilities provider, UNELCO, said it could take two weeks to fully restore water service, according to the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation.

While the search for survivors and recovery of bodies centered on two collapsed buildings in the city center, homes and businesses throughout Port Vila need structural checks by engineers before they can be used again.

Australian search experts on Thursday joined locals who had desperately dug for people yelling out from the crumpled buildings. After dramatic rescues of dust-covered survivors that lifted spirits on Tuesday and Wednesday, the mood had become bleaker about the prospects for those trapped, residents said.

It was not known how many people remained in the buildings — a garage and a surf clothing store. Among the dead were two Chinese nationals, according to China's official Xinhua News Agency, which cited Gu Zihua, an official at the Chinese embassy in Vanuatu.

An economic blow

Another building housing embassies for several countries — including the United States, France and New Zealand — also crumpled, but no casualties were reported. Military flights evacuated 148 Australian nationals from Vanuatu late on Wednesday.

The quake at the start of the summer season in the tourism-dependent island nation threatened an economic crisis if tourists did not return, said Glen Craig, chair of the Vanuatu Business Resilience Council.

"We've had such bad luck," said Craig, referring to the three cyclones that struck in 2023 and the collapse of Vanuatu's national airline in May. "We were just getting back on our feet and we were really looking forward to a bumper summer."

Macao's casino boom brings wealth but at a cost, 25 years since China's takeover

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

MACAO (AP) — When Portugal returned its colony Macao to China in 1999, coffee shop owner Daniel Chao was a first grader living in a different world.

Since then his sleepy hometown has transformed into a bustling gaming hub lined with glittering casinos. Its once quiet streets are now jammed with tourist buses. But the growing wealth of the city dubbed the "Las Vegas of the East" has not brought qualities of sustainable development such as economic diversity

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 38 of 73

and high civic participation.

"What was once a relaxed, free place in my childhood has become a place that is crowded and highly commercialized," said Chao.

Macao will mark the 25th anniversary of its return to Chinese rule on Friday. Chinese President Xi Jinping is visiting the city for three days and the city is festooned with celebratory banners and other decorations. A fireworks display is planned for next week.

Since 1999, the city of 687,000 has transformed from a monopoly-driven gambling enclave into the world's biggest gaming hub, packed with mainland Chinese tourists. Its GDP per person has more than quadrupled to \$68,000, roughly on a par with Denmark and Australia and surpassing Hong Kong's of about \$50,000.

China rules Macao under a "one country, two systems" arrangement similar to its governance of Hong Kong, a former British colony. Macao is the only Chinese city where casino gambling is legal and it has resorts run by affiliates of the American gaming giants MGM Resorts, Las Vegas Sands and Wynn Resorts.

Since Macao opened its casino market following the handover to Beijing, its economy has grown to \$46 billion in 2023 from \$6.5 billion in 1999, despite economic slumps during the COVID-19 pandemic and a crackdown on the junkets that have facilitated visits by high-roller gamblers from elsewhere.

The economic growth has come at a cost.

Chao's mother worked at a casino job that brought better pay and a bigger apartment, but also stress and irregular hours. He remembers doing homework at 5 a.m., after her night shift. When he was working as a teacher, his students often went to sleep late or had to rely on paid tutors because their parents also worked casino shifts.

The city's tourism boom has brought years of easy money that gave its businesses scant incentive to strive to improve their products or services and develop the resilience needed to overcome the hard times of the pandemic and competition from mainland Chinese products, Chao and some other residents said.

Chao has considered leaving the city, but opted to stay.

"Leaving must come at a heavy price," he said, adding that "it seems Macao isn't exactly unlivable yet."

The ruling Communist Party's agenda for Macao now holds sway, with city leaders often referring to national plans. That's a marked shift from the past, when the city rarely felt any direct impact from Beijing, said Ieong Meng U, a professor at the government and public administration department of the University of Macao.

He expects Macao to become increasingly integrated with nearby Guangdong province over the next decade, following plans to promote tourism, Chinese medicine, finance, technology and exhibitions.

China has designated a special zone on Hengqin island in neighboring Zhuhai city, jointly run by Guangdong and Macao, that is planned to have about 120,000 Macao residents by 2035.

The closer economic ties have coincided with more intrusive political controls, especially after huge anti-government protests in Hong Kong in 2019 that led Beijing to crack down on virtually all public dissent.

A vigil commemorating China's bloody 1989 military crackdown on the Tiananmen Square pro-democracy protests was banned. Pro-democracy figures were barred from running in Macao's 2021 legislative elections. Last year, the city toughened its national security law. In November, Macao Journalists Association expressed concerns over signs of declining press freedom, saying some local media outlets have been asked to withdraw their articles due to political pressure.

Activist Jason Chao, no relation to Daniel Chao, decided to leave.

After years of working to promote greater democracy, he grew frustrated by officials' lack of willingness to change and the tendency of Macao residents to rely on solving problems through seeking Beijing's help or personal connections rather than civic participation, a habit he says partly stems from the city's colonial heritage under Portuguese rule.

"I exhausted the tactics I had learned at that time," Chao said.

In 2017, Chao left to study overseas. He's now a director of a civil society organization serving Hong Kong immigrants in Britain.

Some older residents believe life has improved in the past quarter century.

Ka Man Chun, a retiree, likes the annual cash handouts, funded by gaming tax reserves, that the govern-

ment has given residents since 2008. This year, each permanent resident received \$1,240, Ka says he feels safe since he steers clear of politics.

"25 years have passed, there's nothing really bad," he said.

Macao's public security, economy and welfare have improved significantly from the colonial era, said Anna Ng, a flower shop owner in her 60s.

Though critics say Macao has failed to diversify its economy, Ng sees signs of progress in the city's growing exhibition industry and says she's found new opportunities in cultural and creative activities.

Enid Jeong said she has grown bored with the city's limited choices for careers and leisure activities and wants to join her boyfriend in Hong Kong. She dreams of living in Hong Kong's Sai Kung, an area famous for its scenic beauty and beaches.

Jeong mocked the annual cash handout as compensation for what she calls the psychological damage of living in a gaming hub.

"I feel like I was born in a grand mansion, but am only responsible for sweeping the floor," she said.

Now caretaker of his dad's work, Sean Ono Lennon seeks to innovate, not merely repeat

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Only recently given stewardship over his late father's work, Sean Ono Lennon is on a remarkable run.

The only child of John Lennon and Yoko Ono won an Academy Award this year for a short film based on his parents' 1971 song "Happy Christmas (War is Over)" and, a few months later, was nominated for his first-ever Grammy, for producing a box set on the album "Mind Games," originally released in 1973.

"It feels overwhelming and surreal," said Lennon, who also recently shared a Webby Award with his mother for Ono's interactive art project "Wish Tree."

For Lennon, who was 5 when the former Beatle was murdered in 1980, the work is a way to connect with his father. It's more than a preservation mission: On "Mind Games," he takes artistic license, pulling apart the recordings of John Lennon's music to create something entirely new.

Lennon was inspired, in part, by another Beatle offspring, Dhani Harrison, who helped repackage his own father's "All Things Must Pass." Dhani Harrison is also behind this fall's reissue of his dad's "Living in the Material World," but that experience is nothing like what Lennon did with "Mind Games."

Besides the music, the innovative box is modeled after one of his mother's art pieces and filled with art reproductions, hidden music, video, messages and puzzles, some only visible through an ultraviolet light that is included — "mind games," remember? The deluxe box retails for \$1,350, but there are less expensive options.

Learning what his father meant to others by hearing fans sing through the window

Lennon, 49, knew his father was a musician before he died; the boy tagged along to the studio for some "Double Fantasy" sessions. But truly understanding his impact came later, like when he'd hear fans singing his father's music outside their New York apartment on the Oct. 9 birthday they shared. "It was pretty clear to me that wasn't happening with my friends," he said.

His father's music played constantly around the house, and learning to play those songs launched his own journey to become a musician.

"I think I would have rebelled more against my dad's — and my mom's — music if I had grown up with my dad in the house and I had been angry at him or rebelled against him," he told The Associated Press. "Because he wasn't around, I've always really cherished the music as sort of a living part of him."

He inherited the job of keeping his father's music alive for new generations when his mom, now 91, retired.

In liner notes for "Mind Games," Lennon explains that "the only meaningful way that I can show my love to him" is to work hard on his music and keep it in the culture's consciousness. That's poignant, and maybe a little sad. Does Lennon really have to prove to anyone that he loves his father?

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 40 of 73

"What else can I do in this Earth to express my love and reverence for my father than to do an incredibly meticulous job of taking care of his music?" he said. "I can't actually think of anything else, other than taking care of my mother, which I try to do as well."

That reverence for his elders came from his mother, he believes. When his Japanese grandparents came over to the U.S. "it was like the president was visiting," he recalled.

Only after he began the "Mind Games" project did Lennon learn that the album wasn't particularly well-regarded when it was released. He found an interview where even John Lennon considered it a transition from a period of political activism to being a musician again. The title song was its only hit.

That attitude lingers, judging by an online site called "Brutally Honest Rock Album Reviews." In an unsigned review, the author said the "Mind Games" reissue defines overkill. "You can now own and forever cherish six different versions of songs that were unmemorable at best and a complete waste of time at worst."

Motivated to make people take a second look at "Mind Games"

That only motivated Lennon to work harder, and led to a bold artistic decision. Part of the reason the album didn't really connect was because it wasn't promoted well or supported by concerts, he said. But he also described the original album mix as thin and not doing justice to the music.

Using the original recordings, he constructed new versions of the songs, sometimes emphasizing different instruments. He sought a warmer, more direct sound reminiscent of Lennon's "Plastic Ono Band" album — most visibly on "Aisumasen (I'm Sorry)," one of a handful of compositions reflecting marital turmoil that presaged Lennon's notorious "lost weekend" separation from Ono.

Different versions of the title cut also show Sean's approach. There's the original "Mind Games," with a distinctive chiming sound that drives the melody. That's stripped away in a new mix where a reggae guitar lick becomes audible. An organ-dominated instrumental sounds like a church hymn. There are other outtakes, some with alternate lyrics and one with a snippet of "Make Love, Not War," a song fragment dating back to the Beatles that the author repurposed.

He didn't have a trove of unheard material to mine, other than Lennon's demo of "I'm the Greatest," a song he gave to Beatle mate Ringo Starr.

In some of the new versions, Sean goes beyond remixing or revealing outtakes to imposing his own artistic vision over his father's.

"There are some people who feel that it's taking liberties, and I guess it technically is," Lennon said. "The way I look at it is, if I'm going to do the best job I can, the only way I can do that is to follow my heart and make it sound the best that it can sound. If that means maybe turning down an instrument a lot in a certain section because I don't think it's helping, then I'm going to do that."

For anyone who wants the original versions, they're readily available.

"It's very forensic work," he said. "I'm not worried about what someone else is going to think. I'm just in there trying to do good by my dad, and I really feel that I know how to do good by him, because I know his music better than I know anybody else's music."

His father's human moments that inspired his son as a musician

As a musician, he relates to moments where his father expresses vulnerability, like an interview where John described "Intuition" as a good song where he didn't nail the lyrics. The "Get Back" film of recording sessions for the "Let it Be" album showed the Beatles as humans who didn't hand songs down from Mount Olympus.

Next on the docket is a film resurrection of the "One to One" concerts involving his father and a reissue of the "Walls and Bridges" album. Sean, who lives and works in New York and is involved in a longtime relationship with musician and model Kemp Muhl, released his own album, "Asterisms," this year.

Told he sounded like his father when singing forcefully, Lennon practically whispered lyrics on his early albums. He hated the way he sounded, but didn't want to deal with the comparisons. He doesn't hold back anymore. "Now I'm too old to care," he said.

"I didn't get into music because I had some great talent or something," he said. "I got into it because my dad was this famous musician and playing his songs and learning his music made me feel closer to him."

US deaths are down and life expectancy is up, but improvements are slowing

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. life expectancy jumped last year, and preliminary data suggests there may be another — much smaller — improvement this year.

Death rates fell last year for almost all leading causes, notably COVID-19, heart disease and drug overdoses, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report released Thursday. That translated to adding nearly a year the estimated lifespan of Americans.

Experts note it's part of a bounce-back from the COVID-19 pandemic. But life expectancy has not yet climbed back to prepandemic levels, and the rebound appears to be losing steam.

"What you're seeing is continued improvement, but slowing improvement," said Elizabeth Wrigley-Field, a University Minnesota researcher who studies death trends. "We are sort of converging back to some kind of normal that is worse than it was before the pandemic."

Last year, nearly 3.1 million U.S. residents died, about 189,000 fewer than the year before. Death rates declined across all racial and ethnic groups, and in both men and women.

Provisional data for the first 10 months of 2024 suggests the country is on track to see even fewer deaths this year, perhaps about 13,000 fewer. But that difference is likely to narrow as more death certificates come in, said the CDC's Robert Anderson.

That means that life expectancy for 2024 likely will rise — "but probably not by a lot," said Anderson, who oversees death tracking at the CDC's National Center for Health Statistics.

Life expectancy is an estimate of the average number of years a baby born in a given year might expect to live, given death rates at that time. It's a fundamental measure of a population's health.

For decades, U.S. life expectancy rose at least a little bit almost every year, thanks to medical advances and public health measures. It peaked in 2014, at nearly 79 years, and then was relatively flat for several years. Then it plunged during the COVID-19 pandemic, dropping to just under 76 1/2 years in 2021.

It rebounded to 77 1/2 years in 2022 and, according to the new report, to nearly 78 1/2 last year.

Life expectancy for U.S. women continues to be well above that of men — a little over 81 for women, compared with a little under 76 for men.

In the last five years, more than 1.2 million U.S. deaths have been attributed to COVID-19. But most of them occurred in 2020 and 2021, before vaccination- and infection-induced immunity became widespread.

The coronavirus was once the nation's third leading cause of death. Last year it was the underlying cause in nearly 50,000 deaths, making it the nation's No. 10 killer.

Data for 2024 is still coming in, but about 30,000 coronavirus deaths have been reported so far. At that rate, suicide may surpass COVID-19 this year, Anderson said.

Heart disease remains the nation's leading cause of death. Some underappreciated good news is the heart disease death rate dropped by about 3% in 2023. That's a much smaller drop than the 73% decline in the COVID-19 death rate, but heart disease affects more people so even small changes can be more impactful, Anderson said.

There's also good news about overdose deaths, which fell to 105,000 in 2023 among U.S. residents, according to a second report released by CDC on Thursday.

The causes of the overdose decline are still being studied but there is reason to be hopeful such deaths will drop more in the future, experts say. Some pointed to survey results this week that showed teens drug use isn't rising.

"The earlier you start taking a drug, the greater the risk that you could continue using it and the greater the risk that you will become addicted to it — and have untoward consequences," said Dr. Nora Volkow, director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, which funded the survey study. "If you can reduce the pipeline (of new drug users) ... you can prevent overdoses."

A key Trump ally on immigration explains how mass deportations could work

By JOHN HANNA Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — A Kansas official who is an informal adviser to President-elect Donald Trump's transition team on immigration issues doesn't expect mass deportations to prompt arrests of migrants at sensitive locations such as schools and churches.

But Kansas Attorney General Kris Kobach does expect Trump to take action that will spark a legal challenge over the citizenship status of children born in the U.S. to immigrants living in the country illegally. He also expects Trump to encourage local and state law enforcement officers to help with efforts to arrest and detain migrants.

Kobach has for two decades been one of the most influential lawyers in the Republican movement to restrict illegal immigration. He is also a longtime Trump supporter who could be a key ally given federal immigration authorities' need for state and local cooperation to carry out Trump's promise of the largest deportation operation in U.S. history.

He said Wednesday that he's in regular contact with Trump's team, including Tom Homan, Trump's pick for border czar, and Stephen Miller, incoming deputy White House chief of staff for policy. He made his comments during an interview with The Associated Press. Here are excerpts:

Is it realistic to try to remove millions of immigrants?

Critics of Trump's mass deportation plans argue that he's promising to remove millions of immigrants from the U.S. and that's logistically not possible. But Kobach and other Trump allies think only a portion of those migrants would have to be deported for the effort to succeed.

KOBACH: "Once there's a massive enforcement effort going on, then a lot of people start leaving on their own."

"You can put a multiplier on that number, and it'll be a much greater number. They will start leaving on their own because they don't want to get arrested. They want to leave on their own terms, and so I don't know — we don't know — what that multiplier number is going to be, but there will be one."

What about arrests at sensitive locations?

Immigrant rights advocates worry the Trump administration will rescind a longstanding policy of avoiding arrests of migrants at sensitive locations such as schools, hospitals and houses of worship.

KOBACH: "I haven't heard this. ... First of all, I don't think that you are likely to see K-12 students being arrested. It's going to be the adults that are going to be the focus of the removals."

"There are some places that are better to make an arrest than others. There are reasons why the policy of a police department is different with regard to a high-speed chase in a neighborhood versus a high-speed chase on a highway. So I think they're probably going to have to make decisions as to which ones involve the least risk to the public."

Is an attempt to end birthright citizenship coming?

Birthright citizenship means that anyone born in the U.S. is a citizen, whatever the legal status of their parents. Trump has promised to end it, though others say the 14th Amendment enshrines it in the U.S. Constitution.

KOBACH: "Whatever the Trump administration does will certainly be litigated because it's one of those hot-button issues."

"I believe that the Trump administration has every intention of addressing this issue, in his second term."

How would state and local officials help?

The Trump administration would need the help of state and local officials in its efforts to deport millions of immigrants living in the U.S. illegally.

A provision in federal immigration law allows U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement to make agreements with state and law enforcement agencies to deputize and train officers to arrest migrants.

KOBACH: "They can provide a force multiplier to the federal government, and I think that is the biggest and best thing that the states and counties can do to help. ... The point is, it casts a daily net."

"I don't see how a massive deportation program can possibly succeed without it."

Where would immigrants be detained?

President Joe Biden's administration cut the number of beds that ICE had for detaining immigrants living in the U.S. illegally. However, in August, the agency issued requests for information about the potential for new detention centers in Arizona, California, New Mexico, Oregon and Washington, documents show.

Trump could seek new contracts with counties to keep immigrants in their jails, and Kobach said he's previously worked as a lawyer for some Texas counties with bigger jails than they need for local offenders.

KOBACH: "The Trump administration, the people in the immigration sphere, are well aware of this problem, and I've talked to them."

"A few of those (Texas) counties have a really big facility, jail, and the reason it's so big is they want to contract with other counties and with the federal government."

How New York prosecutors used a terrorism law in the charges against Luigi Mangione

By JENNIFER PELTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — New York prosecutors are using a 9/11-era anti-terrorism law in their case against the man charged with gunning down UnitedHealthcare's CEO outside a midtown Manhattan hotel.

Luigi Mangione was indicted on charges of murder as an act of terrorism, under a state law that allows for stiffer sentences when a killing is aimed at terrifying civilians or influencing government.

If it sounds like an unusual application of a terrorism law, it's not the first time the statute has been applied to a case that wasn't about cross-border extremism or a plot to kill masses of people.

Mangione is jailed on other charges in Pennsylvania, where he is scheduled to appear at an extradition hearing Thursday that could clear the way for him to be brought to New York.

Here are some things to know about the anti-terrorism law and the case surrounding the death of Brian Thompson.

What does the law say?

Mangione is charged with first-degree and second-degree murder counts that specifically refer to a New York law that addresses terrorism. Essentially an add-on to existing criminal statutes, it says that an underlying offense constitutes "a crime of terrorism" if it's done "with intent to intimidate or coerce a civilian population, influence the policy of a unit of government by intimidation or coercion or affect the conduct of a unit of government by murder, assassination or kidnapping."

What does it do?

If a defendant is convicted, the "crime of terrorism" designation boosts the underlying offense into a more serious sentencing category. For example, an assault normally punishable by up to 25 years in prison would carry a potential life sentence.

Mangione would face a possible life sentence if convicted.

New York does not have the death penalty. The state's highest court threw out a capital punishment law in 2004.

Why do prosecutors say the anti-terrorism law applies in UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson's killing?

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg put it simply: "The intent was to sow terror." The Democratic prosecutor noted that the shooting unfolded early on a workday in a heavily trafficked business and tourist area, and he mentioned Mangione's writings, while declining to get more specific.

When arrested, the 26-year-old was carrying a handwritten letter that called health insurance companies "parasitic" and complained about corporate greed, according to a law enforcement bulletin obtained by The Associated Press.

New York Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch has said Mangione also was carrying a gun that matched shell casings at the crime scene. Investigators say ammunition found near Thompson's body bore the words "delay," "deny" and "depose," mimicking a phrase some people use to decry insurers' practices.

Deputy Commissioner Rebecca Weiner said the reaction to Thompson's killing shows it fits within a law

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 44 of 73

against violence designed to intimidate a civilian population.

The shooting prompted a wave of public criticism of the health insurance industry. Much of it is people sharing stories and frustration, but there also have been "wanted" posters targeting other health care honchos. Concerned companies have taken top executives' biographies offline, canceled in-person shareholder meetings and even told employees to work from home temporarily.

What does Mangione's side say?

His New York attorney, Karen Friedman Agnifilo, called the case "overcharged" in a statement Wednesday. The term is courthouse lingo for saying that prosecutors went too far.

Where did this law come from?

State lawmakers passed it in 2001, six days after the Sept. 11 attacks, saying the state needed "legislation that is specifically designed to combat the evils of terrorism" and that wasn't just for federal courts. Then-state Sen. Michael Balboni, who was among the law's leading proponents, recalls pointing out that many cases could come via state and local law enforcement officers, who far outnumbered federal agents in New York.

Many other states passed similar laws around the same time, and Congress approved the Patriot Act.

Has New York's anti-terror law been used before?

There's no comprehensive count of cases where the anti-terrorism statute was used, because it can be layered onto many different types of charges, from weapons possession to murder.

The specific first-degree murder "in furtherance of an act of terrorism" charge against Mangione has been the top count in only three other cases statewide, according to the Division of Criminal Justice Services.

In New York City alone, over a half-dozen cases of various sorts have used the terror law, starting with the 2004 indictment of a Bronx gang member. He was accused of killing a 10-year-old girl and paralyzing a man at a christening party.

Manhattan prosecutors got convictions or guilty pleas in cases including plots to bomb synagogues or open fire on their congregants; a plan to build pipe bombs to try to undermine public support for the U.S. wars in Iraq and Afghanistan; alleged efforts to recruit support for the Islamic State group and to provide money and knives to Syrian extremists; and a white supremacist who killed a Black man because of racial hatred.

Friedman Agnifilo was a top deputy to Bragg's predecessor, Cyrus Vance Jr., when some of those cases were prosecuted.

Are there limits on when the terror law applies?

Lawmakers set the parameters broadly. The law doesn't say that cases have to involve mass casualties or international extremism, Balboni said in a telephone interview on Wednesday.

"You're trying to prevent individuals in this country who want to change government and use extremism and violence to that end," whether what they want to change is foreign policy or health care industry regulation, said.

Courts haven't set out overarching rules for when a case qualifies. However, the state's top court said the Bronx gang member's case did not.

The high court overturned his conviction. Justices were skeptical that the shooting — allegedly targeting a rival gang member — was meant to intimidate the broader community. They also worried that the meaning of terrorism could be trivialized if "applied loosely in situations that do not match our collective understanding of what constitutes a terrorist act."

The man, who denied involvement in the shooting, was retried on manslaughter and other charges. He was convicted and sentenced to 50 years in prison.

Is Mangione charged with anything else?

Yes. The indictment includes another second-degree murder charge that doesn't have the terrorism allegation, as well as eight weapons-possession counts.

Survivors recount 'very apocalyptic' cyclone that ripped through French territory of Mayotte

By SAM MEDNICK, ADRIENNE SURPRENANT and SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

MAMOUDZOU, Mayotte (AP) — They clustered around water taps, rare sources of electricity and each other. Four days after the strongest cyclone in nearly a century ripped through the French island territory of Mayotte off the coast of Africa, survivors recalled the horror of the storm that caught many by surprise.

Associated Press journalists reached the humid capital before dusk, as French military personnel and others rushed to clear fallen palm trees from roads ahead of French President Emmanuel Macron's visit Thursday.

Streets were lined with the rubble of informal settlements whose migrant populations complicated the efforts to count the dead.

"We lived something very apocalyptic," said Samuel Anli, 28, who rode out Saturday's storm in a windowless office for hours as shrieking wind gusts exceeding 220 kph (136 mph) tore away doors and walls.

He and others held the door to their small office shut, fearing for their lives. "We thought if it lasted one or two hours more we'd all be dead," he said. His home was partly destroyed and three of his relatives were injured by flying metal.

On Wednesday, French authorities described the storm as a "catastrophe of exceptional intensity."

"The island is devastated," they said, putting the confirmed death toll at 31 but noting that it could be much higher, partly because of the Muslim practice of burying the dead within 24 hours.

Some survivors and aid groups have described hasty burials and the stench of bodies.

Mayotte, located in the Indian Ocean between mainland Africa's east coast and northern Madagascar, is France's poorest territory and is a magnet for migrants hoping to reach Europe.

The cyclone devastated entire neighborhoods as many people ignored the warnings, thinking the storm wouldn't be so extreme.

Days after it passed and destroyed or damaged even sturdy structures such as health centers, residents were left to pick their way through a landscape in search of food. Phone and internet service remained spotty.

Among the damaged and destroyed homes in Mayotte's capital, Mamoudzou, people lined up with jugs to get water Wednesday or waited to charge their phones. Other lines stretched for hours at working gas stations.

The French government deployed gendarmes and other security forces Wednesday to secure food distribution points and assure order in areas where crowds were massing to find fuel or phone signals, the Interior Ministry said in a statement, noting also that more than 8,800 people were being housed in emergency shelter.

Dozens of French military personnel set up camp at the primary airport on Mayotte's main island, Grand Terre, which remained closed due to damage, leaving most residents with little hope of going anywhere soon. Roads were also widely damaged.

French Prime Minister François Bayrou has said more than 1,500 people were injured, more than 200 critically. But authorities fear hundreds or even thousands of people have died. Authorities said 100,000 were living in a "precarious situation."

On the French island of Reunion, about a three-hour flight away, loved ones gathered to donate aid to Mayotte's survivors. Some said their families in Mayotte had no food or water and that it had taken days to contact them.

"It is difficult because I feel helpless," said 19-year-old Khayra Djoumoi Thany.

Anrafa Parassouramin said she feared for her relatives in Mayotte. "We are also afraid of disease outbreaks, because people are drinking water from wherever they can get it, and it's not necessarily potable water," she said.

French Health Minister Geneviève Darrieussecq has raised concerns about the risk of a cholera epidemic on the archipelago, which had an outbreak of a highly drug-resistant strain earlier this year.

French authorities said distribution of 23 tons of water began Wednesday. The French minister for overseas matters, François-Noël Buffet, told French radio Europe 1 that the water supply system was "working at 50%" and presented a risk of "poor quality." Electricity has been partially restored.

Late Wednesday, Buffet announced a "state of extraordinary natural disaster" for Mayotte, an emergency declaration specifically for French overseas territories she said had never been activated before. The measure allows authorities to speed up assistance and cut through administrative hurdles.

"Faced with this extraordinary situation, extraordinary means must be deployed to rapidly reestablish essential services and put in place a sustainable reconstruction plan for Mayotte," she said in a statement. The decree will initially be in place for a month.

Mayotte's hospital was badly damaged. A field hospital should be operational by early next week, Buffet said.

A navy ship was due to arrive in Mayotte on Thursday with 180 tons of aid and equipment, according to the French military.

Macron will travel to Mayotte along with the aid shipment and visit the hospital and a destroyed neighborhood, his office said. "Our compatriots are living through the worst just a few thousand kilometers away," Macron said in a statement.

On Tuesday evening, a program on public broadcaster France 2 raised 5 million euros (\$5.24 million) in aid for Mayotte through the Foundation of France charity, the channel said.

Wisconsin school shooter had 2 guns and got messages from man accused of plotting his own attack

By TODD RICHMOND, SCOTT BAUER and RYAN J. FOLEY Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — The shooter who killed a student and teacher at a religious school in Wisconsin brought two guns to the school and was in contact with a man in California whom authorities say was planning to attack a government building, according to authorities and court documents that became public Wednesday.

Police were still investigating why the 15-year-old student at Abundant Life Christian School in Madison shot and killed a fellow student and teacher on Monday before shooting herself, Madison Police Chief Shon Barnes said. Two other students who were shot remained in critical condition on Wednesday.

"We may never know what she was thinking that day, but we'll do our best to try to add or give as much information to our public as possible," Barnes said.

A California judge, meanwhile, issued a restraining order Tuesday under California's gun red flag law against a 20-year-old Carlsbad man. The order requires the man to turn his guns and ammunition into police within 48 hours unless an officer asks for them sooner because he poses an immediate danger to himself and others.

According to the order, the man told FBI agents that he had been messaging Natalie Rupnow, the Wisconsin shooter, about attacking a government building with a gun and explosives. The order doesn't say what building he had targeted or when he planned to launch his attack. It also doesn't detail his interactions with Rupnow except to state that the man was plotting a mass shooting with her.

The student who was killed in Monday's school shooting was identified in an obituary released Wednesday as Rubi Patricia Vergara, 14, of Madison. She was a freshman at the school and "an avid reader, loved art, singing and playing keyboard in the family worship band," according to the obituary. The Associated Press' attempts to reach the girl's family by phone and email on Wednesday evening were unsuccessful.

The Dane County medical examiner Wednesday evening identified the teacher who was killed as 42-year-old Erin Michelle West, after initially identifying her as Michelle E. West. A man who answered the phone at a number listed for West in public records hung up when reached by a reporter Wednesday evening.

The school's communication director, Barbara Wiers, said in a statement Wednesday evening that Vergara had attended the school since kindergarten.

West worked as a substitute teacher for three years before accepting a position as the school's substitute coordinator and an in-building substitute teacher, Wiers said.

"Our hearts are heavy with these losses," Wiers wrote in an email to The Associated Press.

Police, with the assistance of the FBI, were scouring online records and other resources and speaking with the shooter's parents and classmates in an attempt to determine a motive for the shooting, Barnes said.

Police don't know if anyone was targeted in the attack or if the attack had been planned in advance, the chief said.

"I do not know if she planned it that day or if she planned it a week prior," Barnes said. "To me, bringing a gun to school to hurt people is planning. And so we don't know what the premeditation is."

While Rupnow had two handguns, Barnes said he does not know how she obtained them and he declined to say who purchased them, citing the ongoing investigation.

No decisions have been made about whether Rupnow's parents might be charged in relation to the shooting, but they have been cooperating, Barnes said.

Online court records show no criminal cases against her father, Jeffrey Rupnow, or her mother, Mellissa Rupnow. They are divorced and shared custody of their daughter, but she primarily lived with her father, according to court documents. Divorce records indicate that Natalie was in therapy in 2022, but don't say why.

The school shooting was the latest among dozens across the U.S. in recent years, including especially deadly ones in Newtown, Connecticut, Parkland, Florida, and Uvalde, Texas.

But the Wisconsin shooting stands out because school shootings by teenage females have been extremely rare in the U.S., with males in their teens and 20s carrying out the majority of them, said David Riedman, founder of the K-12 School Shooting Database.

Abundant Life is a nondenominational Christian school that offers prekindergarten classes through high school. About 420 students attend the institution.

Trump brings chaos back to Washington by attempting to kill bipartisan budget deal with Musk's help

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump delivered a likely death blow to bipartisan congressional budget negotiations on Wednesday, rejecting the measure as full of giveaways to Democrats after billionaire ally Elon Musk whipped up outrage toward the bill and cheered on Republican lawmakers who announced their opposition.

Trump's joint statement with Vice President-elect JD Vance, which stopped the bill in its tracks, punctuated a daylong torrent of social media posts by Musk attacking the legislation for what he described as excessive spending.

"Stop the steal of your tax dollars!" Musk wrote on his social media platform X as he dangled primary challenges against anyone who voted for the budget deal, a threat Trump later echoed in a post of his own.

The episode showcased the growing political influence of Musk, whom Trump has selected alongside entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy to spearhead the Department of Government Efficiency, a nongovernmental task force formed to find ways to fire federal workers, cut programs and reduce regulations.

Rep. Andy Barr, a Republican from Kentucky, said his office was flooded with calls from constituents.

"My phone was ringing off the hook," he said. "The people who elected us are listening to Elon Musk."

In his statement with Vance, Trump said Republicans should restart negotiations over the legislation, arguing that "anything else is a betrayal of our country." He also called for including an extension of the debt ceiling while President Joe Biden is in office.

"Increasing the debt ceiling is not great but we'd rather do it on Biden's watch," they said. "If Democrats won't cooperate on a debt ceiling increase now, what makes anyone think they would do it in June during our administration? Let's have this debate over the debt ceiling now."

Trump's opposition to what was considered must-pass legislation reinjected a sense of chaos and political

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 48 of 73

brinkmanship that was reminiscent of his first term in office. It was a dramatic turn of events for House Speaker Mike Johnson, who negotiated the bill and has been undermined by Trump as he faces reelection for his post in just a couple of weeks. Republicans have a slim majority, raising the possibility of a replay of leadership disputes that paralyzed the House a year ago.

Many lawmakers were in the middle of holiday and year-end celebrations with staff when Trump came out against the legislation.

"I've been here 14 years, OK? So nothing up here surprises me anymore," said Rep. Steve Womack, a senior Republican appropriator from Arkansas. "We shouldn't be in this mess."

The Biden administration criticized the possibility of a shutdown.

"Republicans need to stop playing politics with this bipartisan agreement or they will hurt hardworking Americans and create instability across the country," said White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre.

Grover Norquist, president of Americans for Tax Reform and a veteran of Washington's budget battles, was concerned about the lack of a clear plan for resolving the dispute.

"There's got to be a second part of the strategy," he said.

Norquist has been enthusiastic about Musk's ability to generate public attention for efforts to reduce the size of government. But he suggested that the owner of a space rocket company wasn't the right person to spearhead a congressional spending debate.

"He doesn't know politics like he knows physics," he said.

But others were thrilled with Musk's involvement.

"In five years in Congress, I've been awaiting a fundamental change in the dynamic," posted Rep. Dan Bishop, a Republican from North Carolina. "It has arrived."

Musk began criticizing the measure as soon as it was released Tuesday evening, and he continuously posted about it Wednesday.

"Any member of the House or Senate who votes for this outrageous spending bill deserves to be voted out in 2 years!" he wrote. He also called it "one of the worst bills ever written."

Sometimes Musk amplified false claims, such as the idea that the legislation included \$3 billion for a new football stadium in Washington. In reality, the legislation would transfer ownership of the land from the federal government to the city, paving the way for eventual development.

Musk appeared emboldened by the experience.

"The voice of the people was heard," Musk wrote. "This was a good day for America."

Democratic House leader Hakeem Jeffries said the fallout would be Republicans' fault.

"You break the bipartisan agreement, you own the consequences that follow," he wrote on X.

US effort to curb China's and Russia's access to advanced computer chips 'inadequate,' report finds

By AAMER MADHANI and JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Commerce Department's efforts to curb China's and Russia's access to American-made advanced computer chips have been "inadequate" and will need more funding to stymie their ability to manufacture advanced weapons, according to a report published Wednesday by the Senate's Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations.

The Biden administration imposed export controls to limit the ability of China and Russia to access U.S.-made chips after Russia's invasion of Ukraine nearly three years ago.

The agency's Bureau of Industry and Security, according to the report, does not have the resources to enforce export controls and has been too reliant on U.S. chip makers voluntarily complying with the rules.

But the push for bolstering Commerce's export control enforcement comes as the incoming Trump administration says it is looking to dramatically reduce the size and scope of federal government. President-elect Donald Trump has tapped entrepreneurs Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy to lead a new "Department of Government Efficiency" to dismantle parts of the federal government.

The Trump transition team did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the report.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 49 of 73

BIS's budget, about \$191 million, has remained essentially flat since 2010 when adjusted for inflation. "While BIS' budget has been stagnant for a decade, the bureau works diligently around the clock to meet its mission and safeguard U.S. national security," Commerce Department spokesperson Charlie Andrews said in a statement in response to the report.

Andrews added that with "necessary resources from Congress" the agency would be "better equipped to address the challenges that come with our evolving national security environment."

In a letter to Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo on Wednesday, Democratic Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, chair of the subcommittee, pointed to news reports of the Russian military continuing to acquire components from Texas Instruments through front companies in Hong Kong to illustrate how the export controls are failing as an effective tool.

Blumenthal in a statement called on "Commerce to take immediate action and crack down on the companies allowing U.S.-made semiconductors to power Russian weapons and Chinese ambition."

Texas Instruments said it opposes the use of its chips in Russian military equipment and the illicit diversion of its products to Russia.

"It is our policy to comply with export control laws, and any shipments of TI chips into Russia are illicit and unauthorized," the company said in a statement. "If we find evidence indicating product diversion, we investigate and take action."

It's not just Texas Instruments that's the issue. The subcommittee in September published a report that found aggregated exports from four major U.S. advanced chip manufacturers nearly doubled from 2021 to 2022 to Armenia and Georgia.

Both of those countries are home to front companies known to assist Russia in acquiring advanced chips made in the U.S. despite export controls.

China, meanwhile, has created "vast, barely disguised smuggling networks which enable it to continue to harness U.S. technology," the subcommittee report asserts.

Washington has been gradually expanding the number of companies affected by such export controls in China, as President Joe Biden's administration has encouraged an expansion of investments in and manufacturing of chips in the U.S.

But Chinese companies have found ways to evade export controls in part because of a lack of China subject matter experts and Chinese speakers assigned to Commerce's export control enforcement.

The agency's current budget limits the number of international end-use checks, or physical verification overseas of distributors or companies receiving American-made chips that are the supposed end users of products. Currently, Commerce has only 11 export control officers spread around the globe to conduct such checks, the report said.

The committee made several recommendations in its report, including Congress allocating more money for hiring additional personnel to enforce export controls, imposing larger fines on companies that violate controls and requiring periodic reviews of advanced chip companies' export control plans by outside entities.

US stocks fall sharply and Dow tumbles 1,100 points after the Fed hints at just 2 rate cuts for 2025

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. stocks tumbled to one of their worst days of the year after the Federal Reserve hinted Wednesday it may deliver fewer shots of adrenaline for the U.S. economy in 2025 than earlier thought.

The S&P 500 fell 2.9%, just shy of its biggest loss for the year, to pull further from its all-time high set a couple weeks ago. The Dow Jones Industrial Average lost 1,123 points, or 2.6%, and the Nasdaq composite dropped 3.6%.

The Fed said Wednesday it's cutting its main interest rate for a third time this year, continuing the sharp turnaround begun in September when it started lowering rates from a two-decade high to support the job market. Wall Street loves easier interest rates, but that cut was already widely expected.

The bigger question centers on how much more the Fed will cut next year. A lot is riding on it, particu-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 50 of 73

larly after expectations for a series of cuts in 2025 helped the U.S. stock market set an all-time high 57 times so far in 2024.

Fed officials released projections on Wednesday showing the median expectation among them is for two more cuts to the federal funds rate in 2025, or half a percentage point's worth. That's down from the four cuts expected just three months ago.

"We are in a new phase of the process," Fed Chair Jerome Powell said. The central bank has already quickly eased its main interest rate by a full percentage point to a range of 4.25% to 4.50% since September.

Asked why Fed officials are looking to slow their cuts, Powell pointed to how the job market looks to be performing well overall and how recent inflation readings have picked up. He also cited uncertainties that will require policy makers to react to upcoming, to-be-determined changes in the economy.

While lower rates can goose the economy by making it cheaper to borrow and boosting prices for investments, they can also offer more fuel for inflation.

Powell said some Fed officials, but not all, are also already trying to incorporate uncertainties inherent in a new administration coming into the White House. Worries are rising on Wall Street that President-elect Donald Trump's preference for tariffs and other policies could further juice inflation, along with economic growth.

"When the path is uncertain, you go a little slower," Powell said. It's "not unlike driving on a foggy night or walking into a dark room full of furniture. You just slow down."

One official, Cleveland Fed President Beth Hammack, thought the central bank should not have even cut rates this time around. She was the lone vote against Wednesday's rate cut.

The reduced expectations for 2025 rate cuts sent Treasury yields rising in the bond market, squeezing the stock market.

The yield on the 10-year Treasury rose to 4.51% from 4.40% late Tuesday, which is a notable move for the bond market. The two-year yield, which more closely tracks expectations for Fed action, climbed to 4.35% from 4.25%.

On Wall Street, stocks of companies that can feel the most pressure from higher interest rates fell to some of the worst losses.

Stocks of smaller companies did particularly poorly, for example. Many need to borrow to fuel their growth, meaning they can feel more pain when having to pay higher interest rates for loans. The Russell 2000 index of small-cap stocks tumbled 4.4%.

Elsewhere on Wall Street, General Mills dropped 3.1% despite reporting a stronger profit for the latest quarter than expected. The maker of Progresso soups and Cheerios said it will increase its investments in brands to help them grow, which pushed it to cut its forecast for profit this fiscal year.

Nvidia, the superstar stock responsible for a chunk of Wall Street's rally to records in recent years, fell 1.1% to extend its weeklong funk. It has dropped more than 13% from its record set last month and fallen in nine of the last 10 days as its big momentum slows.

On the winning end of Wall Street, Jabil jumped 7.3% to help lead the market after reporting stronger profit and revenue for the latest quarter than analysts expected. The electronics company also raised its forecast for revenue for its full fiscal year.

All told, the S&P 500 fell 178.45 points to 5,872.16. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 1,123.03 to 42,326.87, and the Nasdaq composite skidded 716.37 to 19,392.69.

In stock markets abroad, London's FTSE 100 edged up by less than 0.1% after data showed inflation accelerated to 2.6% in November, its highest level in eight months. The Bank of England is also meeting on interest rates this week and will announce its decision on Thursday.

In Japan, where the Bank of Japan will wrap up its own policy meeting on Friday, the Nikkei 225 slipped 0.7%. That was despite a 23.7% jump for Nissan Motor Corp., which said it was in talks on closer collaboration with Honda Motor Co., though no decision had been made on a possible merger. Honda Motor's stock lost 3%.

Nissan, Honda and Nissan alliance member Mitsubishi Motors Corp. agreed in August to share components for electric vehicles like batteries and to jointly research software for autonomous driving to adapt better to dramatic changes in the auto industry.

US retreats from massive air bag recall and says industry comments show need for more investigation

By TOM KRISHER AP Auto Writer

DETROIT (AP) — U.S. auto safety regulators have backed away from seeking a giant recall of nearly 50 million air bag inflators and will investigate further after the auto industry raised questions about whether all of the inflators are defective.

The move Wednesday by the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is vastly different from a decision reiterated by the agency in July that the inflators made by ARC Automotive Inc. of Tennessee are defective, dangerous and should be recalled.

The agency has said inflators in about 49 million vehicles from 13 manufacturers are at risk of exploding and hurling shrapnel into drivers and passengers. They're responsible for at least seven injuries and two deaths in the U.S. and Canada since 2009, and recalling all of them would have cost millions of dollars.

But in a document posted Wednesday in the Federal Register and dated Dec. 13, the agency said it considered comments on a decision from July seeking the recall. The auto industry pointed to technical and engineering differences between ARC inflators in vehicles made by different manufacturers. The comments also raised manufacturing-process variations at different plants that made the ARC inflators.

"Given the potential relevance of these issues to the agency's decision making, including the appropriate scope of any recall, further investigation is warranted," the agency said in the document.

A message was left Wednesday seeking comment from ARC, which is owned by Yinyi Group of China.

NHTSA said Wednesday that it carefully considered the comments on its decision to seek a recall of all the inflators and decided that more investigation is warranted.

The agency said that in the coming weeks it will send more information request letters to ARC, vehicle manufacturers and air bag-module manufacturing companies.

"NHTSA will evaluate the responses to these information request along with all available information to determine how to proceed," the agency's memorandum said. "If appropriate, NHTSA will provide a further opportunity for public comment prior to considering whether to issue a final decision in this matter."

The agency has been investigating ARC since 2015 after drivers-side inflators blew apart in a 2004 Kia in Canada and a 2002 Chrysler Town & Country minivan in the U.S., both injuring people.

In a supplemental decision in July, NHTSA said seven ARC inflators have ruptured in the field in the U.S., each showing evidence of insufficient welds or too much pressure in a canister designed to contain the explosion and fill the air bags in a crash.

In addition, the agency said 23 inflators have ruptured in testing with causes common to the inflators that blew apart in the field. Also, four inflators have ruptured outside the U.S., killing at least one person, the agency said.

"To be sure, the overwhelming majority of the subject inflators will not rupture upon deployment," NHTSA wrote in July. "However, based on the evidence linking past ruptures to the same friction welding process, all of the subject inflators are at risk of rupturing."

But several automakers argued in public comments that years of investigations by NHTSA did not establish a systemic design defect. Some said none of the millions of inflators in their vehicles have ruptured due to the cause pointed out by the agency.

NHTSA had said the only way to know which of the ARC-designed inflators will blow apart is for them to deploy in a crash. The federal motor vehicle safety act "does not allow such a defect to go unaddressed," the agency said.

One person who died after an ARC inflator explosion was Marlene Beaudoin, a 40-year-old mother of 10 from Michigan's Upper Peninsula. She was struck by metal fragments when her 2015 Chevrolet Traverse SUV was involved in a minor crash in 2021. Beaudoin and four of her sons had been on their way to get ice cream. The sons were not hurt.

Federal Reserve cuts its key rate by a quarter-point but envisions fewer reductions next year

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve cut its key interest rate Wednesday by a quarter-point — its third cut this year — but also signaled that it expects to reduce rates more slowly next year than it previously envisioned, mostly because of still-elevated inflation.

The Fed's 19 policymakers projected that they will cut their benchmark rate by a quarter-point just twice in 2025, down from their estimate in September of four rate cuts. Their new projections suggest that consumers may not enjoy much lower rates next year for mortgages, auto loans, credit cards and other forms of borrowing.

The central bank's expectation of just two rate cuts in 2025 rattled Wall Street, sending stock prices plummeting in the worst day for the market in four months. The Dow Jones Industrial Average closed down more than 1,100 points, roughly 2.5%. The Nasdaq composite was hit worse: It sank about 3.5% Wednesday. Higher interest rates can slow business expansion.

Speaking at a news conference, Chair Jerome Powell underscored that policymakers are slowing their rate reductions as their benchmark rate nears a level that policymakers refer to as "neutral" — the level that is thought to neither spur nor hinder the economy.

Wednesday's projections suggest that the policymakers think they may be close to that level. Their benchmark rate stands at 4.3% after the latest rate cut, which followed a steep half-point reduction in September and a quarter-point cut last month.

"I think that a slower pace of (rate) cuts really reflects both the higher inflation readings we've had this year and the expectations that inflation will be higher" in 2025, Powell said. "We're closer to the neutral rate, which is another reason to be cautious about further moves."

Blerina Uruci, chief economist at T. Rowe Price, said the tone of Powell's news conference was surprisingly "hawkish," meaning that it seemed to favor maintaining relatively high rates.

Uruci noted that Powell said the Fed's decision Wednesday to reduce its benchmark rate by a quarter-point was a "closer call," indicating that there was opposition to the move. Indeed, four officials supported keeping rates unchanged Wednesday, according to the projections. Not all 19 policymakers have a vote at each meeting. One — Beth Hammack, head of the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland — voted against the rate cut because she favored keeping rates unchanged.

"The committee might be quite divided at this point," Uruci said. "And we have a growing hawkish contingent."

At his news conference, Powell acknowledged that at least some Fed officials have begun to assess the potential effects of President-elect Donald Trump's policies on the economy and inflation. The Fed chair noted that some policymakers think that since the election, the future path of inflation has become harder to gauge. Trump's threats to impose tariffs on all imports and to engage in mass deportations of migrants could worsen inflation next year.

"It's kind of common-sense thinking that when the path is uncertain, you go a little bit slower," Powell said. "It's not unlike driving on a foggy night or walking into a dark room with furniture. Just slow down."

This year's Fed rate reductions have marked a reversal after more than two years of high rates, which largely helped tame inflation but also made borrowing painfully expensive for American consumers.

But now, the Fed is facing a variety of challenges as it seeks to complete a "soft landing" for the economy, whereby high rates manage to curb inflation without causing a recession. Chief among them is that inflation remains sticky: According to the Fed's preferred gauge, annual "core" inflation, which excludes the most volatile categories, was 2.8% in October. That is still persistently above the central bank's 2% target.

At the same time, the economy is growing briskly, which suggests that higher rates haven't much restrained the economy. As a result, some economists — and some Fed officials — have argued that borrowing rates shouldn't be lowered much more for fear of overheating the economy and re-igniting inflation.

On the other hand, the pace of hiring has cooled significantly since 2024 began, a potential worry be-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 53 of 73

cause one of the Fed's mandates is to achieve maximum employment.

"We don't think we need further cooling in the labor market to get inflation below 2%," Powell said at his news conference.

The unemployment rate, while still low at 4.2%, has risen nearly a full percentage point in the past two years. Concern over rising unemployment contributed to the Fed's decision in September to cut its key rate by a larger-than-usual half point.

Asked why the central bank envisions any rate cuts in 2025 given still-elevated inflation, Powell noted that the Fed's latest projections "have core inflation coming down to 2.5% next year."

"That would be significant progress," he said. "We'd be seeing meaningful progress to get inflation down to that level."

The Fed chair added: "We and most other forecasters still feel that we are on track to get down to 2%. It might take a year or two from here."

Trump has proposed a range of tax cuts — on Social Security benefits, tipped income and overtime income — as well as a scaling-back of regulations. Collectively, these moves could stimulate growth. At the same time, Trump has threatened to impose a variety of tariffs and to seek mass deportations of migrants, which could accelerate inflation.

Powell acknowledged that Fed officials are seeking "to understand ways tariffs can affect inflation and the economy and how to think about that."

The Fed's uncertainty about the economy's future path was underscored by the quarterly economic projections the Fed issued Wednesday. The policymakers now expect overall inflation, as measured by their preferred gauge, to rise slightly from 2.3% now to 2.5% by the end of 2025. That is far below its peak of 7.2% in June 2022.

Even so, the prospect of slightly higher inflation makes it harder for the Fed to reduce borrowing costs because high interest rates are its principal weapon against inflation.

"From here, it's a new phase," Powell said, "and we're going to be cautious about new cuts."

23XI Racing and Front Row can compete in NASCAR's 2025 season as chartered teams in legal victory

CHARLOTTE, N.C. (AP) — The two teams suing NASCAR over an antitrust complaint were granted a preliminary injunction Wednesday that will allow them to compete as chartered teams in 2025.

U.S. District Court Judge Kenneth D. Bell said in his ruling, which favors 23XI Racing and Front Row Motorsports, that "NASCAR fans (and members of the public who may become fans) have an interest in watching all the teams compete with their best drivers and most competitive teams."

NASCAR did not immediately respond to a request for comment and has not said if it plans to appeal.

23XI, the team owned by NBA Hall of Famer Michael Jordan and three-time Daytona 500 winner Denny Hamlin, and Front Row refused in September to sign take-it-or-leave-it revenue sharing offers made by NASCAR just 48 hours before the start of the playoffs.

A charter is essentially a franchise and guarantees prize money, a spot in the field each week and other protections.

The teams filed an antitrust suit alleging NASCAR owners are "monopolistic bullies" and were denied in federal court in November a request to be recognized as "chartered" teams as the suit continues.

23XI and Front Row can now sign the charter agreements and still pursue their lawsuit. They also each were granted permission to purchase additional charters from Stewart Haas Racing, which closed its four-team shop at the end of the 2024 season, and NASCAR must approve the transfers to those teams.

"YESSSSSS!!!!!!!" Hamlin wrote on social media.

It was a much-needed win for 23XI. Tyler Reddick, who finished fourth in the 2024 Cup standings, had an opt-out clause in his contract that would have gone into effect Wednesday and made him a free agent if the team did not land a charter for next season. Fellow 23XI driver Bubba Wallace also informed his team he needed to know how it intended to compete "immediately" so he could explore options with

other teams, the judge wrote.

Jordan had said he took the fight to court on behalf of all teams competing in the top motorsports series in the United States. NASCAR had argued that the two teams simply do not like the terms of the final charter agreement and asked for the lawsuit be dismissed.

Both Front Row and 23XI want to expand from two full-time cars to three. They have agreements with SHR to purchase one charter each. SHR is now Haas Factory and has plans to use one charter in 2025.

Until Wednesday's injunction, 23XI and Front Row would have been forced to compete next season as "open" teams that don't have the same protections or financial gains that come from holding a charter.

The teams contend they must be chartered under some of their contractual agreements with current sponsors and drivers, and competing next year as open teams will cause significant losses.

Earlier this month, the suit was transferred to a different judge than the one who heard the first round of arguments and ruled against the two teams in their request for a temporary injunction to be recognized in 2025 as chartered teams as the case proceeds.

"Here, the public interest strongly favors entry of a limited preliminary injunction in favor of the Plaintiffs during the 2025 NASCAR race season, both to give fans of stock car racing the opportunity to watch (and root for and against) the full slate of teams and to allow Plaintiffs' antitrust legal challenges to be considered," Bell wrote.

Front Row is owned by businessman Bob Jenkins, while 23XI is owned by Jordan, Hamlin and longtime Jordan adviser Curtis Polk.

Jenkins told The Associated Press in October that the two teams stood to miss out on \$45 million in combined revenue if they competed without charters. But he was willing to do so for Front Row because he believed the case against NASCAR was winnable.

NASCAR had been operating with 36 chartered teams and four open spots since the charter agreement began in 2016.

"The availability of multiple sports in the United States says nothing about NASCAR's control of a major one of them in the same way that the availability of professional basketball and football did not lead to a finding that the NCAA was not a monopolist," the judge ruled.

Judge: Pardoning Oath Keepers leader Stewart Rhodes for Capitol riot plot would be 'frightening'

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The federal judge who presided over the seditious conspiracy case against Oath Keepers members said Wednesday that it would be "frightening" if the anti-government group's founder, Stewart Rhodes, is pardoned for orchestrating a violent plot to keep Donald Trump in the White House after he lost the 2020 presidential election.

President-elect Donald Trump repeatedly has vowed to pardon rioters who stormed the U.S. Capitol nearly four years ago. Rhodes is serving an 18-year prison sentence after a jury convicted him and other Oath Keepers members of seditious conspiracy, the most serious charge stemming from the Jan. 6, 2021, attack by a mob of Trump supporters.

U.S. District Judge Amit Mehta alluded to the prospect of Rhodes receiving a presidential pardon as he sentenced William Todd Wilson, a former Oath Keepers member from North Carolina who pleaded guilty to seditious conspiracy.

"The notion that Stewart Rhodes could be absolved of his actions is frightening and ought to be frightening to anyone who cares about democracy in this country," Mehta said.

Mehta isn't the first judge at the federal courthouse in Washington, D.C., to criticize the possibility that Trump could pardon hundreds of Capitol rioters when he returns to the White House next month. U.S. District Judge Carl Nichols, a Trump nominee, said during a hearing last month that it would be "beyond frustrating and disappointing" if the Republican president-elect issues blanket pardons to Capitol rioters.

On the campaign trial this year, Trump repeatedly referred to Jan. 6 rioters as "hostages" and "patriots"

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 55 of 73

and said he “absolutely” would pardon rioters who assaulted police “if they’re innocent.” Trump also has suggested that he would consider pardoning former Proud Boys leader Enrique Tarrio, who was sentenced to 22 years in prison for a separate plot to stop the peaceful transfer of presidential power from Trump to President Joe Biden.

Over 20 judges have presided over more than 1,500 cases against people charged in the Jan. 6 riot. Many Capitol riot defendants have asked for post-election delays in their cases, but judges largely have denied their requests and forged ahead with sentencings, guilty pleas and other hearings.

Wilson, 48, of Newton Grove, North Carolina, was one of several Oath Keepers who cooperated with the Justice Department’s investigation of the far-right extremist group — one of the most consequential prosecutions arising from the Jan. 6 siege.

Mehta sentenced Wilson to one year of home detention and three years of probation instead of prison. Prosecutors had recommended one year of incarceration for Wilson, a U.S. Army veteran and former firefighter.

The judge praised Wilson’s courage for acknowledging his guilt while many of his co-conspirators have not. “Setting the history books straight came at a great price to you,” Mehta told Wilson, who lost his military benefits after his guilty plea in May 2022.

Rhodes and his followers amassed weapons and set up “quick reaction force” teams at a Virginia hotel that could ferry guns into the nation’s capital if they were needed to support their plot. The guns stayed at the hotel, but Mehta said it is chilling to think that “one order from a madman” could have led to weapons deployed during a riot.

“Just to speak those words out loud ought to be shocking to anyone,” the judge added.

Wilson didn’t testify at any of the trials for Oath Keepers leaders, members and associates charged in the Jan. 6 attack. Prosecutors said he harmed his credibility by making contradictory statements to investigators about his criminal conduct.

“What we want to hear from witnesses is the truth, unvarnished and without an attempt to curry favor with the government,” said Assistant U.S. Attorney Kathryn Rakoczy.

Wilson expressed remorse and shame for his role in the Jan. 6 attack.

“I have lost a lot of things since then,” he said. “The mental burden that this has had on me has been almost unbearable.”

Also on Wednesday, prosecutors asked a different judge to reject a convicted Capitol rioter’s request to attend Trump’s Jan. 20 inauguration ceremony in Washington while she is under the court’s supervision. The rioter, New Hampshire resident Cindy Young, was sentenced on Nov. 21 to four months of prison and one year of supervised release.

Prosecutors argued that Young poses a danger to the nation’s capital and to the police officers who defended the Capitol on Jan. 6. U.S. Magistrate Judge Michael Harvey gave Young until Dec. 24 to respond to prosecutors’ arguments.

Supreme Court to weigh state moves to cut off Medicaid funding to Planned Parenthood

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court said Wednesday it will consider South Carolina’s move to cut off Medicaid funding to Planned Parenthood, the latest abortion-related case since the justices overturned *Roe v. Wade*.

The court agreed to take up the state’s appeal of a lower-court ruling focused on whether Medicaid patients can sue over their right to choose their own qualified provider. The case will be argued in the spring.

South Carolina moved in 2018 to cut off funding to Planned Parenthood. The organization uses Medicaid funding for family planning health services rather than abortions, but Gov. Henry McMaster said any public money sent there “results in the subsidy of abortion.”

Medicaid does not pay for abortion except in cases when a pregnant woman’s life is at risk or the preg-

nancy is the result of rape or incest. Planned Parenthood has previously said it gets less than \$100,000 in South Carolina, one of many conservative-leaning states that sought to halt or reduce public funding for the nation's largest U.S. abortion provider.

The 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals blocked the move after a challenge from the organization and a patient. It found that federal law lets Medicaid patients choose their providers, and sue if necessary.

Planned Parenthood's medical services include birth control, cancer screenings and STD testing as well as abortions. Its two clinics in South Carolina serve hundreds of patients a year covered by Medicaid, a joint federal and state program that covers health services for low-income people.

South Carolina now bans abortion around six weeks of pregnancy, or when cardiac activity is detected, with limited exceptions. Most Republican-controlled states have move to restrict it since the high court overturned constitutional protections for abortion in 2022.

"South Carolina is free to use its limited funding to subsidize life-affirming care," said John Bursch, an attorney with the group Alliance Defending Freedom who is representing the state. Other appeals courts have differed from the 4th Circuit, making it more important for the Supreme Court to take up the issue, he said.

Planned Parenthood had urged the court not to take up the case, saying in court papers that its affiliates "provide essential medical care to low-income individuals" and the law clearly gives patients the right to sue if cut off from accessing it.

The case is "politics at its worst," Jenny Black, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood South Atlantic, said in a statement. Black's organization operates the South Carolina clinics.

"Everyone should be able to access quality, affordable health care from a provider they trust," she said.

France's highest court upholds corruption conviction of former President Nicolas Sarkozy

By SYLVIE CORBET Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — France's highest court has upheld an appeal court decision which had found former President Nicolas Sarkozy guilty of corruption and influence peddling while he was the country's head of state.

Sarkozy, 69, faces a year in prison, but is expected to ask to be detained at home with an electronic bracelet — as is the case for any sentence of two years or less.

He was found guilty of corruption and influence peddling by both a Paris court in 2021 and an appeals court in 2023 for trying to bribe a magistrate in exchange for information about a legal case in which he was implicated.

"The convictions and sentences are therefore final," a Court of Cassation statement on Wednesday said.

Sarkozy, who was France's president from 2007 to 2012, retired from public life in 2017 though still plays an influential role in French conservative politics. He was among the guests who attended the reopening of Notre Dame Cathedral earlier this month.

Sarkozy, in a statement posted on X, said "I will assume my responsibilities and face all the consequences."

He added: "I have no intention of complaining. But I am not prepared to accept the profound injustice done to me."

Sarkozy said he will seek to bring the case to the European Court of Human Rights, and hopes those proceedings will result in "France being condemned."

He reiterated his "full innocence."

"My determination is total in this case as in all others," he concluded.

Sarkozy's lawyer, Patrice Spinosi, said his client "will comply" with the ruling. This means the former president will have to wear an electronic bracelet, Spinosi said.

It is the first time in France's modern history that a former president has been convicted and sentenced to a prison term for actions during his term.

Sarkozy's predecessor, Jacques Chirac, was found guilty in 2011 of misuse of public money during his time as Paris mayor and was given a two-year suspended prison sentence.

Sarkozy has been involved in several other legal cases. He has denied any wrongdoing. He faces another trial next month in Paris over accusations he took millions of dollars from then-Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi to illegally finance his successful 2007 campaign.

The corruption case that led to Wednesday's ruling focused on phone conversations that took place in February 2014.

At the time, investigative judges had launched an inquiry into the financing of Sarkozy's 2007 presidential campaign. During the inquiry, they discovered that Sarkozy and his lawyer, Thierry Herzog, were communicating via secret mobile phones registered to the alias "Paul Bismuth."

Wiretapped conversations on those phones led prosecutors to suspect Sarkozy and Herzog of promising magistrate Gilbert Azibert a job in Monaco in exchange for leaking information about another legal case involving Sarkozy. Azibert never got the post and legal proceedings against Sarkozy have been dropped in the case he was seeking information about.

Prosecutors had concluded, however, that the proposal still constitutes corruption under French law, even if the promise wasn't fulfilled. Sarkozy vigorously denied any malicious intention in his offer to help Azibert. Azibert and Herzog have also been found guilty in the case.

Supreme Court will hear arguments over the law that could ban TikTok in the US if it's not sold

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Wednesday said it will hear arguments next month over the constitutionality of the federal law that could ban TikTok in the United States if its Chinese parent company doesn't sell it.

The justices will hear arguments Jan. 10 about whether the law impermissibly restricts speech in violation of the First Amendment.

The law, enacted in April, set a Jan. 19 deadline for TikTok to be sold or else face a ban in the United States. The popular social media platform has more than 170 million users in the U.S.

It's unclear how quickly a decision might come. But the high court still could act after the arguments to keep the law from taking effect pending a final ruling, if at least five of the nine justices think it's unconstitutional.

Lawyers for the company and China-based ByteDance had urged the justices to step in before Jan. 19. The high court also will hear arguments from content creators who rely on the platform for income and some TikTok users.

The timing of the arguments means that the outgoing Biden administration's Justice Department will make the case in defense of the law that passed Congress with bipartisan support and was signed by Democratic President Joe Biden in April.

The incoming Republican administration might not have the same view of the law.

President-elect Donald Trump, who once supported a ban but then pledged during the campaign to "save TikTok," has said his administration would take a look at the situation. Trump met with TikTok CEO Shou Zi Chew at Trump's Mar-a-Lago club in Florida on Monday.

The companies have said that a shutdown lasting just a month would cause TikTok to lose about one-third of its daily users in the U.S. and significant advertising revenue.

The case pits free speech rights against the government's stated aims of protecting national security, while raising novel issues about social media platforms.

"We believe the Court will find the TikTok ban unconstitutional so the over 170 million Americans on our platform can continue to exercise their free speech rights," TikTok spokesman Michael Hughes said in a statement.

Free-speech advocates also praised the court's decision to step in.

The government should not be able to restrict speech "without proving with evidence that the tools are presently seriously harmful. But in this case, Congress has required and the DC Circuit approved TikTok's

forced divestiture based only upon fears of future potential harm. This greatly lowers well-established standards for restricting freedom of speech in the U.S.," David Greene, a lawyer with the Electronic Frontier Foundation, said in a statement.

A panel of federal judges on the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit unanimously upheld the law on Dec. 6, then denied an emergency plea to delay the law's implementation.

Without court action, the law would take effect Jan. 19 and expose app stores that offer TikTok and internet hosting services that support it to potential fines.

It would be up to the Justice Department to enforce the law, investigating possible violations and seeking sanctions. But lawyers for TikTok and ByteDance have argued that Trump's Justice Department might pause enforcement or otherwise seek to mitigate the law's most severe consequences. Trump takes office a day after the law is supposed to go into effect.

What Americans think of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and his health stances

By AMANDA SEITZ and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The kids seen by Dolores Mejia around suburban Phoenix have been growing heavier in recent years. Their parents, too, she says.

Mejia, a 75-year-old retiree, says she's also had her own weight struggles on the scale.

That's why Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s pledge to "Make America Healthy Again" as he campaigned alongside Donald Trump caught her attention. She liked the questions Kennedy raised about the role of processed foods in America's obesity epidemic.

"I'm a junk food person," said Mejia, an ardent Trump supporter. "I started wondering where those extra pounds came from."

After hearing Kennedy out, she concluded: "We cannot trust the health organizations we've trusted for years to tell us that our foods are safe."

Republicans such as Mejia have embraced Kennedy, whose alliance with the president-elect could make the prominent environmentalist and vaccine skeptic the nation's top health official next year. Republicans hold an overwhelmingly positive view of Kennedy, with most approving of Trump's decision to put him in his administration, according to recent polling from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters in the 2024 presidential election.

But Americans overall are less positive about Kennedy, and there isn't broad support for some of his views, which include closer scrutiny of vaccines.

If confirmed by the Senate, Kennedy will be charged with leading the Department of Health and Human Services, a \$1.7 trillion agency that researches cancer, approves prescription drugs and provides health insurance for roughly half the country.

What Americans think about RFK Jr. as nation's top health official

About 6 in 10 Republicans approve of Kennedy's appointment to Trump's Cabinet and only about 1 in 10 disapprove, according to an AP-NORC poll conducted in December, while the rest aren't familiar with him or didn't have an opinion.

He's found allies in the most conservative corners of the Republican Party. Heritage Foundation President Kevin Roberts credited Kennedy at an event on Wednesday for "sounding the alarm for years" about the what he sees as the dangerous nexus of government agencies, non-profits and corporations that have made Americans sicker and more obese.

Kennedy's talk of healthy foods is what captured the attention of Natalie Morales, a 32-year-old engineer in Albuquerque, New Mexico, who identifies as an independent.

She likes his promises to take on powerful companies. And she's eager to see him challenge the ingredients they use in the food she finds on supermarket shelves.

"Even just buying foods from the grocery store, like what else is in there?" Morales said. "That's my main

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 59 of 73

concern, and hopefully he can figure out what the underlying issues are and see if we can do better.”

Kennedy doesn't fare as well among Americans overall, with about 4 in 10 U.S. adults disapproving and about 3 in 10 approving of his appointment.

Although Kennedy is a member of one of the most powerful Democratic dynasties in the country, most Democrats said they don't like that he's been named to Trump's Cabinet. About 6 in 10 Democrats "strongly disapprove" of the pick, the December poll found. That's a higher share of disapproval than other high-profile picks such as Pete Hegseth to be defense secretary or Marco Rubio for secretary of state.

His anti-vaccine stance isn't broadly popular

Kennedy started his career as an environmental lawyer and won big lawsuits against companies over the chemicals used in weed killers and heavy metal smelters.

But in recent years, he's attracted a sizable and loyal following over his claims that vaccines, recommended and championed by the nation's public health agencies, are dangerous. That's despite decades of research, laboratory testing and real-world use that shows childhood vaccinations have prevented millions of deaths.

"There's no vaccine that is safe and effective," Kennedy said on a podcast in July 2023. During a Fox News interview the same year, he said he believes a repeatedly discredited idea that vaccines can cause autism. In recent days, Trump has increasingly suggested that the link between autism and vaccines should be studied — although decades of research has already concluded there is no connection between the two.

Trump and Kennedy allies have promised not to take away vaccines, instead saying they oppose government mandates and want to conduct more research on the vaccines.

But about half of voters want the government to be more involved in ensuring children are vaccinated for childhood diseases, according to AP VoteCast.

About one-quarter said the government's current involvement on this is "about right," and only about 2 in 10 wanted the government to be less involved. But parents of school-age children were somewhat more likely to support a smaller government role: Roughly 3 in 10 parents of children under 18 wanted the government less involved, compared with about 2 in 10 voters without children under 18.

Among Trump's voters, about one-third wanted the government less involved in ensuring children are vaccinated for childhood diseases.

A similar share wanted the government more involved, and about 3 in 10 said its involvement was about right. Roughly 4 in 10 Trump voters who are parents of children under 18 said they want the government less involved in ensuring children are vaccinated, while about one-third said they wanted it more involved.

Kennedy's anti-vaccine nonprofit group, Children's Health Defense, currently has a lawsuit pending against a number of news organizations, among them the AP, accusing them of violating antitrust laws by taking action to identify misinformation, including about COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccines. Kennedy took leave from the group when he announced his run for president but is listed as one of its attorneys in the lawsuit.

Most Republican voters liked RFK Jr., and most Democrats did not

People who voted in the presidential race this November held divided views on Kennedy, according to AP VoteCast.

Kennedy had dropped out of the presidential race by that point, throwing his support behind Trump, but remained on the ballot in some states.

About 4 in 10 voters had a very or somewhat favorable opinion of Kennedy, and roughly 4 in 10 had a very or somewhat unfavorable view. Slightly more than 1 in 10 did not know enough about Kennedy to have an opinion.

Republican voters — about two-thirds — were more likely to hold a favorable view of Kennedy, much higher than the roughly 2 in 10 Democrats who viewed him positively. Meanwhile, about 7 in 10 Democrats had a negative opinion of Kennedy, with about half saying they had a "very unfavorable" view.

Several children killed in stampede at a holiday fair event in Nigeria, state governor says

By DYEPKAZAH SHIBAYAN Associated Press

ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — Several children have died during a stampede on Wednesday at a holiday funfair in southwestern Nigeria, authorities said.

The incident happened at the Islamic High School in Basorun, Oyo State, near the economic hub of Lagos. Security forces attended the scene and arrested the event organizers, state governor Seyi Makinde said in a statement.

"Earlier today, an incident occurred in Islamic High School Basorun, the venue of an event organised for families. Sadly, a stampede at the venue has led to multiple loss of lives and injuries. This is a very sad day," Makinde said.

"We sympathise with the parents whose joy has suddenly been turned to mourning due to these deaths," he added.

Nigeria's national emergency services said it has deployed a team to help provide assistance to the victims.

Children injured at the venue were taken to local hospitals where parents were asked to check for missing persons.

Video footage that appeared to be from the scene showed a large crowd of mostly children looking on as some children were being carried away from an open field.

Local media identified the event organizers as the Women In Need Of Guidance and Support Foundation, which held a similar event for children last year.

The group was preparing to host up to 5,000 young people at this year's event, the Oyo-based Agidigbo FM radio station reported on Tuesday, citing the organizers who had featured on its program. Children "will win exciting prizes like scholarships and other bountiful gifts," they said.

An investigation has been opened into the causes of the stampede, Makinde said, adding "anyone directly or remotely involved in this disaster will be held accountable."

House Ethics Committee secretly voted to release Matt Gaetz ethics report, source says

By FARNOUSH AMIRI and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House Ethics Committee voted in secret to release the long-awaited ethics report into ex-Rep. Matt Gaetz, raising the possibility that the allegations against the Florida Republican who was President-elect Donald Trump's first choice for attorney general could be made public in the coming days.

The decision by the bipartisan committee was made earlier this month, according to a person familiar with the vote who was not authorized to publicly discuss the matter and spoke on condition of anonymity Wednesday. CNN first reported the vote.

It's a stunning turnaround for the often secretive panel of five Republicans and five Democrats. Just last month, members voted along party lines to not release the findings of their nearly four-year investigation into allegations of sexual misconduct with minors and use of illicit drugs while Gaetz was in office.

Democrats had pressed to make the report public even though Gaetz was no longer in Congress and had withdrawn as Trump's pick to lead the Justice Department. A vote on the House floor this month to force the report's release failed; all but one Republican voted against it.

Gaetz lashed out Wednesday on social media against the latest development, again denying any wrongdoing. He criticized the committee for its move after he had left Congress, saying he would have "no opportunity to debate or rebut as a former member of the body."

"It's embarrassing, though not criminal, that I probably partied, womanized, drank and smoked more than I should have earlier in life," Gaetz posted on X, the website formerly known as Twitter. "I live a different life now."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 61 of 73

Most Republicans have argued that any congressional investigation into Gaetz ended when he resigned from the House. Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., also requested that the committee not publish its report, saying it would be a terrible precedent.

While ethics reports have previously been released after a member's resignation, it is extremely rare.

Gaetz has noted that the Justice Department's separate investigation against him into sex trafficking allegations involving underage girls ended last year without federal charges.

Onetime political ally Joel Greenberg, a fellow Republican who served as the tax collector in Florida's Seminole County, admitted as part of a plea deal with prosecutors in 2021 that he paid women and an underage girl to have sex with him and other men. The men were not identified in court documents when he pleaded guilty. Greenberg was sentenced in late 2022 to 11 years in prison.

What a merger between Nissan and Honda could mean for the automakers and the industry

By ELAINE KURTENBACH AP Business Writer

BANGKOK (AP) — Japanese automakers Nissan Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co. confirmed Wednesday that they are discussing closer collaboration but denied reports they have decided on a merger.

Nissan's share price soared nearly 24% in Tokyo after reports citing unnamed sources said it might merge with Honda to form the world's third-largest automaking group. Honda's share price fell as much as 3%. Nissan alliance member Mitsubishi Motors Corp. is also part of the talks.

Trading in Nissan's shares was suspended but then resumed after the companies jointly issued a statement saying they were "considering various possibilities for future collaboration, but no decisions have been made."

An industry shakeup

The ascent of Chinese automakers is rattling the industry at a time when manufacturers are struggling to shift from fossil fuel-driven vehicles to electrics. Relatively inexpensive EVs from China's BYD, Great Wall and Nio are eating into the market shares of U.S. and Japanese car companies in China and elsewhere.

Japanese automakers have lagged behind big rivals in EVs and are now trying to cut costs and make up for lost time.

Nissan, Honda and Mitsubishi announced in August that they will share components for electric vehicles like batteries and jointly research software for autonomous driving to adapt better to dramatic changes in the auto industry centered around electrification. A preliminary agreement between Honda, Japan's second-largest automaker, and Nissan, third largest, was announced in March.

A merger could result in a behemoth worth about \$55 billion based on the market capitalization of all three automakers.

Joining forces would help the smaller Japanese automakers add scale to compete with Japan's market leader Toyota Motor Corp. and with Germany's Volkswagen AG. Toyota itself has technology partnerships with Japan's Mazda Motor Corp. and Subaru Corp.

What would Honda need from Nissan?

Nissan has truck-based body-on-frame large SUVs such as the Armada and Infiniti QX80 that Honda doesn't have, with large towing capacities and good off-road performance, said Sam Fiorani, vice president of AutoForecast Solutions.

Nissan also has years of experience building batteries and electric vehicles, and gas-electric hybrid powertrains that could help Honda in developing its own EVs and next generation of hybrids, he said.

"Nissan does have some product segments where Honda doesn't currently play," that a merger or partnership could help, said Sam Abuelsamid, a Detroit-area automotive industry analyst.

While Nissan's electric Leaf and Ariya haven't sold well in the U.S., they're solid vehicles, Fiorani said. "They haven't been resting on their laurels, and they have been developing this technology," he said. "They have new products coming that could provide a good platform for Honda for its next generation."

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 62 of 73

Why now?

Nissan said last month that it was slashing 9,000 jobs, or about 6% of its global work force, and reducing global production capacity by 20% after reporting a quarterly loss of 9.3 billion yen (\$61 million).

Earlier this month it reshuffled its management and its chief executive, Makoto Uchida, took a 50% pay cut to take responsibility for the financial woes, saying Nissan needed to become more efficient and respond better to market tastes, rising costs and other global changes.

Fitch Ratings recently downgraded Nissan's credit outlook to "negative," citing worsening profitability, partly due to price cuts in the North American market. But it noted that it has a strong financial structure and solid cash reserves that amounted to 1.44 trillion yen (\$9.4 billion).

Nissan's share price has fallen to the point where it is considered something of a bargain. A report in the Japanese financial magazine Diamond said talks with Honda gained urgency after the Taiwan maker of iPhones Hon Hai Precision Industry Co., better known as Foxconn, began exploring a possible acquisition of Nissan as part of its push into the EV sector.

The company has struggled for years following a scandal that began with the arrest of its former chairman Carlos Ghosn in late 2018 on charges of fraud and misuse of company assets, allegations that he denies. He eventually was released on bail and fled to Lebanon.

Honda reported its profits slipped nearly 20% in the first half of the April-March fiscal year from a year earlier, as sales suffered in China.

More headwinds

Toyota made 11.5 million vehicles in 2023, while Honda rolled out 4 million and Nissan produced 3.4 million. Mitsubishi Motors made just over 1 million. Even after a merger Toyota would remain the leading Japanese automaker.

All the global automakers are facing potential shocks if President-elect Donald Trump follows through on threats to raise or impose tariffs on imports of foreign products, even from allies like Japan and neighboring countries like Canada and Mexico. Nissan is among the major car companies that have adjusted their supply chains to include vehicles assembled in Mexico.

Meanwhile, analysts say there is an "affordability shift" taking place across the industry, led by people who feel they cannot afford to pay nearly \$50,000 for a new vehicle. In American, a vital market for companies like Nissan, Honda and Toyota, that's forcing automakers to consider lower pricing, which will eat further into industry profits.

Donald Trump said he wants to ban trans athletes from competing. The reality is more nuanced

By WILL GRAVES AP National Writer

One of President-elect Donald Trump's most popular talking points during his campaign centered on the future of transgender athletes.

Trump revisited the topic multiple times in the months and weeks before the election, suggesting at his rallies that one of the goals of his second term would be to "keep men out of women's sports." Millions were spent on advertising that turned something that affects a tiny minority of competitors into a wedge issue.

More than half of voters overall — and the vast majority of Trump supporters — said support for transgender rights in government and society has gone too far, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters nationwide.

What, exactly, Trump will do when he takes office on Jan. 20 is unclear. His transition team has not divulged any specifics, though the president-elect said during his campaign that the process would be "easy."

In some ways, it might be. In others, things could be far murkier.

What did Trump say during the campaign?

A lot. Trump seemed to identify the discussion around the rights of transgender people in general and trans athletes in particular as one that could garner both attention and support that went beyond his usual base.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 63 of 73

Trump would often use language about gender identity that LGBTQ+ advocates say is wrong and harmful. He also falsely labeled two Olympic female boxers as men, and said their ability to participate in the Paris Games was “demeaning to women” even though both Imane Khelif of Algeria and Li Yu-ting of Taiwan were assigned female at birth and identify as women.

Trump ramped up the rhetoric as election day approached, telling the crowd at a Madison Square Garden rally in October: “We will get ... transgender insanity the hell out of our schools, and we will keep men out of women’s sports.”

What are the presidential powers in this area?

Trump has said on Day 1 that he would cut federal funding to “any school pushing critical race theory, transgender insanity, and other inappropriate racial, sexual or political content on our children.”

There are several layers to this, but the most immediate would be how his administration interprets Title IX, the law best known for its role in pursuing gender equity in athletics and preventing sexual harassment on campuses.

Every administration has the authority to issue its own interpretations of the landmark legislation. The last two presidential administrations — including Trump’s first — offer a glimpse at the push-pull involved.

Betsy DeVos, the education secretary during Trump’s first term, issued a Title IX policy in 2020 that narrowed the definition of sexual harassment and required colleges to investigate claims only if they’re reported to certain officials.

The Biden administration rolled back that policy in April with one of its own that stipulated the rights of LGBTQ+ students would be protected by federal law and provided new safeguards for victims of campus sexual assault. The policy stopped short of explicitly addressing transgender athletes. Still, more than a half-dozen Republican-led states immediately challenged the new rule in court.

Trump could again shift the way the Title IX sports regulation is viewed and enforced.

“All Trump has to say is, ‘We are going to read the regulation traditionally,’” said Doriane Lambelet Coleman, a professor at Duke Law School.

What’s the difference between “sex” and “gender” and how would it affect Title IX?

Under the first Trump administration, the government interpreted “sex” as the gender someone was assigned at birth.

The Biden administration chose to interpret sex as “gender identity” under Title IX, which could be interpreted to protect trans athletes from being discriminated against if they wanted to participate in a sport that aligned with their gender identity, not their sex assigned at birth.

It is widely expected that Trump will roll back the definition of sex to align with the sex someone was assigned at birth.

How many transgender athletes are actively competing?

That number is up for debate.

The NCAA, for example, does not track data on transgender athletes among the 544,000 currently competing on 19,000 teams at various levels across the country, though NCAA president Charlie Baker testified in Congress on Tuesday that he was aware of less than 10 active NCAA athletes who identified as transgender.

A 2019 survey of high school students by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) noted just 5% of respondents said they participated in a sport that aligned with their gender identity.

It might be easier to do the math from a macro level. A 2022 report by the Williams Institute estimated about 300,000 high school-age students (13-17) identified as transgender. How many of those young people participate in sports is unknown, but it is likely a tiny fraction.

Still, any case of a transgender athlete competing — or even believed to be competing — draws outsized attention, from Lia Thomas swimming for the University of Pennsylvania to the just-completed season of the San Jose State volleyball team.

What are the rules at the high school level?

It varies from state to state. About half the states have enacted legislation that effectively bars transgender athletes from competing in the category that aligns with their gender identity.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 64 of 73

The AP reported in 2021 that in many cases, the states introducing a ban on transgender athletes could not cite instances where their participation was an issue. When Utah state legislators overrode a veto by Gov. Spencer Cox in 2022, the state had only one transgender girl playing in K-12 sports who would be affected by the ban. It did not regulate participation for transgender boys.

"This is a solution looking for a problem," said Cheryl Cooky, a professor at Purdue University who studies the intersection of gender, sports, media and culture.

What about collegiately?

The NCAA established a policy in 2010 that requires trans athletes who were assigned male at birth to complete at least one year of testosterone suppression therapy before being eligible to compete on a women's team. Trans athletes who were assigned female at birth and transitioned to male can compete on a men's team but if they have received testosterone treatment are ineligible to compete on a women's team.

The athletes are required to meet their chosen sport's standard for documented testosterone levels at various points during a season.

In 2022, the NCAA revised the policy in what the organization called an attempt to be aligned with national sports governing bodies (NGBs). If the NGB does not have a trans athlete policy, then it scales up to the international federation that oversees the sport. If there is no international federation policy, previously established Olympic policy criteria would be followed.

The NCAA's decision to kick it up to the NGBs proved more restrictive in some sports like swimming. A policy introduced by World Aquatics in 2023 only allows transgender athletes to compete in women's races if the athlete can prove they have not experienced any part of male puberty.

Things are far more definitive for schools that compete in the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, the governing body for more than 200 small schools across the country. The NAIA voted unanimously earlier this year to effectively ban transgender athletes from competing in women's sports.

And how about the Olympic level?

The International Olympic Committee has essentially passed the buck, deferring to the international federations for each sport.

That could change, however, when a new IOC president comes on to replace the retiring Thomas Bach.

Former track star Sebastian Coe, now the leader of World Athletics, is among the candidates up for election in March. Coe has been a strong proponent of limiting participation to cisgender women.

What might the future look like?

The near future figures to be volatile, with the state-by-state map on transgender athletes mirroring what abortion access looks like post-Dobbs. Democrats have been at odds about how to address the topic.

There is a chance that a Republican-led Congress could introduce another form of the "Protection of Women and Girls in Sports Act" that was proposed in 2021 and 2023. The 2023 version of the bill — which would prohibit school athletic programs from allowing individuals whose biological sex at birth was male to participate in programs that are for women or girls — passed the House but didn't make it to the Senate floor for a vote.

Republicans hold a slim majority in the Senate and remain short of the 60-vote threshold needed for passage, but given the white-hot discussion around transgender athletes the issue could come to the fore quickly. It could come even as Sarah McBride, a Democrat from Maryland, becomes the first openly transgender person in Congress.

Russia says it has detained a suspect in the Moscow bombing that killed a senior general

By The Associated Press undefined

Russia's security service said Wednesday it detained a citizen from Uzbekistan in the bombing that killed a senior general as he left his southeastern Moscow apartment — a bold assassination that was claimed by Ukraine's security service.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 65 of 73

Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov was killed Tuesday by a bomb hidden on an electric scooter outside his apartment building, a day after Ukraine's security service leveled criminal charges against him. His assistant, Ilya Polikarpov, also was killed.

The brazen bombing brought the nearly 3-year-old war in Ukraine once again to the streets of the capital. The suspect was identified by Tass and RIA-Novosti news agencies as Akhmad Kurbanov of Uzbekistan. The Federal Security Service, or FSB, which did not identify him, said he was born in 1995 and was recruited by Ukraine's security service. The Associated Press could not confirm the conditions under which the suspect spoke to the FSB.

He said he had been promised \$100,000 and resettlement in a European Union country in exchange for killing Kirillov, according to the FSB.

The agency said that acting on instructions from Ukraine, the suspect picked up a homemade bomb in Moscow, placed it on an e-scooter and parked it at the entrance to Kirillov's apartment building.

He rented a car to monitor the location and set up a camera that livestreamed the scene to his handlers in the Ukrainian city of Dnipro, the FSB said, detonating the bomb when Kirillov left the building.

The suspect, who was detained in a village in the Moscow region, according to Interior Ministry, could face a life sentence if convicted.

Kirillov, 54, was the chief of Russia's Radiation, Biological and Chemical Protection Forces. These special troops are tasked with protecting the military from the enemy's use of nuclear, chemical or biological weapons and ensuring operations in a contaminated environment.

He was under sanctions from several countries, including the U.K. and Canada, for his actions in Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. On Monday, Ukraine's Security Service, or SBU, opened a criminal investigation against him, accusing him of directing the use of banned chemical weapons.

Russia has denied using any chemical weapons in Ukraine and has accused Kyiv of using toxic agents in combat.

An SBU official told AP on Tuesday that the agency was behind the attack. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to release the information, described Kirillov as a "war criminal and an entirely legitimate target."

The SBU official provided video that was said to be of the bombing, showing two men leaving a building shortly before a blast fills the frame.

Kirillov, who took up his post in 2017, was one of the highest profile figures to level the accusations against Ukraine. He held numerous briefings to accuse the Ukrainian military of using toxic agents and planning to launch attacks with radioactive substances — allegations that Ukraine and its Western allies rejected as propaganda.

Russian officials described Kirillov's killing as an act of terrorism and vowed to punish Ukraine.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday it was "obvious" that Ukraine was behind Kirillov's killing, saying Kyiv "does not shy away from terrorist methods."

It was the second time this year that Russia has described an attack in Moscow as an act of terrorism and sought to tie it to Ukraine.

In March, when gunmen attacked a Moscow concert hall that killed more than 130 people, President Vladimir Putin said the assailants — four men from Tajikistan, also in Central Asia — were captured while fleeing to Ukraine. Russian officials have claimed that the suspects had links to Ukrainian intelligence agencies, although Kyiv firmly denied involvement and an affiliate of the Islamic State group claimed responsibility.

Families of hostages endure uncertainty even as hopes rise for a ceasefire in Gaza

By MELANIE LIDMAN Associated Press
KIRYAT GAT, Israel (AP) — Ilana Gritzewsky is fighting a battle against time to save her boyfriend from Hamas captivity.

While there appears to be progress toward a deal to free the remaining captives in phases, Matan Zan-

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 66 of 73

gauker would likely not be released in the first stage since he is a young man. Gritzewsky is terrified a deal could break down or he could die in captivity before he's freed.

Gritzewsky knows first-hand the perils facing her boyfriend, who turned 25 on Wednesday. She was kidnapped and held hostage for 55 days before being released during the only previous ceasefire deal a year ago.

"All the hostages need to get out," said Gritzewsky. "If we don't release all of the hostages — all the hostages in captivity — they will be dead."

Many relatives of people held in Gaza find no reprieve in reports that negotiations toward a deal are progressing. The renewed ceasefire talks are just the latest twist in what's been more than 14 months of anguish, despair and uncertainty about their loved ones' fates. Still, they dedicate themselves to lobbying for their loved ones' freedom, even as the world moves on to other crises.

"I gave my promise to my friends from the kibbutz in the tunnels before I went home. I told them I will do everything, everything I have to, to take them out from that hell. And I ask all the time: Am I doing everything I can?" said Gritzewsky, 31.

Hamas militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing 1,200 people and abducting roughly 250, dragging them into Gaza. The attack sparked an Israeli invasion of Gaza. More than 45,000 people have been killed in the ongoing war, according to local health authorities, who say more than half are women and children but do not distinguish between civilians and militants in their count.

About 100 hostages were freed in a brief truce in November 2023, while others have been rescued or their bodies have been retrieved by the Israeli military. Around another 100 have not been released, though Israel believes at least a third of them are dead.

In the deal under discussion, mostly women and older people are expected to be freed in the first six-to-eight-week phase, but many families of hostages are lobbying for all of the hostages to be freed at once.

Zangauker and Gritzewsky were kidnapped from Kibbutz Nir Oz, where they lived together, and then held separately in Gaza. Just before her release from a tunnel under Gaza, Gritzewsky heard from other hostages that Zangauker was nearby. She begged to be able to see him but was not allowed.

Two weeks ago, Hamas released a video of Zangauker, filmed under duress, where he described difficult conditions in Gaza and pleaded with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to strike a deal to end the war.

"He spoke quietly, but his eyes were screaming for help," Gritzewsky said of the footage.

While it was a relief to see Zangauker, the video is no guarantee that he's still alive today, she said. "I don't want a photo. I don't want a video. I want him here. I want all the hostages here," she said.

The video brought back some of the worst memories of her captivity: the middle of the night interrogations, the filthy conditions, the lack of medical help for the injuries she suffered during the kidnapping. Gritzewsky's pelvis and jaw were broken and she has burns on her legs. She suffered hearing loss in one ear.

"What they are going through is physically, psychologically, and emotionally torture, day and night," said Gritzewsky, wearing a hat that belonged to Zangauker that she rescued from their destroyed home. "I know the psychology that they use, how you don't have water, how you don't have food, how you don't see the light, you don't know what day or hour it is."

Gritzewsky said she hates being in front of the cameras, telling her story over and over, reliving the worst days of her life, in a desperate attempt to raise awareness of the plight of the hostages and bring her boyfriend home.

Nonetheless, Gritzewsky has been a constant presence at protests and demonstrations across the country along with Zangauker's mother, who has emerged as one of the most vocal activists for the hostages.

Einav Zangauker, who used to support Netanyahu, has virulently opposed his handling of the war and is furious at the government for not yet reaching a ceasefire deal, accusing it of forsaking the hostages in its bid to topple Hamas.

Netanyahu has said that the war must continue until Hamas is crushed and unable to rearm, but critics point out that Israel has already assassinated the top leadership and destroyed large swaths of Gaza.

Einav Zangauker, a single mother, has been relentless in her crusade, attending demonstrations daily, speaking repeatedly to every major Israeli media outlet, and even climbing into a cage that was hoisted high above a protest to hammer home the idea of her son in captivity.

She has demanded that politicians pursue a ceasefire that will release all the hostages at once.

"If my son returns in a body bag or body parts, I will not put you on trial, I will take the law into my own hands!" she screamed at lawmakers during a parliamentary committee meeting Monday.

While Gritzewsky is no longer captive in Gaza, she said she can't begin to heal until the hostages, including her boyfriend, come home.

"Since Oct. 7, it's like time stopped," she said. "You see the world running in front of your eyes, but your life is crushed like little pieces of dust."

Accident or homicide? Medical rulings in arrest-related deaths can dictate what happens to police

By MITCH WEISS, HOLBROOK MOHR, REESE DUNKLIN and JUSTIN PRITCHARD Associated Press

Sitting alone in her car, Jen Dold was crying too hard to drive. She had just received a manila envelope with her brother's autopsy report.

There it was, one devastating word: "accident." The papers trembled in her hands.

Their mother had called 911 for help getting Dold's 29-year-old brother, Alex, to the hospital because he was in a mental health crisis. Four sheriff's deputies and two police officers shocked him with Tasers, wrapped an arm around his neck, punched and kicked him, then left him face down until they noticed he wasn't breathing.

How could that be an accident? Dold was certain it was a homicide.

Angry and grieving in the parking lot outside the county medical examiner's office 30 miles north of Seattle, Dold vowed to fight.

"No more silence or complacency," she thought. "No sweeping it under the rug."

In the United States, police rarely face criminal charges when civilians die after officers use physical force. Whether they do can depend on a system that operates after the initial attention passes: medical examiners and coroners who decide how and why someone died — what's known as the manner and cause of death.

On TV dramas such as "CSI" or "Bones," facts and established science determine whether a death was an accident or homicide. In reality, medical investigations involving police restraint deaths can be so riddled with inconsistencies, suspect science or conflicts of interest that even extensive force may matter little, an investigation led by The Associated Press has found.

That investigation identified 1,036 deaths over a decade after police used not their guns but physical blows, restraints or weapons such as Tasers that aren't supposed to kill. Some people were causing little or no trouble, while others were committing violent crimes. Many died after officers broke widely known safety practices, or after medics injected them with powerful knock-out drugs, sometimes at the urging of police.

Accident was the most common conclusion of medical investigations in AP's case database. Accidental rulings typically blamed preexisting conditions such as obesity or asthma, or drug use — even when in some cases blood testing did not detect lethal levels. Others faulted "excited delirium," a controversial diagnosis discredited by major medical associations. Some medical officials based their decisions not on physical evidence, but instead on whether they believed police intended to kill.

Manner of death decisions are so pivotal that members of law enforcement and their allies push to shape them, with the multibillion-dollar company behind Tasers peppering medical officials with research it funded or wrote that downplays the dangers of its weapon.

The degree of physical and professional separation a medical official had from local law enforcement appeared to affect rulings. Deaths were ruled accidents more frequently when medical examiners or coroners were in the same community as the department under investigation, or when they fell under

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 68 of 73

the control of law enforcement.

The mere location of a death has huge sway because each state designs its own system. Even within a state, county lines can matter. Death decisions are made in some places by doctors trained as forensic pathologists, in others by an elected coroner who may have no medical training and deep ties to local law enforcement.

"I call it a crazy quilt," said Dr. Victor Weedn, the former chief medical examiner of Maryland who has written about failed attempts to bring national consistency. Concerned about medical examiners' independence in police-involved deaths, he advocates for state health departments to take charge.

When deaths are ruled accidental, prosecutions of officers are exceedingly rare — of the 443 cases the AP identified, just two resulted in criminal charges. A family's chances of winning a wrongful death lawsuit also become much tougher.

"I had a belief that the justice system was fair, that if you were a victim you'd get justice, and the perpetrator would be convicted of their crime — police officer or not," Jen Dold said. "Sadly, we realized this was not the case."

A matter of intent

Jen Dold — 11 years older than Alex — had been more like a doting mother to him growing up. When his schizophrenia began at 19, and he started to believe people were whispering and lurking outside his house, she became his primary caregiver, shuttling him around and helping him financially.

One night in 2017, Alex Dold had an argument with his mother. He was in his late-20s, unemployed, living with her and off his medication. She had refused to give him more than his daily \$30 from federal disability payments. So he yanked a lanyard around her neck, flipped the living room recliner where she sat, and left.

The county mental health department wouldn't send someone, saying Dold wasn't violent enough.

When Dold returned and sat down to watch television like nothing had happened, his mother called 911. She told the dispatcher her son was calm, yet needed hospital treatment.

Two Snohomish County sheriff's deputies arrived. Dold acknowledged getting physical, but insisted his mother was fine and tried to close the front door.

Many police are trained to calm people in mental crisis. Instead, Deputy Bryson McGee pushed inside. McGee would later say Dold punched his face, something Dold's mother, Kathy Duncan, who witnessed the interaction, denied.

Four backup officers joined the fight. Over 12 minutes, the group punched, kicked and hit Dold with a baton, shocked him with Tasers, pressed a knee to his face and pushed his head down with a flashlight, according to a 990-page police report.

Dold said he was submitting and cried out for his mother, who screamed that her son was mentally ill.

"It was the worst yelling, shouting I've ever heard," one neighbor told an investigator.

After handcuffing Dold in the driveway, deputies left him face down, a position the Justice Department and others have long warned carries a suffocation risk. No one started proper resuscitation for at least 10 minutes.

Jen Dold didn't trust the investigation from the beginning. The detectives who interviewed her focused on her brother's mental illness, she thought to protect officers.

Seeking an ally, she contacted Snohomish County's chief medical examiner, and was relieved when Dr. Daniel Selove told her by phone that he'd weigh police force.

Yet when Selove met her at his office, he explained that Dold died from an irregular heartbeat. While the Taser shocks and struggle were significant factors, Selove said, he didn't believe the officers intended to kill her brother, so his death was an accident.

Whether to consider intent is a philosophical divide among forensic pathologists. Dold's death illustrates how unevenly intent can be applied — Selove used it even though under his own office's policies intent "need not be present or proven" for a homicide ruling.

For coroners and medical examiners, homicide doesn't carry the same meaning as murder does in criminal law. Guidelines from the National Association of Medical Examiners say intent is a valid consideration,

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 69 of 73

but restraint deaths may be classified as homicide without it — and doing so has “some value” to reduce any appearance of a cover-up.

Dr. J. Keith Pinckard, the organization’s president, said manner of death is an opinion meant to be used for vital statistics and public health, not a legal determination. Nonetheless, it has influence in court.

The significance of an accidental ruling quickly became clear when the local prosecutor cited it in exonerating the deputies and officers. It was one example among dozens AP found in which prosecutors referenced autopsy outcomes to close investigations, including other cases involving severe force.

Jen Dold figured the last chance to hold the deputies in her brother’s death accountable was a lawsuit.

Looking for a lawyer, the family found a promising lead. Seven years before her brother’s death, Deputy McGee — the first one into Dold’s home — had fired his Taser in a fatal struggle with another man in mental distress. Dold was not his first death on duty.

The county had settled that family’s lawsuit. The Dolds contacted the lawyer, who took their case but cautioned litigation would be arduous. Officers get protections, including qualified immunity, which shield them from liability. The accidental manner of death would not help.

As the lawsuit ground on, the attorney discovered something intriguing. The day after Alex Dold’s autopsy, Selove fired the doctor who did it.

Now it was February 2022. Jen Dold huddled with her mother and sister around a laptop to watch their attorney question Dr. Stanley Adams, a forensic pathologist who worked for the U.S. military before Snohomish County.

Their lawyer asked Adams to review Dold’s autopsy report. For the first time, Adams learned that, after he was fired, Selove had changed his conclusion from homicide and labeled it an accident.

“I have a little bit of heartburn with that because he took my correct answer and he changed it to an incorrect answer,” Adams said.

“Why do you say it’s a homicide?” the lawyer asked.

“Because when one human being does an action or neglects to do an action that caused the death of another, it really doesn’t matter about the intent,” Adams replied.

The family hugged.

“We just kept saying, ‘Did he really just say that? Did he really just say ‘homicide?’” Jen Dold recalled.

Adams told AP that under the settlement he reached over his termination, he couldn’t discuss his employment. But in a complaint filed with Snohomish County, Adams wrote he was fired for documenting Selove’s violations of county policies and guidelines of the National Association of Medical Examiners. Without saying which policies, Adams called the violations a “danger to public health and safety.”

In an interview, Selove said Adams’ homicide finding was unrelated to his firing. They disagreed over other matters, he said, but couldn’t elaborate due to the settlement. His office’s policy on intent was a relic of a predecessor that he didn’t need to follow, he said. And he never felt pressure from law enforcement in any restraint death, including one in 2015 where a detective was publicly accused of improperly influencing him.

The county offered Dold’s family around \$1.5 million to end their case in 2023. Jen Dold wanted the settlement to require a change to homicide, but said the county wouldn’t budge. She finally relented.

“The process beat us down and we were ready for it to be over,” she said.

When a reporter reached Deputy McGee, who resigned within three months of Alex Dold’s death, he said never to call again and hung up. The deputy who responded with McGee resigned in 2019 after being accused of having sex on duty, according to police disciplinary records.

In the seven years since her brother’s death, the extent of the force troubles Jen Dold, as does the pain and fear he must have felt as he struggled to breathe.

A simple question haunts her: What if the medical examiner’s report was different by just one word — homicide?

Influencing the manner of death

While loved ones like Jen Dold want a homicide ruling, powerful institutions may not. The AP found attempts at influencing medical officials in other cases by elected and appointed officials — the police chief

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 70 of 73

or sheriff, the mayor — as well as outside sources, such as Axon Enterprise Inc., the maker of Tasers.

In November 2021, the chief medical examiner in North Dakota was deciding how to rule the death of a 43-year-old man police encountered in a Bismarck neighborhood who was on methamphetamine, drenched in sweat and agitated because he believed his daughter was in danger.

Police video that has never been reported before shows Ryan Pederson, a local hockey club coach and single father, resisted when officers tried to handcuff him. Three of them fired their Tasers at nearly the same time, with one connecting.

Awakened by the commotion, a neighbor recorded police holding Pederson face down under a streetlight, remarking, "I think they George Floyd-ed him."

The autopsy was done by Dr. Barrie Miller, the state's chief medical examiner.

Emails AP obtained show Miller spoke with Michael Brave, then a longtime Axon attorney, who late into a Friday night and over one weekend emailed her more than a dozen documents, including research papers and book chapters co-authored by company officials that downplayed the risks of Tasers.

"Great day!!" Brave wrote in one. "After our conversation I thought of a couple more documents you might want to have."

He attached a checklist that tells forensic pathologists what evidence to collect during death investigations involving Tasers. Other materials described how the device works or discussed purported symptoms of excited delirium syndrome, such as "superhuman strength" and high pain tolerance.

Brave also sent a chart from a study he contributed to which argued that people rarely, if ever, die when police restrain them face down in what's known as prone position — the way officers restrained Pederson. While police do use prone restraint every day without harm, AP's investigation, done with the Howard Centers for Investigative Journalism and FRONTLINE (PBS), identified 44 deaths from 2012-2021 where a medical examiner or coroner ruled that prone restraint caused or contributed. In another 17 cases involving prone restraint, positional asphyxia or asphyxia due to restraint was cited as a cause or contributing factor.

Four days later, Miller ruled Pederson's death was due to methamphetamine-induced "psychomotor agitation" and "physical exertion with physical restraint." The cause mentioned neither Tasers nor officers. The manner was undetermined — one of five choices along with accident, homicide, natural and suicide.

Miller didn't respond to multiple calls and emails seeking comment. She was fired this spring after police went to her office. Brave, now a partner in a Phoenix law firm, said Miller contacted him wanting information about how Tasers work. He said he wasn't trying to influence her — he wanted her to have the correct information. An Axon official did not respond to messages.

Checklists like the one Brave sent Miller have long been an Axon strategy.

In a 2018 "Managing Your Medical Examiner" web presentation, a longtime member of the company's board of directors, Mark Kroll, urged law enforcement officials and prosecutors to use a company-created checklist. The essence: Influence the manner of death ruling. "Control the narrative" by getting the deceased's criminal and medical history. Drop in on the forensic pathologist and talk about cases. And if they are "hostile," line up police-friendly experts to counter them.

Kroll left Axon this year. In an email to AP, he questioned how medical examiners arrive at a manner of death, saying their opinion is not "infallible truth" but rather "driven by personal biases, local politics, sex of the medical examiner, religion, and years on the job." Noting the role drugs and preexisting conditions can play, he called some who die "walking time bombs."

Axon has exerted influence in other ways. In autopsy reports, some medical officials shift culpability by citing company-funded research. And in the early 2000s, the company sent a chill through forensic pathology when, faced with product liability lawsuits, it launched a campaign to undermine rulings that Tasers caused or even contributed to deaths.

One important victory came after the company sued a medical examiner in Ohio who had partially blamed the device in three fatal encounters. A judge required the medical examiner to change the manner of death from homicide and remove Taser references in the cause.

"Dangerously close to intimidation," the president of the National Association of Medical Examiners said at the time.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 71 of 73

Pressure is a reality of forensic pathology. In a 2011 survey not specific to Taser or arrest-related deaths, 22% of the association's members said elected or appointed officials had leaned on them to change cause or manner of death. And 25% of those who resisted said they "suffered consequences," including being fired.

In a follow-up paper, the association said death investigations and decisions must be "independent from law enforcement and prosecutors," and based on scientific evidence and research.

Cases in North Carolina and Vermont show what can happen behind the scenes.

Marcus Smith was having a mental health breakdown at a music festival in 2018 and approached Greensboro, North Carolina, police for help. When he panicked and tried to flee, officers pinned Smith, 38, face down to the ground, records show.

After an associate chief medical examiner for North Carolina ruled it a homicide, a police lawyer emailed the state's chief medical examiner in correspondence marked highly confidential and said Smith's death should have been undetermined because health problems, cocaine and alcohol could be to blame. He called the homicide classification "wrong and it is being used by those with ulterior motives and visions of monetary payouts ... to baselessly vilify police officers."

The police lawyer, Amiel Rossabi, told AP in an email that he "was not pressuring anyone" but was instead pointing out that, based on his research, the medical examiner was wrong. The chief medical examiner and the pathologist who performed the autopsy did not respond to emails and phone messages.

In March 2019, an officer's punch fractured a 54-year-old man's skull in Burlington, Vermont. Douglas Kilburn died days later. After a Vermont Health Department doctor called it a homicide, Burlington's police chief questioned the finding in an email to the state health commissioner, saying he had conferred with the mayor.

The former chief, Brandon del Pozo, now an assistant professor of medicine at Brown University, told AP he sent the email after getting unsatisfying answers from the medical examiner about the degree of certainty that it was homicide. It could have been undetermined, del Pozo said. Former Mayor Miro Weinberger told AP that Kilburn's death was tragic but the medical examiner's report had "confusing and contradictory findings."

Neither state office budged from its homicide ruling. No officer was charged, but lawsuits resulted in payouts of \$2.5 million in North Carolina and \$45,000 in Vermont.

An analysis by AP showed that death rulings can vary according to how close the medical examiner or coroner is to local law enforcement.

State offices such as in Vermont and North Carolina labeled as accidents about 30% of deaths. Local agencies investigating deaths in their own communities classified nearly 50% of deaths as accidents. That number was higher still when the local agency was part of law enforcement, such as Texas' justice of the peace system or the sheriff-coroners in many California counties.

In one notable California restraint death, a forensic pathologist resigned after learning the sheriff changed the manner from homicide to accident. The ensuing controversy led San Joaquin County to create an independent medical examiner's office.

County lines can matter

The death of Kyle Briones in the sprawl east of Los Angeles shows how important the coincidence of where someone dies can be.

The 28-year-old was driving in the pre-dawn hours when a tire blew out. His car swerved and hit a street sign before stopping in a San Bernardino County farm field.

Briones survived the wreck — but not the night.

Ontario Police Department officers responding to a 911 call for an injured motorist pulled him from the car. Although there were no drugs or alcohol in his system, Briones was disoriented and wobbled as he walked. Police ordered him to sit. When Briones didn't respond, officers shocked him with a Taser, threw him to the ground and placed him face down for more than six minutes, according to court records. The department did not respond to requests for comment.

By the time paramedics got to him, it was too late.

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 72 of 73

Had Briones crashed a mile down the road, across the line dividing San Bernardino and Riverside counties, what happened next might have gone far differently.

The two counties, known together as the Inland Empire, each have more than 2 million people and saw similar patterns in their arrest-related deaths — typically, people in mental health or drug emergencies died after a struggle. Each has a sheriff-coroner death investigation system.

Yet in these cases, they arrived at opposite conclusions. Among the 13 deaths AP identified from 2012-2021 in Riverside County, the coroner's office classified 11 as homicides. The coroner's division of the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department ruled on 12 deaths, labeling none a homicide.

In the Briones death, the chief forensic pathologist working for the San Bernardino County coroner blamed preexisting heart and lung conditions. Dr. Frank Sheridan said that — at 317 pounds and 5 feet, 11 inches — Briones was "morbidly obese." He ruled the death natural.

The Briones family couldn't understand. Their attorney hired as an expert witness a former medical examiner who had worked for Ventura County, on the other side of Los Angeles. He said Briones died because officers held him down with pressure on his back so he couldn't breathe, and that it should be a homicide. The lawsuit settled for \$2.75 million. Sheridan did not respond to requests for comment.

San Bernardino was one of 19 agencies in the United States that had four or more deaths in AP's database and ruled none a homicide.

In Miami-Dade County, for instance, all deaths in AP's data involving Tasers were ruled accidents. The one man who was shocked in Miami-Dade but whose death was not an accident died six years later — in neighboring Broward County, where a medical examiner called Derrick Blake's death a homicide attributable to tasing.

All 16 deaths in Miami-Dade over the 10 years AP analyzed were accidents. Just one of Broward County's four deaths was. Miami's chief medical examiner declined to comment.

The 19 agencies with four or more deaths but no homicides cover at least 17 million people. One was the medical examiner's office in Snohomish County, Washington. The same place where Jen Dold fought, to no avail, to reclassify her brother's death.

Today in History: December 19, Bill Clinton is impeached

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Dec. 19, the 354th day of 2024. There are 12 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 19, 1998, President Bill Clinton was impeached by the U.S. House of Representatives for perjury and obstruction of justice. (He was subsequently acquitted by the Senate.)

Also on this date:

In 1777, during the American Revolutionary War, Gen. George Washington led his army of more than 12,000 soldiers to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, to camp for the winter.

In 1907, 239 workers died in an explosion at the Darr coal mine, near Van Meter, Pennsylvania.

In 1960, fire broke out on the hangar deck of the nearly completed aircraft carrier USS Constellation at the New York Naval Shipyard, killing 50 civilian workers.

In 1972, Apollo 17 splashed down in the Pacific, concluding the Apollo program of crewed lunar landings.

In 2008, citing imminent danger to the national economy, President George W. Bush ordered a \$17.4 billion emergency bailout of the U.S. auto industry.

In 2011, North Korea announced the death two days earlier of leader Kim Jong Il; North Koreans marched by the thousands to mourn while state media proclaimed his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, as the nation's new leader.

In 2016, a truck rammed into a crowded Christmas market in central Berlin, killing 12 people in an attack claimed by the Islamic State. (The suspected attacker was killed in a police shootout four days later.)

In 2022, the House Jan. 6 Committee urged the Justice Department to bring criminal charges against former President Donald Trump for the violent 2021 Capitol insurrection, calling for accountability for the

Groton Daily Independent

Thursday, Dec. 19, 2024 ~ Vol. 32 - No. 177 ~ 73 of 73

former president and "a time of reflection and reckoning."

Today's Birthdays: Actor Tim Reid is 80. Singer Janie Fricke is 77. Actor Jennifer Beals is 61. Basketball Hall of Famer Arvydas Sabonis is 60. Olympic skiing gold medalist Alberto Tomba is 58. Actor Kristy Swanson is 55. Model Tyson Beckford is 54. Actor Alyssa Milano is 52. Football Hall of Famer Warren Sapp is 52. Actor Jake Gyllenhaal (JIH'-lihn-hahl) is 44. Actor Annie Murphy is 38. Journalist Ronan Farrow is 37.