

Groton Daily Independent

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Saturday, Jan. 11

Boys JV Wrestling at Madison, 9 p.m.
Boys Varsity at Garretson, 9:30 a.m.
Girls Varsity Wrestling at Lyman, 10 a.m.
Basketball Double Header hosts Lennox ((Boys C/ Girls JV at 1 p.m.; Boys JV/Girls C at 2:15 p.m.; Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity to follow)
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

It's Saturday Good Morning

Today is
going to be
a good day
simply
because
God made it.



Have a wonderful weekend!

Sunday, Jan. 12

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion, 9 a.m. (Milestones 6th graders and sophomores), Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

United Methodist: Conde worship, 8:15 a.m.; Groton worship, 9:30 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:30 a.m.; Coffee Time, 10:30 a.m.; Britton worship, 11:15 a.m.

Catholic: SEAS Confession, 7:45-8:15 a.m.; SEAS Mass, 8:30 a.m.; Turton Confession, 10:30-10:45 a.m.; Turton Mass, 11 a.m.

First Presbyterian Church: Bible Study, 9:30 a.m.; Worship, 11 a.m.

Groton CM&A: Sunday School, 9:15 a.m.; worship, 10:30 a.m.;

St. John's Lutheran: Worship at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.

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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.

An Unconditional Discharge

President-elect Donald Trump was sentenced yesterday to an unconditional discharge for falsifying business records to cover up an alleged 2006 sexual encounter with adult film star Stormy Daniels. The ruling means Trump won't face prison time, fines, or any other penalties; however, the sentencing does mean he will take office as the first US president with a felony conviction.

The sentencing officially caps off a historic criminal trial and comes after a New York jury in May convicted the now-78-year-old Trump on 34 felony charges. The charges relate to a \$130K payment Michael Cohen, Trump's one-time personal attorney, made to Daniels to keep quiet about her alleged affair with Trump to protect his chances of election in 2016. Trump then reimbursed Cohen for the payment as legal fees.

Justice Juan Merchan, who oversaw the six-week-long trial and delivered the sentencing, said Trump's presidential status protected him from facing harsher consequences. Trump will be sworn in as president Jan. 20.

US hiring in December surges past economists' expectations.

The US labor market ended 2024 with robust job growth, adding 256,000 jobs in December and surpassing forecasts of 155,000 jobs. The unemployment rate fell to 4.1%. Average hourly earnings rose 0.3% month-over-month and 3.9% year-over-year. Analysts say the data suggest continued economic strength and may provide the Federal Reserve less incentive to cut interest rates this year.

Constellation Energy agrees to buy Calpine for roughly \$16B.

The cash-and-stock transaction values Calpine at nearly \$27B when including debt and creates the largest clean energy provider in the US. The acquisition combines Constellation's nuclear expertise with Calpine's natural gas and geothermal assets while expanding Constellation's presence in markets like Texas and California—America's two most populous, energy-consuming states.

US Supreme Court appears likely to uphold federal TikTok law.

Supreme Court justices on Friday appeared to lean toward upholding a federal law ordering TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, to either divest the video-sharing app or face a national ban. Justices signaled the primary concern was national security issues related to the app's Chinese ownership and said because the law targets its foreign owner, TikTok may not be able to claim First Amendment protections.

US announces \$25M reward for arrest of Venezuela's president.

The US imposed new sanctions on high-ranking Venezuelan officials and increased the reward for information leading to President Nicolás Maduro's arrest to \$25M, coinciding with Maduro's third-term inauguration following a disputed election. The sanctions include visa restrictions. The Biden administration also extended temporary protected status for certain Venezuelan migrants in the US.

Blue Origin's New Glenn rocket to attempt first orbital flight tomorrow.

Blue Origin, Jeff Bezos' aerospace company, is set to launch its New Glenn rocket tomorrow from Cape Canaveral, Florida, marking its long-awaited debut after more than a decade of development. The launch, initially intended for 2020, will carry a test version of Blue Origin's Blue Ring spacecraft platform and aims to validate its communications and tracking capabilities during a six-hour mission.

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Global temperature rise breached 1.5 degrees Celsius for first time in 2024.

Last year was Earth's hottest year on record since preindustrial times, with global temperatures temporarily surpassing a critical 1.5 degrees Celsius warming threshold set in a 2015 internationally agreed-upon pact.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Annie C. in Evansville, Wyoming.

"My daughter, her friend, and I were driving to Iowa to visit family. When I stopped for fuel, I noticed oily-like spatters on the side of my truck and the back of my tailgate. Checking the fluid levels, starting with the transmission fluid, I noticed it was slightly low. When we got to our first destination, Villisca, Iowa, we stopped by the farmers co-op, and while buying some transmission fluid, three of the men, hearing that I was traveling and far from home, proceeded to go outside (it was 14° out) and take a look."

"Within a minute or two, they discovered that while my transmission fluid was just a bit low, my pick-up had an active power steering leak. The co-op employee got me the exact types of fluid I needed, topped off the transmission fluid, and another gentleman topped off the power steering fluid. He explained to me how to watch it and fill it for the remainder of our trip, until I can get it home to my mechanic. The men were reassuring and confident and put my mind at ease. I went from worried to happy traveler in just minutes."

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Zak's Late Free Throws Propel Groton Area to Stunning 49-48 Win

In an electrifying boys' basketball matchup, Karson Zak etched his name into Groton Area basketball lore by sinking two clutch free throws with 1.7 seconds remaining to lift the Tigers to a dramatic 49-48 victory over the previously unbeaten Clark/Willow Lake Cyclones. The win nearly mirrored the Lady Tiger's win the night before as a three-pointer lifted Groton Area to the win with 1.7 seconds left in that game.

The Cyclones controlled much of the game, jumping to an early 6-0 lead and finishing the first quarter with a 16-10 advantage after a 7-0 run. By halftime, Clark/Willow Lake appeared firmly in command with a 27-15 lead, thanks to strong shooting and solid defense. Groton Area was just one of nine shooting for 11 percent while the Cyclones were four of nine for 44 percent.

Groton's offense came alive in the third quarter, fueled by Gage Sippel, who scored 8 of his 11 points during the period. Groton Area made seven of 11 field goals in the quarter for 64 percent while Clark/Willow Lake made four of 13 shots for 31 percent. The Tigers cut the Cyclones' lead to 36-29 heading into the final quarter, setting the stage for a thrilling finish.

Trailing 47-39 late in the fourth quarter, Groton dug deep and roared back with an 8-0 run to tie the game at 47. With just 4.5 seconds left, Clark/Willow Lake's Sullivan Felberg hit one of two free throws to give the Cyclones a 48-47 lead.

On the ensuing inbound play, Clark/Willow Lake committed a critical foul, sending Zak to the line with just 1.7 seconds left on the clock. The tension in the gym was palpable as the freshman guard stepped up. With the game—and perhaps the race for the conference title hanging in the balance, Zak delivered, sinking both free throws to give Groton a one-point lead.

A desperation shot by Clark/Willow Lake at the buzzer missed, sealing the Tigers' stunning comeback victory.

Zak's late-game heroics capped an impressive overall performance by Groton, who shot 54% from two-point range and capitalized on Clark/Willow Lake's 17 team fouls, converting 11 of 15 free throws. The Cyclones, despite shooting 47% from the line on 21 attempts, struggled to maintain their composure in crunch time, committing 17 turnovers.

Ryder Johnson led all scorers with 19 points for Groton, while Sippel added 11, and Zak finished with 10, including the two biggest points of the night. Clark/Willow Lake was paced by Sullivan Felberg's 17 points, with Bo Begeman contributing 11 and Emmerson Larson adding 10.

The win improves Groton's record to 5-2 and hands Clark/Willow Lake their first loss of the season, dropping them to 5-1.

- Story compiled by ChatGPT

Ryder Johnson: 19 points, 2 rebounds, 1 assist, 4 fouls.

Gage Sippel: 11 points, 4 rebounds, 1 steal, 5 fouls, 2 blocks.

Karson Zak: 10 points, 4 rebounds, 3 assists, 4 steals, 1 foul, 1 block.

Blake Pauli: 3 points, 1 rebound.

Keegen Tracy: 3 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists, 1 steal, 3 fouls.

Becker Bosma: 3 points, 5 rebounds, 3 assists, 1 steal, 2 fouls.

Jayden Schwan: 1 rebound, 1 assist, 1 steal, 2 fouls.

Ethan Kroll: 2 fouls.

Totals: 2 pointers: 13-24 54%, 3-pointers: 4-19 21%, Free Throws: 11-15 73%, 21 rebounds, 11 turnovers, 10 assists, 8 steals, 19 fouls, 3 blocks.

Clark/Willow Lake: Sullivan Felberg 17 points, Bo Begeman 11, Emmerson Larson 10, Chris Bevers 7, Joey Ries 2, Griffin Musser 1.

Field Goals: 16-50 32%, Free Throws: 10-21 47%, 17 fouls, 13 turnovers, 41 rebounds, 9 steals, 2 blocks, 7 assists.

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Clark/Willow Lake won the junior varsity game, 30-24. Groton Area had a nine point run in the first half and led it, 11-6, at half time. Clark/Willow Lake scored 10 straight points in the third quarter to take a 23-17 lead. Groton Area closed to within four points late in the game, but was unable to close the gap.

Groton Area Scoring: Anthony Tracy 6, Jace Johnson 5, Asher Johnson 5, Jayden Schwan 2, Ryder Schelle 2, Ethan Kroll 2, Jordan Schwan 2.

Clark/Willow Lake Scoring: Jacob Steen 10, Joey Ries 7, William Hovde 6, Miles Olson 2, Talen Huber 1.

Groton Area had a 22-point run in the second half to beat the Cyclones in the C game, 36-22. Clark/Willow Lake led after the first quarter, 7-4, and at half time, 12-8. Groton led at the end of the third quarter, 27-16. The Tigers trailed, 16-8, and then had the 22-point run to take a 30-16 lead.

Groton Area Scoring: Anthony Tracy 18, Asher Johnson 11, Ryder Schelle 5, Zac Flihs 2.

Clark/Willow Lake Scoring: Wyatt Schlagel 6, Jaden LaPlante 5, Max Bratland 4, Trigg Felberg 4, Aiden Nelson 3.

All games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The C game was sponsored by Larry and Val Flihs. An anonymous donor sponsored the junior varsity game. The varsity game was sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Jungle Lanes & Lounge, Locke Electric, Krueger Brothers, R&M Farms/Rix Farms and The Meathouse in Andover.

Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

Saturday, Jan. 11

Groton Area
Tigers



Lennox DH at Groton

1:00 Boys C

Sponsored by The Johnson Agency

1:00 Girls JV

Sponsored by Adam & Nicole Wright

2:15 Boys JV Game

Sponsored by The Johnson Agency

Followed by Girls Varsity

and Boys Varsity



\$5 ticket or

GDI Subscription

required to watch the games.

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NSU Women's Basketball

Wolves Come Up Short in Overtime Against Wildcats

Wayne, NE. – The Northern State University women's basketball team fell to Wayne State in overtime, 87-82, unable to fend off a late rally by the Wildcats. Wayne State shot 51.3% from the floor, outpacing the Wolves' 47.8%. Despite the loss, five NSU players scored in double figures, with Michaela Jewett leading the charge, recording 21 points and 13 rebounds.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 82, WSC 87

Records: NSU 9-6 (NSIC 6-3), WSC 8-6 (NSIC 5-5)

Attendance: 231

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern State tallied 20 points in the first quarter, 21 in the second, 16 in the third, 16 in the fourth, and nine in overtime

The Wolves shot 47.8 percent from the floor and 80.0 percent from the foul line

NSU notched a season-high 48 points in the paint, along with 18 fast-break points, 14 second-chance points, and 10 points off turnovers

Michaela Jewett recorded her second double-double of the season with 21 points and 13 rebounds while shooting 56.2 percent from the floor

Rianna Fillipi followed with 20 points on the night, along with a team-high six assists and four steals

Alayna Benike and Madelyn Bragg rounded out the top scorers with 15 and 13 points, respectively, and nine and six rebounds

NORTHERN STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Michaela Jewett: 21 points, 13 rebounds, 56.2 FG%

Rianna Fillipi: 20 points, 6 rebounds, 6 assists, 4 steals

Alayna Benike: 15 points, 9 rebounds, 62.5 FG%

Madelyn Bragg: 13 points, 6 rebounds, 3 blocks, 3 steals

Morgan Fiedler: 10 points, 2 assists, 50.0 FG%

UP NEXT

Northern State continues on the road to take on Augustana. Tip-off is slated for 3:30 p.m. from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, on Saturday, January 11, against the Vikings.

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NSU Men's Basketball

Wayne State Pulls Away from Northern State in Second Half

Wayne, Neb. – The Northern State University men's basketball opened their road trip with a loss at Wayne State College. James Glenn and Ethan Russell led the team with 17 points apiece; a career high for Russell.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 61, WSC 84

Records: NSU 1-14 (0-4 NSIC), WSC 9-7 (3-7 NSIC)

Attendance: 385

HOW IT HAPPENED

Northern tallied 30 points in the first and 31 in the second, while Wayne scored 37 in the first and 47 in the second

They recorded 29 rebounds, eight assists, six steals, and four blocks, shooting 39.1% from the floor, 43.5% from the 3-point line, and 68.2% from the foul line

The Wolves scored 22 points off the bench, 14 points in the paint, and 14 points off turnovers

Russell drained four 3-pointers in the win, leading the Wolves in the contest and off the bench

Glenn added 17 as well, shooting 60.0% from the floor with three rebounds and two assists

Kaleb Mitchell added nine points, as well as a team second best seven rebounds, while Marcus Burks led the team with nine rebounds and four assists

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Ethan Russell: 17 points, 45.4 field goal%, 1 assist, 1 block

James Glenn: 17 points, 60.0 field goal%, 3 rebounds, 3 assists, 1 steal

UP NEXT

Northern returns to action this evening at Augustana University. Tip-off is set for 5:30 p.m. against the Vikings from the Elmen Center on the AU campus.

Minnehaha County Fatal Crash

What: Vehicle and light pole fatal crash
Where: Interstate 229, mile marker 9, Sioux Falls City Limits
When: 1:05 p.m., Thursday, January 9, 2025

Driver 1: 60-year-old male from Sioux Falls, SD, fatal injuries
Vehicle 1: 2017 Dodge Ram ProMaster
Seat belt Used: Yes

Minnehaha County, S.D.- A contractor was working on a large tower light pole along Interstate 229 near exit 9 when the pole began to lean and fell across the northbound lanes of I-229, striking a passing vehicle. The driver sustained fatal injuries.

The names of the persons involved have not been released pending notification of family members.

The South Dakota Highway Patrol is investigating the crash. All information released so far is only preliminary.

The Highway Patrol is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.

Caution: Strong Winds Create Dangerous Conditions for Burn Piles

PIERRE, S.D. – Due to strong winds and the forecast for strong winds to continue this weekend across Western SD, please use extra caution regarding slash pile burning.

South Dakota Wildland Fire (SDWF) reminds landowners to check active burn piles during these conditions and do not ignite any additional piles until it is safe to do so.

Persistent drought conditions and a lack of snow cover over much of the central and southern Black Hills has increased wildfire danger.

Even with adequate snow cover (2" minimum for hand piles and 6" for large piles), burning in windy conditions violates burn permit requirements. Wind can reignite smoldering piles and blow embers away from burning piles into dry fuels like tall grass, pine needles, or dry brush which can ignite a wildfire.

Keep an eye on your local forecast before lighting any new piles to see if windy or warm conditions are expected in coming days.

For more information and a video demonstrating how to be sure your piles are fully out, please visit: www.wildlandfire.sd.gov.

SDWF is an agency of the South Dakota Department of Public Safety.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Flexibility fuels surge in alternative schooling, while critics point to lack of accountability

Parents cite children's learning styles, religion and other factors as reasons for opting out of public education

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 10, 2025 2:19 PM



Madison Zacharias plays during lunch break with other Buffalo Christian Homeschool Academy students on May 10, 2024, at the school near Humboldt, South Dakota. (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

Drew Dittmer and his wife tried homeschooling their children in 2015.

The family of six in Sioux Falls enjoyed the freedom and flexibility it allowed them. But after welcoming their fifth child, the couple sent their children back to public school to avoid being overwhelmed at home.

In 2020, a kind of homeschooling was thrust on the Dittmers again: remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"Seeing the work they were getting from school a little bit more up close because we were so involved, we recognized we could give them a better all-around education than what they were getting in school," Dittmer said.

The Dittmer children are part of a trend. Alternative instruction nearly tripled in South Dakota over the last decade from 3,933 students in 2014 to 11,489 — now

making up about 7% of school-age children in the state, according to the state Department of Education. That includes homeschooling and private schools — online, hybrid and microschoools — that are unaccredited, or accredited by an entity other than the state.

The state's 94% increase in alternative students during the past five years is the third-fastest growth rate in the nation, following Washington, D.C., (108%) and New York (103%).

The growth could accelerate in South Dakota if lawmakers adopt a new proposal by Republican Gov. Kristi Noem to create education savings accounts. The \$4 million program would provide about \$3,000 per student annually to pay for a portion of private school tuition or curriculum for alternative instruction. Legislators will begin considering the proposal when they convene for their annual lawmaking session on Tuesday.

South Dakota Searchlight connected through an online survey and interviews with more than 100 parents who've chosen alternative instruction for their children. They most commonly said they chose this path because:

They are concerned about problems in school environments, such as bullying, anxiety and safety.

They don't think the traditional system meets their children's learning styles.

They can incorporate religious or cultural teachings, travel or occupational pursuits.

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They also pointed to the long bus ride for children attending rural schools taking up too much of their day, and the increasing ease of pursuing nontraditional education with new technology.

Deregulation and accountability concerns

Alternative instruction was increasing in South Dakota even before the pandemic, which accelerated the trend, said state Department of Education Secretary Joseph Graves.

"Parents need access to more opportunities for children when they are not finding success at school," Graves said in an emailed statement. "Currently, the decision to pursue alternative instruction is in the hands of parents, whom we rely on to make the best decisions for their children."

The largest spike in enrollment was in 2022, a year after the state removed regulations on alternative instruction and made it easier to enroll.

Students are no longer required to take standardized tests. Parents don't need to disclose their reasons for choosing alternative instruction, and rather than enrolling yearly with their district, families now only alert the state once.

Local school boards lost the authority to deny or revoke a student's request to opt out of public school attendance. Public school districts were also required to allow alternative students to play school-sponsored sports.

Critics say the decreased oversight could shield potential child abuse and neglect. Caregivers can skirt the state's compulsory education laws, and protocols in place to protect children are "woefully inadequate," said Harrisburg Superintendent Tim Graf.

"I know the people who homeschool and want to do a good job — and are doing a good job — don't want to be lumped in with the second group," Graf said. "At the same time, without some level of accountability, I don't know how you can separate the two."

Graf raised his concerns when he testified against the weakened regulations in 2021. Although he said the prior regulations weren't perfect, he "would take them back in a heartbeat."

"Right now, we just have nothing. So anything we could do for more accountability would be an improvement," Graf said.

The removal of children from public education also pulls state funding from public schools, because it's based primarily on student enrollment.

Deregulation can feed national attacks on public school systems, Graf said, and fits into a larger effort to defund public schools and invest in education savings accounts and vouchers — public school money used for nonpublic education. Rob Monson, executive director of the School Administrators of South Dakota, said Noem's proposal to fund private education with public dollars is part of a national movement to help private businesses and organizations profit from education.

Changing models

Today, some alternative-school students in South Dakota experience an education with connections or similarities to traditional public or private schools, especially in Rapid City and Sioux Falls. They play school-sanctioned sports, take classes with other students, participate in their own choir or band, and host their own graduation ceremonies and proms.

Traditional homeschooling is stagnant nationwide, said Angela Watson, director of the Homeschool Research Lab at Johns Hopkins School of Education. The growth is in online, hybrid and microschoools.

Hybrid and microschoools — which are not accredited by the state — are private, in-person school settings. Online schools can be recorded or taught virtually. Co-ops are groups of homeschooling families teaching each other's children lessons, or hiring a tutor to lead a class.

"It's kind of a smorgasbord right now," said Lisa Nehring, of Parker, who is the founder of True North Home School Academy. The online academy teaches roughly 600 children in grades second through 12th in math, literature, science, foreign language and other subjects.

Nehring said new education models cater to full-time working parents to find what fits best for their child.

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"You can do dual enrollment. You can be part of a co-op. You can do an online class. You can do online or in-person tutoring," she said. "You can do all of these things at the same time."

Tuition to hybrid and microschoools can range from \$3,000 to \$7,000 annually across the state, founders of the alternative schools told South Dakota Searchlight. Alternative schools often seek out grants to make the school more affordable for families, but grants from private organizations and donations aren't sustainable, they say. Acton Academy in Sioux Falls received over \$25,000 from the VELA Education Fund in 2022 and Onward Learning received a \$200,000 award as a 2024 Yass Prize semifinalist.

Mary Jo Fairhead, owner and founder of Onward Learning in Martin, said Noem's education savings account proposal would be helpful, although \$3,000 won't cover the cost of educating a child at her school — over \$6,000 per child, she said. Low-income parents could struggle to pay for the rest of the cost.

But she supports any efforts to get some funding to alternative instruction students, she said.

Reasons for choosing alternative instruction

South Dakota Searchlight connected through an online survey and interviews with more than 100 parents who chose alternative instruction for their children. Here are some of the reasons they cited:

Easier for parents than traditional homeschooling

Michelle Billingsley is co-founder of the Journey Homeschool Tutoring Program in Sturgis and Box Elder. She sees more families seeking out hybrid schools like hers because it's less work than homeschooling. The school takes on planning and grading while parents teach their children when Journey doesn't offer a class.

"Before we did microschoool, I would spend hours preparing for the week for homeschooling: pulling out assignments needed or looking over what needed to be taught or planning for science projects," Billingsley said. "All of that is eliminated for parents, with most projects done at school in class."

Tailored interests

Alternative schooling allows students to tailor their education to career interests, said Mimi Klosterman, who started homeschooling 25 years ago. She focused her eight children's homeschool curriculum on computers and cybersecurity, which she said wasn't provided in public schools a decade ago, especially for middle schoolers.

"Getting that experience in middle school and high school and thinking about what you really want to do is important," Klosterman said.

Renee Butcher and her husband, of Rapid City, homeschool their 8-year-old daughter while they travel for work. That flexibility allows them to focus on their daughter's interests and strengths, she said.

Each time the family travels, Butcher takes her 8- and 1-year-old daughters to museums, theater performances or landmarks. Their education will include an experiential component rather than merely reading books at a desk, Butcher said.

Distance

Nearly 30% of school-aged children in the Bison School District are enrolled in alternative instruction, one of the highest percentages in South Dakota.

Generations of homeschoolers live in the Bison School District, said Superintendent George Shipley. Bison is one of the sparsest school districts in the state, with 190 school-aged children in a district spanning more than 1,330 square miles.

Since the shift away from country schools in the last century, often for financial reasons, some rural children can spend more than three hours a day riding a bus to schools in town.

On the Cheyenne River Reservation in north-central South Dakota, Paige Fast Wolf's son had to wake up early to sit on a bus for an hour and a half before attending a public school. He was too tired to focus by the time he got to school, Fast Wolf said. He didn't return home until around 5:30 p.m.

"He'd start the day on a bad foot. He'd come home tired and starving," Fast Wolf said. "It was just too much for him."

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Educational disabilities

Drew Dittmer's 12-year-old daughter showed signs of dyslexia while attending public school.

After switching to homeschooling, Dittmer enrolled his daughter in an online program catering to dyslexic children. Within a month, her reading and comprehension improved, he said.

Julie Christian, president of Families for Alternative Instruction Rights in South Dakota (FAIRSD), taught special education in the Sioux Falls School District for years before homeschooling her children. Now she has a private practice serving people with dyslexia and autism.

Some alternative students in South Dakota have other educational disabilities, including processing disorders, anxiety and attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder.

"The parents think, 'I can create something at home that helps them without stressing them out,'" Christian said. "They're doing that, and there's tons of support out there now."

Fast Wolf pulled her 7-year-old son out of the Timber Lake School District after seeing him struggle to achieve in a traditional school setting. Her son has ADHD.

"He used to say he's 'the dumbest boy.' He hasn't said that since homeschooling, and the meltdowns have slowed down a lot," Fast Wolf said. "He's like a little sponge now and speeding up, and I just have to work really hard to keep him engaged and challenged."

Anxiety

Chelsi Brown was nervous when her son started at Onward Learning, a microschool in Martin, because she didn't know what to expect in the nontraditional format. But it was worth a chance, she thought, because she saw how anxious he'd become attending public school in the Oglala Lakota County School District.

Oglala Lakota is identified as a school improvement district, with students tested more heavily than a typical district to track performance. Testing starts in kindergarten, three times a school year, Brown said.

"Not having my own child go through it before, I didn't really notice how much stuff is put on kids for testing," Brown said.

Homeschooling or smaller micro or hybrid schools can allow students affected by anxiety more individual attention than they'd receive at a public school with a larger class, Brown said.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.

'Big gray area': SD authorities fear alternative instruction means 'no-schooling' for some students

2021 law changes lessened ability of schools to intervene

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 10, 2025 2:20 PM

Pennington County truancy officer Kim Morsching doesn't know what kind of education alternative instruction students are receiving in her county.

South Dakota requires school-age kids to receive public, private or alternative instruction, and Morsching's office handles truancy reports for five districts across the county to ensure compliance. The office handled more than 1,200 reports last school year.

She has never had a truancy case come across her desk for a student in alternative instruction — which includes homeschooling, hybrid schools, microschools and private schools that are either unaccredited or accredited by an entity other than the state.

But Morsching has seen alternative instruction students come through the juvenile justice system who aren't getting educated.

She's asked some of those kids what a typical day looks like for them, what they're working on, how

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many hours a day they spend on education, and — if they have a job — how they fit education around their work schedule. They don't all have good answers.

Recent truancy data has led critics to suspect some families who say they're enrolled in alternative instruction are not educating their kids. The number of truancy diversions in South Dakota, which is a program to improve school attendance for absent children, nosedived from 513 during fiscal year 2022 to 195 in 2024. The drop followed changes to state law in 2021 that made it easier to remove kids from public schools and enroll them in alternative instruction.

If parents enroll their children in alternative instruction, follow-ups on truancy reports from school districts and the court system stop for the most part.

Because of the 2021 law changes, the state Department of Education says truancy officers are only responsible for alternative instruction students when they take a class at a public school. When alternative instruction students are not enrolled in any public school classes, "the district is not responsible for making truancy reports," the department wrote in a guide updated in September.

Since the South Dakota Legislature and Gov. Kristi Noem deregulated alternative instruction in 2021, parents now only notify their district once about their intent to alternatively educate their students, instead of every year, and the students no longer take state tests to prove their educational growth.

While some families may truly invest in educating their child once removed from a public school, there's no way to ensure that, said First Circuit Judge David Knoff during the state Juvenile Oversight Council's November meeting.

"It's not that homeschooling itself is the problem," Knoff said. "It's certain parents who maybe don't have the ability or resources to effectively homeschool, and they just pull their kid out of school, which has a lot of long-term effects."

The state Department of Education did not answer South Dakota Searchlight questions about whether the department is studying or collecting data on "no-schooling" concerns.

The Rapid City School District has 1,775 alternatively instructed students, the most in the state. The Douglas School District, which includes Ellsworth Air Force Base, has the third highest alternatively instructed student population at 616. Both are in Pennington County, where Morsching works.

Since 2021, alternative instruction in South Dakota has grown by 4,075 students. Nearly 11,500 students are enrolled in alternative instruction statewide this school year.

Public school officials interviewed for this story said that since the laws became more lax, they can only check their district's alternative instruction roster and report any suspicions of educational neglect — which is legally defined as a form of child abuse — to the state's Division of Child Protection Services.



A mother teaches a math lesson to her daughter and another alternative instruction student at St. Joseph Academy in central Sioux Falls on May 13, 2024. The school was taught by parents during the 2023-2024 school year, but switched to a hybrid classical school for the 2024-2025 school year. (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

(Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

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Some officials are seeking increased oversight for school districts.

Rob Monson, executive director of the School Administrators of South Dakota, said deregulation hinders efforts to educate all school-aged kids. He said it's similar to posting speed limit signs and not having law enforcement in the area to patrol and enforce the laws.

"As far as compulsory education, it really doesn't exist anymore," said Monson, who testified against the changes in 2021.

Morsching said there are families in the Rapid City area who "do a great job and don't want state oversight," but to assume every family is "fully invested" in their child's alternative instruction isn't realistic.

"While I'm grateful we've allowed alternative instruction, and I validate the parents doing a great job, I think we've created a really big gray area for oversight," Morsching said.

What about child abuse and neglect?

If Child Protection Services receives a report of potential educational neglect in an alternative instruction setting, the office coordinates with the state Department of Education to ensure the student's family or guardian has enrolled in alternative instruction, said a spokesperson for the state Department of Social Services in an email.

If a report meets criteria for intervention, the spokesperson said, investigators gather information to determine if a "present danger" exists, if any additional abuse or neglect occurred, or if any further safety interventions are required.

Samantha Field, government relations director for the national nonprofit Coalition for Responsible Home Education, questioned the effectiveness of such a system, since the parents or guardians of abused and neglected children may remove their children from the public eye to avoid being reported and investigated.

Schools have professionals — teachers, principals and guidance counselors — who are trained to recognize unexplained bruises or erratic behaviors in children that may point to an abusive caregiver.

Educational mandatory reporters in South Dakota reported 3,072 instances of suspected child abuse and neglect between July 2022 and June 2023. Mandatory reporters in medical professions made the most reports at 4,028 and public safety workers made 3,877. Non-mandatory reporters made 3,238 reports in the same timeframe. The state does not collect data specifically tracking educational neglect.

It's more difficult and burdensome to report suspected abuse and neglect for an alternative instruction child than a student in public school, said Harrisburg Superintendent Tim Graf.

Graf said he's heard from other superintendents that reports made for alternative instruction students are handled differently, as though the reporter is being interrogated and has to prove the case before investigators follow through. School professionals often don't have firsthand knowledge of the child to back up their concerns after issuing a report on nonpublic school students, since those children aren't in the classroom every day.

The protocols in place to report and investigate abuse and neglect for alternative instruction students are "woefully inadequate," Graf said, adding that he doesn't feel such reports are investigated thoroughly. He doesn't blame Child Protection Services workers for that though, adding that he believes the department is short-staffed and underfunded.

Monson hears from superintendents that some children are removed from public school and placed in alternative instruction without a teaching plan. One recent example was that a family removed a middle school-aged child from a public school system and planned to have a grandparent watch the child at home, Monson said.

"Not going to 'educate' them or 'teach' them: She's going to 'watch' them," Monson told South Dakota Searchlight. "That scenario is what scares us. No one is going to instruct this child. They're taken out of the school system because they're a problem, and they're going to sit at home with grandma."

Monson shared the anecdote again during a recent press conference ahead of Tuesday's start of the 2025 legislative session. At the press conference, public education leaders explained their opposition to Gov. Kristi Noem's proposed \$4 million education savings account program, saying the state's current lack of accountability for alternative instruction could be exacerbated by Noem's plan if there isn't proper

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oversight. The program would provide up to \$3,000 of public funds per student for private school, homeschooling or alternative instruction.

"I do not understand what the homeschool people and the private school people, to a certain degree, are afraid of with accountability," said Dianna Miller, a lobbyist for large public school districts in the state. "If they're truly going to do what they say they're going to do, then they should be willing to meet certain standards and they should be willing to be held accountable."

Regulation discussions face pushback

Julie Christian, with homeschooling advocacy group FAIRSD, and Jen Beving, a homeschooling organizer and deputy state director for Americans for Prosperity-South Dakota, said current laws should be enough.

Homeschool parents are already subjected to informal scrutiny because of their choice to alternatively educate their child, according to Beving. Protections — such as concerned people reporting to the school district or the Department of Social Services — are in place, she said.

Alternative instruction leaders like Beving and Christian are concerned that public school officials and others are using concern for "no-school" children as an opportunity to "encroach on everybody's freedoms."

Specifically, they oppose standardized testing and forced home visits of homeschool families.

"What do we believe the state's role is in the home and with parents? Are we going to become a surveillance state where we have to see a child every day?" Beving said.

Monson said he would be in favor of some "guardrails" being placed on alternative instruction, such as annual alternative instruction notification to school districts, mandatory reporting of assessment scores or required assessments at the local school.

"It's the people who are using alternative instruction as a legal dropout and aren't educating their children that worry us," Monson said. "Those children won't be part of the workforce because of it. There are years and years of problems ahead for those students who aren't being educated in some way, shape or form."

Ideas for regulation

The Coalition for Responsible Home Education advocates for noninvasive, unburdensome policies, Field said. She spoke against South Dakota's deregulation in 2021.

A basic level of regulation, Field said, would be requiring families to visit a professional trained to recognize abuse and neglect at least once a year — such as a required wellness checkup. Physicians are mandatory reporters like school professionals. Field added that such wellness checks could be through public health departments or with school nurses to make it more accessible and affordable for low-income families.

Stories about homeschooled children being isolated and murdered by their parents have made headlines across the country in recent years, Field said. West Virginia has had multiple high-profile child abuse and neglect cases involving homeschool students in the last year, which critics said were partially due to holes in the state's homeschooling laws.

Studies conducted in recent years haven't shown that homeschooled children are at a greater risk of abuse than those who attend traditional schools. But some research suggests that when abuse does occur in homeschool families, it can escalate into especially severe forms, and that some parents exploit lax home education regulation to avoid contact with social service agencies.

A minimal wellness check could deter bad actors, Field said.

"When we can say homeschool students aren't being murdered, then we can move onto broader conversations about academic achievement," she added.

The "gold standard" for academic achievement regulations, Field said, would require alternative instruction students to complete annual assessments, such as portfolio reviews to demonstrate developmentally appropriate progress, rather than standardized testing. The review wouldn't be used to penalize families, but to recommend resources to improve a child's learning.

The Legislature could mandate that the assessment be conducted by a trained professional within the state Department of Education who could recommend community resources or guidance to families if any

deficiencies are identified, Field said.

Homeschooling advocates said they were motivated to push for deregulation because of what they heard from homeschooling families interested in moving to South Dakota.

They'd rather see schools and lawmakers focus on children "falling through the cracks" in public schools before focusing on a smaller number of alternative instruction families.

"I really want the conversation to start being how to increase test scores in South Dakota, have less kids committing suicide, or how to get more kids reading, graduating and job-ready," Beving said. "We graduate almost every single kid from public school in this state, which isn't the reality of where these kids are academically or workforce-ready."

Field said there are problems in public schools, but the state is aware of them.

"You can only address problems if you know they exist," Field said, "and the fact of the matter is we don't know what problems are in the homeschool population or how to address them."

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.

COMMENTARY

With jokes about differences, Terry Ree showed South Dakotans they're all the same

Death of comedic straight man from 'The Indian and the White Guy' leaves the world less funny

by Austin Kaus

At an early age, a few people taught me the power of a quick wit — how it can defuse a situation, help assert oneself, or unite an otherwise divided room. Terry Ree and Bruce Williams were two of those comedic professors.

Known best as "The Indian and the White Guy," Williams & Ree were a musical comedy duo formed at Black Hills State University in 1968. They performed consistently for 56 years across two countries at venues from now-defunct ballrooms in small-town South Dakota to gigantic country music festivals. Given the lightning speed of zingers they flung at each other — as well as every ethnic group available — it is especially painful to now put the word "late" in front of Ree's name.

Terry Ree, a member of the Crow Creek Sioux Tribe, died Dec. 21 at the age of 75. His passing leaves his



Terry Ree and Bruce Williams, aka Williams & Ree, perform during Country Thunder on July 20, 2018, in Twin Lakes, Wisconsin. (Rick Diamond/Getty Images for Country Thunder)

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performance partner Bruce Williams without a straight man, and a half-century's worth of fans without a South Dakota legend that understood the power of fighting prejudice with exaggeration.

Ree was born in Huron and raised in Pierre before heading to college in Spearfish. With a self-proclaimed major in "Registration," he met a Scandinavian from Idaho named Bruce Williams during their freshman year. The mutual talent at both music and tomfoolery led the pair to run for student government. Their platform was thin, but their campaign plan to perform songs in the women's dormitories led them to victory — Ree as president, Williams as vice. So was set the hierarchy and dynamics that would serve as a career for more than half a century.

With a smooth tenor voice that could seamlessly launch into Indigenous song, Ree was the straight man to Williams' unpredictable zaniness. It was a natural dynamic easily amplified for the stage. After interviewing the duo in 1974, a reporter wrote that Ree was "serious, likable and prone to talk about the future, while his partner interrupts with remarks that keep the conversation permanently off track."

The act forged in South Dakota's Black Hills became one where Native and white people could laugh at each other until they laughed with each other, giving bigotry a metaphorical black eye by punching everyone — especially each other. But any ethnic group and belief system was on the table. Local South Dakota performances led to shows in the Las Vegas area and, eventually, The Comedy Store in Los Angeles in the 1970s. They took the stage with peers Robin Williams and David Letterman. After a performance, Richard Pryor approached the pair and said, "I don't know what it is, but you got it."

Jimmie Walker, best known as J.J. ("DYN-O-MITE!") from the hit '70s hit sitcom "Good Times," took a shine to the pair and connected them with his managers. But the savage world of entertainment combined with some bad luck — they were to guest star on a new sitcom led by "M.A.S.H" star McLean Stevenson before it got axed after only a few episodes — and they never got the break they wanted. Managers would introduce them to L.A. executives as an Indian and a funny guy, said Williams in 1978. "They look at me and say, 'So you're the Indian. What are you doing with a Hawaiian?'"

The West Coast execs may not have understood, but an ever-growing number of fans got it. Ree's voice was often compared to early Wayne Newton, but his comedy influences came from the likes of Jack Benny and Bob Hope. Smooth songs were sprinkled through goofball bits, some of which "make Don Rickles sound like a Sunday school teacher on a picnic," according to one critic. When Williams would admit he didn't know the difference between a shower curtain and toilet paper, Ree would exclaim "So YOU'RE the one!"

They could viciously insult each other before easily transitioning into their version of 1959's "Running Bear" or perhaps their most popular original tune, "The Ding Dong Song," a tale of a distracted truck driver with a snack cake who died "with his Ding Dong in his hand." Onstage, Ree was a master of staying stone-faced until his stage temper blew at his partner's shenanigans. But even during the "serious" moments, a smirk would sometimes appear, often transforming into a full smile. Because those two were clearly having a good time making fun of everyone, including themselves. Ree himself once cracked, "If I get embarrassed, who'll know if I turn red?"

The pair performed consistently in the U.S. and Canada for half a century, appealing to every race and creed while often touring with country superstars like Kenny Rogers, the Oak Ridge Boys, Reba McEntire and Merle Haggard. They appeared on "Hee Haw" and hosted a dessert segment for years on "Country Kitchen" with Florence Henderson. They released records, home videos and two movies. No matter the medium, Williams & Ree had a knack for bridging division with humor and charm. As the two often espoused onstage — partially as a cooling mechanism for potentially offended parties — "we are all the same."

"Indians have a great sense of humor," Ree once said. "We pretty much had to have that or we wouldn't be here."

Politicians were often in the comedic crosshairs, but Williams & Ree stayed popular across party lines. They played Democratic Party benefits and fundraisers, but that didn't stop South Dakota Republican Gov. George Mickelson from declaring July 11 "Williams and Ree Day" in 1987. When a contract dispute arose with the South Dakota State Fair in 1983, the Republican and notoriously spiky Gov. Bill Janklow stepped in to help — even after the pair quipped he "asked us not to do any political jokes because South Dakota

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elected one.”

The duo mostly avoided controversy despite their hyper-focus on ethnic humor, but not everyone got the joke. They caught flack in 2018 when an Indigenous group took offense at a comedy bit. But most of the time people perceived their barbs as intended. “We try to shoot rubber arrows,” Ree once said. “We’ll sting them, but we won’t hurt them.”

It could be argued that Williams & Ree were in the wrong time: too late for Vaudeville but too early for today’s TikTok generation. Either way, Ree’s passing has South Dakota and beyond feeling a little less funny. Fans are left with the songs, jokes and a perpetual wonder about what a Williams & Ree theme park might have been like. (It seriously almost happened in the ‘90s.) With his goofball partner, Ree weaponized wit in a quest to show how we’re all just humans that want to chuckle. It’s a lesson more powerful today than ever.

“We do humor and people laugh,” Ree once said. “Well, most of the people laugh.” For those of us exhausted at the current state of division in the world, Ree’s passing has left us all wishing we could have just one more chuckle.

Austin Kaus is a writer and filmmaker in South Dakota. His documentary “The Pomp Room: A Rock N Roll Bar Story” tells the stories of South Dakota’s most infamous rock bar. It is available on YouTube and at [AwesomeCouch.Etsy.com](#).

State is sustaining much of its pandemic boost in hunting, fishing and park visits, officials say

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 10, 2025 5:37 PM

South Dakota has largely sustained pandemic-era gains in park visitation and license sales for hunting and fishing, according to the Department of Game, Fish and Parks.

A widespread desire to get outdoors during the COVID-19 pandemic caused state park visits to surge from 6.8 million in 2019 to 8.2 million in 2020, and visits have stayed around 8 million since then, including in newly reported numbers for 2024. That number was roughly even with the prior year.

Director of Parks and Recreation Jeff VanMeeteren presented the data Thursday in Pierre to the department’s oversight commission.

“I think it just speaks volumes,” he said. “We were able to retain a lot of these folks that we introduced into our campgrounds and to our day-use operations during COVID.”

The Division of Parks and Recreation’s revenue grew 5% last year, rising to \$22 million.

Park license sales were the biggest contributor. The state sold 517,000 of them, generating \$11.2 million, up from \$10.6 million in 2023. Lodging revenues also grew by 2% to over \$10 million.



An August 2020 view of Sylvan Lake in South Dakota’s Custer State Park. (Seth Tupper/South Dakota Searchlight)

George S. Mickelson Trail pass sales jumped to 7,907 from 6,377 the prior year. The passes brought \$119,000 to the department.

Flooding and construction projects caused dips in some parks' numbers, such as the 45% decline at Lewis and Clark Recreation Area, due partly to road construction. Custer and Palisades state parks experienced visitation increases of 5% and 35%, respectively.

Small game, fishing numbers

Hunting and fishing also maintained much of its pandemic-fueled boost.

Fishing licenses brought in \$5.5 million in department revenue last year, close to the three-year average. Resident purchases remained strong, with annual licenses increasing over the prior year by 1,000 to over 55,000 sold. One-day nonresident license sales rose to 37,000 but remained below the three-year average.

"The Missouri River system was really strong," said Wildlife Division Director Tom Kirschenmann. "Lake Oahe, in particular, had probably the best year it's had in the last couple of years."

Small-game hunting licenses grew in 2024, driven by a strong pheasant season. Sales to out-of-state hunters jumped by 5,700 to nearly 84,000, generating \$11.6 million of the \$12.6 million in small-game license revenue last year.

Small-game license sales to South Dakota residents increased by 4,000 compared to the three-year average, bringing in nearly \$1 million. Youth small-game licenses rose by 700 to over 6,300.

Combination licenses, which allow residents to fish and hunt small game, generated \$2.5 million in revenue. Over 46,000 licenses were sold to residents and nonresidents, slightly below last year's numbers.

The Habitat Stamp, a mandatory fee on the first license purchased each year, generated \$5.5 million in revenue – up \$291,000 from the three-year average. The funds support wildlife habitat and provide public access to private land. Nearly 314,000 stamps were sold in 2024, with nonresidents contributing \$4 million of the total.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public affairs specialist after high school and then earned a degree from the University of South Dakota. Prior to joining South Dakota Searchlight, Joshua worked for five years as a multimedia specialist and journalist with South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

Biden extends protected status for migrants from four countries ahead of Trump return

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - JANUARY 10, 2025 4:43 PM

WASHINGTON — With a little over a week before the end of President Joe Biden's term, his administration extended humanitarian protections for nationals from four countries Friday before President-elect Donald Trump, who has promised an immigration crackdown, returns to the White House.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security extended Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, for another 18 months for 103,000 Ukrainians, about 600,000 Venezuelans, and 1,900 Sudanese, which is until October 2026. DHS also extended TPS for 232,000 Salvadorians until September 2026.

Roughly 1 million people have TPS, which allows them to live and work in the U.S. because their home country is deemed too dangerous to return to for reasons including war, environ-



Michigan Democratic U.S. Rep. Rashida Tlaib, left, speaks at a press conference hosted by immigrant youth, allies and advocates outside the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday, Dec. 17, 2024. (Photo by

Shauneen Miranda/States Newsroom)

mental disasters or violence. It's up to an administration to determine whether or not to renew a status. TPS does not lead to a long-term path to citizenship.

Immigration advocates have pushed the Biden administration to extend TPS status before a second Trump administration. The former president has expressed his intent to not only enact mass deportations, but to scale back humanitarian programs.

During Trump's first term, he tried to end TPS designation for migrants from Haiti, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Sudan, but the courts blocked those attempts in 2018.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her areas of coverage include politics and policy, lobbying, elections and campaign finance.

Skeptical Supreme Court justices weigh a rescue of TikTok from nearing ban

BY: JACOB FISCHLER AND ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 10, 2025 4:40 PM

U.S. Supreme Court justices on Friday questioned why they should intervene to block a law forcing the sale of TikTok in nine days, saying the short-form video platform's Chinese parent company does not enjoy First Amendment rights.

Lawyers for TikTok's parent company, ByteDance, and a group of the platform's users faced sharp questions from justices on both sides of the court's ideological split about how any party other than ByteDance would have its rights restricted.

Under the bipartisan law passed by Congress and signed into law by President Joe Biden, ByteDance must divest TikTok by Jan. 19 or the wildly popular platform will be banned from app stores in the United States.

ByteDance holds the intellectual property rights to the algorithm that powers what content TikTok users see. If severed from the parent company, as required by the law, TikTok would lose access to the proprietary algorithm, which the company argued was a form of speech.

But the justices suggested only ByteDance — which, as a foreign company, they said, does not have the presumption of First Amendment rights — would be the only party directly harmed by the law.

The law targets ownership and potential control of the platform, including access to user data, by the Chinese Communist Party, Chief Justice John Roberts said. The law designates the Chinese government a foreign adversary.

"Congress doesn't care about what's on TikTok, they don't care about the expression," Roberts, a mem-



Sarah Baus of Charleston, South Carolina, left, holds a sign that reads "Keep TikTok" as she and other content creators Sallye Miley of Jackson, Mississippi, middle, and Callie Goodwin of Columbia, South Carolina, stand outside the U.S. Supreme Court Building on Jan. 10, 2025, as the court hears oral arguments on whether to overturn or delay a law that could lead to a ban of TikTok in the United States. (Photo by Andrew Harnik/Getty Images)

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ber of the court's conservative majority, said. "That's shown by the remedy: They're not saying, 'TikTok has to stop.' They're saying, 'The Chinese have to stop controlling TikTok,' so it's not a direct burden on the expression at all."

Lawmakers when the law was debated said the platform was dangerous because ByteDance is subject to Chinese national security laws that can compel companies to hand over data at any time.

"Are we supposed to ignore the fact that the ultimate parent is, in fact, subject to doing intelligence work for the Chinese government?" Roberts said.

Justice Elena Kagan, who was appointed by Democratic President Barack Obama, also noted the law would mainly affect ByteDance, not its U.S.-based subsidiary. Separated from its Chinese parent company, TikTok would be free to pursue its own algorithm to compete with Meta's Instagram and other video-based social media, she said.

"The statute only says to this foreign company, 'Divest or else,' and leaves TikTok with the ability to do what every other actor in the United States can do, which is go find the best available algorithm," Kagan said.

National security vs. free speech

Noel Francisco, who represented TikTok and ByteDance, argued that the law's true aim was to stop "manipulation of content" by the Chinese government, which he said amounted to censorship in violation of the Constitution.

"The government's real target, rather, is the speech itself, it's fear that Americans, even if fully informed, could be persuaded by Chinese misinformation," Francisco said. "That, however, is a decision that the First Amendment leaves to the people."

The law burdens TikTok's speech, Francisco said, "shutting down one of the largest speech platforms in America" that boasts about 170 million U.S. users.

He asked the court to analyze if that burden on speech was "content-based," which he reasoned it was, noting the government's national security argument speculated that TikTok could be used to misinform Americans.

The singling out of TikTok presents a particular problem, he said.

The law "says there's one speaker we're particularly concerned about, and we're going to hammer home on that one speaker," he said. "One of the reasons they're targeting that speaker is because they're worried about the future content on that platform — that it could, in the future, somehow be critical of the United States or undermine democracy."

Jeffrey Fisher, an attorney for TikTok creators, said a law to prevent content manipulation — the government's argument that TikTok users were vulnerable to being force-fed content approved by China — was not permitted by the First Amendment.

"That argument is that our national security is implicated if the content on TikTok is anti-democracy, undermines trust in our leaders — they use various phrases like that in their brief," Fisher said. "That is an impermissible government interest that taints the entire act. ... Once you have an impermissible motive like that, the law is unconstitutional."

TikTok lawyers react

Lawyers for TikTok and several creators expressed confidence in their case following the arguments.

"We thought that the argument went very well, the justices are extremely engaged. They fully understand the importance of this case, not only for the American citizens of this country, but for First Amendment law, generally, the rights of everybody," Francisco said at the National Press Club Friday afternoon.

Francisco also defended the ownership makeup of ByteDance as a company incorporated in the Cayman Islands that "is not owned by China" — though 21% is owned by a Chinese national who lives in Singapore, he said. Francisco also said TikTok's source code for the algorithm is stored on servers in Virginia.

Three TikTok users shared stories about the livelihoods they've built through their presence on the

platform.

Chloe Joy Sexton of Memphis, Tennessee, said TikTok allowed her to jump-start her baking business after a job loss and difficult family circumstances.

"I have now shipped thousands of cookies all over the world and even published a cookbook. As a small business without a lot of capital, I rely almost entirely on TikTok to market my products. To say TikTok changed my life is an understatement," Sexton said.

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.

Lawmaker proposes bills to increase child care affordability, sustainability based on new report

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 10, 2025 4:24 PM

Lawmakers dedicated to tackling South Dakota child care affordability and sustainability plan to introduce a legislative package this year based on a statewide report released Friday by the South Dakota Early Childhood Task Force.

A lack of affordable and accessible child care — due primarily to unsustainable funding for child care providers — lowers workforce productivity in the state, slows economic growth and costs the state an annual \$392 million, according to the report.

The legislative package, which task force leader and Brookings Republican Sen. Tim Reed plans to introduce, includes bills to:

Provide scholarships for higher education students to pursue early education careers.

Provide government-subsidized child care assistance at the "true cost of care" rather than the market rate.

Expand the state's child care assistance program.

The bills will require state funding, though Reed hasn't determined an estimate yet. Given a tight budget this year due to lower-than-anticipated state revenues, he anticipates it'll be a hard sell to lawmakers.

Access to child care allows parents to work instead of leaving the workforce, Reed said, but it also invests in the state's future.

Research shows early childhood investments improve a child's potential and provide a return on investment for government spending — as much as \$4 to \$9 return per \$1 invested due to reduced need for special education, welfare support and incarceration in the future.

Kayla Klein, task force leader and CEO of Klein Visioneering Group, said child care reform focused at the local level is ready to go statewide.

"We need to remind ourselves that we are here for the youngest and most vulnerable citizens in South Dakota, which are our children," Klein said. "They are the future of our state, and their parents and pro-



Brookings children watch caterpillars grow at the local Boys and Girls Club. (Courtesy of the Boys and Girls Club of the Northern Plains)

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viders need all the support they can get to give the best start to their educational journey and growth.”

Policy recommendations: Improve child care access, affordability & workforce

With more than 50,000 children aged 5 and younger with both parents working in South Dakota, there are 32,670 total licensed child care spaces in the state. That’s a potential child care gap of 35%.

That gap, which grows as child care providers continue to close in the state, is primarily due to the industry’s unsustainable funding model, Klein said. Child care businesses operate on slim to no margins at market rate, according to the task force report and a 2024 cost of care study by the state Department of Social Services.

With thin margins, child care workers have one of the lowest wages in the state at \$12.67 an hour on average. Four out of 10 South Dakota early educators quit their jobs in 2021, according to the task force report, and less than 40% of surveyed workers in 2024 said they’re satisfied with pay, according to the department’s workforce study. Fewer workers means fewer child care spaces available or more child care businesses closing.

“We need to be able to pay our child care workforce. If we’re ignoring that — how much we’re able to pay the child care workers — we’re never going to solve the problem of increasing capacity,” Reed said.

But many parents can’t afford to pay more. Infant care at licensed centers costs 10-20% of a median family’s income across the state, according to the report. In-home providers cost 9-12% of a median family’s income. Seven percent of the median family income is considered affordable, the report says, citing the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Where the state can step in, Reed said, is reevaluating how much the state provides families and providers for child care assistance.

The Child Care Assistance Program is a federally funded program for low-income families to pay for child care. South Dakota uses a market rate assessment to reimburse child care providers. But it doesn’t reflect the actual cost of care, according to the report, given that most businesses don’t make enough money to pay their staff salaries comparable to other teaching professions.

“If you’re not able to provide the true cost of care, you’re not going to have capacity,” Reed said. “If you don’t have capacity, you don’t have people working.”

The state spends most of the federal money allocated to the program each year, Reed said, even with just 7% of eligible infants and toddlers receiving the benefit. The state financially supported an average of 2,985 children per month in fiscal year 2024, with an average monthly payment of \$892.51 per case, according to the governor’s proposed budget.

An increase in assistance would be on the state’s dime. Reed’s hope is that the increased subsidies would allow child care providers to lower their tuition costs for families who don’t rely on the assistance program.

“It’s only a start,” Reed said. “I think there’s a lot more work to be done.”

Reed also plans to introduce a bill that would expand the state’s child care assistance program to include a parent who exceeds the program’s income limits but works in the child care industry. The proposal aims to mirror a Kentucky program started in 2022. About a dozen states have implemented or are considering implementing similar policies since then.

A family is currently eligible for the Child Care Assistance Program if they earn less than 209% of the federal poverty level, or less than \$54,000 a year for a family of three.

The proposed expansion aims to incentivize parents who leave the workforce to stay with their children at home to take a job as an early childhood worker instead — making child care more affordable for those families, and increasing the workforce needed to stabilize the industry.

Reed hopes creating state-supported scholarships for early childhood education could alleviate workforce concerns as well by drawing more workers into the profession.

Aside from the task force’s planned bills, the report recommends creating “braided funding streams” to supplement child care revenue. That effort should be carried out at the local level because the state “just doesn’t have the funding available,” Reed said.

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Some communities are already using braided funding. Rapid City is piloting a tri-share model, where public, business and family partners share a third of child care costs. In Rapid City's case, the nonprofit John T. Vucurevich Foundation, a plumbing company and the family each pay a third of tuition for 13 children whose families exceed eligibility for child care assistance but can't afford child care completely. "All communities," Reed said, "need to take a look at what they can do for braided funding."

2024 Child Care Workforce Study

The early childhood task force report released Friday references data from a workforce study completed by the state Department of Social Services in late 2024.

According to the department report:

52% of child care center directors reported that hiring staff is difficult; of those who expressed concern, nearly three-fourths cited no or too few applicants and 65% said jobs were turned down due to pay.

Over 83% of center directors were worried that teachers would quit due to low compensation. About 36% of center staff surveyed said they were satisfied with their pay.

To deal with staffing challenges, 78% of center directors asked existing staff to work longer hours and 68% said they hired staff with less experience and qualifications. Nearly 72% of directors said they raised wages.

About 58% of center directors have "turned families away" due to staffing challenges, and 38% have reduced the number of classrooms.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.

No jail time or fines for Trump in sentencing for NY hush money case

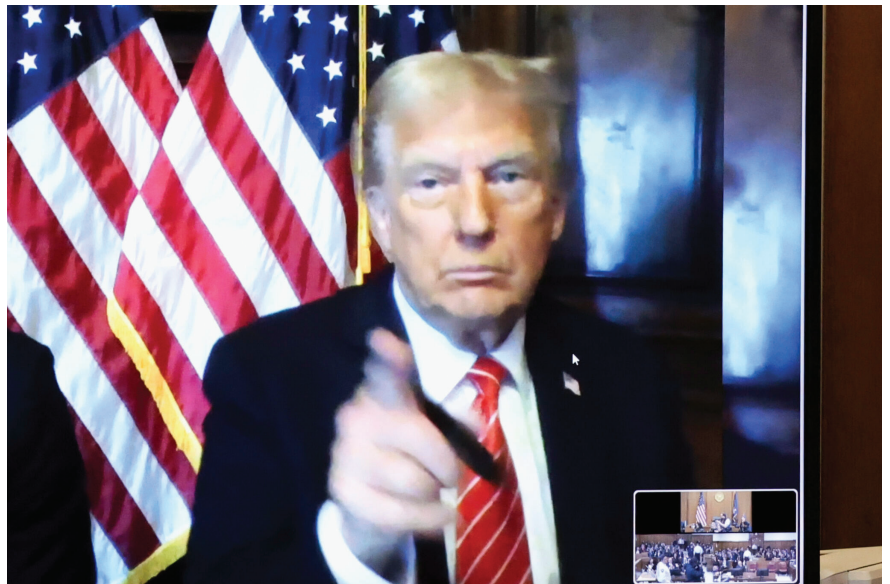
BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 10, 2025 12:17 PM

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald Trump was sentenced Friday in his New York hush money case just days before his inauguration, making him the only past and future U.S. president with a criminal record.

Trump has faced four criminal prosecutions but the New York state case was the sole one that went to trial. A jury convicted him in May on 34 felonies for falsifying invoices, checks and ledger entries that amounted to a \$130,000 reimbursement to his lawyer for paying off a porn star ahead of the 2016 presidential election.

New York Justice Juan Merchan sentenced the president-elect to an "unconditional discharge," handing down no jail time or fines but cementing a mark on Trump's record 10 days before he takes the oath of office to become the 47th president.

Speaking during the virtual proceeding



U.S. President-elect Donald Trump appears remotely for a sentencing hearing in front of New York State Judge Juan Merchan at Manhattan Criminal Court on Jan. 10, 2025 in New York City. (Photo by Brendan McDermid-Pool/Getty Images)

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from his Mar-a-Lago residence, Trump said he was "totally innocent" and defended the description of his payments to his lawyer in business records as "legal expenses." As he has in the past, he accused the federal government of being involved in the New York state case.

"It's been a political witch hunt that was done to damage my reputation so that I'd lose the election, and obviously that didn't work. And the people of our country got to see first hand because they watched the case in your courtroom," the president-elect said, according to audio published by C-SPAN. Cameras were not allowed in the courtroom during the trial or sentencing.

The courtroom contains limited space for the public and journalists.

Merchan called the case "extraordinary" but said "The same burden of proof was applied and a jury made up of ordinary citizens delivered a verdict."

After Merchan explained the sentence, he told Trump, "Sir, I wish you Godspeed as you pursue your second term in office."

Trump was represented Friday morning, and at trial, by his personal lawyer Todd Blanche, whom he's chosen to be the nation's next deputy attorney general, the No. 2 position at the U.S. Justice Department.

Trump last-minute attempt

Following months of delays, the sentencing went forth despite Trump's eleventh-hour request that the U.S. Supreme Court halt the proceeding. The justices denied Trump's application late Thursday, though the order noted that Justices Clarence Thomas, Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch and Brett Kavanaugh would have granted it.

ABC News reported Thursday that Trump had spoken with Alito by phone just hours before submitting the application to the court's emergency docket. Alito told the network that the two did not speak about the application.

The sentencing, lasting less than 30 minutes, was a brief disruption in Trump's barreling preparations for his second presidency. The president-elect was set to host members of the House Freedom Caucus, a contingent of far-right House Republicans, at his Florida property later on Friday. Trump huddled with Senate Republicans on Capitol Hill Wednesday and with Republican governors on Thursday.

Trump slammed his sentence on his Truth Social platform as a "scam," "hoax" and "despicable charade" that he will appeal, a process that will likely drag on for years in New York.

"The real Jury, the American People, have spoken, by Re-Electing me with an overwhelming MANDATE in one of the most consequential Elections in History," Trump wrote.

The 12 jurors in New York that convicted Trump were also U.S. citizens, or "American people," as required by law.

Immunity argument

Trump had challenged his New York conviction on the grounds that last summer the Supreme Court ruled that former presidents enjoy criminal immunity for official acts while in office, and presumptive immunity for acts on the perimeter of their formal duties.

Merchan ultimately denied Trump's immunity argument, saying that the trial and evidence "related entirely to unofficial conduct entitled to no immunity protection."

Trump has also been occupied with another legal battle in recent days as he cheered a court order to block the release of Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith's final report detailing federal criminal charges against Trump for mishandling and hoarding classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate after he left office, and for scheming to subvert the 2020 presidential election results.

Smith ended both cases following Trump's election victory, as the Justice Department has a long-standing protocol against prosecuting sitting presidents.

A federal appeals court Friday denied requests to block the report in full, leaving only protections for the portion of the report dealing with the classified documents case following an appeal by Trump's two co-defendants in the case.

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

Minimum wages increasing in nearly half the states this year, including South Dakota

Voters in several states, including deeply red ones, chose to make significant boosts this year

BY: KEVIN HARDY, STATELINE - JANUARY 10, 2025 9:24 AM

The minimum wage will increase in nearly half the states this year, including South Dakota, even as the federal wage floor remains stuck at \$7.25 per hour.

In many states, the minimum wage is automatically adjusted upward as inflation rises. But voters in several states, including deeply red ones such as Alaska and Missouri, chose in November to significantly increase their minimum wages this year.

Michigan will see its minimum wage jump from \$10.33 to \$12.48 on Feb. 21 after the state Supreme Court concluded the legislature subverted residents when it adopted but then significantly amended voter-initiated ballot measures in 2018 to raise the minimum wage and mandate paid sick time.

Michigan's wage floor is set to rise to \$14.97 by 2028 — more than double the federal minimum wage, which has not increased since 2009. That's the longest period without a federal increase since Congress first set a minimum wage in 1938.

A total of 30 states and the District of Columbia have set their own minimum wage higher than the federal rate. And 67 localities — including Birmingham, Alabama; Denver; Flagstaff, Arizona; and Los Angeles — have raised their minimum wage above the state minimum, according to the Economic Policy Institute, a left-leaning think tank.

Currently, 10 states have a minimum wage of \$15 or higher: California, Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island and Washington.

Alaska, Florida, Hawaii, Missouri and Nebraska are on track to reach the \$15 benchmark in the coming years. Such movement in red states should prompt Republicans who control Congress and the White House to move the national wage floor, argued Richard von Glahn, the political director at the labor advocacy group Missouri Jobs with Justice.

"We should have Republican legislators looking and seeing what their own voters are telling them and say, 'You know, maybe they're on to something here and maybe I should follow their lead,'" he said.

Von Glahn led a successful campaign to raise Missouri's minimum wage from 2024's rate of \$12.30 to \$15 per hour next January through a November ballot initiative that also guaranteed sick leave for many workers.

While a tight labor market forces many employers to pay above minimum wage to compete, von Glahn noted many workers still earn at or near the lowest legal rate. The Economic Policy Institute estimates that more than half a million Missouri workers will see raises as the state's minimum wage increases.

"That sort of proves the point as to why this is so necessary, why these guardrails are so important,"



A sign at a Carl's Jr. restaurant in Anchorage, Alaska, advertises for workers. The state's minimum wage increased to \$11.91 this month and will rise to \$13 in July. (Yereth Rosen/Alaska Beacon)

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he said.

For Kaamilya Hobbs, the Missouri law means she can expect at least an extra 31 cents per hour once she returns to work at Arby's following maternity leave.

This year's new minimum wage of \$13.75 isn't enough to live comfortably in Kansas City, she said. But every bit helps her afford the basics, such as diapers and baby formula.

"It won't be a huge difference. But it'll still be a little bit of something for us," said Hobbs, 33, who is also an organizer for a group advocating for low-wage workers.

Inflation has significantly eroded the buying power of the stagnant federal minimum wage. Advocates say raising the wage floor helps low-wage workers cover the rising cost of essentials and boosts the economy by putting more money into the pockets of people who are likely to spend it. But many employers, especially retailers and restaurants, counter that raising the minimum wage forces them to cut workers or raise prices.

In December, President-elect Donald Trump said he would consider a national increase in the minimum wage. Trump won 19 of the 20 states — all but New Hampshire — still subject to a \$7.25 minimum wage. In an NBC News interview, he acknowledged the \$7.25 rate was "a very low number," but said raising the minimum wage too much would decrease employment.

"There is a level at which you can do it," he said, without specifying a number.

Earlier this month, Alaska's minimum wage went up 18 cents thanks to an automatic inflation-based bump.

But the state's current \$11.91 rate will increase to \$13 this July, thanks to the passage of a November ballot measure. Under the measure, the wage will increase to \$14 in July 2026 and \$15 in July 2027, followed by inflation-adjusted increases starting in 2028.

The ballot measure drew fierce opposition from business groups but won approval by 58%-42%. The new law also mandates employers provide up to seven paid sick days per year — a major concern particularly in seasonal industries, including tourism.

Before November's election, members of the Alaska Cabaret, Hotel, Restaurant and Retailers Association said passage of the ballot measure would result in higher prices and lead to layoffs and reduced hours for workers, said Sarah Oates Harlow, president and chief executive officer of the organization.

The minimum wage hike will particularly hurt smaller businesses, she said, and those with tipped workers such as servers and bartenders. Alaska is among seven states that don't allow employers to pay tipped employees less than the minimum wage, meaning many of those workers are already making well above the state's wage floor, she said.

"I guarantee you we will be seeing prices going up across the board," she said. "Groceries are going to be more expensive. Eating out is going to be more expensive."

But Mark Robokoff, who owns the pet supply store AK Bark in Anchorage, sees a higher wage floor as good for business. He said the minimum wage increase will put more money into the pockets of his customers.

"It's not like there's no benefit to this cost," Robokoff said.

To attract the best staff, he said, employee wages start at \$17 per hour. But he expects to ratchet that figure up as the state's minimum wage increases.

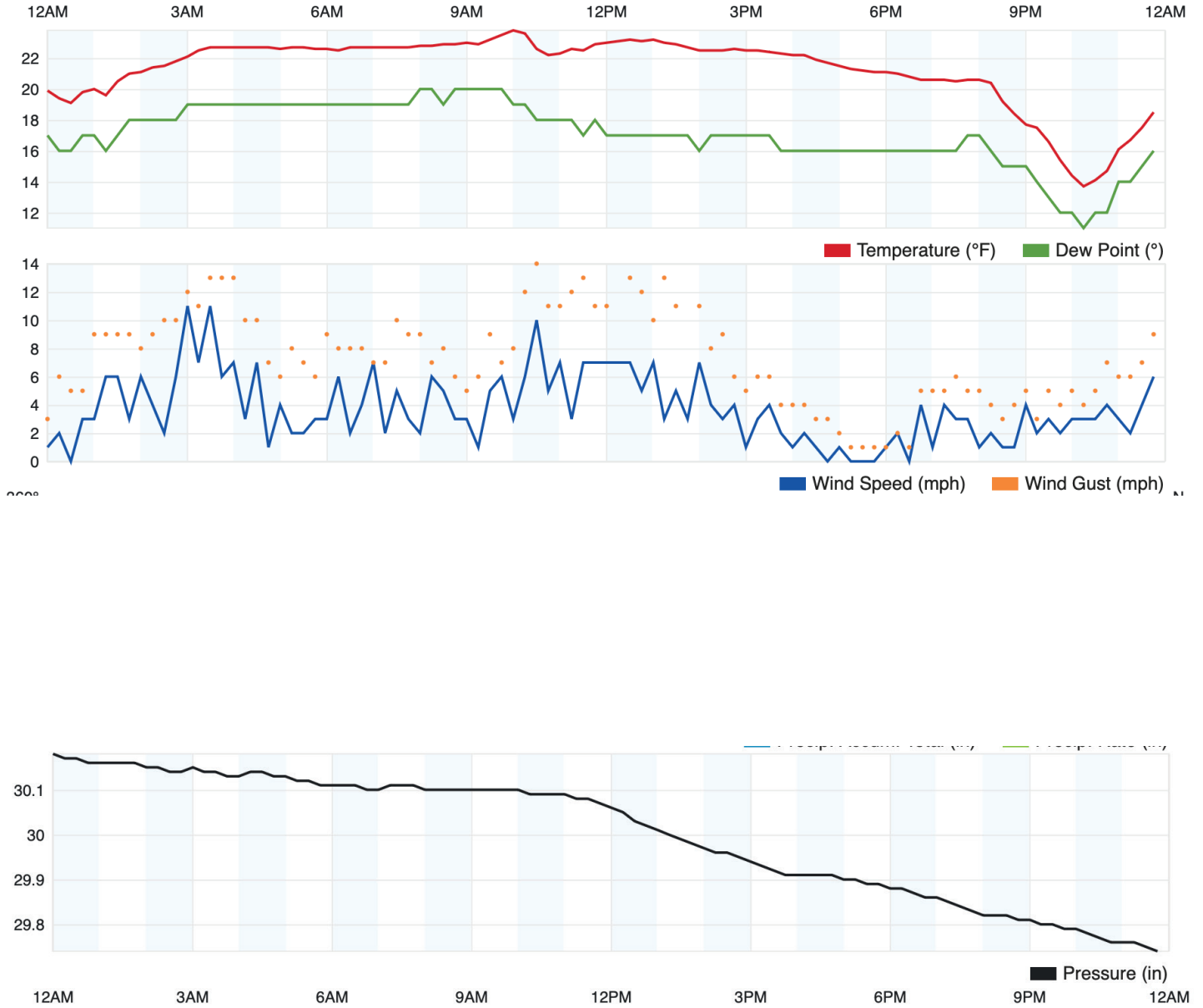
"That's why it needed to be a law," he said. "It only works if we all do it. Then we all get more revenue and pay our employees a little bit more."

Kevin Hardy covers business, labor and rural issues for Stateline from the Midwest.

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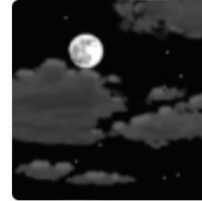

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today	Tonight	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
High: 35 °F	Low: 5 °F	High: 11 °F ↓	Low: -4 °F	High: 5 °F
Chance Snow	Chance Snow	Chance Snow and Blustery then Partly Sunny	Partly Cloudy	Cold



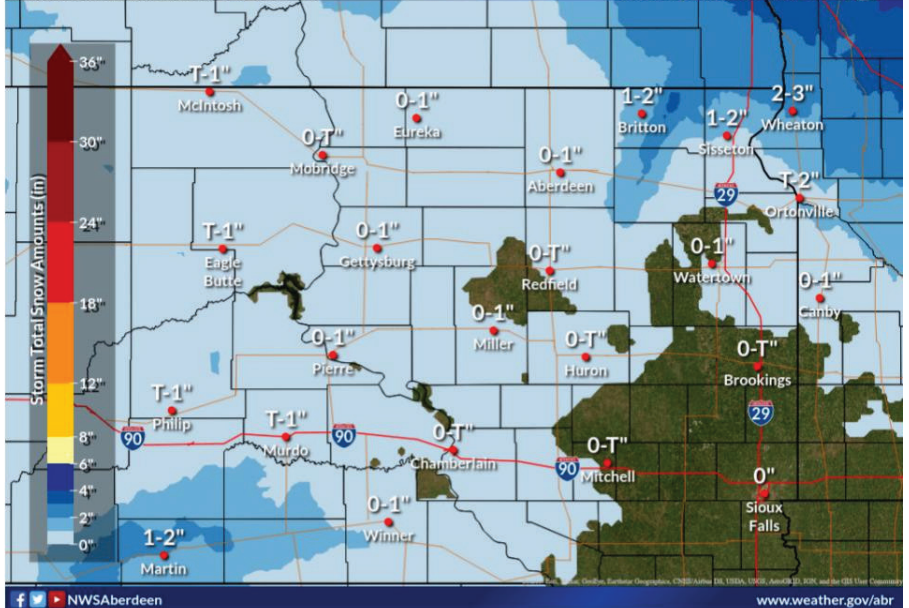
Snow Today/Tonight and Early Sunday

January 11, 2025
2:12 AM

Expected Snowfall - Official NWS Forecast

Weather Forecast Office
Aberdeen, SD
Issued Jan 11, 2025 1:15 AM CST

Valid Sat 6:00AM through Sun 12:00PM CST



Key Messages

- A clipper system will bring mainly snow to the region today.
 - A mix of rain and snow possible in central SD.
- All snow tonight, with snow diminishing in coverage Sunday morning.
- Mild temperatures today, falling temperatures tonight through Sunday.
- Pockets of blowing snow with gusts of 25 to 35 mph.



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

A clipper system moving across the region today/tonight will bring moisture in the form of mainly snow, though a mix is possible in central South Dakota today. Accumulations will be relatively light, with the highest totals of a few inches focused in far northeast South Dakota and western Minnesota. Winds will be on the increase out of the northwest today and persist overnight which could result in some pockets of blowing snow. Snow will depart early Sunday with the winds diminishing in the afternoon.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 24 °F at 10:02 AM

Low Temp: 14 °F at 10:14 PM

Wind: 15 mph at 10:19 AM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 4 minute

Today's Info

Record High: 55 in 1987

Record Low: -31 in 1912

Average High: 23

Average Low: 2

Average Precip in Jan.: 0.23

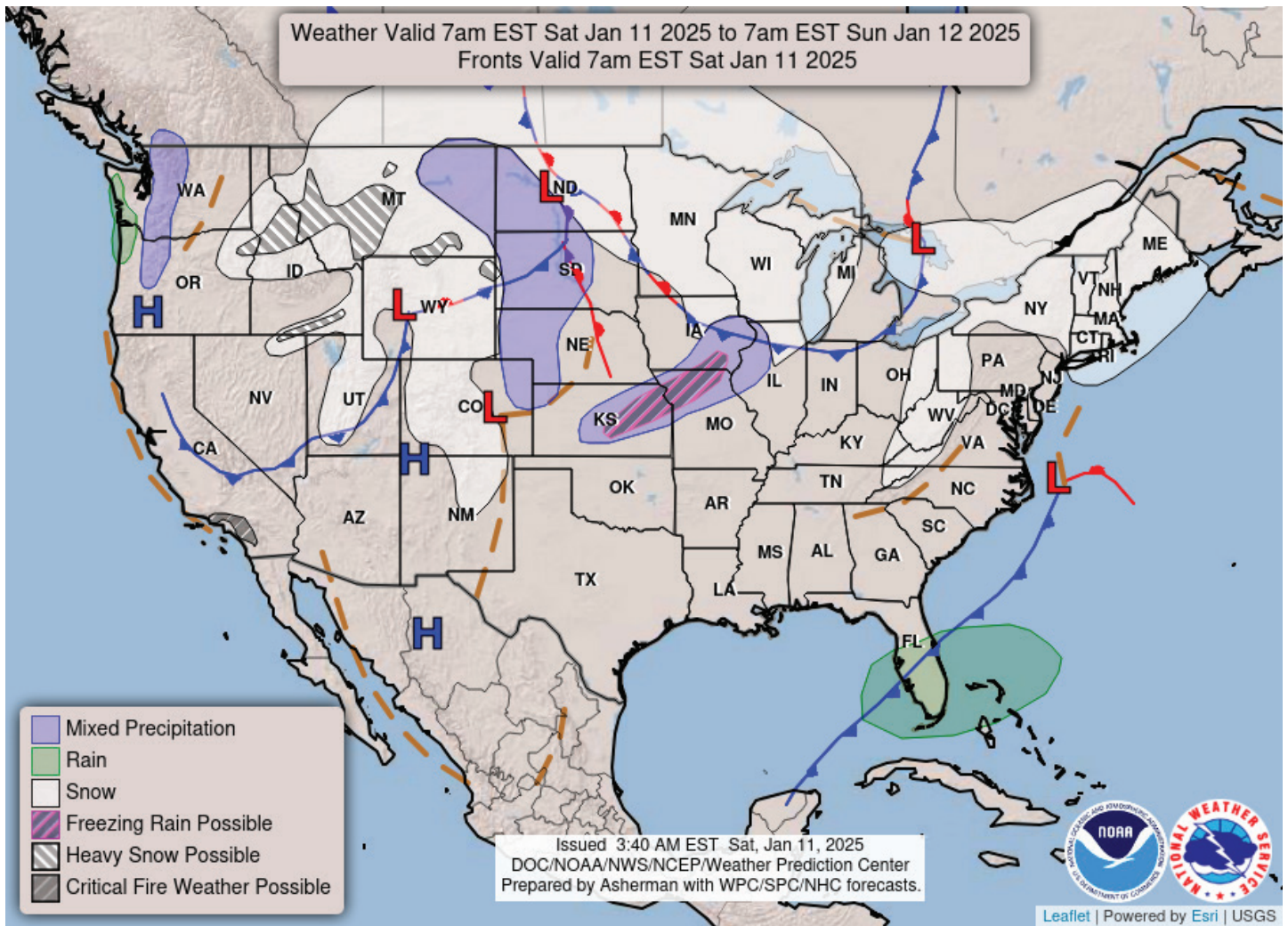
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.23

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 5:12:39 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:07:56 am



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Today in Weather History

January 11, 1980: A strong area of low pressure resulted in strong winds of 35 to 45 mph with gusts to 70 mph across Minnesota on the 11th and 12th. Blowing and drifting snow made roads hazardous or impossible. The strong winds also caused some damage. There were areas in western Minnesota that had a lot of blowing dirt.

January 11, 1995: A combination of an ice storm, heavy frost accumulation, and strong winds for several days caused widespread damage to electrical systems resulting in power outages across central and north-central South Dakota. The first ice storm occurred on the 11th and the 12th. In the days following, widespread fog developed and resulted in additional heavy deposits of ice and frost on power lines and other surfaces. Much of the damage occurred when strong winds, mainly from the 16 through the 18th, caused the heavily weighted power lines and poles to collapse. Power outages lasted as long as eight days. Several electric cooperatives had never experienced damages of this magnitude. Some traffic accidents resulted from icing, and many vehicles slid off the roads. The property damage was estimated at 3.5 million dollars.

January 11, 2009: A vigorous but fast-moving winter storm system moved through the Dakotas last night and early today. Although snow accumulations from the storm only ranged from 1 to 4 inches, strong winds behind the system produced significant blowing and drifting snow and widespread blizzard conditions across the area. Reports from trained spotters and law enforcement indicated visibility dropped to below one-quarter mile for several hours and near-zero (white-out conditions) in many rural or unsheltered areas. Sustained north to northwest winds at many locations was 20 to 35 mph, with peak wind gusts as high as 60 to 65 mph. As the arctic airmass surged into the region, temperatures fell some 30 degrees from early this morning to mid-afternoon.

1898: An estimated F4 tornado struck the city of Fort Smith, Arkansas, just before midnight. The tornado, which touched down about 100 miles southwest of town, killed 55 people and injured 113 others along its track.

1918: A powerful area of low pressure brought snow and bitterly cold temperatures to Chattanooga, Little Rock, and Shreveport. Birmingham, Alabama, picked up an inch of snow. In far southeastern Alabama, an estimated F3 tornado virtually damaged every building in the town of Webb. The tornado leveled one rural school, killing one teacher and seven students. Please note, the date on the historical marker is an error. January 10th in 1918 was a Thursday.

1963: An F2 tornado was reported in Scott County, Indiana, north of Louisville, Kentucky. It was on the ground for 5 miles north of Scottsburg and damaged or destroyed several homes and barns.

1972: Downslope winds hit the eastern slopes of the Rockies in northern Colorado and southeastern Wyoming. Boulder CO reported wind gusts to 143 mph and twenty-five million dollars property damage.

1987 - A storm in the northeastern U.S. buried the mountains of central Vermont with up to 26 inches of snow, and snowfall totals in Maine ranged up to 27 inches at Telos Lake. Winds gusted to 45 mph at Newark NJ and Albany NY. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Snow and high winds in Utah resulted in a fifty car pile-up along Interstate 15. Winds in Wyoming gusted to 115 mph at Rendezvous Peak. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 - A cold front which the previous day produced 21 inches of snow at Stampede Pass WA and wind gusts to 75 mph at Mammoth Lakes CA, spread snow across Colorado. Totals in Colorado ranged up to 17 inches at Steamboat Springs. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Strong northwesterly winds associated with a deep low pressure system crossing the Upper Great Lakes Region ushered cold air into the central U.S. Winds gusted to 72 mph at Fort Dodge IA, and wind gusts reached 75 mph at Yankton SD. Snow and high winds created blizzard conditions in northwestern Minnesota. Squalls produced heavy snow in parts of Upper Michigan and northern Lower Michigan, with 16 inches reported at Wakefield. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data) 2008 - Iraqis in Baghdad woke up to the novelty of falling snowflakes as the city experienced its first snowfall in about 100 years. (NCDC)

2010: Bitter cold temperatures gripped central and southern Florida with lows in the teens and 30s.



GIVING HELP – INSPIRING OTHERS

Joseph Priestly left college believing he was called to serve God as a minister. However, he soon became uncomfortable with this calling and decided to teach school. One day Benjamin Franklin visited his classroom and was very impressed with his teaching skills. At the conclusion of the class he said to Priestly, "I believe that you have the abilities to write a history of electricity. I'll help you by lending you my books and notes."

Encouraged by the generosity of Mr. Franklin, he accepted the challenge and immediately began writing a book on the history of electricity. He was so enthusiastic and excited about this project that he researched and wrote the entire book in one year. This inspired him to dedicate his life to scientific research. His research led him to the discovery of oxygen. He is also credited with developing the first carbon dioxide fire extinguisher.

Paul recognized the important role of encouraging others. In his letter to the Thessalonians, he encouraged them to "encourage each other and build each other up!"

At the end of a long race the runners often speak of muscles that are cramping or throats that are parched and burning as their body is about to collapse. But then the crowd begins to shout, "You can do it – keep it up – you are going to make it!" Those few words of encouragement are all they need to finish well.

Prayer: Help us, Heavenly Father, to be alert to those around us who need a word of strength, hope or love to persevere in the face of adversity. Make us Your encouragers. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today : So encourage each other and build each other up, just as you are already doing.
1 Thessalonians 5:11

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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.10.25

9 23 39 65 66 22

MegaPlier: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$95,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.08.25

4 15 33 39 41 7

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,870,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 1 Mins 11 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.10.25

3 9 21 33 36 1

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 16 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.08.25

5 15 25 26 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$20,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 16 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.08.25

22 29 36 61 65 17

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 45 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
01.08.25

1 20 36 38 43 24

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$263,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 14 Hrs 45 Mins 10 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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Upcoming Groton Events

- 01/05/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 01/26/2025 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed at the Community Center 10am-1pm
- 01/26/2025 87th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm
- 02/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 02/05/2025 FB Live Electronic Hwy 12 Sign Drawing City Hall 12pm
- 03/02/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 03/22/2025 Spring Vendor Fair at the GHS Gym 10am-2pm
- 04/05/2025 Dueling Duo Baseball/Softball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39, 6-11:30pm
- 04/06/2025 Pancake Sunday, Historical Society Fundraiser, 10am-1pm, Community Center
- 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
- 06/07/2025 Day of Play
- 07/04/2025 Firecracker Couples Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
- 07/13/2025 Lion's Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm
- 07/09/2025 Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar at the Groton Legion 11am-1pm
- 08/09/2025 2nd Annual Celebration in the Park/Rib Cook-Off 1-9:30pm
- 09/06/2025 Lion's Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm
- 10/31/2025 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1:30pm

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 47, Sioux Falls Lincoln 37
Aberdeen Roncalli 54, Sisseton 42
Beresford 60, McCook Central-Montrose 35
Brandon Valley 58, Brookings 26
Canistota 36, Alcester-Hudson 30
Centerville 86, Burke 59
Dakota Valley 73, Viborg-Hurley 62
Deubrook 65, James Valley Christian School 6
Ekalaka, Mont. 57, Bison 12
Elkton-Lake Benton 63, Florence-Henry 57, OT
Ethan 62, Wessington Springs 30
Flandreau 46, Tri-Valley 31
Gayville-Volin High School 41, Irene-Wakonda 30
Great Plains Lutheran 49, Britton-Hecla 20
Herreid-Selby 36, Langford 33
Highmore-Harrold 50, Sully Buttes 34
Lakota Tech 65, Alliance, Neb. 35
Little Wound 48, Dupree 46
Mitchell 54, Yankton 35
New Underwood 53, Lead-Deadwood 20
Philip 58, Hill City 47
Rapid City Christian 57, Sturgis Brown High School 30
Rapid City Stevens 65, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 28
Sioux Falls Jefferson 53, Rapid City Central 37
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Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Some US lawmakers want more Christianity in the classroom. Trump could embolden their plans

By MORIAH BALINGIT AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — Conservative lawmakers across the U.S. are pushing to introduce more Christianity to public school classrooms, testing the separation of church and state by inserting Bible references into reading lessons and requiring teachers to post the Ten Commandments.

The efforts come as President-elect Donald Trump prepares to take office pledging to champion the First Amendment right to pray and read the Bible in school, practices that are already allowed as long as they are not government-sponsored.

While the federal government is explicitly barred from directing states on what to teach, Trump can indirectly influence what is taught in public schools and his election may embolden state-level activists.

Trump and his fellow Republicans support school choice, hoping to expand the practice of using taxpayer-funded vouchers to help parents send their children to religious schools.

But there is a parallel push to incorporate more Christianity into the mainstream public schools that serve the overwhelming majority of students, including those of other faiths. And with the help of judicial appointees from Trump's first presidential term, courts have begun to bless the notion of more religion in the public sphere, including in schools.

"The effect of even Trump being the president-elect, let alone the president again, is Christian nationalists are emboldened like never before," said Rachel Laser, the president and CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Large numbers of Americans believe the founders intended the U.S. to be a Christian nation. A smaller group, part of a movement widely called Christian nationalism, champions a fusion of American and Christian identity and believes the U.S. has a mandate to build an explicitly Christian society.

Many historians argue the opposite, claiming the framers created the United States as an alternative to

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European monarchies with official state churches and oppression of religious minorities.

Efforts to introduce more Christianity into classrooms have taken hold in several states.

In Louisiana, Republicans passed a law requiring every public school classroom to post the Ten Commandments, which begin with "I am the Lord thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me." Families have sued.

In Texas, officials in November approved a curriculum intertwining language arts with biblical lessons. And in Oklahoma, the state superintendent of education has called for lessons to incorporate the Bible from grades 5 through 12, a requirement schools have declined to follow.

Utah state lawmakers designated the Ten Commandments as a historic document, in the same category as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, so teachers could post it in their classrooms. Many other states have seen legislation that would put them in more classrooms. And attorneys general from 17 GOP-led states recently filed a brief supporting Louisiana's Ten Commandments mandate.

Schools are permitted — and even encouraged — to teach about religion and to expose students to religious texts. But some say the new measures are indoctrinating students, not educating them.

Critics have raised concerns also about proliferating lesson plans. Some states have allowed teachers to use videos from Prager U, a nonprofit founded by a conservative talk show host, despite criticism that the videos positively highlight the spread of Christianity and include Christian nationalist talking points.

During his first administration, Trump commissioned the 1776 Project, a report that attempted to promote a more patriotic version of American history. It was panned by historians and scholars who said it credited Christianity for many of the positive turns in U.S. history without mentioning the religion's role in perpetuating slavery, for example.

The project was developed into a curriculum by the conservative Hillsdale College in Michigan and is now taught in a network of publicly funded charter schools supported by the college. It also has influenced state standards in South Dakota.

Challenges to some state measures are now working their way through the courts, which have grown friendlier to religious interests thanks to Trump's judicial appointments.

In 2022, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of a football coach in Washington state who was fired for praying with players at midfield after a game, saying the school district infringed on his rights to religious expression. Dissenting justices noted some players felt pressure to join the coach. But the high court said a public school can't restrict an employee's religious activity just because it could be construed as an endorsement of religion, reversing a five-decade precedent.

The ruling could pave the way for conservatives to introduce more Christianity in public schools, said Derek Black, a law professor at the University of South Carolina.

"Donald Trump's judicial appointees have emboldened states" to test the separation of church and state, he said.

In the wake of the football coach's case, courts now analyze church-state separation through the lens of history, said Joseph Davis of Becket, a public interest law firm focused on religious freedom that is defending Louisiana over its Ten Commandments mandate.

The Supreme Court has endorsed the idea that "it's OK to have religious expression in the public spaces," Davis said, "and that we should sort of expect that ... if it's a big part of our history."

Critics say some measures to introduce more historical references to Christianity in classrooms have taken things too far, inserting biblical references gratuitously, while erasing the role Christianity played in justifying atrocities perpetuated by Americans, like genocide of Native people.

These are among the criticisms facing the new reading curriculum in Texas. Created by the state, districts aren't required to use it, but they receive financial incentives for adopting it.

"The authors appear to go out of their way to work detailed Bible lessons into the curriculum even when they are both unnecessary and unwarranted," religious studies scholar David R. Brockman wrote in a report on the material. "Though religious freedom is vital to American democracy, the curriculum distorts its role in the nation's founding while underplaying the importance of other fundamental liberties cherished

by Americans.”

Texas Values, a conservative think tank that backed the new reading curriculum, said in a statement that the court’s pivot toward permitting more Christianity in schools, and allowing more taxpayer money to flow to religious institutions, is corrective.

The football coach case has rightfully returned protections for religion and free speech in public school, said Jonathan Saenz, the Texas Values president.

“Voters and lawmakers (are) getting tired of the attacks on God and our heritage of being ‘One Nation Under God,’” he said.

It’s sick season. Here’s how to protect yourself from norovirus, COVID-19, flu and RSV

The Associated Press undefined

In the winter months, it seems few are safe from some kind of illness — flu, COVID-19, norovirus, colds.

While many of the germs that cause this misery can circulate throughout the year, scientists think that the winter surge of flu and cold activity may be because we spend more time indoors and the cold, dry air may weaken our defenses.

But knowing what these bugs are and how they spread can help. While it may be difficult to make it through the season totally unscathed, there are some things you can do to protect yourself from these respiratory and stomach viruses.

How do I know whether I have the cold, the flu, COVID-19 or something else?

Some symptoms are hard to distinguish among illnesses, especially with respiratory viruses. Others are unmistakable.

— Norovirus is a foodborne illness that can spread through water and contaminated surfaces and can cause vomiting, diarrhea, nausea and stomach pain for about one to three days.

— The common cold can be caused by several different types of viruses and can cause a runny nose, congestion, cough, sneezing, sore throat, headaches, body aches or low fever for less than a week.

— The flu, caused by influenza viruses that are always changing, leads to fever, chills, cough, sore throat, runny nose, body aches, headaches and feeling tired. Flu symptoms tend to hit more quickly than cold symptoms, and can last anywhere from a few days to two weeks.

— COVID-19 can cause fever, chills, cough, short of breath, sore throat, congestion, loss of smell or taste, fatigue, aches, headache, nausea, or vomiting for several days.

— RSV can cause a runny nose, congestion, coughing, sneezing, wheezing, fever and a loss of appetite for a week or two.

One way to protect yourself from all viruses: Wash your hands

Seriously. Rigorous and frequent handwashing — with soap! — is crucial to reduce the spread of norovirus, colds, flu and COVID-19.

This is especially true after using the bathroom and eating or preparing food, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says.

Don’t speed through it, either. Count to 20, slowly, while you scrub away.

If you don’t have access to soap and water, try a hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol — though that isn’t enough to wipe out norovirus.

Cleaning surfaces can wipe out viruses

If norovirus has found you, you’ll want to immediately clean surfaces that came in contact with contaminated food or bodily fluids. The CDC recommends disinfecting things with a chlorine bleach solution or one of the products listed on this Environmental Protection Agency website.

Don’t forget to wash any clothing that came in contact with vomit or feces — use hot water and detergent. Then, wash your hands. Again.

With colds and flu, it’s best to regularly clean surfaces that you come into a lot of contact with. Think doorknobs, light switches, countertops, beloved toys, cellphones.

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Use household cleaning products that contain soap or detergent, and follow it up with a sanitizer. The CDC has more tips on how to clean.

COVID-19 generally spreads through the air from droplets and particles, and the CDC says the risk of getting the virus from a contaminated surface is low.

Keeping your hands off your face can keep viruses out

Viruses can spread through talking, coughing and sneezing, so cover your mouth with a tissue if you feel a tickle in your throat or your nose. Then, wash your hands. Again.

Also, even if you're not sick, consider masking in crowded areas with an N95 or medical-grade mask to protect yourself from respiratory viruses.

Don't touch your face: If you have a germ or virus on your unwashed hands — respiratory or norovirus — and touch your face, eyes or nose, it can get into your mucus membranes and, voila!, you're sick!

Consider a vaccine (if there is one)

Updated COVID-19 vaccines are available, as well as annual flu shots for people 6 months and older. For those 60 and older or for people who are pregnant, you may want to get the RSV vaccine.

But there is no vaccine for norovirus or the common cold.

Another way to keep your defenses against viruses up: Rest

Your immune system may not work as well if you're sleep-deprived, stressed out or dehydrated. So don't grind yourself into the ground if you can help it. Rest. Sleep. Drink water.

If you are sick, stay at home

If you do get sick, prompt testing can help determine whether you have COVID-19 or influenza. That's important to see if you need one of the medicines that can help prevent severe illness: Paxlovid for COVID-19 and Tamiflu for flu.

Above all, if you're symptomatic, stay at home to keep from getting others sick.

To treat a cold, flu or COVID-19, rest and drink fluids. You can take pain relievers to lower a fever or help with an achy body. Humidifiers can help with symptoms, too.

There's no medication for norovirus. Instead, you'll need to rehydrate as much as possible with water and other liquids. Seek help if you are dehydrated and notice you have a dry mouth and throat, aren't urinating as much or feel dizzy when you're standing up.

Trump's words on Greenland and borders ring alarms in Europe, but officials have a measured response

By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump has tossed expansionist rhetoric at U.S. allies and potential adversaries with arguments that the frontiers of American power need to be extended into Canada and the Danish territory of Greenland, and southward to include the Panama Canal.

Trump's suggestions that international borders can be redrawn — by force if necessary — are particularly inflammatory in Europe. His words run contrary to the argument European leaders and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy are trying to impress on Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But many European leaders — who've learned to expect the unexpected from Trump and have seen that actions don't always follow his words — have been measured in their response, with some taking a nothing-to-see-here view rather than vigorously defend European Union member Denmark.

Analysts, though, say that even words can damage U.S.-European relations ahead of Trump's second presidency.

A diplomatic response in Europe

Several officials in Europe — where governments depend on U.S. trade, energy, investment, technology, and defense cooperation for security — emphasized their belief that Trump has no intention of marching troops into Greenland.

"I think we can exclude that the United States in the coming years will try to use force to annex territory

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that interests it," Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni said.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz pushed back — but carefully, saying "borders must not be moved by force" and not mentioning Trump by name.

This week, as Ukrainian President Zelenskyy pressed Trump's incoming administration to continue supporting Ukraine, he said: "No matter what's going on in the world, everyone wants to feel sure that their country will not just be erased off the map."

Since Putin marched troops across Ukrainian borders in 2022, Zelenskyy and allies have been fighting — at great cost — to defend the principle that has underpinned the international order since World War II: that powerful nations can't simply gobble up others.

The British and French foreign ministers have said they can't foresee a U.S. invasion of Greenland. Still, French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot portrayed Trump's remarks as a wake-up call.

"Do we think we're entering into a period that sees the return of the law of the strongest?" the French minister said. "Yes."

On Friday, the prime minister of Greenland — a semiautonomous Arctic territory that isn't part of the EU but whose 56,000 residents are EU citizens, as part of Denmark — said its people don't want to be Americans but that he's open to greater cooperation with the U.S.

"Cooperation is about dialogue," leader Múte B. Egede said.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen called the U.S. "our closest ally" and said: "We have to stand together."

Analysts find Trump's words troubling

European security analysts agreed there's no real likelihood of Trump using the military against NATO ally Denmark, but nevertheless expressed profound disquiet.

Analysts warned of turbulence ahead for trans-Atlantic ties, international norms and the NATO military alliance — not least because of the growing row with member Canada over Trump's repeated suggestions that it become a U.S. state.

"There is a possibility, of course, that this is just ... a new sheriff in town," said Flemming Splidsboel Hansen, who specializes in foreign policy, Russia and Greenland at the Danish Institute for International Studies. "I take some comfort from the fact that he is now insisting that Canada should be included in the U.S., which suggests that it is just sort of political bravado.

"But damage has already been done. And I really cannot remember a previous incident like this where an important ally — in this case the most important ally — would threaten Denmark or another NATO member state."

Hansen said he fears NATO may be falling apart even before Trump's inauguration.

"I worry about our understanding of a collective West," he said. "What does this even mean now? What may this mean just, say, one year from now, two years from now, or at least by the end of this second Trump presidency? What will be left?"

Security concerns as possible motivation

Some diplomats and analysts see a common thread in Trump's eyeing of Canada, the Panama Canal and Greenland: securing resources and waterways to strengthen the U.S. against potential adversaries.

Paris-based analyst Alix Frangeul-Alves said Trump's language is "all part of his 'Make America Great Again' mode."

In Greenland's soils, she noted, are rare earths critical for advanced and green technologies. China dominates global supplies of the valuable minerals, which the U.S., Europe and other nations view as a security risk.

"Any policy made in Washington is made through the lens of the competition with China," said Frangeul-Alves, who focuses on U.S. politics for the German Marshall Fund.

Some observers said Trump's suggested methods are fraught with peril.

Security analyst Alexander Khara said Trump's claim that "we need Greenland for national security purposes" reminded him of Putin's comments on Crimea when Russia seized the strategic Black Sea peninsula from Ukraine in 2014.

Suggesting that borders might be flexible is “a completely dangerous precedent,” said Khara, director of the Centre for Defense Strategies in Kyiv.

“We’re in a time of transition from the old system based on norms and principles,” he said, and “heading to more conflicts, more chaos and more uncertainty.”

Uyghurs detained in Thailand say they face deportation and persecution in China

By DAKE KANG and HUIZHONG WU Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — A group of Uyghur men who were detained in Thailand over a decade ago say that the Thai government is preparing to deport them to China, alarming activists and family members who say the men are at risk of abuse and torture if they are sent back.

In a letter obtained by The Associated Press, 43 Uyghur men held in Bangkok made a public appeal to halt what they called an imminent threat of deportation.

“We could be imprisoned, and we might even lose our lives,” the letter said. “We urgently appeal to all international organizations and countries concerned with human rights to intervene immediately to save us from this tragic fate before it is too late.”

The Uyghurs are a Turkic, majority Muslim ethnicity native to China’s far west Xinjiang region. After decades of conflict with Beijing over discrimination and suppression of their cultural identity, the Chinese government launched a brutal crackdown on the Uyghurs that some Western governments deem a genocide. Hundreds of thousands of Uyghurs, possibly a million or more, were swept into camps and prisons, with former detainees reporting abuse, disease, and in some cases, death.

Over 300 Uyghurs fleeing China were detained in 2014 by Thai authorities near the Malaysian border. In 2015, Thailand deported 109 detainees to China against their will, prompting international outcry. Another group of 173 Uyghurs, mostly women and children, were sent to Turkey, leaving 53 Uyghurs stuck in Thai immigration detention and seeking asylum. Since then, five have died in detention, including two children.

Of the 48 still detained by Thai authorities, five are serving prison terms after a failed escape attempt. It is unclear whether they face the same fate as those in immigration detention.

Advocates and relatives describe harsh conditions in immigration detention. They say the men are fed poorly, kept in overcrowded concrete cells with few toilets, denied sanitary goods like toothbrushes or razors, and are forbidden contact with relatives, lawyers, and international organizations. The Thai government’s treatment of the detainees may constitute a violation of international law, according to a February 2024 letter sent to the Thai government by United Nations human rights experts.

The immigration police has said they have been trying to take care of the detainees as best as they could.

Recordings and chat records obtained exclusively by the AP show that on Jan. 8, the Uyghur detainees were asked to sign voluntary deportation papers by Thai immigration officials.

The move panicked detainees, as similar documents were presented to the Uyghurs deported to China in 2015. The detainees refused to sign.

Three people, including a Thai lawmaker and two others in touch with Thai authorities, told the AP there have been recent discussions within the government about deporting the Uyghurs to China, though the people had not yet seen or heard of any formal directive to do so.

Two of the people said that Thai officials pushing for the deportations are choosing to do so now because this year is the 50th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Thailand and China, and because of the perception that backlash from Washington will be muted as the U.S. prepares for a presidential transition in less than two weeks.

The people spoke on condition of anonymity in order to describe sensitive internal discussions. The Thai and Chinese foreign ministries did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Beijing says the Uyghurs are jihadists, but has not presented evidence. Uyghur activists and rights groups say the men are innocent and expressed alarm over their possible deportation, saying they face persecution, imprisonment, and possible death back in China.

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"There's no evidence that the 43 Uyghurs have committed any crime," said Peter Irwin, Associate Director for Research and Advocacy at the Uyghur Human Rights Project. "The group has a clear right not to be deported and they're acting within international law by fleeing China."

On Saturday morning, the detention center where the Uyghurs are being held was quiet. A guard told a visiting AP journalist the center was closed until Monday.

Two people with direct knowledge of the matter told the AP that all of the Uyghurs detained in Thailand submitted asylum applications to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, which the AP verified by reviewing copies of the letters. The U.N. agency acknowledged receipt of the applications but has been barred from visiting the Uyghurs by the Thai government to this day, the people said.

The UNHCR did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Relatives of three of the Uyghurs detained told the AP that they were worried about the safety of their loved ones.

"We are all in the same situation — constant worry and fear," said Bilal Ablet, whose elder brother is detained in Thailand. "World governments all know about this, but I think they're pretending not to see or hear anything because they're afraid of Chinese pressure."

Ablet added that Thai officials told his brother no other government was willing to accept the Uyghurs, though an April 2023 letter authored by the chairwoman of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand first leaked to the New York Times Magazine and independently seen by the AP said there are "countries that are ready to take these detainees to settle down."

Abdullah Muhammad, a Uyghur living in Turkey, said his father Muhammad Ahun is one of the men detained in Thailand. Muhammad says though his father crossed into Thailand illegally, he was innocent of any other crime and had already paid fines and spent over a decade in detention.

"I don't understand what this is for. Why?" Muhammad said. "We have nothing to do with terrorism and we have not committed any terrorism."

With their Los Angeles-area homes still smoldering, families return to search the ruins for memories

By MANUEL VALDES, JULIE WATSON, JOHN SEEWER and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press LOS ANGELES (AP) — Many watched their homes burn on television in a state of shock.

Since the flames erupted in and around Los Angeles, scores of residents have returned to their still smoldering neighborhoods even as the threat of new fires persisted and the nation's second-largest city remained unsettled. For some, it was a first look at the staggering reality of what was lost as the region of 13 million people grapples with the gargantuan challenge of overcoming the disaster and rebuilding.

Calmer winds enabled firefighters to start gaining some control of the biggest blazes in metropolitan LA on Friday before gusty weather returns over the weekend to an area that hasn't seen rain in more than eight months. But by Friday evening, new evacuations were ordered in an area that includes part of Interstate 405 after a flare up on the eastern side of the Palisades Fire.

Bridget Berg, who was at work when she saw on TV her house in Altadena erupt in flames, came back for the first time with her family two days later "just to make it real."

Their feet crunched across the broken bits of what had been their home for 16 years.

Her kids sifted through debris on the sidewalk, finding a clay pot and a few keepsakes as they searched for Japanese wood prints they hoped to recover. Her husband pulled his hand out of rubble near the still-standing fireplace, holding up a piece of petrified wood handed down by his grandmother.

"It's OK. It's OK," Berg said as much to herself as others as she took stock of the destruction, remembering the deck and pool from which her family watched fireworks. "It's not like we just lost our house — everybody lost their house."

Since the fires first began popping up around a densely populated, 25-mile (40-kilometer) expanse north of downtown LA, they have burned more than 12,000 structures, a term that includes homes, apartment buildings, businesses, outbuildings and vehicles. No cause has been identified yet for the largest fires.

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Allegations of leadership failures and political blame have begun and so have investigations. Gov. Gavin Newsom on Friday ordered state officials to determine why a 117 million-gallon (440 million-liter) reservoir was out of service and some hydrants ran dry, calling it "deeply troubling." Meanwhile, Los Angeles Fire Chief Kristin Crowley said city leadership failed her department by not providing enough money for firefighting. She also criticized the lack of water.

"When a firefighter comes up to a hydrant, we expect there's going to be water," she said.

At least 11 people have been killed, with five from the Palisades Fire and six from the Eaton Fire, according to the LA County medical examiner's office. Officials said they expected that number to rise as cadaver dogs go through leveled neighborhoods to assess the devastation to an area larger than San Francisco.

Officials on Friday set up a center where people could report those missing. Tens of thousands of people remained under evacuation orders, and the fires have consumed about 56 square miles (145 square kilometers).

The disaster took homes from everyone — from waiters to movie stars. The government has not yet released figures on the cost of the damage, but private firms have estimated it will climb into the tens of billions. The Walt Disney Co. announced Friday it will donate \$15 million to respond to the fires and help rebuild.

The flames hit schools, churches, a synagogue, libraries, boutiques, bars, restaurants, banks and local landmarks like the Will Rogers' Western Ranch House and a Queen Anne-style mansion in Altadena that dated back to 1887 and was commissioned for wealthy mapmaker Andrew McNally.

Neighbors wandered around ruins Friday as they described now-vanished bedrooms, recently remodeled kitchens and outdoor living spaces. Some talked about the gorgeous views that drew them to their properties, their words contrasting sharply with the scene of soot and ash.

In the coastal community of Pacific Palisades, Greg Benton surveyed where he lived for 31 years, hoping to find his great-grandmother's wedding ring in the wreckage.

"We just had just had Christmas morning right over here, right in front of that chimney. And this is what's left," he said, pointing to the blackened rubble that was once his living room. "It's those small family heirlooms that are the ones that really hurt the most."

Elsewhere in the city, people at collection sites picked through cardboard boxes of donated items to restart their lives.

Firefighters on Friday afternoon had made progress for the first time on the Eaton Fire north of Pasadena, which has burned more than 7,000 structures. Officials said Friday most evacuation orders for the area were lifted.

LA Mayor Karen Bass, who faces a critical test of her leadership as her city endures its greatest crisis in decades, said several smaller fires also were stopped.

Crews earlier Friday had been gaining ground on the Palisades Fire, which burned 5,300 structures and is the most destructive in LA's history.

California National Guard troops arrived on the streets of Altadena before dawn to help protect property in the fire evacuation zone, and evening curfews were in effect to prevent looting after several earlier arrests.

The level of devastation is jarring even in a state that regularly confronts massive wildfires.

Anna Yeager said she and her husband agonized over going back to their beloved Altadena neighborhood near Pasadena after fleeing with their 6-year-old daughter and 3-year-old son, their two dogs and some clothes. A neighbor told them their house was gone.

Now she regrets not grabbing her children's artwork, her husband's treasured cookbooks, family photos, and jewelry from her mom, who died in 2012, and her husband's grandmother, who survived Auschwitz.

When the couple returned, they saw blocks of only "chimney after chimney."

"Power lines everywhere. Fires still going everywhere" she said, adding that when they walked up to their home "it was just dust."

Charred grapefruits littered their yard around a blackened tree, a few still hanging from its branches.

Yeager's neighborhood of Tudor homes was planning to celebrate its 100th anniversary in May.

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"You build a world for yourself and your family, and you feel safe in that world and things like this happen that you cannot control," she said. "It's devastating."

There were remnants of the front porch where Yeager had photographed her children nearly daily since 2020 and had planned to keep doing that until they reached high school. That gave her hope.

"The porch is still there and it's to me, it's a sign to rebuild and not leave," she said. "You know, it's like saying, 'Hey, I'm still here. You can still do this.'"

Ohio State getting shot at 6th national title after 28-14 win over Texas in CFP semi Cotton Bowl

By STEPHEN HAWKINS AP Sports Writer

ARLINGTON, Texas (AP) — Jack Sawyer had the kind of moment that will live on long past his playing days with Ohio State. Of course, one more victory would make it that much sweeter.

Sawyer stripped Texas quarterback Quinn Ewers — his former roommate — and returned the fumble 83 yards for the clinching touchdown in a 28-14 victory over the Longhorns in the Cotton Bowl on Friday night, giving the Buckeyes a shot at their sixth AP national title.

"We talked before the game about how do you leave a legacy is to become your old legend. And there's some guys on this team today that I believe will become legends in Ohio State history," coach Ryan Day said. "Now they get 10 more days together, and an opportunity to tell their story if they go win one more."

Led by Ohio native Sawyer and Quinshon Judkins, who rushed for two touchdowns, the Buckeyes (13-2) posted the semifinal victory in the same stadium where 10 years ago they were champions when the College Football Playoff debuted with a four-team format. Now they have the opportunity to be the winner again in the first season with an expanded 12-team field.

Ohio State plays Orange Bowl champion Notre Dame in Atlanta on Jan. 20. It could be quite a finish for the Big Ten Buckeyes after they lost to rival Michigan on Nov. 30.

Sawyer got to Ewers on a fourth-and-goal from the 8, knocking the ball loose before scooping it up and lumbering all the way to the other end zone with 2:13 left. It was the longest fumble return in CFP history.

"I saw the ball pop out right to me after I tackled him, I was just thinking, I've got to stay on my feet, because I almost blacked out when I scooped it and saw a bunch of green grass ahead of me," Sawyer said.

Ewers and Sawyer were roommates in Columbus for one semester before the quarterback transferred home to Texas. Ewers helped lead the Longhorns (13-3) to consecutive CFP semifinals, but next season will be their 20th since winning their last national title with Vince Young in 2005.

"I felt him. I started drifting away, thought I was going to be able to get the ball off before he got there," Ewers said. "I saw Jack running with the ball down the sideline. ... Jack's a good player made a great play."

Texas had moved to the 1, helped by two pass-interference penalties in the end zone, before Quintrevion Wisner was stopped for a 7-yard loss. Ewers then threw a third-down incompleteness while being pressured by Sawyer on the play before the defensive touchdown.

"He's everything that we possibly ask for in a captain," Day said. "To make a play like that in that moment ... He just became a legend at Ohio State."

Judkins, a transfer from Mississippi, had a 1-yard touchdown for a 21-14 lead with 7:02 left, capping an 88-yard, 13-play drive over 7:45. That score came four plays after quarterback Will Howard converted a fourth-and-2 from the Texas 34 with a stumbling 18-yard run that probably should have been a score.

"That fourth down was huge. ... I fell on purpose. I'm joking," Howard said. "A statement drive. We needed that."

Howard was 24-of-33 passing for 289 yards with a touchdown and an interception. He played his first game at AT&T Stadium since leading Kansas State to a win over undefeated TCU in the Big 12 championship two years ago. He was 0-3 as a starter against the Longhorns while at K-State, including an overtime thriller in Austin last season.

Ewers finished 23 of 39 for 283 yards with two TD passes to Jaydon Blue and an interception after getting the ball back one final time. It might have been his last play for the Longhorns since he could go into

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the NFL draft.

Texas won the Big 12 title last season before moving to the SEC.

Not so fast

The Buckeyes went ahead on their opening drive of the game when Judkins scored on a 9-yard run. It looked as if they could get off to another fast start, after jumping ahead 21-0 and 34-0 in their first two playoff games.

But Ohio State then punted on four consecutive possessions before Texas tied it at 7 on Ewers' 18-yard touchdown pass to Blue with 29 seconds left in the first half. Arch Manning, the backup and future starting quarterback, kept that drive alive when he converted fourth-and-1 from midfield with an 8-yard keeper — his only play in the game.

Right after Texas' first TD, Buckeyes running back TreVeyon Henderson turned a screen pass into a 75-yard touchdown, following a wall of blockers before shooting through an open gap and sprinting to the end zone.

A great escape

Blue had a tying 26-yard TD catch with 3:12 left in the third quarter. The drive featured a terrific play by Ewers, who was being dragged down by Sawyer on third-and-10 when he managed to scoop the ball underhanded to Wisner for a 13-yard gain.

Up next

While Ohio State prepares for the CFP title game, Texas waits for a rematch with the Buckeyes at Ohio Stadium in the previously scheduled 2025 season opener Aug. 30.

Sam Moore, who sang 'Soul Man' in Sam & Dave duo, dies at 89 due to surgery complications

CORAL GABLES, Fla. (AP) — Sam Moore, the surviving half and higher voice of the 1960s duo Sam & Dave that was known for such definitive hits of the era as "Soul Man" and "Hold On, I'm Comin,'" has died. He was 89.

Publicist Jeremy Westby said Moore died Friday morning in Coral Gables, Florida, due to complications while recovering from surgery. No additional details were immediately available.

Moore, who influenced musicians including Michael Jackson, Al Green and Bruce Springsteen, was inducted with Dave Prater into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1992.

At the Memphis, Tennessee-based Stax Records, Moore and Prater were second only to Otis Redding. They transformed the "call and response" of gospel music into a frenzied stage show and recorded some of soul music's most enduring hits, which also included "You Don't Know Like I Know," "When Something is Wrong With My Baby" and "I Thank You."

Most of their hits were written and produced by the team of Isaac Hayes and David Porter and featured the Stax house band Booker T. & the MGs, whose guitarist Steve Cropper received one of music's most famous shoutouts when Sam & Dave called "Play it, Steve" midway through "Soul Man."

Like many '60s soul acts, Sam & Dave faded after the 1960s. But "Soul Man" hit the charts again in the late 1970s when the Blues Brothers, John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd recorded it with many of the same musicians. Moore had mixed feelings about the hit becoming associated with the "Saturday Night Live" stars, remembering how young people believed it originated with the Blues Brothers.

In 2008, the movie "Soul Men" depicted a pair of aging, estranged singers who bore more than a little resemblance to Sam & Dave. Moore lost a lawsuit claiming the resemblance was too close.

He also spent years suing Prater after Prater hired a substitute and toured as the New Sam & Dave. Prater died in a 1988 car crash in Georgia.

Moore also pressed legal claims that the record industry had cheated him out of retirement benefits. Moore and other artists sued multiple record companies and the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists in 1993.

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Moore told The Associated Press in 1994 that he joined the legal effort after learning, despite his million-selling records, his pension amounted to just \$2,285, which he could take as a lump sum or in payments of \$73 monthly.

"Two thousand dollars for my lifetime?" Moore said then. "If you're making a profit off of me, give me some too. Don't give me cornbread and tell me it's biscuits."

Moore wrote the song "Dole Man," modeled on "Soul Man," for Republican Bob Dole's presidential campaign in 1996. In 2017, he was among the few entertainers who performed for Republican President Donald Trump's inaugural festivities. Eight years earlier, Moore had objected when Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama's campaign used the song "Hold On, I'm Comin'."

Moore was born Oct. 12, 1935, in Miami and got his start singing in church.

He and Prater performed in soul and R&B clubs in the 1950s, but didn't meet until 1961 in Miami. Moore helped coach Prater on the lyrics of a song and they quickly became a popular local duo. In 1965, after signing with Atlantic Records, producer Jerry Wexler sent them to the label's Stax subsidiary in Memphis.

Moore and Prater argued often and Moore told the AP in 2006 that a drug habit, which he kicked in 1981, played a part in the band's troubles and later made entertainment executives leery of giving him a fresh start. The duo broke up in 1970 and neither had another major hit.

He married his wife, Joyce, in 1982, and she helped him get treatment for his addiction that he credited with saving his life.

"I did a lot of cruise ships, I did a lot of oldies shows," during those struggles, he said, adding that he once opened for a group of Elvis impersonators.

"That's funny to think back to it now. And I did a lot of shows where if I did a show with an oldie show, I had to actually audition," he said. "But you know what? You keep your mouth shut and you get up there and you sing as hard and perform as hard as you can, and get the little money and go on about your business and try and pay those bills. I'm laughing about it now, but at that time, man, it was really serious."

Moore kept recording and singing. He was a frequent performer at the Kennedy Center Honors and performed for presidents, including Obama.

Moore is survive by his wife, Joyce, daughter, Michell, and two grandchildren.

Californians scrambled to evacuate dogs, cats, horses, even pigs as LA flames closed in

By HALLIE GOLDEN and LESLIE AMBRIZ Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Arianna Buturovic kept a wary eye on distant smoke from the rescue shelter she runs outside Los Angeles for dogs at risk of being euthanized. Within hours, nearby mountains were ablaze and fire began encircling her.

"I stuffed 15 dogs in a black Prius and two cats," Buturovic said.

But she still had nine more dogs and a pig to evacuate, so flagged down some 18-year-olds with a truck who agreed to take them to a shelter. She couldn't bring two ponies with her, but she left the corral open so they could escape if needed.

"That's how we evacuated almost 30 animals," she said. "It was crazy."

Buturovic is one of many animal owners in Los Angeles who scrambled to get themselves and their beloved companions out of the way of fast-moving wildfires that killed 11 people and burned more than 12,000 homes and other structures this week. It has overwhelmed shelters, whose leaders have implored people, if they're able, to find friends or family to foster their pets.

Wendy Winter and her husband decided Tuesday evening that they should buy some cat carriers so they could evacuate their Altadena home with their felines Purry Mason and Jerry. Less than two hours later, it was clear they needed to leave. The next morning, they learned the house they lived in for more than seven years was gone along with the rest of their street.

"There's fear and loss and you just don't even know," she said. "You're in shock."

They're hoping to find friends to foster their cats for two months while they figure out what they're going

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to do next. Winter said she and her husband are disoriented, and they aren't sure they can provide their cats an environment where they will feel safe and comfortable right now.

Some people took their pets to shelters because they couldn't evacuate with them.

The Pasadena Humane Society took in 250 pets in the first day after the fires started. Los Angeles County Animal Care was looking after 97 pets — mostly cats and dogs but also pigs, a turtle, a bird, and a snake, said Christopher Valles, a department spokesperson.

Veterinarian Dr. Annie Harvilicz had been moving out of an old Animal Wellness Centers office in Marina del Rey, but inspired by her brother's need to find a place for his pets, she turned the exam, X-ray and surgery rooms into an impromptu shelter. She quickly took in 41 dogs, cats and a bunny and soon found foster homes for all but two.

She told people on Facebook to contact her if they needed a place for their animals. She expected an onslaught of pets needing refuge but instead has been inundated with people wanting to volunteer.

"I'm very proud of the people of Los Angeles and how I really feel like they've stepped up to the plate when it comes to helping out each other," she said.

Some people wanted Harvilicz to take their donkeys but she wasn't able to get a trailer to them before they had to evacuate. Difficulties transporting larger animals puts them at greater risk from wildfires, she said.

Julia Bagan, who is part of a Facebook group called Southern California Equine Emergency Evacuation, found five horses locked in their stalls in Altadena one day after the fire. The horses huddled in a small exterior pen attached to the stalls but couldn't entirely escape the flames.

By the time a neighbor called for help and firefighters used bolt cutters to free them, one of the horses was badly hurt, Bagan said.

She drove through the remnants of the fire Wednesday night to rescue them as damaged power lines sparked overhead. She described it as "the most crazy, dangerous" evacuation she's had yet. Almost all the houses in the area had burned when she pulled up.

The injured horse, a 3-year-old black mare she decided to name after the movie Flicka, had leg burns. Her halter burned off, along with her tail and mane. The embers gave her eyes ulcers.

A veterinarian at an emergency equine hospital gave the horse 50-50 odds of surviving.

"She just had no chance, getting left locked in a stall and her owners evacuating and just leaving them all there," Bagan said.

But some horse owners were ready.

When Meredith McKenzie got a notice days before of the heightened fire risk, she asked people at her barn to help evacuate her horse so she could focus on caring for her sister who has Alzheimer's.

"Horse people are not stupid about if there's fire coming. We're out before it starts because once that smoke happens, the horses go nuts and go crazy," McKenzie said. "It's very hard to corral them because they just want to run."

The ranch where she kept her horses, the historic Bob Williams Ranch on Cheney Trail, burned, she said. McKenzie lost her equipment but another ranch has said they'll give her a saddle and bridle.

Suzanne Cassel evacuated Tuesday from Topanga with her two horses, a donkey named Oscar Nelson, four dogs and two cats. They rushed to nab a spot at a large animal emergency shelter at Pierce College, a community college in Woodlands Hills.

Her horses are together in the shelter, while the dogs and cats are staying in the horse trailer. Her donkey, though, was feeling down in a stall by himself.

"He's lonely, so I just went inside and sat in the stall with him for half an hour, and he liked that because nobody likes to be alone when you're a herd animal," she said.

Buturovic, who runs the dog rescue shelter, took some of her canines to Harvilicz's old hospital and others to a friend's home in Venice.

By the time she returned to the Topanga ranch Wednesday morning, it had burned. The cement building that withstood two or three other fires since the 1950's was covered in soot, its roof gone and windows

blown out. Her ponies disappeared, along with two semi-feral dogs she fed. She's hoping to raise money to support Philozoia, her non-profit organization that rescues animals from high-kill shelters.

"I don't know where we're going to go from here," she said.

Maintaining good balance is crucial as you age. Asking these questions can help

By ALBERT STUMM Associated Press

Taking a shower. Grocery shopping. Moving around the kitchen. Getting dressed. The underappreciated link between these mundane activities is good balance, which geriatricians say is key to maintaining an independent lifestyle as we age.

Lacking balance can be dangerous. In the U.S., 3 million older people seek medical care for fall-related injuries each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control. But falls are not inevitable, said Roopa Anmolsingh, a geriatrician who created the Cleveland Clinic's balance classes.

"Some people have a misconception that part of getting old is, you're going to fall. That's not true," Anmolsingh said. "You can control how you fall, or if you fall."

To prevent falls, geriatricians say people should start asking themselves questions about their balance as early as 50 years old.

Do I ever feel unsteady?

Besides muscles and bones, other systems in the body can affect balance, so it's important to have a doctor check you if you ever feel unsteady, even if only occasionally. The cause could be related to blood pressure, a medication, inner-ear function, a nervous system issue or countless other potential problems.

Even if unsteadiness is not an issue, you can determine whether you still might need an intervention with an easy at-home assessment.

Standing next to a wall or something that can lend support if needed, raise one leg. If you can balance on each leg for 10 seconds, you should be fine, said Greg W. Hartley, a University of Miami professor of physical therapy specializing in geriatrics.

"If you can't do that, then you should probably go see a physical therapist," he said.

Another assessment, which Hartley recommended doing supervised, is called TUG, for "timed up and go." Sit in a chair and start a timer when you stand. Walk 10 feet (3 meters), come back and stop the timer upon sitting back down. If it takes longer than 15 seconds, the risk for a fall is very high. Twelve seconds or less, the likelihood of a fall is almost zero.

The National Council on Aging offers an online resource to assess the risk of a fall with questions about medications, whether you worry about falling and if you have trouble stepping over a curb, among others.

What can I do to improve balance?

Because muscle mass begins to decline in most people during their 30s, geriatricians say the best way to preserve good balance is to stay physically active throughout life. But it's never too late to start prioritizing it, Anmolsingh said.

Tai chi and yoga are particularly good for older adults because they involve controlled movements while shifting body weight. There also are individual exercises people can work into their everyday lives.

Anmolsingh recommended standing on one foot while waiting in line at the grocery store. At home, try sitting up and down from a chair several times without using arm rests. While holding onto a chair or the wall, do three-way leg lifts on each side, lifting a leg to the front, side and then back. At the kitchen counter, take a few steps to the side in each direction.

How often should I do the exercises?

For general physical activity, which will improve balance as well as mood and overall health, the National Institute of Aging recommends at least 150 minutes per week. That should include a mixture of stretching to improve flexibility, an aerobic activity increasing the heart rate and strength training with weights or resistance bands.

For balance-specific exercises, it's particularly important to do them regularly because it takes at least 50 hours of training to have a measurable impact, Hartley said. Besides strengthening the associated muscles, doing exercises repetitively for extended periods trains the brain to react properly when you slip or trip.

"Just like an athlete needs to do repetition to train for a sport, you're doing repetition to train for every-day balance activities," he said.

Venezuela's opposition supporters grapple with hope and disappointment after Maduro is sworn in

By REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — The inauguration of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro left his opponents to grapple with conflicting feelings of hope and disappointment on Saturday, pondering why the self-described socialist leader could not be stopped despite credible evidence that he had lost the election last year.

Some described their mood after Friday's ceremony at the legislative palace in Caracas, Venezuela's capital, like an emotional hangover while others said they feel abandoned.

Many expressed cautious optimism, finding a measure of comfort in the social media videos released by two opposition leaders — popular former lawmaker María Corina Machado and Edmundo González, the opposition's candidate in the vote — who had promised to topple Maduro.

"In the end, it feels as if the soup got cold," college professor Nelson Perez said. "We've been on the subject of not losing hope for a while. ... But then you realize it's more of the same."

That realization is hard to process for millions of Venezuelans who, like Perez, had imagined a different Jan. 10 — one with González receiving the presidential sash and Machado giving one of her signature fiery speeches before the National Assembly.

Instead, González and Machado sent messages on social media while Maduro placed his hand on Venezuela's constitution and took the oath of office, defying overwhelming evidence contradicting his victory claim in the July presidential election.

Maduro compared himself to a biblical David fighting Goliath and accused his opponents and their supporters in the United States of trying to turn his inauguration into a "world war." He said his enemies' failure to block his inauguration to a third six-year term was "a great victory" for Venezuela's peace and national sovereignty.

"I have not been made president by the government of the United States, nor by the pro-imperialist governments of Latin America," he said after being draped with a sash in the red, yellow and blue of Venezuela's flag. "I come from the people, I am of the people, and my power emanates from history and from the people."

Venezuela's National Electoral Council, stacked with government loyalists, had declared Maduro the winner of the July 28 election. But unlike in previous contests, electoral authorities did not provide detailed vote counts to back the announced result.

The opposition, however, collected tally sheets from 85% of electronic voting machines and posted them online — showing its candidate, González, had won by a more than a two-to-one margin. U.N. experts and the U.S.-based Carter Center, both invited by Maduro's government to observe the election, said the tally sheets published by the opposition are legitimate.

Machado, in a message on social media Friday, said Maduro was guilty of a coup by not leaving office by Jan. 10, when by law, Venezuela's presidential term begins. She also said she was confident that the country's "freedom is near" but stopped short of saying anything about future steps the opposition could take to end Maduro's presidency.

"Today, Maduro didn't put the sash on his chest. He put a shackle on his ankle, which will tighten every day," she said.

A day earlier, Machado — who was banned from running for office but remains the driving force behind Venezuela's beleaguered opposition — had emerged from months of hiding to join an anti-Maduro pro-

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test in Caracas. She said security forces had briefly detained her after leaving the rally, an allegation the government promptly denied.

Thursday's rally drew far smaller crowds than the massive demonstrations Machado and González had led during the election campaign, primarily because of fears over the government's brutal crackdown on dissent. More than 2,000 people were arrested during and after the civil unrest that followed the election.

"You see people, and they look like they have a hangover," bricklayer Luis Carlos Moreno, 55, said of the mood among those who had stayed away from the inauguration ceremony. "We have to wait until next week to see how things go and if ... everyone goes to work and the kids go to school."

In contrast, Maduro's supporters near the legislative palace were jubilant, some unable to hold back tears of joy.

State TV said 10 heads of state attended the ceremony. But far more governments around the world have rejected Maduro's victory claims, pointing to credible evidence validated by election observers.

Underscoring Maduro's growing isolation, the U.S., Canada, Britain and the European Union announced new sanctions Friday on more than 20 Venezuelan officials, accusing them of gutting the country's democracy. Those sanctioned included Supreme Court justices, electoral authorities, the head of Venezuela's state oil company and Cabinet ministers.

Meanwhile, González, who left for Spain in September to avoid arrest, was in the Dominican Republic, which was supposed to be the last stop on his tour of the Americas before attempting to return to Venezuela to be sworn in. In his video message, he told supporters that Maduro's government will end "soon, very soon" and reiterated his promise to return to Venezuela.

"I am ready for safe entry at the right time," he said.

Those struggling with the idea of Maduro's rule for six more years included poll workers — many of them were harassed or arrested following the election.

"I'm very disappointed," said Caracas resident and poll worker Marlyn Ruiz. "Reality is not as we were led to believe."

Powerful winter storm that dumped snow in US South maintains its icy grip

By KATE BRUMBACK and TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A winter storm that dropped heavy snow and glazed roads throughout the U.S. South was maintaining its icy grip on much of the region into the weekend.

Power outage numbers around Atlanta crept up Friday night as meteorologists warned of accumulating freezing rain. More than 110,000 customers were without electricity, mostly in the Atlanta area.

"As our crews anticipated based on the forecast, additional freezing rain and falling trees have caused power outages as the sun has gone down," Georgia Power said via social media.

"Conditions overnight remain challenging with icy roads and winds, but as long as it is safe — we will be working," the utility said.

Georgia transportation officials urged people to stay off the roads until midday Saturday, and snow and ice was also forecast to continue in the Carolinas, Virginia and the Ohio and Tennessee Valleys.

Earlier this week the storm brought heavy snow and slicked roads across much of Texas and Oklahoma before moving east. Arkansas and North Carolina mobilized National Guard troops for tasks such as helping stranded motorists, and governors in multiple states declared states of emergency.

School was canceled for millions of children from Texas to Georgia and as far east as South Carolina, giving them a rare snow day.

The storm piled up more than a year's worth of snowfall on some cities.

As much as a foot (about 31 centimeters) fell in parts of Arkansas, and there were reports of nearly 10 inches (about 25 centimeters) in Little Rock, which averages 3.8 inches (9.7 centimeters) a year.

More than 7 inches (about 18 centimeters) fell at Memphis International Airport in Tennessee since late Thursday. The city usually sees 2.7 inches (6.9 centimeters) a year. City officials in Memphis were also

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concerned that wet roads would freeze overnight.

The wintry mix of sleet, snow and ice has made travel treacherous in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. Sleet and snow that fell in South Carolina and North Carolina was changing to freezing rain.

For kids home from school Friday, the wet snow also packed into a pretty good snowball.

In Atlanta, Mikayla Johnson, 12, was making snow angels and snow figures.

"My first thought was, 'Wow!'" said Mikayla, who was outdoors with her father, Nate. "We haven't had snow since I was, like, 4 — good snow, at least. So I was really happy."

The storm dumped as much as 7 inches (about 18 centimeters) in some spots in central Oklahoma and northern Texas.

Snow began falling in metro Atlanta before dawn Friday, leading to hundreds of flights being cancelled and hundreds more delayed at the world's busiest airport, according to flight tracking software FlightAware.

Four passengers were injured after a Delta plane bound for Minneapolis aborted takeoff that morning, according to the Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport. One passenger was hospitalized, while three people were treated at the scene for minor injuries.

The incident contributed to further delays, although Delta said it was unclear whether the weather had anything to do with the flight aborting its takeoff. The airline said there was an indication of an engine issue.

Other airports with significant delays and cancellations included those in Charlotte, North Carolina, Dallas-Fort Worth and Nashville, Tennessee.

The storm could continue to affect air traffic, the Federal Aviation Administration said Friday night.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott urged residents to avoid driving if possible, even as some 75,000 fans were expected Friday at AT&T Stadium in Arlington for the college football championship semifinal between Texas and Ohio State.

The polar vortex of ultra-cold air usually spins around the North Pole, but it sometimes ventures south into the U.S., Europe and Asia. Some experts say such events are happening more frequently, paradoxically, because of a warming world.

The cold snap coincided with rare January wildfires tearing through the Los Angeles area.

Southern discomfort

As much as 8 inches (about 20 centimeters) of snow was forecast in parts of Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia through Saturday, the National Weather Service said.

Officials urged drivers to give plows space after a semitrailer hit a Tennessee Department of Transportation truck in Smith County.

Parts of South Carolina were seeing their first wintry weather in three years. The state Department of Transportation treated interstates and other major highways from Columbia northward, but vehicles were slipping off icy Interstate 95 south of the city.

A public outdoor inauguration ceremony Saturday in Raleigh, North Carolina, for Gov. Josh Stein and other elected officials was canceled. The storm's trajectory overlapped with much of the western North Carolina area impacted by Hurricane Helene last year.

In Richmond, Virginia. Mayor Danny Avula said officials brought in extra resources to monitor the city's water treatment facility, which suffered a multiday outage following a snowstorm earlier in the week, including a new backup battery and additional water filters.

Families in shock begin to visit their charred homes in the Los Angeles area

By MANUEL VALDES, JULIE WATSON, JOHN SEEWER and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press LOS ANGELES (AP) — Many watched their homes burn on television in a state of shock.

Since the flames erupted in and around Los Angeles, scores of residents have returned to their still smoldering neighborhoods even as the threat of new fires persisted and the nation's second-largest city remained unsettled. For some, it was a first look at the staggering reality of what was lost as the region of 13 million people grapples with the gargantuan challenge of overcoming the disaster and rebuilding.

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Calmer winds enabled firefighters to start gaining some control of the biggest blazes in metropolitan LA on Friday before gusty weather returns over the weekend to an area that hasn't seen rain in more than eight months. But by Friday evening, new evacuations were issued in an area that includes The Getty museum as the eastern side of the Palisades Fire spread, nearing Interstate 405.

Bridget Berg, who was at work when she saw on TV her house in Altadena erupt in flames, came back for the first time with her family two days later "just to make it real."

Their feet crunched across the broken bits of what had been their home for 16 years.

Her kids sifted through debris on the sidewalk, finding a clay pot and a few keepsakes as they searched for Japanese wood prints they hoped to recover. Her husband pulled his hand out of rubble near the still-standing fireplace, holding up a piece of petrified wood handed down by his grandmother.

"It's OK. It's OK," Berg said as much to herself as others as she took stock of the destruction, remembering the deck and pool from which her family watched fireworks. "It's not like we just lost our house — everybody lost their house."

Since the fires first began popping up around a densely populated, 25-mile (40-kilometer) expanse north of downtown LA, they have burned more than 12,000 structures, a term that includes homes, apartment buildings, businesses, outbuildings and vehicles. No cause has been identified yet for the largest fires.

Allegations of leadership failures and political blame have begun and so have investigations. Gov. Gavin Newsom on Friday ordered state officials to determine why a 117 million-gallon (440 million-liter) reservoir was out of service and some hydrants ran dry, calling it "deeply troubling." Meanwhile, Los Angeles Fire Chief Kristin Crowley said city leadership failed her department by not providing enough money for firefighting. She also criticized the lack of water.

"When a firefighter comes up to a hydrant, we expect there's going to be water," she said.

At least 11 people have been killed, with five from the Palisades Fire and six from the Eaton Fire, according to the LA County medical examiner's office. Officials said they expected that number to rise as cadaver dogs go through leveled neighborhoods to assess the devastation to an area larger than San Francisco.

Officials on Friday set up a center where people could report those missing. Tens of thousands of people remained under evacuation orders, and the fires have consumed about 56 square miles (145 square kilometers).

The disaster took homes from everyone — from waiters to movie stars. The government has not yet released figures on the cost of the damage, but private firms have estimated it will climb into the tens of billions. The Walt Disney Co. announced Friday it will donate \$15 million to respond to the fires and help rebuild.

The flames hit schools, churches, a synagogue, libraries, boutiques, bars, restaurants, banks and local landmarks like the Will Rogers' Western Ranch House and a Queen Anne-style mansion in Altadena that dated back to 1887 and was commissioned for wealthy mapmaker Andrew McNally.

Neighbors wandered around ruins Friday as they described now-vanished bedrooms, recently remodeled kitchens and outdoor living spaces. Some talked about the gorgeous views that drew them to their properties, their words contrasting sharply with the scene of soot and ash.

In the coastal community of Pacific Palisades, Greg Benton surveyed where he lived for 31 years, hoping to find his great-grandmother's wedding ring in the wreckage.

"We just had just had Christmas morning right over here, right in front of that chimney. And this is what's left," he said, pointing to the blackened rubble that was once his living room. "It's those small family heirlooms that are the ones that really hurt the most."

Elsewhere in the city, people at collection sites picked through cardboard boxes of donated items to restart their lives.

Firefighters made progress for the first time since Tuesday containing the Eaton Fire north of Pasadena, which has burned more than 7,000 structures. Officials said Friday most evacuation orders for the area were lifted.

LA Mayor Karen Bass, who faces a critical test of her leadership as her city endures its greatest crisis in decades, said several smaller fires also were stopped.

Crews were also gaining ground on the Palisades Fire, which burned 5,300 structures and is the most destructive in LA's history.

California National Guard troops arrived on the streets of Altadena before dawn to help protect property in the fire evacuation zone, and evening curfews were in effect to prevent looting after several earlier arrests.

The level of devastation is jarring even in a state that regularly confronts massive wildfires.

Anna Yeager said she and her husband agonized over going back to their beloved Altadena neighborhood near Pasadena after fleeing with their 6-year-old daughter and 3-year-old son, their two dogs and some clothes. A neighbor told them their house was gone.

Now she regrets not grabbing her children's artwork, her husband's treasured cookbooks, family photos, and jewelry from her mom, who died in 2012, and her husband's grandmother, who survived Auschwitz.

When the couple returned, they saw blocks of only "chimney after chimney."

"Power lines everywhere. Fires still going everywhere" she said, adding that when they walked up to their home "it was just dust."

Charred grapefruits littered their yard around a blackened tree, a few still hanging from its branches.

Yeager's neighborhood of Tudor homes was planning to celebrate its 100th anniversary in May.

"You build a world for yourself and your family, and you feel safe in that world and things like this happen that you cannot control," she said. "It's devastating."

There were remnants of the front porch where Yeager had photographed her children nearly daily since 2020 and had planned to keep doing that until they reached high school. That gave her hope.

"The porch is still there and it's to me, it's a sign to rebuild and not leave," she said. "You know, it's like saying, 'Hey, I'm still here. You can still do this.'"

Panama Canal administrator pushes back against Trump's assertions of Chinese meddling

By ALMA SOLÍS Associated Press

PANAMA CITY (AP) — The administrator of the Panama Canal said Friday that the vital waterway will remain in Panamanian hands and open to commerce from all countries, rejecting claims by President-elect Donald Trump that the United States should take it over.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Ricaurte Vásquez denied Trump's claims that China was controlling the canal's operations, and said making exceptions to current rules concerning its operation would lead to "chaos."

He said Chinese companies operating in the ports on either end of the canal were part of a Hong Kong consortium that won a bidding process in 1997. He added that U.S. and Taiwanese companies are operating other ports along the canal as well.

Trump has gone so far as to suggest the U.S. should take back control of the canal and he would not rule out using military might to do so.

"It might be that you'll have to do something," Trump said Tuesday. "The Panama Canal is vital to our country." Trump has characterized the fees for transiting the canal that connects the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans as "ridiculous."

Panama President José Raúl Mulino has said unequivocally that the canal will remain in Panamanian hands.

Responding to the suggestion that the U.S. could try to retake control of the canal, Vásquez said there was "no foundation for that sort of hope. That is the only thing I can say."

Vásquez stressed that the Panama Canal was open to the commerce of all countries.

The canal can't give special treatment to U.S.-flagged ships because of a neutrality treaty, Vásquez added. "The most sensible and efficient way to do this is to maintain the established rules."

Requests for exceptions are routinely rejected, because the process is clear and there mustn't be arbitrary variations, he said. The only exception in the neutrality treaty is for American warships, which receive expedited passage.

Some 70% of the sea traffic that crosses the Panama Canal leaves or goes to U.S. ports.

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The United States built the canal in the early 1900s as it looked for ways to facilitate the transit of commercial and military vessels between its coasts. Washington relinquished control of the waterway to Panama on Dec. 31, 1999, under a treaty signed in 1977 by President Jimmy Carter.

Last month, Trump told supporters "We're being ripped off at the Panama Canal." He claimed that the U.S. "foolishly gave it away."

Regarding the fees for using the canal, Vasquez said a planned series of increases had concluded with one this month. Any additional increases would be considered in the first half of the year to give clients certainty in their planning and would go through a public comment process, he said.

"There's no discrimination in the fees," he said. "The price rules are uniform for absolutely all those who transit the canal and clearly defined."

The canal depends on reservoirs to operate its locks and was heavily affected by drought during the past two years that forced it to substantially reduce the number of daily slots for crossing ships. With fewer ships using the canal each day, administrators increased the fees that are charged all shippers for reserving a slot.

The canal bisects Panama, running 51 miles end to end. It allows ships to avoid the longer and costlier trip around Cape Horn at the tip of South America.

"It is an enormous responsibility," Vásquez said of Panama's control of the canal. "Take the case of COVID, when it arrived, the canal took the necessary measures to protect the labor force, but while keeping the canal open, because the international commitment is to keep it open."

Venezuela latest: Maduro sworn in for third term as global backlash and sanctions mount

By The Associated Press undefined

CARACAS, Venezuela (AP) — Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro was sworn in for a third six-year term Friday despite international condemnation of his recent reelection as illegitimate, as his administration grows increasingly brazen in cracking down on opponents.

The country's legislative palace, where he was sworn in, was heavily guarded by police, military and intelligence officers. Crowds of people, many sporting pro-Maduro T-shirts, gathered in adjacent streets and a nearby plaza.

Here's the latest:

Biden defends decision to avoid tougher sanctions on Venezuela's energy sector

U.S. President Joe Biden defended his decision not to toughen sanctions on Venezuela's energy sector, saying he was worried it could have created an opening to be filled by Iranian oil.

Despite sanctioning a number of Maduro officials, the administration did not end a license it granted oil giant Chevron to export Venezuelan oil to the U.S. That license has significantly boosted oil production, and state coffers, as a result.

Asked about criticism that his sanctions did not go far enough, Biden said of additional energy sanctions on Venezuela.

"That's still being investigated in terms of what impact it would have and whether or not it would just be replaced by Iran or any other," he said, adding that if he had more time before he leaves office on Jan. 20 he might have made that decision in the future.

Opposition leader González: 'I am the president-elect'

Former presidential candidate and opposition leader Edmundo González said that he represents the will of Venezuelans and declared he is the country's president-elect.

In a video recorded from the Dominican Republic and released on social media, González thanked Venezuela's "democratic friends" for their support, citing a new round of sanctions announced Friday by global leaders.

He said he is ready to enter the country once it is safe to do so, and called on the military to not follow

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“illegal” orders from Maduro.

“He has crowned himself a dictator. The people don’t support him, nor does any government that can call itself democratic,” he said.

World leaders join condemnations of Maduro after inauguration

Leaders from the Group of Seven democracies (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America and the High Representative of the European Union) released a joint statement condemning “lack of democratic legitimacy” of election and crackdown on dissent in Venezuela.

In Latin America, Argentina and Chile released separate statements calling Maduro’s presidency fraudulent and decrying repression by his government.

Venezuela closes its border with Brazil

Venezuela made a unilateral decision to close its border with Brazil, the Brazilian government said in a statement. The border will remain closed until Jan. 13.

Earlier Friday, Venezuela closed its border with Colombia and suspended air travel between the two nations.

Caracas remains paralyzed as Venezuelans express disappointment over inauguration

With limited traffic and many businesses closed, Venezuela’s capital felt like a ghost town Friday, hours after Maduro’s inauguration.

“You see people looking like they’re hungover,” said Luis Carlos Moreno, a 55-year old painter and brick-layer, referring to the feeling of uncertainty displayed by the few passers-by on the main avenues of Caracas.

Schools were closed on Thursday and Friday due to security concerns, following a significant student absence on Wednesday. Moreno said numerous work appointments also had to be canceled due to the potential for civil unrest.

The disappointment comes after a year of yearning for change and hope in Venezuela in the lead up to the July presidential election.

As Miriam Lara waited for a bus leaving Caracas on Friday morning, she expressed a feeling of hopelessness.

“What I tell you is horrible. Six more years, no one can stand this. It’s like being stuck and scared, going neither forward nor backward. Maduro can’t stay in power anymore,” she said.

Opposition leader Machado accuses Maduro of staging a coup

Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado, called Maduro’s inauguration a “coup” and said she has asked former presidential candidate Edmundo González not travel to Venezuela until “the moment was right.”

The announcement walks back previous promises by Venezuela’s opposition that González would travel to the country on Friday to take control from Maduro.

In a video message posted to her 8.7 million followers on Instagram, Machado said she was in constant contact with regional leaders and that she “believed freedom was close.” She didn’t say, however, what the opposition’s plan was to continue to push back against Maduro.

“We all know that as of today the pressure will increase even more until Maduro understands that this is over,” she said.

“Today Maduro didn’t put the sash on his chest. He put it on his ankle as a shackle, which will tighten more every day.”

As Maduro’s reaffirms control of military, opposition leader González is nowhere to be seen

As Maduro gave a speech to the Venezuelan military forces largely credited with keeping him in power, the country’s opposition leader, Edmundo González, was nowhere to be seen Friday in the Dominican Republic, where he arrived on Wednesday. He held a brief press conference on Thursday before disappearing from the public eye.

While his wife was spotted at the hotel on Friday, González had not appeared.

On Friday morning, former Mexican President Felipe Calderón, who had traveled to the Dominican Republic in support of González along with other Latin American dignitaries, announced they would hold a

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press conference about Venezuela's opposition leader.

But as of Friday afternoon, no press conference had been held yet.

Earlier on Friday, Maduro made fun of González, saying in a mocking tone: "I'm waiting for him to arrive, I'm nervous."

Biden administration extends temporary protections for 600,000 Venezuelans

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security said it is extending the temporary legal status to about 600,000 Venezuelans who fled the country for another 18 months. It cited "the extraordinary conditions that prevent eligible Venezuelan nationals from safely returning."

The announcement came just minutes after Maduro was sworn in to serve a third six-year term and marks the Biden administration's latest in support of Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, which faces an uncertain future under U.S. President-elect Donald Trump, who tried to sharply curtail its use during his first term as president.

Britain and Canada slap sanctions against Venezuelan officials

The U.K. imposed sanctions on 15 senior top Venezuelan officials, including senior officials with the electoral service and the commander of the armed forces, and called Maduro's claim to the presidency illegitimate. The sanctions include a travel ban and a freezing of assets.

"Nicolás Maduro's claim to power is fraudulent," Foreign Secretary David Lammy said. "Today's sanctions send a clear message. The U.K. will not stand by as Maduro continues to oppress, undermine democracy, and commit appalling human rights violations."

Canada also said it has imposed sanctions on 14 current and former senior officials that the government said "have engaged in activities that have directly or indirectly supported human rights violations in Venezuela."

Inauguration marred by lack of regional support

Few regional leaders – other than those facing their own human rights criticisms – traveled to Venezuela to attend Maduro's inauguration.

While countries like Peru said they recognized opposition leader Edmundo González, not Maduro, as Venezuela's rightful leader, other regional allies like Colombian leftist leader Gustavo Petro and Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum were notably absent.

Venezuelan Opposition: 'A coup d'état has been consummated against the rights of the people'

A coalition of Venezuelan opposition parties condemned Maduro's inauguration, calling it a "coup d'état" against the democratic will of the people. It said in a statement that Maduro landed his third term through "brute force and by ignoring" the popular vote.

It maintained that opposition leader Edmundo González was the rightful president who won the July presidential election.

"We begin today a new stage in the struggle for the freedom of Venezuela," the coalition wrote. "We must make them feel our permanent and active democratic resistance, until the national constitution and especially the popular will is respected."

US doles out new sanctions, boosts reward for information leading to capture of Maduro and top officials

As Maduro rails on foreign critics, the U.S. Treasury Department slapped a new round of sanctions on Venezuelan officials.

The U.S. sanctions were placed on the president of Venezuela's state-owned oil company, Maduro's transportation minister and state-owned airline, and high-level military and police officials which the Treasury said had "roles in carrying out Maduro's repression and human rights abuses against democratic actors."

The U.S. State Department also boosted its offer for information leading to the arrest of Maduro and his interior minister, Diosdado Cabello, to \$25 million each, and placed a new bounty of \$15 million for information about Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino.

In 2020, the department had offered a reward of up to \$15 million for information on Maduro. It also imposed new travel restrictions on an undisclosed number of Maduro-aligned government officials who the U.S. believes undermined the electoral process and were complicit in repression.

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Maduro claims compliance with constitution, criticizes US

In a fiery speech following his swearing in, Maduro claimed that his government has "complied with the constitution" despite little evidence that he won the election and international claims of fraud.

Maduro accused external powers of "attacking" Venezuela, taking digs at the U.S. government and foreign critics, and he promised to guarantee "peace and national sovereignty."

"Today more than ever I feel the weight of commitment, the power that I represent, the power that the constitution grants me," he said. "I have not been made president by the government of the United States, nor by the pro-imperialist governments of Latin America."

Maduro accused the opposition of trying to turn the inauguration into a "world war," but said they failed.

In the crowd celebrating Maduro's inauguration was Presidents Miguel Díaz-Canel of Cuba and Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua – countries also facing international sanctions for democratic crackdowns. Top Russian and Chinese officials were also in attendance.

Maduro is sworn in inside the legislative palace

Standing before officials, Maduro was sworn in at Venezuela's legislative palace.

"I swear by Bolivar, by Sucre, by Urdaneta, by Manuela Saez, by the eternal memory of our eternal commander Hugo Chavez ... I swear by history, I swear by my life," Maduro said.

As he did, followers erupted into cheers.

Maduro arrives to heavily guarded palace before inauguration

Authorities announced the arrival of Maduro and other leaders to Venezuela's legislative palace, where he is set to be sworn in shortly.

The building is being heavily guarded by police, military and intelligence officers. In adjacent streets and a nearby plaza, people, many sporting pro-Maduro T-shirts, are already gathering. Maduro walked by crowds as some outside the palace roared "Vamos Nico!", "or Let's go, Nico!"

"Today we've come to support our constitutional President Nicolás Maduro with tons of joy and excitement," said supporter Sabrina Sucre, who traveled from the Venezuelan coast with a fellow fisherwoman to witness the inauguration.

EU imposes sanctions on 15 Venezuelan officials

The European Union imposed sanctions on 15 top Venezuelan officials who had a role in the South American country's 2024 election.

Among those sanctioned are the president and vice president of Venezuela's Supreme Court, electoral agency and others, which the 27-nation bloc said have put the nation's democracy at risk.

Flights suspended, borders closed between Venezuela and Colombia

Venezuelan authorities have announced the suspension of commercial flights and the closure of borders between Venezuela and Colombia, a country with which it shares a 2,200-kilometer (1,367-mile) border.

The measure, which came into effect at 5 a.m. Friday local time and will last 72 hours, came after former opposition presidential candidate Edmundo González promised to return to the country to be sworn in as president.

González, who returned to Latin America last weekend from his self-exile in Madrid, is recognized as president-elect by the United States, several countries in the region and international organizations such as the Organization of American States. He hasn't offered details of how he intends to enter the country to appear at the inauguration and strip Maduro of power.

Costa Rica's former President Laura Chinchilla — part of the delegation of former leaders accompanying González — said Thursday he was still intending to enter Venezuela on Friday, without providing details. She spoke at the hotel in the Dominican Republic where they were staying.

Maduro has weathered condemnation before

Maduro is facing more international rebuke than at any time in his nearly 12 years in power. The self-declared socialist has clung to power despite credible evidence that he lost last year's election by a landslide. That sparked criticism by the United States and others that the vote was stolen.

But this isn't the first time Maduro's claim to power has been questioned. Dozens of countries led by the U.S. condemned his 2018 re-election as a sham and recognized Juan Guaidó, the then-head of the

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National Assembly, as Venezuela's legitimate leader.

Maduro, who took power in 2013 following Hugo Chávez's death from cancer, has seen the entirety of his time in office marked by the crisis. Without "El Comandante" in charge, the economy entered a death spiral — shrinking 71% from 2012 to 2020, with inflation topping 130,000%.

Ahead of last year's election, voters across the country repeatedly said they or their loved ones would emigrate if Maduro remained in power. Under his watch, more than 7.7 million Venezuelans have already left their homeland in search of better living conditions.

Kidnapping and arrests ahead of Maduro's swearing-in

This week alone, masked gunmen arrested a former presidential candidate, a prominent free speech activist and the son-in-law of self-exiled opposition leader González.

González, who handily won last year's election according to tally sheets activists collected from electronic voting machines, said his son-in-law was kidnapped Tuesday in Caracas by hooded men wearing black while en route to drop off his children at school.

On Thursday, the eve of Maduro's inauguration, aides to opposition leader María Corina Machado said she was detained, followed moments later by official denials, in a confusing episode that capped a day of protests. She was freed after she was coerced into recording various videos, according to her aides.

Sharing cells in the country's packed prisons with the hundreds of government opponents arrested since the election are as many as 10 Americans. Most have not had access to a lawyer and only limited contact with family members, who worry they could be subject to torture, as past American detainees have alleged.

None has been declared wrongfully detained by the State Department, a designation that would give their cases more attention. Because the U.S. has no diplomatic presence in Venezuela, their families can face a long process pushing for their release. The Americans' detentions add another complication to the many Venezuela challenges that await President-elect Trump when he returns to the White House on Jan. 20.

Evidence of election fraud

Electoral authorities loyal to the ruling party declared Maduro the winner hours after polls closed on July 28, but unlike in previous presidential elections, they did not provide detailed vote counts.

At the same time, the main opposition coalition collected tally sheets from 85% of electronic voting machines, posted them online and said they showed that González thrashed Maduro by a more than two-to-one margin. Experts from the Atlanta-based Carter Center, invited by Maduro's government to observe the election, have said the tally sheets published by the opposition are legitimate.

Global condemnation over the lack of transparency prompted Maduro to ask the country's high court — also filled with allies of his United Socialist Party of Venezuela — to audit the election results. The court reaffirmed Maduro's victory without providing thorough evidence and encouraged the electoral council to release the vote counts. But neither the council nor the ruling party produced any evidence.

LA wildfires destroy numerous houses of worship. Clergy and congregants vow to persevere

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO, LUIS ANDRES HENAO and PETER SMITH Associated Press

Flames were already attacking the campus of Pasadena Jewish Temple and Center when the cantor, Ruth Berman Harris, and three companions rushed in to rescue its sacred Torah scrolls.

Physically, that's now all that is left of the 80-year-old synagogue, destroyed by wildfires that also destroyed a mosque, a Catholic parish and a half-dozen Protestant churches. Many members of these congregations were among the thousands of Angelenos who lost their homes this week. As the threat of new fires persisted, clergy were left with the huge challenges of offering comfort and pondering paths toward rebuilding and recovery.

"There's absolutely nothing except for a few walls and the empty space," said the Pasadena Jewish Center's executive director, Melissa Levy.

Nevertheless, hundreds of its congregants have gone to the site "to say, 'Goodbye'" to the places where they celebrated milestones in their faith and family lives, Levy added.

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Navigating road closures to rescue Torah scrolls

Berman Harris — along with her husband, another congregant and a custodian — managed to get the Torah scrolls into their cars and whisked away to safety before the synagogue was engulfed in flames Tuesday night.

"It's the heartbeat of any Jewish community," she said of the Torah. That's why, despite road closures, she rushed in to try to save the scrolls after a congregant who lives near the temple called her to say the flames were getting closer.

Several houses of worship were destroyed in Pasadena and Altadena, including a mosque — Masjid Al-Taqwa, leaving its small, tight-knit community mourning the loss of a beloved gathering space. One of its board members lost his house in the fire, along with at least 10 of the faithful, said the volunteer imam, Junaid Aasi.

"So many families called it their second home," Aasi said of the mosque. It was started as an African American place of worship, and in the past 20 years had attracted diverse young families as well as professionals and college students.

Its backyard had become a place of community celebration nightly when breaking the fast during Ramadan, with children doing art activities like painting murals.

"It was a sense of belonging for us," Aasi said.

Samar Ghannoum, a professor at the University of Redlands, has prayed at the mosque with her family since the 1990s. It was Ghannoum's daughter who alerted that the mosque was destroyed.

"When she called and said, 'Mom, the masjid is burned,' and was in tears, my heart broke," Ghannoum said Friday.

Earlier in the day, she had gone for midday prayer to another mosque, where congregants added the "Salat al-Istisqa," a prayer for rain rooted in the Islamic belief that God's mercy provides sustenance.

Community fundraising efforts have already started to rebuild, with donations surpassing \$100,000 by Friday night. For Friday prayer, Aasi shared a list of neighboring mosques; for Ramadan, the faithful hope to be able to secure a space to gather again as a community.

The wildfires destroyed Altadena Community Church, as well as several homes owned by members of the congregation of about 60 people, said its pastor, the Rev. Paul Tellström.

"It's shocking," said Tellström. "It's a reminder to us of all of the fragility of life."

Worship without a building

The church, built in the 1940's, was known for its colorful stained glass and for hosting a popular choir.

The church's Facebook page shared images of the building engulfed in flames. Another photo showed parishioners singing outdoors. Underneath, the image it read: "WE are the church! We can worship anywhere."

"This is a big blow, but it will not impede our progress," Tellström said. "The most important takeaway is that we are the church — not the building."

Altadena United Methodist Church also burned down, as did homes of many members, according to Facebook posts by its pastor, the Rev. J. Andre Wilson.

"Our building is gone," he wrote. "But YOU and US, are the church."

Fire spoils church's weekend wedding plans

Ricardo Springs II, a church member who came to see the remains of the building, said the congregation had been planning this Sunday to host the wedding of a couple that recently joined the church.

The devastation is "just heartbreaking," he said. "God will see us through this."

"My sons grew up in this church, my wife grew up in this church," he told The Associated Press on Thursday. "It's an awesome church community."

St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Altadena also was destroyed.

"It is with a broken heart that I share with you the news that our church building is lost," the Rev. Carri Patterson Grindon, the rector, wrote on Facebook. She said several community members lost their homes and the church staff was organizing a network of mutual support.

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"We will need one another in the days ahead as we face these devastating losses," she wrote. "I am here for you, and I know our community will hold together, and love and support one another through whatever lies ahead."

Prayers — and faith — bolster affected congregations

The Parish of St. Matthew, an Episcopal church in Pacific Palisades, whose campus also includes a preschool-through-8th grade school, reported that all of its clergy residences were destroyed, though its sanctuary, middle school and other buildings were intact.

The church has hosted online gatherings, using the liturgy of Compline or night prayer.

"We feel your prayers," the school's chaplain, the Rev. Stefanie Wilson, said in the Thursday night online gathering, responding to the outpouring of concern from people far and near. "We need them and we want them and we feel that you're with us right now."

In Pacific Palisades, Corpus Christi Catholic Church was destroyed. Its website displayed a photo of the skeletal remains of the church, accompanied by this message: "I have no words. Our beautiful church in Pacific Palisades, as of this morning."

Also destroyed was Pacific Palisades Presbyterian Church, which posted photos on its Facebook page showing the church intact before the fire and in ruins afterward.

Throughout the stricken areas, faith leaders were concerned about congregation members who lost their homes and have found temporary shelter with friends or in hotels. But they are finding hope in their faith and their communities.

"Nothing in my faith has been rocked by this," said Melissa Levy of the Pasadena Jewish Center. "If anything, it's been bolstered by the support we have received and we can give."

Synagogues still standing offer a place to worship

The Los Angeles area is home to more than 600,000 Jews, the second-largest community in the United States. The Pasadena synagogue also lost its preschool, and in Pacific Palisades, fires seriously damaged another synagogue and a Chabad center, said Rabbi Noah Farkas, president of the Jewish Federation Los Angeles.

Synagogues away from danger will host services over the weekend for those congregants who cannot attend their regular temples, and volunteers have been helping with everything from food and cash assistance to providing a dedicated text messaging line for hundreds of displaced families who have no idea what, if anything, of their homes survived the fires.

"I've been here 32 years and literally every person I know has lost their house," Rabbi Zushe Cunin said of the neighborhood of his Chabad center. "Apocalyptic is the word I've been using."

As clouds of smoke started building in the area earlier this week, Cunin said, he and other staff escorted about 100 children from their school to safety through growing traffic jams to the Pacific Coast Highway, and then ran back to save the scrolls. The fire damaged classrooms and other spaces, though the sanctuary is intact.

But even as they remain determined to rebuild, the immediate priority for Cunin, Levy and Farkas is helping their congregants and the broader communities who have lost all their possessions.

"Even with the people of means, everything is gone," Cunin said.

Powerful winter storm dumps heavy snow, causing flight delays, slick roads and school closings

By KATE BRUMBACK and TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — A powerful winter storm that dumped heavy snow and glazed roads with ice across much of Texas and Oklahoma lumbered eastward into Southern U.S. states Friday, making for dicey travel and a rare snow day for many students.

Arkansas and North Carolina mobilized their National Guards for tasks such as helping stranded motorists, as governors in multiple states declared states of emergency. School was canceled for millions of children from Texas to Georgia and as far east as South Carolina.

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The storm piled up more than a year's worth of snowfall on some Southern cities. As much as a foot (about 31 centimeters) fell in parts of Arkansas. There were reports of nearly 10 inches (about 25 centimeters) in Little Rock, a city that averages 3.8 inches (9.7 centimeters) a year.

More than 7 inches (about 18 centimeters) fell at Memphis International Airport in Tennessee since late Thursday. The city usually sees 2.7 inches (6.9 centimeters) a year. In some areas where snow tapered off, such as Memphis, the worry was that wet roads would freeze overnight.

Farther south and east into Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia, a wintry mix of sleet, snow and ice made travel treacherous. The sleet and snow that fell over parts of Atlanta into South Carolina and North Carolina was changing to freezing rain, and forecasters warned that if the ice accumulation gets heavy enough, power lines and trees could topple.

The number of people without electricity in Georgia rose sharply in the evening to more than 100,000 customers, mostly around metro Atlanta. More than 30,000 lost power Friday night in northeast Texas and neighboring southwest Arkansas.

For kids home from school, the heavy wet stuff also packed into a pretty good snowball.

In Atlanta, Mikayla Johnson, 12, was out making snow angels and snowmen on her day off.

"My first thought was, 'Wow!'" said Mikayla, who was outdoors with her father, Nate. "We haven't had snow since I was, like, 4 – good snow, at least. So I was really happy."

The storm dumped as much as 7 inches (about 18 centimeters) in some spots in central Oklahoma and northern Texas.

And in the Kansas City area, students were back at school in several districts Thursday after three straight snow days, only to see classes called off again Friday because of more snow.

Snow began falling in metro Atlanta before dawn, leading to hundreds of flights being cancelled and hundreds more delayed at the world's busiest airport, according to flight tracking software FlightAware. Controllers declared a ground stop before 8 a.m., meaning no planes could land or take off.

Four passengers were injured after a Delta plane bound for Minneapolis aborted takeoff Friday morning, according to the Hartsfield–Jackson Atlanta International Airport. One passenger was hospitalized, while three people were treated at the scene for minor injuries.

The incident contributed to further delays, although Delta said it was unclear whether the weather had anything to do with the flight aborting its takeoff. The airline said there was an indication of an engine issue.

Airports with significant delays and cancellations included those in Charlotte, North Carolina, Dallas-Fort Worth and Nashville. Fifty-five passengers on three American Airlines flights that were diverted from Dallas-Fort Worth spent the night at the Bill and Hillary Clinton National Airport in Little Rock.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott urged residents to avoid driving if possible. Some 75,000 fans were expected Friday at AT&T Stadium in Arlington for the college football championship semifinal between Texas and Ohio State in the Cotton Bowl.

The polar vortex of ultra-cold air usually spins around the North Pole, but it sometimes ventures south into the U.S., Europe and Asia. Some experts say such events are happening more frequently, paradoxically, because of a warming world.

The cold snap coincided with rare January wildfires tearing through the Los Angeles area.

Southern discomfort

As much as 8 inches (about 20 centimeters) of snow was forecast in parts of Georgia, North Carolina, Tennessee and West Virginia through Saturday, the National Weather Service said.

More than 1 million public school students in metro Atlanta and north Georgia got a snow day or were at home learning online.

After a disastrous winter storm in 2014 left thousands of Atlanta-area workers and schoolchildren stranded overnight away from home, officials in Georgia were quick to cancel in-person classes and close offices Friday.

In the Atlanta area, multiple freeway interchanges were temporarily closed or paralyzed by stalled trucks. Having learned a lesson from past storms when that was a massive problem, this time around emergency

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crews were towing stalled vehicles, said James Stallings, director of Georgia Emergency Management and Homeland Security.

Officials urged drivers to give plows space after a semitrailer hit a Tennessee Department of Transportation truck in Smith County.

In Nashville, Joe Feliciano tromped over snowy sidewalks to deliver the mail Friday. A Florida native who moved to Tennessee in 2023, he said he isn't used to driving in the snow but the U.S. Postal Service trained him, so now he's "nervous, but confident" and knows: Just go slow, and be careful.

"This is like, 'Wow!' This is a lot of snow," Feliciano said.

Parts of South Carolina were seeing their first wintry weather in three years. The state Department of Transportation treated interstates and other major highways from Columbia northward, but vehicles were slipping off icy Interstate 95 south of the city. Some schools closed.

With snow, sleet and freezing rain expected across North Carolina, a public outdoor inauguration ceremony Saturday in Raleigh for Gov. Josh Stein and other elected officials was canceled. The storm's trajectory overlapped with much of the western North Carolina area impacted by Hurricane Helene last year.

The snowstorm was expected to arrive Friday night in Richmond, Virginia. Mayor Danny Avula said officials brought in extra resources to monitor the city's water treatment facility, which suffered a multiday outage following a snowstorm earlier in the week, including a new backup battery and additional water filters.

Biden is still considering pardons for people who have been criticized or threatened by Trump

By ZEKE MILLER and COLLEEN LONG Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden on Friday said he was still considering whether to give pardons to people who have been criticized or threatened by President-elect Donald Trump.

Speaking to reporters at the White House, Biden said he and his aides were playing close attention to rhetoric from Trump and his allies about his political opponents and those involved in his various criminal and civil woes.

"It depends on some of the language and expectations that Trump broadcast in the last couple days here as to what he's going to do," Biden said. "The idea that he would punish people for not adhering to what he thinks should be policy related to his well-being is just outrageous."

Biden has just 10 days left in office, and the institutionalist has been using his waning days in office to restore some of the transition norms broken by his predecessor-turned-successor. But issuing preemptive pardons — for actual or imagined offenses by Trump's critics that could be investigated or prosecuted by the incoming administration — would stretch the powers of the presidency in untested ways.

Trump's frequent targets include Republican Liz Cheney, the former Wyoming congresswoman, and Rep. Bennie Thompson, a Mississippi Democrat. They helped lead the House committee that investigated the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters. He has aimed particular criticism at special counsel Jack Smith, who charged Trump over his efforts to overturn the 2020 election.

Biden, who Trump has said should be jailed, scoffed at the notion that he would pardon himself. "What would I pardon myself for?" he asked incredulously. "No, I have no contemplation of pardoning myself for anything. I didn't do anything wrong."

Former Rep. Adam Kinzinger, one of the Republican members of the House committee that investigated the Jan. 6 Capitol insurrection, rejected the prospect of a pardon from Biden earlier this week in an appearance on CNN.

"I understand the theory behind it because Donald Trump has clearly said he's going to go after everybody," he said. "But the second you take a pardon and it looks like you're guilty of something — I'm guilty of nothing besides bringing the truth to the American people and, in the process, embarrassing Donald Trump."

In his remarks to reporters, Biden said a decision by the social media giant Meta to end fact-checking on Facebook was "really shameful," calling it "contrary to American justice."

The move to replace third-party fact-checking with user-written "community notes," similar to those on Trump backer Elon Musk's social platform X, was the latest example of a media company moving to accommodate the incoming administration. It comes on the fourth anniversary of Zuckerberg's banning Trump from his platforms after the insurrection.

Biden added: "You think it doesn't matter that they let it be printed? Where millions of people read it, things that are simply not true. I mean, I don't know what that's all about. It's just completely contrary to everything America's about. We want to tell the truth."

Biden levies new sanctions against Russian energy sector, but it's up to Trump whether to keep them

By AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Joe Biden's administration announced Friday that it's expanding sanctions against Russia's critically important energy sector, unveiling a new effort to inflict pain on Moscow for its grinding war in Ukraine as President-elect Donald Trump gets set to return to office vowing to quickly end the conflict.

The outgoing Democratic administration billed the new sanctions as the most significant to date against Moscow's oil and liquefied natural gas sectors, the driver of Russia's economy. Officials said the sanctions, which punish entities that do business with the Russians, have the potential to cost the Russian economy upward of billions of dollars per month.

More than 180 oil-carrying vessels that are suspected to be part of a shadow fleet utilized by the Kremlin to evade oil sanctions as well as traders, oil field service firms and Russian energy officials are also targeted by the new sanctions. Several of the vessels targeted are also suspected of shipping sanctioned Iranian oil, according to the Treasury Department.

"Putin is in tough shape right now, and I think it's really important that he not have any breathing room to continue to do the god-awful things he continued to do," Biden told reporters.

In the move coordinated with Washington, the U.K. also slapped sanctions on Russian energy firms. The U.S. and Britain are both targeting two of Russia's major oil producers, Gazprom Neft and Surgutneftegas, and dozens of the companies' subsidiaries.

The Foreign Office said that between them the two companies produce more than 1 million barrels of oil a day, worth \$23 billion a year. British Foreign Secretary David Lammy said "oil revenues are the lifeblood of Putin's war economy."

"Taking on Russian oil companies will drain Russia's war chest – and every ruble we take from Putin's hands helps save Ukrainian lives," he said.

The U.K. has already sanctioned almost 100 vessels in Russia's oil-transporting "shadow fleet" as Ukraine's Western allies seeking to increase economic pressure on Moscow ahead of any negotiations on ending the war.

White House national security spokesman John Kirby said the Biden administration chose this moment—just 10 days before Biden leaves office—for tougher oil measures because worries about world oil markets have subsided. Biden told reporters that he anticipated the move could cost drivers "three, four cents a gallon" at the pump.

"This was really based on market conditions," Kirby added. "And so the time was propitious for this decision, and that's why the president made it."

The State Department also announced it was hitting 14 senior Rosatom officials and executives with travel bans that also affect their immediate family members.

Biden administration officials said that it will ultimately be up to Trump's administration whether to keep or scrap the new sanctions.

Trump's transition team did not immediately respond to a request for comment about the sanctions.

Asked if the Biden administration consulted with the incoming Trump team, Kirby responded, "We have at every step and on every major issue been keeping the transition team informed of our decisions, what

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we're doing and why we're doing it."

Trump's incoming national security adviser, Mike Waltz, wrote in an opinion piece for the Economist published shortly before Election Day that the U.S. should "use economic leverage" for "cracking down on Russia's illicit oil sales" to bring Russian President Vladimir Putin to the negotiating table.

Meanwhile, Trump told reporters on Thursday that Putin "wants to meet, and we are setting it up."

Trump's warm relationship with Putin over the years has come under heavy scrutiny. The Republican president-elect has also balked at the cost of aid to Kyiv, pledging to move quickly to end the conflict upon his return to office on Jan. 20.

Trump added a new layer of doubt about future American support earlier this week when he appeared to sympathize with Putin's position that Ukraine should not be part of NATO. The president-elect has criticized the Biden administration for expressing support for Kyiv's eventual membership in the transatlantic military alliance.

Biden spoke with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Friday as the sanctions were announced, discussing his administration's ongoing support for the effort to hold Russia at bay and underscored the need for that support to continue. The White House said Zelenskyy expressed appreciation for the U.S.

"I know that there are a significant number of Democrats and Republicans on the Hill who think we should continue to support Ukraine," Biden told reporters after the call. "It is my hope and expectation they will speak up...if Trump decides to cut off funding for Ukraine."

White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan on Friday warned that a pullback in support for Ukraine would have reverberations far beyond Kyiv. He noted that the U.S. has relied on European allies cooperation over the last four years as it devised a strategy to deal with growing economic competition posed by China.

"I think it's evident that if the U.S. pulls the rug out from under Ukraine, that will have an impact on the health of our European alliances and it will have reverberations in the Indo-Pacific," Sullivan said in a conversation with a small group of reporters at the White House.

The Kremlin on Friday dismissed the new sanctions ahead of the anticipated announcement.

"We are aware that the administration will try to leave as difficult legacy in bilateral relations as possible for Trump and his team," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

The designation comes under a sanctions authority approved during Russia's 2014 invasion and annexation of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula, according to administration officials who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity under ground rules set by the White House.

Should the Trump administration move to roll back the sanctions, it would have to first notify Congress, which would have the ability to take a vote of disapproval of such a move, the officials added.

The shadow fleet is made up of aging tankers bought used, often by nontransparent entities with addresses in non-sanctioning countries such as the United Arab Emirates or the Marshall Islands, and flagged in places like Gabon or the Cook Islands. Some of the vessels are owned by Russia's state-owned Sovcomflot shipping company. Their role is to help Russia's oil exporters elude the \$60 per barrel price cap imposed by Ukraine's allies.

Finnish authorities suspect a Russia-linked shadow fleet vessel was involved in possible sabotage, cutting critical power and communications cables under the Baltic Sea between Finland and Estonia on Dec. 25.

Supreme Court seems likely to uphold a federal law that could force TikTok to shut down on Jan. 19

By MARK SHERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Friday seemed likely to uphold a law that would ban TikTok in the United States beginning Jan. 19 unless the popular social media program is sold by its China-based parent company.

Hearing arguments in a momentous clash of free speech and national security concerns, the justices seemed persuaded by arguments that the national security threat posed by the company's connections

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to China override concerns about restricting the speech either of TikTok or its 170 million users in the United States.

Early in arguments that lasted more than two and a half hours, Chief Justice John Roberts identified his main concern: TikTok's ownership by China-based ByteDance and the parent company's requirement to cooperate with the Chinese government's intelligence operations.

If left in place, the law passed by bipartisan majorities in Congress and signed by President Joe Biden in April will require TikTok to "go dark" on Jan. 19, lawyer Noel Francisco told the justices on behalf of TikTok.

At the very least, Francisco urged, the justices should enter a temporary pause that would allow TikTok to keep operating. "We might be in a different world again" after President-elect Donald Trump takes office on Jan. 20. Trump, who has 14.7 million followers on TikTok, also has called for the deadline to be pushed back to give him time to negotiate a "political resolution." Francisco served as Trump's solicitor general in his first presidential term.

But it was not clear whether any justices would choose such a course. And only Justice Neil Gorsuch sounded like he would side with TikTok to find that the ban violates the Constitution.

Gorsuch labeled arguments advanced by the Biden administration' in defense of the law a "paternalistic point of view." TikTok, he said, has offered to post a warning that the content could be manipulated by the Chinese government.

"Don't we normally assume that the best remedy for problematic speech is counter speech?" he asked Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar, who defended the law for the Biden administration

A warning wouldn't be enough to counterbalance the spread of misinformation, Prelogar said.

Francisco and lawyer Jeffrey Fisher, representing content creators and TikTok users, repeatedly tried to focus the court on the First Amendment restrictions that would fall on TikTok and its users, imperiling the livelihood of content creators, if the law is allowed to take effect.

But compared to the mildly challenging questions directed to Prelogar, they faced skepticism from every justice other than Gorsuch.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh raised U.S. concerns about China accessing information on tens of millions of Americans, including especially teenagers and people in their 20s, with whom TikTok is extremely popular.

"That seems like a huge concern for the future of the country," said Kavanaugh, whose daughters are in that age range.

Roberts downplayed Fisher's argument that banning TikTok violates American users' free speech rights. "Congress is fine with the expression," Roberts said. "They're not fine with a foreign adversary, as they've determined it is, gathering all this information about the 170 million people who use TikTok."

The justices are expected to act within days, almost certainly ahead of the Jan. 19 deadline.

Content creators and small business owners who rely on the app are awaiting a decision with anxiety.

"There's really no replacement for this app," said Skip Chapman, co-owner of KAFX Body in Manasquan, N.J., a maker and seller of natural deodorants. Chapman said more than 80% of his sales come on TikTok and he has not found the same traction on Amazon or other platforms.

Lee Zavorskas, a TikTok creator and a licensed esthetician based in New Hampshire, said she makes nearly half of her income on the platform by promoting products for other businesses. Zavorskas said she found it too stressful to listen to Friday's arguments. Instead, she spent her time building a YouTube channel.

ByteDance has said it won't sell the short-form video platform, and Francisco said a sale might never be possible under the conditions set in the law.

But some investors have been eyeing TikTok, including Trump's Former Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and billionaire businessman Frank McCourt. On Thursday, McCourt's Project Liberty initiative said it, along with its unnamed partners, presented a proposal to ByteDance to acquire TikTok's U.S. assets. The consortium, which includes "Shark Tank" host Kevin O'Leary, did not disclose the financial terms of the offer.

If TikTok isn't sold to an approved buyer, the federal law would prohibit app stores, such as those operated by Apple and Google, from offering the popular app. It would also bar internet hosting services from hosting TikTok.

TikTok users who already have the app on their phones will continue to have access to it. But new users

won't be able to download the app, and existing ones will no longer be able to receive updates. That will eventually render the app unworkable, the Justice Department has said in court filings.

Prelogar said an eventual sale of the platform, even after the ban kicks in, would allow TikTok to resume operations. The sale of Twitter to Elon Musk, who renamed it X, shows that the sale of a social media platform can happen quickly, she said.

That high-profile transaction went through in about six months from offer to completion, she said.

TikTok, meanwhile, has been "on notice" since 2020, during Trump's first term, that its sale could be required if it couldn't satisfy the U.S. government's national security concerns

The federal law was the culmination of a yearslong saga in Washington over TikTok, which the government sees as a national security threat due to its connections to China.

U.S. officials argue that the vast amounts of user data that TikTok collects, including sensitive information on viewing habits, could fall into the hands of the Chinese government through coercion. They also are concerned that the proprietary algorithm that fuels what users see on the app is vulnerable to manipulation by Chinese authorities, who could pressure ByteDance to shape content on the platform in a way that's difficult to detect.

TikTok, which sued the government last year over the law, has long denied it could be used as a tool of Beijing.

The company negotiated with the Biden administration between 2021 and 2022 to resolve the concerns around U.S. data privacy and potential algorithmic manipulation. In court documents, it has accused the administration of essentially walking away from those negotiations after it presented a draft agreement in August 2022. But the Justice Department has said the Biden administration concluded the proposal was "insufficient" because it would maintain TikTok's ties to China. The agency said the Executive Branch also could "neither trust ByteDance to comply nor detect noncompliance before it was too late."

A three-judge panel made up of two Republican appointees and a Democratic appointee unanimously upheld the law in December, prompting TikTok's quick appeal to the Supreme Court.

Judge holds Rudy Giuliani in contempt of court for continued lies about Georgia election workers

By MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Rudy Giuliani was found in contempt of court Friday for the second time in a week, as a federal judge warned him he could be sent to jail if he doesn't stop spreading lies about two former Georgia election workers who won a \$148 million defamation judgement against him.

U.S. District Judge Beryl Howell in Washington, D.C., found the former New York City mayor and one-time attorney for President-elect Donald Trump violated court orders barring him from defaming Wandrea "Shaye" Moss and her mother, Ruby Freeman. The judge ordered him to review trial testimony and other materials from the case, and warned him that future violations could land him behind bars.

Moss and Freeman sued Rudy Giuliani for defamation for falsely accusing them of committing election fraud in connection with the 2020 election. His lies upended their lives with racist threats and harassment.

Giuliani smiled and chuckled as the judge explained why she was holding him in contempt of court. Howell, who was nominated to the bench by President Barack Obama, said it is "outrageous and shameful" for Giuliani to suggest that he is the one who has been treated unfairly in this case.

"This takes real chutzpah, Mr. Giuliani," she said.

Shortly before the hearing began, Giuliani slammed the judge in a social media post, calling her "blood-thirsty" and biased against him and the proceeding a "hypocritical waste of time." After leaving the courtroom, Giuliani called the hearing a farce and the judge "completely biased and prejudiced."

"I don't care what she did. She is a completely farcical judge," Giuliani said outside the courtroom. "She didn't consider a damn thing I said. She wrote it beforehand."

It's the latest legal setback for Giuliani, who is also facing criminal charges and lost his law license in D.C.

and New York after pursuing false claims that Trump made about his 2020 election loss.

Giuliani briefly testified during Friday's hearing, only to authenticate records about his personal finances. The judge didn't fine Giuliani for his most recent defamatory comments about the case, but she said would impose daily fines of \$200 if he doesn't certify within 10 days that he has complied with her order to review trial testimony and other case-related material.

A jury sided with the mother and daughter in December 2023 and awarded them \$75 million in punitive damages plus roughly \$73 million in other damages.

"Mr. Giuliani started lying about Plaintiffs in December of 2020, and refused to stop after repeatedly being told that his election-rigging conspiracy theory about Plaintiffs was baseless, malicious, and dangerous," the plaintiffs' lawyers wrote.

Giuliani's attorneys argued that the plaintiffs haven't presented "clear and convincing" evidence that he violated a court order in the defamation case in comments that he made on November podcasts about alleged ballot counting irregularities in Georgia.

"Giuliani acted with the good faith belief that his comments did not violate the (judgment) and he should not be subject to contempt sanctions," his lawyers wrote.

On Monday in New York, Judge Lewis Liman found Giuliani in contempt of court for related claims that he failed to turn over evidence to help the judge decide whether he can keep a Palm Beach, Florida, condominium.

Giuliani, who testified in Liman's Manhattan courtroom Jan. 3, said he didn't turn over everything because he believed the requests were overly broad, inappropriate or even a "trap" set by plaintiffs' lawyers.

Giuliani, 80, had tried to get out of appearing in person Friday, telling the judge he gets death threats and has been told to be careful about traveling. But he withdrew his request to appear virtually after the judge ordered him to explain whether he has traveled from his Florida home within the last month.

On the witness stand at the defamation trial, Moss and Freeman described fearing for their lives after becoming the target of a false conspiracy theory that Giuliani and other Republicans spread as they tried to keep Trump in power after he lost the 2020 election to Democrat Joe Biden. Moss told jurors she tried to change her appearance, seldom leaves her home and suffers from panic attacks.

Giuliani has pleaded not guilty to nine felony charges in the Arizona case alleging he spread false claims of election fraud there after the 2020 election.

He was separately charged in Georgia along with Trump and other allies of the former president accused of trying to overturn his 2020 election loss in the state. The future of the Georgia case is unclear after an appeals court said Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis and her office could not continue to prosecute it because of an "appearance of impropriety" created by a romantic relationship she had with a special prosecutor she hired to lead the case.

Federal probe of 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre says 'no avenue' for criminal case in connection to attack

By SEAN MURPHY Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY (AP) — The first-ever U.S. Justice Department review of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre concluded Friday that while federal prosecution may have been possible a century ago there is no longer an avenue to bring a criminal case more than 100 years after one of the worst racial attacks in U.S. history.

The Department of Justice said at the outset of its probe it had no expectation anyone would be prosecuted, but in a more than 120-page report federal investigators outlined the scope and impact of the massacre, an attack by a white mob on a thriving Black district that left as many as 300 people dead and 1,200 homes, businesses, schools and churches destroyed.

"Now, the perpetrators are long dead, statutes of limitations for all civil rights charges expired decades ago, and there are no viable avenues for further investigation," the report states.

Among the findings in the DOJ investigation were federal reports from just days after the massacre, in

1921, conducted by an agent with the precursor agency to the FBI. But today's investigators said they found no evidence that any federal prosecutors ever evaluated those reports.

"It may be that federal prosecutors considered filing charges and, after consideration, did not do so for reasons that would be understandable if we had a record of the decision," the report concluded, adding that if the department didn't seriously consider such charges, "then its failure to do so is disappointing."

The report also examined the role of various people and organizations in the massacre, including the Tulsa Police Department, local sheriff, Oklahoma National Guard and then-Tulsa Mayor T.D. Evans, determining that each played a role in the chaos and destruction, either by failing to act or by actively participating in the attack.

Damario Solomon-Simmons, an attorney for the last known survivors of the massacre, Viola Fletcher and Lessie Benningfield Randle, both of whom are 110, did not immediately respond Friday to a request for comment on the report. Solomon-Simmons had previously decried the DOJ's decision to investigate the massacre as a "joyous occasion."

Victor Luckerson, a Black author and historian who wrote a book about Tulsa's Greenwood district, said there is value in the government establishing a definitive record of the attack.

"Having government documents available lays the groundwork for the possibility of reparations," Luckerson said. "Any of those discussions about reparations, one of the first questions is how we establish a factual record of what happened."

A researcher working for a state commission in 1999 estimated the damage from the attack to be \$1.8 million in 1921 dollars, a figure the report said would be about \$32.2 million today.

The Oklahoma Supreme Court in June dismissed a lawsuit by survivors, dampening the hope of advocates for racial justice that the city would make financial amends for the attack.

The nine-member court upheld the decision made by a district court judge in Tulsa last year, ruling that the plaintiff's grievances about the destruction of the Greenwood district, although legitimate, did not fall within the scope of the state's public nuisance statute.

New Orleans attacker fired at police before they shot and killed him, bodycam video shows

By JACK BROOK Associated Press/Report for America

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — The Islamic State group-inspired attacker who killed 14 people in a truck rampage on New Year's Day in New Orleans fired at police from inside his vehicle before officers fatally shot him, police bodycam footage released Friday shows.

"They killed the terrorist. ... They are national heroes," New Orleans Police Department Superintendent Anne Kirkpatrick said of the officers at a news conference.

Shamsud-Din Jabbar had driven his white F-150 around a police car blockading the entrance of Bourbon Street, the city's most famous thoroughfare, and plowed into revelers about 3:15 a.m. New Year's Day, killing 14 and injuring dozens.

After the vehicle crashes, officer Christian Beyer stands beside the truck's open driver's side door with his gun raised, bodycam footage from approaching officer Luis Robles shows. Officer Jacobie Jordan is also seen standing by the driver's side. He too had his gun drawn, officials said.

Beyer identifies himself and asks Jabbar to get out of the truck, said Sgt. Mike Guasco with the Public Integrity Bureau's Force Investigation Team. The team is responsible for reviewing all police shootings.

Jabbar then shoots from behind an airbag at close range and the flash of the muzzle is visible. Robles and at least two unidentified officers turn, run a few steps away and dive onto the ground as a succession of shots rings out.

Beyer and Jordan both fired their weapons, Guasco said. A third officer not visible in the footage, Sgt. Nigel Daggs, was standing by the truck's front passenger door and also fired.

"Officers are trained for shoot scenarios like that — they're highly trained, and that's what you saw. These are split-second decisions," Kirkpatrick said.

Citing the ongoing investigation and pending litigation, Kirkpatrick said police won't yet disclose how many shots Jabbar fired. But she stressed that the officers had followed protocol and had been allowed to return to full duty.

"All officers are faced with 'shoot, don't shoot.' And this was clearly within the law and clearly, solidly within policy," Kirkpatrick said.

The three officers who shot at Jabbar were Daggs, a 21-year veteran of the department, and Beyer and Jordan, each of whom has been with the department nearly two years, police officials said. Jordan and nine-year veteran officer Joseph Rodrigue, who did not fire his weapon, were both wounded in the thighs and Rodrigue's shoulder was fractured. Kirkpatrick declined to comment on whether any officers or bystanders were hit by friendly fire.

The officers involved have provided statements to investigators about "their thinking and understanding" of the events that took place, Kirkpatrick said, declining to elaborate because it is part of an FBI investigation. She said the officers would not be available for comment.

She also refused to answer questions about the security measures in place or state how many officers were in the area at the time of the attack. A group of victims sued the city and two of its contractors on Thursday, claiming they failed to implement security measures that could have prevented the attack.

"I will answer any and all questions through the investigations and then the results of that will be made public," Kirkpatrick said. She indicated that police will eventually release more bodycam footage.

Trump gets no-penalty sentence in his hush money case, while calling it 'despicable'

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, JENNIFER PELTZ, JAKE OFFENHARTZ and MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press NEW YORK (AP) — President-elect Donald Trump was sentenced Friday to no punishment in his historic hush money case, a judgment that lets him return to the White House unencumbered by the threat of a jail term or a fine.

With Trump appearing by video from his Florida estate, the sentence quietly capped an extraordinary case rife with moments unthinkable in the U.S. only a few years ago.

It was the first criminal prosecution and first conviction of a former U.S. president and major presidential candidate. The New York case became the only one of Trump's four criminal indictments that has gone to trial and possibly the only one that ever will. And the sentencing came 10 days before his inauguration for his second term.

In roughly six minutes of remarks to the court, a calm but insistent Trump called the case "a weaponization of government" and "an embarrassment to New York." He maintained that he did not commit any crime.

"It's been a political witch hunt. It was done to damage my reputation so that I would lose the election, and, obviously, that didn't work," the Republican president-elect said by video, with U.S. flags in the background.

After the roughly half-hour proceeding, Trump said in a post on his social media network that the hearing had been a "despicable charade." He reiterated that he would appeal his conviction.

Manhattan Judge Juan M. Merchan could have sentenced the 78-year-old to up to four years in prison. Instead, Merchan chose a sentence that sidestepped thorny constitutional issues by effectively ending the case but assured that Trump will become the first president to take office with a felony conviction on his record.

Trump's no-penalty sentence, called an unconditional discharge, is rare for felony convictions. The judge said that he had to respect Trump's upcoming legal protections as president, while also giving due consideration to the jury's decision.

"Despite the extraordinary breadth of those protections, one power they do not provide is the power to erase a jury verdict," said Merchan, who had indicated ahead of time that he planned the no-penalty sentence.

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As Merchan pronounced the sentence, Trump sat upright, lips pursed, frowning slightly. He tilted his head to the side as the judge wished him "godspeed in your second term in office."

Before the hearing, a handful of Trump supporters and critics gathered outside. One group held a banner that read, "Trump is guilty." The other held one that said, "Stop partisan conspiracy" and "Stop political witch hunt."

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg, whose office brought the charges, is a Democrat.

The norm-smashing case saw the former and incoming president charged with 34 felony counts of falsifying business records, put on trial for almost two months and convicted by a jury on every count. Yet the legal detour — and sordid details aired in court of a plot to bury affair allegations — didn't hurt him with voters, who elected him in November to a second term.

Beside Trump as he appeared virtually Friday from his Mar-a-Lago property was defense lawyer Todd Blanche, with partner Emil Bove in the New York courtroom. Trump has tapped both for high-ranking Justice Department posts.

Prosecutors said that they supported a no-penalty sentence, but they chided Trump's attacks on the legal system throughout the case.

"The once and future president of the United States has engaged in a coordinated campaign to undermine its legitimacy," prosecutor Joshua Steinglass said.

Afterward, Trump was expected to return to the business of planning for his new administration. He was set later Friday to host conservative House Republicans as they gathered to discuss GOP priorities.

The specific charges in the hush money case were about checks and ledgers. But the underlying accusations were seamy and deeply entangled with Trump's political rise.

Trump was charged with fudging his business' records to veil a \$130,000 payoff to porn actor Stormy Daniels. She was paid, late in Trump's 2016 campaign, not to tell the public about a sexual encounter she maintains the two had a decade earlier. He says nothing sexual happened between them and that he did nothing wrong.

Prosecutors said Daniels was paid off — through Trump's personal attorney at the time, Michael Cohen — as part of a wider effort to keep voters from hearing about Trump's alleged extramarital escapades.

Trump denies the alleged encounters occurred. His lawyers said he wanted to squelch the stories to protect his family, not his campaign. And while prosecutors said Cohen's reimbursements for paying Daniels were deceptively logged as legal expenses, Trump says that's simply what they were.

"For this I got indicted," Trump lamented to the judge Friday. "It's incredible, actually."

Trump's lawyers tried unsuccessfully to forestall a trial, and later to get the conviction overturned, the case dismissed or at least the sentencing postponed.

Trump attorneys have leaned heavily into assertions of presidential immunity from prosecution, and they got a boost in July from a Supreme Court decision that affords former commanders-in-chief considerable immunity.

Trump was a private citizen and presidential candidate when Daniels was paid in 2016. He was president when the reimbursements to Cohen were made and recorded the following year.

Merchan, a Democrat, repeatedly postponed the sentencing, initially set for July. But last week, he set Friday's date, citing a need for "finality."

Trump's lawyers then launched a flurry of last-minute efforts to block the sentencing. Their last hope vanished Thursday night with a 5-4 Supreme Court ruling that declined to delay the sentencing.

Meanwhile, the other criminal cases that once loomed over Trump have ended or stalled ahead of trial.

After Trump's election, special counsel Jack Smith closed out the federal prosecutions over Trump's handling of classified documents and his efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss to Democrat Joe Biden. A state-level Georgia election interference case is locked in uncertainty after prosecutor Fani Willis was removed from it.

The Trump company is not banning private foreign deals, a break with its first term policy

By BERNARD CONDON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Trump family business released a voluntary ethics agreement Friday that allows it to strike deals with private foreign companies, a move that could help outside actors try to buy influence with the new administration.

The so-called ethics white paper bars the Trump Organization from striking deals directly with foreign governments, but allows ones with private companies abroad, a significant departure from President-elect Donald Trump's first term. An ethics pact that Trump signed eight years ago barred both foreign government and foreign company deals.

The Trump company also announced it would commit to several safeguards from his first term designed to stop his private financial interests from shaping policy. That includes hiring an outside ethics adviser to vet deals.

"The Trump Organization is dedicated to not just meeting but vastly exceeding its legal and ethical obligations during my father's Presidency," said executive vice president Eric Trump.

The Trump Organization recently struck deals for hotels and golf resorts in Vietnam, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, raising concerns by government ethics experts that president-elect Trump's personal financial interests could influence policy toward those countries.

The family company has expressed interest in striking deals in Israel and elsewhere, and has financial interests in two businesses with publicly traded stock that could get a boost from foreign investors. That includes Trump Media & Technology Group, the parent company of social media platform Truth Social, and a new cryptocurrency venture, World Liberty Financial.

"The scale of corruption will be orders of magnitude greater than what we saw in the first Trump administration," said government ethics lawyer Kathleen Clark of Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. People trying to win Trump's favor now have an easy way to do so, she said, by using "massive influxes of cash through 'investments' in Trump crypto and real estate ventures."

The Trump Organization announced that it was hiring William A. Burck, a managing partner of Quinn Emanuel LLP, to vet deals that could pose conflicts with public policy.

As in the last ethics agreement, the five-page white paper also prohibits Trump from "day-to-day" decision making at the Trump Organization, limits financial information about the business shared with him and commits the company to donate to the U.S. Treasury profits from foreign government spending at its properties.

Under U.S. law, federal government officials are not permitted to hold financial interests in businesses that could sway their opinion on public policy they help shape, and are often forced to sell off their stakes. U.S. presidents are excluded from the post-Watergate ethics ban, but all presidents have voluntarily agreed to follow the law, except for Trump.

The first billionaire president would have had to sell more than a dozen golf courses around the world, office and residential towers in Las Vegas, Chicago and New York and several resorts, including Mar-a-Lago in Florida.

In his first term, Trump pledged to avoid even the appearance of conflicts of interest at the outset of his presidency, but ended up openly courting business to his properties instead. He once tried to hold a G-7 meeting of global leaders at his golf resort in Doral, Florida. He had to abandon the idea after outcry from critics.

His Trump hotel in Washington D.C. was also a major source of concern for ethics watchdogs in his first term. The Trump International Hotel down the street from the White House quickly became a gathering spot for lobbyists, both domestic and foreign, as well as foreign diplomats.

Several groups accused Trump of violating the Constitution's "emoluments" ban on gifts and payment to the president, citing the hotel in particular. The hotel has since been sold and the Supreme Court refused to rule on an emoluments violation after Trump had left office, citing that the issue was moot.

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Now, the emoluments clause could become a legal headache for Trump again given his company's sprawling businesses, including the two new, publicly traded ventures.

His financial stake in one of them, Trump Media, is worth billions of dollars.

Critics worry people who want to curry favor with the president, including foreign officials, could buy stock in the company, pushing the price up further along with his paper wealth.

Another new Trump family venture, World Liberty Financial, a platform used to trade cryptocurrencies, is also controversial.

In his first term in office, Trump said he was "not a fan" of cryptocurrency and tweeted in 2019, "Unregulated Crypto Assets can facilitate unlawful behavior, including drug trade and other illegal activity."

He has since reversed that position, promising to make the U.S. the "crypto capital of the planet" at a bitcoin conference in Nashville this year. He has tapped two cryptocurrency champions to join his administration, Commerce Secretary nominee Howard Lutnick and Treasury Secretary nominee, Scott Bessent.

The Securities and Exchange Commission has warned that cryptocurrencies are volatile investments with few safeguards to protect investors from manipulation and fraud, and cracked down on some firms. It's not clear if the agency's close scrutiny of the industry will continue in the new administration. Trump's nominee to head the SEC, Paul Atkins, is an advocate for cryptocurrencies.

Eric Trump, the son most heavily involved in running the Trump Organization, has expressed frustration that the company had become a lightning rod for conflicts of interest critics during his father's first presidential term despite the company's voluntary ethics ban on certain deals. He has said he wants a freer hand this time running the business.

In a Vietnam deal in October, the Trump Organization joined with a Vietnamese developer with ties to the ruling Communist Party for a \$1.5 billion luxury golf resort, raising questions about whether this might influence U.S. policy.

The deal comes at an especially vulnerable time for Vietnam as Trump vows to raise tariffs on many countries. Vietnam has a large U.S. trade surplus that makes it a ripe target for Trump's threat to punish countries he says are engaging in unfair trading practices.

The Trump Organization also has buildings bearing the Trump name in India, Turkey and several other countries. It owns two golf courses in Scotland, and one in Ireland, and has plans for resorts in other countries, including Oman and Indonesia that are at various stages of development.

US finds no 'Havana syndrome' link to foreign powers, but 2 spy agencies say it's possible

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. intelligence has found no evidence linking a foreign power to the mysterious "Havana syndrome" injuries reported by some U.S. diplomats and other government personnel, though two agencies now say it's possible a foreign adversary may have developed or even deployed a weapon responsible for the injuries.

The conclusion, which echoes early investigations, follows a review conducted by seven intelligence agencies or departments that examined cases of brain injuries and other symptoms reported by American diplomats and other military and government staffers, who have raised questions about the involvement of a foreign adversary.

In the new assessment released by U.S. intelligence on Friday, five of the seven agencies concluded that it is very unlikely that a foreign adversary was behind the injuries.

Two of the agencies, however, reached a different conclusion, determining that there is a possibility that a foreign power may have developed or even used a weapon capable of causing the reported injuries. Such a device would presumably rely on acoustic energy, microwaves or another kind of directed energy.

Symptoms that include headaches, balance problems and difficulties with thinking and sleep were first reported in Cuba in 2016 — leading to the label "Havana Syndrome" — and later by hundreds of American personnel in multiple countries.

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The Biden administration has faced pressure to investigate following the reports from U.S. personnel of significant brain injuries and other symptoms after being targeted by what some have suggested is an effort to harass and injure Americans working overseas. But officials have been unable to find an explanation.

In the new assessment, the two agencies, which officials did not identify, did not find evidence linking any specific episode to technology developed by Russia or another country but based their findings on understandings of foreign weapon development and capability.

One of the agencies found there was a "roughly even chance" that a foreign government used such a weapon or prototype device in a "small, undetermined" number of cases affecting U.S. personnel.

The other agency determined that while it's possible that a foreign power has developed such a weapon, it's unlikely that it has been deployed in any of the cases reported to authorities.

The new findings released Friday represent a "shift in key judgments by some intelligence components" that demonstrates the need for additional investigation, National Security Council spokesperson Sean Savett said in a statement.

"Our focus on these priorities remains unwavering and must continue," Savett said. "It is vital that the U.S. government continue critical research, investigate credible incidents, and strengthen efforts to provide timely care and long-term clinical follow-up."

A Republican lawmaker who led a separate investigation into the unexplained incidents accused the White House of withholding evidence of foreign involvement. Rep. Rick Crawford of Arkansas leads the House Intelligence Committee's CIA Subcommittee, which last month released a report that concluded that it is "increasingly likely" that a foreign adversary is responsible for "some portion" of the incidents.

In a statement, Crawford vowed to work with the incoming Trump administration to get answers for affected federal employees and the public.

"Congress must continue working towards the truth and seeking accountability," Crawford said.

An intelligence official who briefed reporters on the new assessment said the two agencies that held open the possibility that a foreign government was developing or deploying a weapon responsible for the injuries expressed "low confidence" in their findings.

The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity under rules set out by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, noted that other national security agencies were more confident in their determination that foreign governments were not involved and that specific information obtained by U.S. intelligence cast doubt on any foreign involvement.

"There's no intelligence linking a foreign actor to any specific event," the official told reporters.

Lamar Jackson repeats and Ja'Marr Chase and Justin Jefferson are unanimous choices for AP All-Pro

By ROB MAADDI AP Pro Football Writer

Lamar Jackson beat out Josh Allen, and Ja'Marr Chase and Justin Jefferson are unanimous choices for The Associated Press 2024 NFL All-Pro Team.

Saquon Barkley received 48 of 50 first-place votes and Patrick Surtain II got 49 from a nationwide panel of media members who regularly cover the league.

"Wow, that's crazy. That's respect right there. That's love," Jefferson said of his unanimous selection and second overall.

Jackson received 30 first-place votes to Allen's 18, making the team for the second straight year and third overall. Peyton Manning (7) and Aaron Rodgers (4) are the only quarterbacks with more All-Pro nominations in the Super Bowl era than Jackson.

Linebacker Roquan Smith, slot cornerback Marlon Humphrey and fullback Patrick Ricard joined Jackson from the Ravens (12-5).

The NFC-leading Lions (15-2) had four players selected: wide receiver Amon-Ra St. Brown, right tackle Penei Sewell, safety Kerby Joseph and punter Jack Fox.

"They know what's up," said Joseph, who led the NFL with nine interceptions but was snubbed from

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the Pro Bowl.

Barkley, who ran for 2,005 yards in 16 games in his first season with the Eagles (14-3), and linebacker Zack Baun were Philadelphia's first-team selections. Barkley sat out the final regular-season game with the Eagles locked into the No. 2 seed instead of chasing Eric Dickerson's 40-year-old single-season rushing record.

Browns edge rusher Myles Garrett and 49ers linebacker Fred Warner were each chosen for the fourth time.

Buccaneers left tackle Tristan Wirfs became the first player selected at both tackle spots. Before 2016, the All-Pro roster included two tackles but didn't differentiate between right or left side. Wirfs made it at right tackle in 2021. He switched positions in 2023.

"It's pretty special," Wirfs said. "It's something I wanted to do, wanted to accomplish."

Fourteen players are first-timers, including Raiders rookie tight end Brock Bowers. He got 27 first-place votes to George Kittle's 22.

Chiefs center Creed Humphrey and left guard Joe Thuney and Broncos right guard Quinn Meinerz round out the offense.

Cincinnati's Trey Hendrickson, who led the league with 17 1/2 sacks, joined Garrett at edge rusher.

"That's such a privilege and an honor," Hendrickson said.

Kansas City's Chris Jones and Pittsburgh's Cameron Heyward are the interior linemen. Texans cornerback Derek Stingley Jr. and Packers safety Xavier McKinney join Surtain, Humphrey and Joseph in the secondary.

"That's a huge honor," Surtain said. "That's one of the accolades I definitely had goals for."

Stingley, the No. 3 overall pick in 2022 chosen right before two-time All-Pro cornerback Sauce Gardner, rebounded from two-injury plagued seasons and played every game to help Houston win its second straight AFC South title.

"It's really more about the secondary as a unit, how do we gel together when it comes to communication, when the ball is in the air and different types of things like that. I'd rather focus more on that than the personal," Stingley said.

Steelers kicker Chris Boswell, Cowboys kick returner KaVontae Turpin, Broncos punt returner Marvin Mims Jr., Patriots special teams ace Brenden Schooler and Vikings long snapper Andrew DePaola along with Fox are the special teams picks.

Jackson also was an All-Pro in 2019 and 2023. He was the NFL MVP both of those seasons and Baltimore had the AFC's No. 1 seed both years but failed to reach the Super Bowl. Jackson got 30 first-place votes, Allen received 18 and Joe Burrow got two.

Ravens running back Derrick Henry received the two first-place votes that didn't go to Barkley.

St. Brown (40), Thuney (41), Humphrey (44), Baun (44), Garrett (45) and Turpin (49) also had at least 40 of the 50 first-place votes.

This was the third year for the AP's new voting system. Voters chose a first team and a second team. First-team votes are worth 3 points, second-team votes are worth 1.

Biden extends time in US for 800,000 Venezuelans, Salvadorans as Trump readies immigration crackdown

By GISELA SALOMON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — About 600,000 Venezuelans and more than 230,000 Salvadorans already living in the United States can legally remain another 18 months, the Department of Homeland Security said Friday, barely a week before President-elect Donald Trump takes office with promises of hardline immigration policies.

Biden's administration has strongly supported Temporary Protected Status, which he has broadly expanded to cover about 1 million people. TPS faces an uncertain future under Trump, who tried to sharply curtail its use during his first term as president. Federal regulations would allow the extensions to be terminated early, although that's never been done before.

Homeland Security also extended TPS for more than 103,000 Ukrainians and 1,900 Sudanese that are

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already living in the U.S.

For José Palma, a 48 year-old Salvadoran who has lived in the U.S. since 1998, the extension means that at least for now he can still work legally in Houston. He is the only person in his family with temporary status; his four children were born U.S. citizens and his wife is a permanent resident. If TPS was not extended he could be deported and separated from the rest of the family.

"It brings me peace of mind, a breath of fresh air," Palma said. "It offers me stability".

Palma, who works as an organizer at a day laborer organization, sends about \$400 a month to his 73-year-old mother, who is retired and does not have any income.

The TPS designation gives people legal authority to be in the country but it doesn't provide them a long-term path to citizenship. They are reliant on the government renewing their status when it expires. Conservative critics have said that over time, the renewal of the protection status becomes automatic, regardless of what is happening in the person's home country.

Friday's announcement, which came as Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro took office for a third six-year term in Caracas amid widespread international condemnation, is "based on the severe humanitarian emergency the country continues to face due to political and economic crises under the Maduro regime," the department said.

Homeland Security cited "environmental conditions in El Salvador that prevent individuals from returning," specifically heavy rains and storms in the last two years.

Congress created TPS in 1990 to prevent deportations to countries suffering from natural disasters or civil strife, giving people authorization to work in increments of up to 18 months at a time.

About 1 million immigrants from 17 countries are protected by TPS, including people from Venezuela, Haiti, Honduras, Nicaragua, Afghanistan, Sudan, Ukraine and Lebanon. Venezuelans are one of the largest beneficiaries and their extension runs from April 2025 to Oct. 2, 2026.

Salvadorans won TPS in 2001 after earthquakes rocked the Central American country. TPS for Salvadorans was to expire in March and was extended until Sept. 9, 2026.

Trump and his running mate, JD Vance, suggested they would scale back the use of TPS and policies granting temporary status as they pursue mass deportations. During his first administration, Trump ended TPS for El Salvador but was held up in court.

In recent months, advocates have increased pressure on the Biden administration to ask for TPS extensions for those who already have it, and to protect people from other countries like Guatemala and Ecuador.

"This extension is just a small victory," said Felipe Arnoldo Díaz, an activist with the National TPS Alliance. "Our biggest concern is that after El Salvador, there are countries whose TPS are expiring soon and are being left out" like Nepal, Nicaragua, and Honduras.

Victor Macedo, a 40-year-old Venezuelan, arrived to the U.S. in 2021 after receiving death threats back home for being an activist with the political opposition. He couldn't believe the news about the extension, as his TPS was set to expire in April.

"It is a very big relief. I was afraid," said Macedo, who works remodeling houses in Davie, Florida. "TPS helps me have legal status, work, and be able to drive."

For Elton John, 'Never Too Late' isn't just a documentary and song — it is a life mantra

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Capturing Sir Elton John's 50-year career is a herculean task. Good thing his husband, David Furnish, and filmmaker R.J. Cutler were up for the challenge.

"Elton John: Never Too Late," one of The Associated Press' picks for the best music documentaries of 2024, was inspired by John's final U.S. tour in 2022 — but quickly became a celebration of his life and work. It is filled with insight into his music, relationships — including a fiery friendship with John Lennon — troublesome childhood and struggles with addiction. It is bookended by myth-making performances at Los Angeles' Dodger Stadium in 1975 and 2022.

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For fans — and even John himself — it is revelatory viewing.

"I was struck by how good the music was in those first five years, because I very rarely listened to my music. I was very proud of that," John told the AP this week. "And also, it brought back the incredible struggle that I had with success, having no foundation underneath it. I turned to alcohol, drugs and then had redemption by getting sober."

Success and satisfaction are not one in the same, a fact that's quickly established in the film. John had fame but hungered for connection. Having a family changed him.

"The greatest things in my life are my two kids and David. And the music comes secondary to them," he says.

"The title 'Never Too Late' sums it up for everybody, not just me. You can change things. It's never too late to change anything. Thank God I did. Because when I got sober, my whole life completely changed." He's now been sober for 34 years.

"It's been glorious compared to what it was for about 10 years, 15 years," he says of his past struggles with drug and alcohol addiction. "You know, I was still playing and touring while I was doing drugs. I never stopped. Because music kept me alive. Music kept me alive. It nearly killed me, but it saved me, if you get what I mean. I am just so proud because now I have a family."

He views "Never Too Late" as not only a celebration of that journey, but an effective "piece of advocacy," as he describes it. "You can have children, and you can be gay, and you can have a happy family. I couldn't be happier."

"Never Too Late" is also the title of an uplifting theme song written by Brandi Carlile, Andrew Watt, John and his longtime lyricist Bernie Taupin, currently shortlisted for the 2025 Oscars. Carlile was the catalyst; she paid John and Furnish a visit to their home in France, saw a rough cut of the documentary and felt moved to write a song.

"This song was about my life, and I found it very easy to write to," he said of the collaboration. And its message is simple: "I've been through hell," John says. "And I still come out fighting the other side. So, you know, it's very true to what I am."

And while his days of touring are behind him, the song "Never Too Late" is part of a "new era," as John explains it. Fans can expect new music in the future. "There will be a new album sooner or later," he said. "I'm dying to record new stuff."

A project like "Never Too Late" allows for reflection. When asked what John hopes his legacy becomes 50, 100 years from now, he says simply: "I just want, on my tombstone to say, 'He was a great dad.' That's what I want. The musical legacy will speak for itself. But from a human point of view, 'He was a great dad and a great husband.'"

Last month, John revealed he had lost some vision after contracting an infection. "The eyesight is a problem. But we're looking into treatment for it. I'm a huge optimist. I basically lost the eyesight in my right eye for the time being. My left eye is not the greatest," he says.

He's been adjusting to the condition for six months. "I've had, since this happened, such an empathy for sight-impaired people and blind people... When you see so many other people who just can't see at all — I'm very blessed."

John's positivity is felt throughout "Never Too Late." He's uninterested in looking backwards; in the same way his record-breaking accomplishments are celebrated on film, so too are contemporary moments that spotlight his enthusiasm for his family and younger talent.

"For me, it's all about what's going to happen in the future, not what's happened in the past," he says. "With this documentary, we leave certain time behind. And now it's all about starting again."

"Elton John: Never Too Late" is available to stream now on Disney+.

Earth breaks yearly heat record and lurches past dangerous warming threshold

By SETH BORENSTEIN AP Science Writer

Earth recorded its hottest year ever in 2024, with such a big jump that the planet temporarily passed a major climate threshold, weather monitoring agencies announced Friday.

It's the first time in recorded history that the planet was above a hoped-for limit to warming for an entire year, according to measurements from four of the six teams. Scientists say if Earth stays above the threshold long-term, it will mean increased deaths, destruction, species loss and sea level rise from the extreme weather that accompanies warming.

And that would come on top of a year of deadly climate catastrophes — 27 billion-dollar disasters in the U.S. alone in 2024 — and as 2025 begins with devastating wildfires in southern California.

Last year's global average temperature easily passed 2023's record heat and kept going. It surpassed the long-term warming limit of 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) since the late 1800s that was called for by the 2015 Paris climate pact, according to the European Commission's Copernicus Climate Service, the United Kingdom's Meteorology Office, Japan's weather agency and the private Berkeley Earth team.

Only two U.S. government agencies had Earth below that 1.5 mark. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and NASA had last year at 1.46 degrees Celsius (2.63 degrees Fahrenheit) and 1.47 degrees Celsius (2.65 degrees Fahrenheit).

The Copernicus team calculated 1.6 degrees Celsius of warming, Japan 1.57 and the British 1.53. Berkeley Earth — founded by a climate change skeptic — came in the hottest at 1.62 degrees.

Much of the differences, which are small, stem from which ocean temperature tools are used. The World Meteorological Organization crunched the six estimates into a composite of 1.55 degrees, which NASA climate scientist Gavin Schmidt called a "reasonable assessment."

"The primary reason for these record temperatures is the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere" from the burning of coal, oil and gas, said Samantha Burgess, strategic climate lead at Copernicus. "As greenhouse gases continue to accumulate in the atmosphere, temperatures continue to increase, including in the ocean, sea levels continue to rise, and glaciers and ice sheets continue to melt."

Last year was the hottest year for the United States, NOAA said. It was not only the hottest in record-keeping that goes back to 1850, but likely the hottest for the planet in 125,000 years, Burgess said.

"There's nothing to indicate that it won't continue," NOAA monitoring chief Russ Vose said Friday. "When there's more heat in the system that has a cascading effect on other parts of the system. Sea level goes up. Warmer air can hold more moisture which tends to equate to more extreme storms. There's a lot of impacts that go along with a warmer world."

By far the biggest contributor to record warming is the burning of fossil fuels, several scientists said. Schmidt said the El Nino that started the year probably added a tenth of a degree Celsius to this year's figures.

Alarm bells are ringing

"Climate-change-related alarm bells have been ringing almost constantly, which may be causing the public to become numb to the urgency, like police sirens in New York City," Woodwell Climate Research Center scientist Jennifer Francis said. "In the case of the climate, though, the alarms are getting louder, and the emergencies are now way beyond just temperature."

Comparing it to a car's dashboard warning light, University of Georgia meteorology professor Marshall Shepherd said, "Hurricane Helene, floods in Spain and the weather whiplash fueling wildfires in California are symptoms of this unfortunate climate gear shift."

There were 27 weather disasters in the United States that caused at least \$1 billion in damage, just one fewer than the record set in 2023, according to NOAA. The U.S. cost of those disasters was \$182.7 billion. Hurricane Helene was the costliest and deadliest of the year with at least 219 deaths and \$79.6 billion in damage.

"In the 1980s, Americans experienced one billion-plus weather and climate disaster on average every four

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months," Texas Tech climate scientist Katharine Hayhoe said in an email about NOAA's inflation-adjusted figures. "Now, there's one every three weeks —and we already have the first of 2025 even though we're only 9 days into the year."

World breaches major threshold

Scientists were quick to point out that the 1.5 goal is for long-term warming, now defined as a 20-year average. Warming since pre-industrial times over the long term is now at 1.3 degrees Celsius (2.3 degrees Fahrenheit).

"The 1.5 degree C threshold isn't just a number — it's a red flag. Surpassing it even for a single year shows how perilously close we are to breaching the limits set by the Paris Agreement," Northern Illinois University climate scientist Victor Gensini said in an email. A 2018 massive United Nations study found that keeping Earth's temperature rise below 1.5 degrees Celsius could save coral reefs from going extinct, keep massive ice sheet loss in Antarctica at bay and prevent many people's death and suffering.

Francis called the threshold "dead in the water."

More warming is likely

Scientists say with a cooling La Nina instead of last year's El Nino, 2025 is likely to be not quite as hot as 2024. Several predict it will turn out to be the third-warmest. However, the first six days of January — despite frigid temperatures in the U.S. East — averaged slightly warmer and are the hottest start to a year yet, according to Copernicus data.

Scientists remain split on whether global warming is accelerating.

There's not enough data to see an acceleration in atmospheric warming, but the heat content of the oceans seem to be not just rising but going up at a faster rate, said Carlo Buontempo, Copernicus' director.

This is all like watching the end of "a dystopian sci-fi film," said University of Pennsylvania climate scientist Michael Mann. "We are now reaping what we've sown."

Prosecutors seek 15 years in prison for former New Jersey Sen. Bob Menendez after bribery conviction

By LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Prosecutors say former U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez should be imprisoned for 15 years for a "grave abuse of his power," after the New Jersey Democrat became the first person to be convicted of abusing a Senate committee leadership position and the first U.S. public official to be convicted of serving as a foreign agent.

In papers filed late Thursday in Manhattan federal court, prosecutors called for the lengthy prison term for the 71-year-old Menendez when he is sentenced on Jan. 29.

Menendez was convicted in July of 16 corruption charges brought after an FBI raid on his home in 2022 turned up \$150,000 in gold bars and \$480,000 in cash, much of which prosecutors alleged was the result of bribes paid by three New Jersey businessmen who wanted the senator to use his power to protect their interests and make them money.

When he was charged in the fall of 2023, Menendez was chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. He was forced out of that position that year and gave up his Senate seat last August.

In presentence arguments last week, defense lawyers called for Judge Sidney H. Stein to be lenient, saying Menendez's conviction had "rendered him a national punchline and stripped him of every conceivable personal, professional, and financial benefit."

"Bob is deserving of mercy because of the penalties already imposed, his age, and the lack of a compelling need to impose a custodial sentence," the lawyers said.

Two businessmen, Wael Hana and Fred Daibes, were also convicted along with Menendez, while a third pleaded guilty and testified at the July trial. Prosecutors called for Hana to receive at least 10 years in prison and Daibes to spend at least nine years behind bars. Prosecutors said the crimes occurred from 2018 to 2022.

In their submission, prosecutors called the case a "historical rarity" because Menendez abused his

powerful post on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and because he acted as an agent of Egypt. "The defendants' crimes amount to an extraordinary attempt, at the highest levels of the Legislative Branch, to corrupt the nation's core sovereign powers over foreign relations and law enforcement," prosecutors wrote.

"He corruptly promised to influence foreign relations, including attempting to pressure a federal agency engaged in diplomatic attempts to protect U.S. businesses from an extractive monopoly granted by a foreign nation to one of his coconspirators. And he corruptly promised to subvert the rule of law by disrupting multiple felony criminal proceedings, state and federal, including by influencing the selection of the chief federal law enforcement officer for New Jersey," they added.

With Menendez's support, Hana was granted the sole right to certify that meat exported to Egypt from the United States conformed to Islamic dietary requirements.

The monopoly that Hana's company received forced out several other companies that had been certifying beef and liver exported to Egypt and occurred over a span of several days in May 2019, according to trial testimony.

Meanwhile, prosecutors wrote, Menendez in multiple instances promoted the Egyptian government's viewpoints and assisted the Egyptian government in ways "directly adverse to his own fellow U.S. Senators" as he modulated his public criticism of Egypt.

They noted that Menendez helped ghost-write a letter seeking to justify Egypt's alleged human rights abuses.

"In short, while a U.S. Senator himself, Menendez literally not just took the side of, but secretly authored a response in the voice of, a foreign government against his own fellow U.S. Senators," prosecutors wrote.

At another point, prosecutors said, Menendez briefed the head of Egyptian intelligence on questions other U.S. senators planned to ask Egypt about reports that it had aided in a notorious human rights abuse, the murder and dismemberment of a journalist who was a legal U.S. permanent resident.

"Menendez's provision of non-public information to Egypt was — like his advocacy on behalf of the Egyptian government — also indefensible and a grave abuse of his power," they wrote.

Menendez's wife, Nadine Menendez, is scheduled to stand trial on Feb. 5 on many of the same charges as her husband. She has pleaded not guilty. Her trial was delayed after she required surgery last year after she was diagnosed with breast cancer.

Americans have dimmer view of Biden than they did of Trump or Obama as term ends, AP-NORC poll finds

By WILL WEISSERT and AMELIA THOMSON-DEVEAUX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As Joe Biden prepares to leave office, Americans have a dimmer view of his presidency than they did at the end of Donald Trump's first term or Barack Obama's second, a new poll finds.

Around one-quarter of U.S. adults said Biden was a "good" or "great" president, with less than 1 in 10 saying he was "great," according to the survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

It's a stark illustration of how tarnished Biden's legacy has become, with many members of his own party seeing his Democratic presidency as merely mediocre. About one-third described Trump as "good" or "great" on the eve of the Republican's departure from the White House in 2021, according to AP-NORC polling, including about 2 in 10 who said he was "great" — even after he helped sparked a deadly insurrection that saw a mob of his supporters overrun the U.S. Capitol. Americans were similarly likely to describe both Biden and Trump as "poor" or "terrible" — about half said this characterized each president's time in office — but about 3 in 10 said Biden was "average," while less than 2 in 10 said this about Trump.

Biden's standing is also much lower than the last outgoing Democratic president, Obama, who left office with about half of Americans describing his tenure as "good" or "great," according to another AP-NORC poll.

Those findings are consistent with data released this week by Gallup, which found Biden's standing similar

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to that of President Richard Nixon after the Republican resigned during the Watergate scandal. The Gallup analysis found that other presidents who left with poor ratings — including Trump, Republican George W. Bush and Democrat Jimmy Carter — saw views of their presidencies grow warmer with time. But for now, few seem impressed with Biden's time in office, including a sizable chunk of Democrats.

"I'm not going to sound like 'Star Wars,' that he went over to the dark side and everything that might be implied there," John Cressey, a 79-year-old Democrat who lives in the Los Angeles area and does background work for films and movies, said of Biden. "But I think he just lost the pulse of the nation and that's why Trump won."

Among supporters of Biden's party, only about 1 in 10 described his presidency as "great," while about 4 in 10 called it "good," and a similar share described it as "average."

Cressey said he saw the 82-year-old Biden declining physically and believes the president was increasingly controlled by aides. He says Biden let the situation on the U.S.-Mexico border deteriorate into "a mess." And Cressey summed up his chagrin with Biden's handling of the economy by saying, "Go buy a carton of eggs."

Disappointment especially high among Black and Hispanic Americans

Things weren't always so bad for Biden. About 6 in 10 Americans approved of the way he handled the presidency as he took office, according to AP-NORC polling, but by early 2022, that had fallen to about 4 in 10, where views largely stayed for the remainder of his term.

In the new poll, disappointment was especially palpable among Black and Hispanic Americans, who have traditionally leaned Democratic but shifted in larger numbers toward Trump in 2024.

The contrast with Obama was especially striking among Black Americans. About 6 in 10 said Obama, the nation's only Black president, had kept his promises at the end of his term, compared with around 3 in 10 who said the same for Biden. Similarly, about 7 in 10 Black Americans said they and their family were better off at the end of Obama's presidency while only about a third said that about Biden.

"I feel as though the economy hasn't progressed in a positive way since he's been in office," said Evonte Terrell, 30, a sales manager at a telecommunications company from Detroit who described himself as a "waning Democrat."

Terrell, who is Black, said the party has become too focused on things like climate change and war while de-emphasizing rebuilding communities and helping the poor. He also bristled at Biden's pardoning of his son Hunter, saying that, "as a father, I would do the same" but "not everyone is going to have that capability."

Younger people were particularly likely to have a negative view of Biden's presidency. Only about 1 in 10 Americans under age 30 say he was a "good" or "great" president, compared with about 4 in 10 ages 60 or older. Roughly 6 in 10 Americans ages 18 to 29 say Biden was a "poor" or "terrible" president.

Terrell, facing student loan payments, also pointed to Biden's efforts to ease educational debt that were struck down by the Supreme Court. He said that amounted to years of "just deferring" when "otherwise I could have been paying it off this entire time."

A perception of failed promises

The Biden administration helped oversee the passage of more large-scale legislation than did Trump or Obama — including on public works, microchip production and health care and promoting green jobs. The president also signed the first major gun safety package in decades.

Still, only about 2 in 10 Americans said the president made good on his campaign trail pledges. About 4 in 10 said he tried but failed to keep his promises, and a similar share said he has not kept his promises.

Mark Jeanmougin, 47, who is from Cincinnati and works in cybersecurity, voted for Trump in 2016 but backed Biden in 2020 and Democratic Vice President Kamala Harris in November.

He sees Biden as a good president who set the United States up for success on issues like climate change while delivering badly needed infrastructure funding. But, he said, Biden "definitely ran into some activist judges who were saying no to some of his policies."

Jeanmougin said Biden helped improve the post-COVID-19 economy and rising inflation was an expected consequence.

"A hard landing, lots of unemployment, or a soft landing with inflation," he said. "We knew that was what was going to happen. So the idea that so many of my fellow citizens were unaware or didn't know is really hard."

In all, about half of Democrats said Biden tried and failed to keep his campaign promises, while about 4 in 10 said he succeeded.

Few believe they are better off

For the most part, Americans don't think Biden is leaving the country in a better position than when he took office four years ago — with a few exceptions.

On the issues of creating jobs and prescription drug costs, Americans were about as likely to say Biden had a positive impact as they were to say he'd had a negative impact. A similar share said he had no impact.

But many thought he'd done more harm than good in other key areas. At least half of Americans said Biden had a negative impact on the cost of living, immigration and the conflict between the Israelis and the Palestinians — compared with about 2 in 10 who said he had a positive impact in each of these arenas.

He was also perceived as having more of a negative impact than a positive one on Russia's war with Ukraine, despite his administration pushing for billions of dollars in military aid to Kyiv. The negative views toward Biden regarding Israel's war against Hamas were particularly pronounced among younger voters, with slightly less than 1 in 10 Americans under age 30 saying he had a positive impact on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

About 4 in 10 Americans said they and their families are somewhat or much worse off than they were when Biden became president, while about one-quarter said they are much or somewhat better off.

Only about one-quarter said they and their families were worse off at the end of either Trump's or Obama's presidency.

South Korea's acting leader accepts resignation of presidential security chief

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — South Korea's acting leader on Friday accepted the resignation of the chief of the presidential security service, Park Jong-joon, as he faced police questioning over how his forces blocked law enforcement efforts to detain impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol last week.

The acting leader, Deputy Prime Minister Choi Sang-mok, also expressed regret over the clashes between law enforcement officials and the presidential security service and called for lawmakers to reach a bipartisan agreement to launch an independent investigation.

The Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials and police are planning a second attempt to bring Yoon into custody as they jointly investigate whether his brief martial law declaration on Dec. 3 amounted to an attempted rebellion. The presidential security service blocked an earlier attempt to detain Yoon at his official residence, which he has not left for weeks.

It wasn't immediately clear how Park's resignation and Choi's call for an independent investigation to take over the probe on Yoon would affect the push to bring Yoon into custody.

"The government has been deliberating to find a wise solution, but unfortunately, within our current legal framework, it's difficult to find a clear resolution to end the conflict between the two agencies," Choi said about the tensions between the anti-corruption office and presidential security service over Yoon's potential detention.

"We urge the ruling and opposition parties to work together to agree on a bill to launch a special prosecutor investigation that is free from constitutional issues. This will naturally resolve the ongoing intense standoff."

The main liberal opposition Democratic Party accused Choi of legitimizing Yoon's refusal to comply with a court-issued warrant under the guise of neutrality.

"It amounts to a public declaration of support for the leader of a rebellion," said Noh Jong-myun, a party

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lawmaker and spokesperson.

The Democrats and other opposition parties on Thursday introduced a bill calling for an independent investigation into allegations of rebellion against Yoon.

An earlier bill by the opposition proposing an independent investigation was scrapped after members of Yoon's conservative party opposed a clause allowing only opposition parties to recommend special prosecutor candidates.

The conservatives also aren't endorsing the new bill, which proposes that the Supreme Court's chief justice recommend two candidates to Yoon, who would then select one as the special prosecutor. If Yoon refuses to appoint anyone, the older of the two candidates would automatically assume the role, according to the bill.

Park ignored two summonses before appearing for questioning on Friday over allegations of obstructing justice, a week after his forces repelled dozens of anti-corruption and police investigators from Yoon's official residence. Park said his duty is to protect the president and warned of "bloodshed," as critics said that his agency is becoming Yoon's private army.

The embattled president remains holed up at his official residence in Seoul, where the presidential security service has fortified the grounds with barbed wire and rows of vehicles blocking the roads.

Yoon made a short-lived declaration of martial law and deployed troops to surround the National Assembly on Dec. 3, which lasted only hours before lawmakers managed to get through the blockade and voted to lift the measure.

His presidential powers were suspended when the opposition-dominated Assembly voted to impeach him on Dec. 14 and accused him of rebellion. His fate now rests with the Constitutional Court, which has begun deliberating on whether to formally remove Yoon from office or reject the charges and reinstate him.

A Seoul court on Tuesday issued a new warrant to the anti-corruption agency to detain Yoon after the previous one-week warrant expired. The agency and police have not publicly disclosed how long the new warrant will remain valid.

Speaking to reporters upon arriving for police questioning, Park again criticized the efforts to detain Yoon, saying that the investigation should proceed in a manner "appropriate for the status of an incumbent president" and the "dignity of the nation."

"Many citizens are surely deeply concerned about the possible conflict and confrontation between government agencies," Park said. "I came here today with the belief that under no circumstances should there be any physical clashes or bloodshed, and am hoping to prevent such incidents from occurring."

Park said he made several calls to Choi, urging him to mediate an alternative approach with law enforcement and also made similar requests to Yoon's lawyers, but did not receive a satisfactory response. The anti-corruption agency had also criticized Choi for refusing to instruct the presidential security service to cooperate with its execution of the detainment warrant.

After 13 hours of questioning, Park reappeared but refused to answer reporters' questions about why he had offered his resignation to Choi, before departing in a vehicle.

While the presidential security act mandates protection for Yoon, it does not authorize the service to block court-ordered detainments and some legal experts say the presidential security service's action last week may have been illegal.

Asked in parliament about the presidential security service's effort to block the detention, National Court Administration head Cheon Dae-yeop said Friday that "resistance without a legitimate reason can constitute a crime, such as obstruction of official duties."

Although the president himself has wide-ranging immunity from prosecution while in office, that does not extend to allegations of rebellion or treason.

Yoon's lawyers have questioned the legitimacy of the new detention warrant against Yoon issued by the Seoul Western District Court, arguing that the anti-corruption agency lacks legal authority to investigate rebellion charges or order police to detain suspects.

They also argue that detention and search warrants against Yoon cannot be enforced at his residence,

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citing a law that protects locations potentially linked to military secrets from search without the consent of the person in charge — which would be Yoon.

Yoon's lawyers have urged the agency to either indict the president or seek a formal arrest warrant, a process that requires a court hearing. However, they have said that Yoon would only comply with an arrest warrant issued by the Seoul Central District Court, which handles most key requests in high-profile cases.

They accuse the agency of deliberately choosing another court with an allegedly favorable judge, even though the official residence is located in the jurisdiction of the Western District Court. There are concerns in Seoul that the political paralysis created by Yoon's martial law decree and impeachment could put the country at a disadvantage in getting a steady footing with Donald Trump ahead of his return to the White House.

Yoon's office on Friday confirmed a media report that he met shortly after his impeachment on Dec. 14 with Matt Schlapp, the head of the American Conservative Union and a Trump ally, for talks on the political situation in South Korea.

Today in History: January 11

Theodore Roosevelt makes the Grand Canyon a national monument

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Jan. 11, the 11th day of 2025. There are 354 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Jan. 11, 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt leveraged the Antiquities Act of 1906 to proclaim the Grand Canyon as a national monument; it would become a national park in 1919.

Also on this date:

In 1861, Alabama became the fourth state to declare its secession from the Union.

In 1964, U.S. Surgeon General Luther Terry issued "Smoking and Health," a report that concluded that "cigarette smoking contributes substantially to mortality from certain specific diseases and to the overall death rate."

In 2002, the first al-Qaida prisoners from Afghanistan arrived at the U.S. military's Guantanamo Bay detention camp in Cuba.

In 2010, Mark McGwire admitted to The Associated Press that he'd used steroids and human growth hormone when he broke baseball's home run record in 1998.

In 2021, House Democrats introduced an article of impeachment against then-President Donald Trump, charging him with "incitement of insurrection" in the wake of the attack on the U.S. Capitol building five days prior.

Today's birthdays: Filmmaker Alfonso Arau is 93. Golf Hall of Famer Ben Crenshaw is 73. Jazz guitarist Lee Ritenour is 73. Olympic swimming gold medalist Tracy Caulkins is 62. Filmmaker Malcolm D. Lee is 55. Singer Mary J. Blige is 54. Actor Amanda Peet is 53.