

Groton Daily Independent

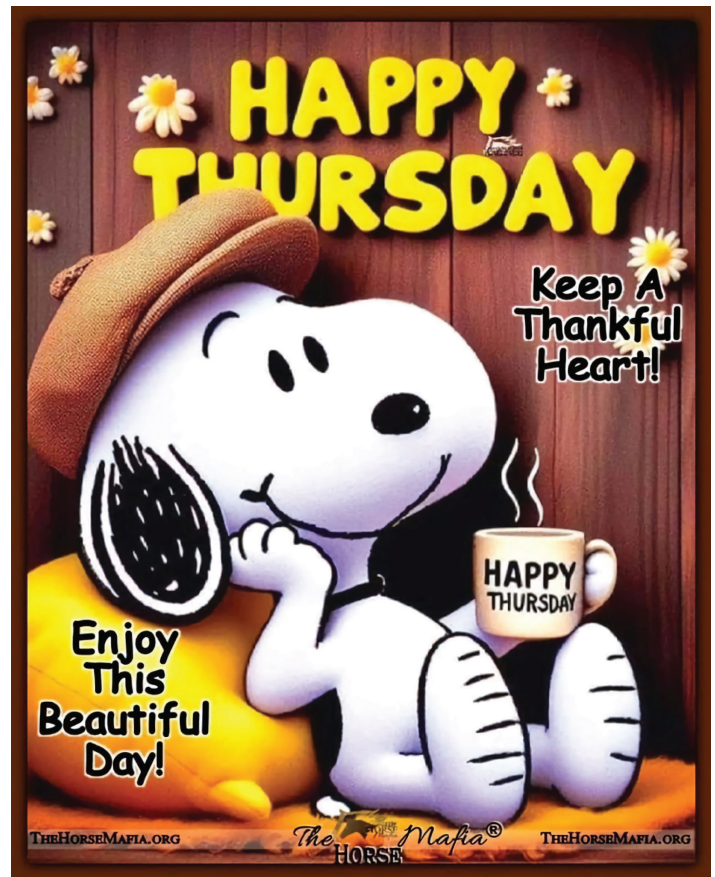
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Thursday, Jan. 30

Senior Menu: Goulash, corn, pineapple, breadstick.
School Breakfast: Pancake on stick.
School Lunch: Hamburgers, fries.
Boys JH Basketball hosts Webster in the GHS Gym, 7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.
Girls Basketball hosts Webster (C-5 p.m., JV-6:15, varsity to follow)

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



Friday, Jan. 31

Senior Menu: Meatloaf, mashed potatoes, creamed peas, fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Egg bake.
School Lunch: Pizza crunchers, green beans.
Groton Quad Wrestling, boys and girls, 6 p.m.

Saturday, Feb, 1

Groton Invitational Wrestling Tournament, 10 a.m., boys and girls
Boys Basketball at DAK XII/NEC Clash at Madison: Groton Area vs. Dell Rapids, 5 p.m., auxiliary gym
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

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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.

Breaking: Last night a regional American Eagle plane en route from Wichita, Kansas, reportedly collided in mid-air with a military helicopter as it was landing at Washington, DC's Reagan National Airport. At least 64 people were onboard the plane, which crashed into near-freezing water in the Potomac River. No survivors have been found from either aircraft as of early this morning. This is a developing story.

'Gold Bar Bob' Sentenced

Former New Jersey Sen. Bob Menendez (D) was sentenced yesterday afternoon to 11 years in prison on bribery, fraud, and extortion charges in federal court in Manhattan.

Menendez was convicted in July when a jury found the 71-year-old guilty on all 16 counts of taking payments in gold bars and cash to influence New Jersey criminal investigations and provide intel to Egyptian officials. The case ended the former head of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's political career after three terms.

Menendez, his wife Nadine, and three New Jersey businessmen were indicted in the scheme in 2023, though Nadine's trial has been postponed until March as she undergoes breast cancer treatment. Two of the co-conspirators, Fred Daibes and Wael Hana, were tried alongside Menendez and convicted on all counts. They were also sentenced yesterday, each receiving more than \$1M in fines and nearly a decade in prison. The third businessman, Jose Uribe, is scheduled for sentencing in April.

Guantánamo Bay Plan

The US government will repurpose Guantánamo Bay to hold as many as 30,000 undocumented migrants after President Donald Trump said yesterday the facilities will be used as a holding center for high-priority migrants facing deportation with criminal backgrounds.

Colloquially known as "Gitmo," the naval base has operated on a small patch of southeast Cuba under an open-ended lease since 1903. The facilities became infamous during the war on terror for the indefinite detention of suspected enemy combatants—as of the beginning of the year, 15 people are still being held. Details of how the base will be used to process migrants or when the effort will begin were not specified.

In related news, the Trump administration rescinded a memo issued yesterday ordering a wide-ranging freeze in federal funding. The guidance reportedly created confusion over which of the thousands of programs were affected and raised legal questions regarding the executive branch's ability to intervene in congressionally directed spending.

Separately, health secretary nominee Robert F. Kennedy Jr. began confirmation hearings yesterday, facing questions about Medicaid and Medicare, past statements on vaccines, and more.

Brine on Bennu

Analyses of samples harvested from a near-Earth asteroid suggest it broke billions of years ago from a much larger, watery object containing crucial ingredients to life, according to research released yesterday.

In 2020, NASA's OSIRIS-REx mission collected a quarter-pound sample of regolith, or dirt, from the one-third-mile-wide asteroid Bennu, returning it to Earth in Utah in 2023. Early analyses identified 14 of 20 amino acids crucial to life on Earth in the sample, as well as all five nucleobases comprising genetic code. Additionally, a type of salt was discovered, suggesting the asteroid may have once been covered in salty ponds where amino acids had the potential to mix with other minerals and form organic compounds.

In a surprise to researchers, the asteroid's amino acids are made of an equal proportion of the molecule and its mirror-image structure, similar to right- and left-handedness. Earth's amino acids consist mostly of just one side of that mirror image, known as left-handed chirality, casting doubt on a long-held theory that life's ingredients arrived on Earth via such asteroids.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

FireAid benefit concert for Los Angeles wildfires takes place tonight, featuring Billie Eilish, Olivia Rodrigo, Lady Gaga, and Stevie Wonder.

Magic Johnson among business and civic leaders tapped to head wildfire recovery philanthropy LA Rises. William E. Leuchtenburg, renowned US presidential historian, dies at age 102.

Temple University student, 18, dies after falling from light pole while celebrating Philadelphia Eagles NFC Championship victory.

Harvey Weinstein's New York City retrial on rape charges set for April 15.

Rapper A\$AP Rocky's trial on felony assault charges is ongoing in Los Angeles.

Science & Technology

OpenAI accuses Chinese AI startup DeepSeek of using its models to train its own chatbots; recent announcement of DeepSeek's cheap-but-powerful R1 model caused shockwaves in Silicon Valley.

>Lab-grown muscle patch developed from stem cells helps patient with heart failure survive until transplant; roughly 6 million people worldwide currently experience advanced heart failure, with demand outstripping organ supply.

Researchers reveal first map of the ice-free land area of Antarctica, which makes up less than 0.5% of the continent; survey expected to aid in future conservation measures.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close lower (S&P 500 -0.5%, Dow -0.3%, Nasdaq -0.5%); Federal Reserve holds interest rates steady.

Global arabica coffee prices reach record high above \$3.60 per pound.

IBM shares rise 9% in after-hours trading after topping Wall Street earnings and revenue expectations.

Tesla reports lower-than-expected Q4 earnings and revenue.

Meta beats Q4 earnings and revenue forecasts.

Frontier Airlines makes second bid for Spirit Airlines three years after first attempt; comes after JetBlue's failed \$3.8B bid to buy Spirit.

Trump Media to invest up to \$250M in financial services venture with Charles Schwab.

Politics & World Affairs

Hamas expected to release eight hostages today—three Israelis and five Thai nationals who were abducted in Oct. 7, 2023, attack.

Ahmad al-Sharaa, leader of rebels who toppled Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in December, is named country's interim president.

At least 30 people killed, 60 injured from crowd surge at India's Maha Kumbh Mela festival, considered one of the largest religious gatherings in history.

Average reading scores for both US fourth and eighth graders dropped five points from 2019 to 2024, per results of latest exam known as the nation's report card.

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GROTON AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT 06-6

MIDDLE/HIGH SCHOOL

P.O. Box 410
502 North 2nd Street
Groton, SD 57445
Fax: (605) 397-8453

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

P.O. Box 410
810 North 1st Street
Groton, SD 57445
Fax: (605) 397-2344

Groton Area School

Board

Grant Rix, President
Nick Strom, VP
Debra Gengerke
Martin Weismantel
Tigh Flihs
Travis Harder
Dr. Heather Lerseth-Flihs,
DVM

Superintendent

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Technology Coordinator

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JH Boys / HS Girls Basketball Game

Webster @ Groton Area
Thursday, January 30th, 2025

Game Times/Locations:

Main Court in Arena

- 5:00 PM CT → Girls C
- 6:00 PM CT → Girls JV
- **Senior Night prior to Varsity Warm-ups.**
- 7:30 PM CT → Girls Varsity
 - o *Halftime Entertainment: Sugar Babes and Sweet Sensations Dancers*

Main Court in Old Gym

- 4:00 PM CT → 7th Grade
- 5:00 PM CT → 8th Grade

Prior to the Girls Varsity game, the National Anthem will be first, with Varsity Introductions/Lineups to follow.

ADMISSION & SPECTATORS: Adults: \$5.00 Students: \$4.00.

CONCESSIONS: Will be available

LOCKER ROOM: JH Boys will use the locker room in the Old Gym.
HS Girls will use the far back locker room down the JH Locker Room Hallway.

Team Benches – Groton: South Bench
Webster: North Bench

ATHLETIC TRAINER: There will be an athletic trainer on site. AED is located near the ticket booth.

Livestream: www.GDlive.com or [Groton High School | High School Sports | Home | Hudl](#)

JH Officials: Quintin Biermann, Jacob Zak, Jordan Kjellsen (7th), Jesse Zak (8th)

JH Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

C Officials: Kristi Zoellner, Jordan Kjellsen, Kasey Kurtz

C Scoreboard: Joe Schwan

C Shot Clock: Carla Tracy

JV/Varsity Officials: Kris Frericks, Daren Lorenz, Spencer Aberle

Announcer: Mike Imrie

JV/V Scoreboard: Kristen Dolan

C/JV/V Official Book: Alexa Schuring

JV/V Shot Clock Operator: Kristi Zoellner

National Anthem: Recording

****Full Circle Ag Free Popcorn Night!**

****Elementary PAC Split Pot Fundraiser**

Thank you,
Alexa Schuring, Athletic Director

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Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

Groton Area
Tigers



Thursday, Jan. 30

**Girls Basketball
Webster Area
at Groton Area**

5:00 C Game

Sponsored by Larry & Val Fliehs

6:00 JV Game

Sponsored by Weber Landscaping

Followed by Girls Varsity

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, The Meathouse in Andover

\$5 ticket or

GDI Subscription

required to watch the games.

Nation's Report Card released: South Dakota performing well compared to nation

PIERRE, S.D. -- Results of the 2024 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) were released earlier today. Known as the Nation's Report Card, NAEP is a nationwide assessment of reading and math administered to students in 4th and 8th grades across the United States every two years.

Scores indicate that students in South Dakota outperformed the national average in 8th grade reading and math, as well as in 4th grade math. Fourth grade reading scores in South Dakota were equal to the national average.

"These tests are a good measure of where we are compared to the rest of the nation," said Secretary of Education Joe Graves. "In that regard, South Dakota students are doing well. But our work in education is never done. That's one of the reasons we launched our statewide literacy initiative, which focuses on teaching reading using the proven concepts of the Science of Reading. In the long term, we believe this effort will help to boost test scores – but even more importantly – literacy among our next generation."

Compared to South Dakota's scores from 2022, math scores have remained the same for 8th graders, and they improved slightly for 4th graders. In reading, scores dropped for both 4th and 8th grade students. Other points of interest for 2024 NAEP scores include:

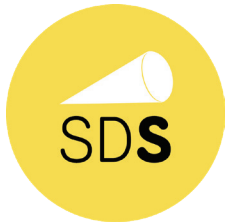
The percentage of 4th grade students in South Dakota who performed at or above NAEP Basic in math is 79 percent; 42 percent of students performed at or above NAEP proficient.

The percentage of 8th grade students in South Dakota who performed at or above NAEP Basic in math is 71 percent; 33 percent of 8th grade students performed at or above NAEP proficient.

The percentage of 4th grade students who performed at or above NAEP Basic in reading is 60 percent; 28 percent of 4th grade students performed at or above NAEP proficient.

The percentage of 8th grade students who performed at or above NAEP Basic in reading is 70 percent; 29 percent of 8th grade students performed at or above NAEP proficient.

More information can be found on the NAEP website at <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard>.



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Rival SD school choice bills both fail in Education Committee

Noem's plan rejected by lawmakers who seek a less restrictive alternative

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - JANUARY 29, 2025 1:34 PM



Lobbyists, members of the public and lawmakers crowd the South Dakota House Education Committee room ahead of a Jan. 29, 2025, hearing on a bill to create an education savings account program in the state. (Josh Haiar/

South Dakota Searchlight)

Lawmakers in the House Education Committee shot down former South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem's proposed \$4 million education savings account program and a similar, competing proposal Wednesday morning at the Capitol in Pierre.

Procedural maneuvers could still be used to bring the bills to the House floor, but the committee votes were an early setback for an idea proposed by Noem and supported by her successor, Gov. Larry Rhoden, after she departed to become secretary of the federal Department of Homeland Security.

The committee voted 9-6 against the governor-supported House Bill 1020, despite the bill having the majority leaders of both legislative chambers as prime sponsors. The bill would provide up to \$3,000 per student to help cover private school tuition, homeschooling or other alternative-instruction costs.

Lawmakers and people who testified against the bill included public education

stalwarts, who argued that the program would lack oversight and divert funds from public schools, and school choice advocates, who said the program would be too limited.

A competing school choice bill that would create a similar program with a higher price tag and less oversight was also shot down with an 8-7 vote. The bill, HB 1009, was introduced by Rep. Dylan Jordan, R-Clear Lake, and is estimated to cost up to \$142 million by the Legislative Research Council.

Reps. Jordan and Phil Jensen, R-Rapid City, both supported Jordan's bill but opposed the governor's bill. Rep. Travis Ismay, R-Newell, was the only other committee member to switch his vote — supporting the governor's bill but opposing Jordan's bill — while all other committee members either supported both bills or opposed both bills.

Anthony Mirzayants, representing the Texas-based student activist group Young Americans for Liberty, told lawmakers the bill supported by the governor isn't "a real school choice bill." He compared it to South Dakota's Partners in Education scholarship program. That program gives insurance companies up to \$5 million in tax credits annually in exchange for their contributions to scholarships for private-school students.

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Other opponents of HB 1020 included representatives of public education organizations, teachers, school board members and superintendents, disability advocates, the South Dakota Chamber of Commerce, the South Dakota Retailers Association and the Great Plains Tribal Education Directors.

Opponents were concerned with the impact the programs would have on public school funding and a lack of accountability, standards and transparency. They brought up similar concerns in HB 1009's committee hearing last week.

"Public education funding should reflect a shared responsibility. Instead, public funds would be drained from public and tribal schools, leaving fewer resources and opportunities for all students," said Roquel Gorneau, representing the Great Plains Tribal Education Directors. "This bill does not strengthen education. It weakens it, forcing public schools to do more with less."

Several supporters of HB 1020 (the governor's bill) included private school administrators who said the program would make alternatives to public education more accessible to students and could lead to better teacher pay within their schools. Supporters also included alternative instruction advocates and alternative school founders.

The bill, introduced by House Majority Leader Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, was amended during the hearing to clarify that students who use education savings accounts would not be classified as alternative instruction students. Odenbach proposed the amendment to appease the homeschool advocacy group Families for Alternative Instruction Rights in South Dakota, which feared that not separating education savings account students from alternative instruction students would open the door to regulation of alternative instruction. The organization switched its stance on the bill from opposed to neutral because of the amendment, based on a memo sent to lawmakers last week.

The amendment means that if the bill is revived and becomes law, families opting for homeschooling, microschoools or other alternative settings would have to choose whether they want to be ESA families eligible for the state financial assistance or alternative instruction students ineligible for the money.

Both South Dakota Department of Education Secretary Joseph Graves and Governor's Office Policy Adviser Sarah Hitchcock told lawmakers the program would improve education in the state by increasing competition among schools.

"We can't force our students to wait until we have perfect funding," Hitchcock told the committee.

Supporters of the legislation could seek approval from one-third of the House of Representatives to force the committee to send the bills to the floor. Support from a majority of the chamber's 70 members would then be needed to add the bills to the House calendar for debate and a vote.

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.

Lawmakers advance bill to cut tobacco-use prevention fund by \$2 million

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 29, 2025 2:14 PM

PIERRE — A committee of South Dakota lawmakers advanced a bill 5-2 on Wednesday at the Capitol to reduce state funding for tobacco and vaping prevention efforts.

But the lawmakers softened the proposed cut following a debate over public health and budget priorities.

The bill, originally intended to slash annual funding for the state's Tobacco Prevention and Reduction Trust Fund from \$5 million to \$2 million, was amended to set the new funding level at \$3 million.

The bill is a priority of former Gov. Kristi Noem, and now Gov. Larry Rhoden's administration. The Senate Health and Human Services Committee sent the amended bill to the Legislature's budget committee with

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State Sen. Kevin Jensen, R-Canton, contemplates a committee vote during the South Dakota legislative session in Pierre on Jan. 29, 2025. Also pictured is Sen. Sydney Davis, R-Burbank. (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota Searchlight)

bacco prevention grants, which will remain intact. The reduced state contribution would continue funding South Dakota's QuitLine services and other prevention efforts, he said.

Public health advocates pushed back, saying the state is trading short-term savings for long-term costs in health care.

South Dakota voters approved a 2006 ballot measure to dedicate a portion of increased cigarette tax revenue to prevention efforts. Jennifer Stalley, a lobbyist for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, helped make that happen. She warned that the bill undermines that commitment and could lead to a resurgence of youth tobacco use, particularly vaping and nicotine pouches.

Stalley said the state is spending \$5 million to fight a \$75 million annual problem in smoking-related health care costs, driving up the cost of Medicaid.

"Taking our foot off the gas right now, because we're doing well, isn't going to make sure that we are successful," she said. "It's going to make sure that in five years or 10 years – hopefully, not me – we're going to be back here going through this litany of asks again to get back to a successful program."

Kim Malsam-Rysdon is a former secretary of the state Department of Health and a current Avera Health lobbyist. Avera has a contract to manage the state's QuitLine program. She said it is one of the most effective in the nation with a 49% long-term success rate.

"We need to continue to fund these services. We also need to continue our other prevention services so that people never have to get to the QuitLine," she said.

Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, successfully proposed the amendment to set the new funding level at \$3 million instead of the originally proposed \$2 million. He said the change is a compromise that acknowledges budget constraints while hopefully preserving key prevention efforts.

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.

a positive recommendation.

Bureau of Finance and Management Commissioner Jim Terwilliger said the state needs to make budget cuts to help cover a \$62 million increase in Medicaid costs.

Opponents of the bill, including public health advocates and medical organizations, warned that reducing tobacco prevention funding could undo years of progress in reducing smoking and vaping rates, particularly among youth.

Terwilliger said smoking rates have declined significantly in South Dakota over the past two decades.

"The \$5 million that's been spent has been successful, certainly, but you're also looking at a smaller problem to tackle, if you will, in terms of tobacco prevention," he said.

Terwilliger said the state receives \$1 million annually in federal to-

Sioux Falls legislator Tony Venhuizen is Rhoden's pick for SD lieutenant governor

Lawmaker is a longtime presence in South Dakota Republican politics

BY: SETH TUPPER AND JOSHUA HAIAR - JANUARY 29, 2025 10:57 AM



Tony Venhuizen speaks to the media on Jan. 29, 2025, at the South Dakota Capitol in Pierre after he was announced as Gov. Larry Rhoden's choice for lieutenant governor. (Joshua Haiar/South Dakota

Searchlight)

A Sioux Falls legislator and longtime presence in South Dakota Republican politics, Tony Venhuizen, is Gov. Larry Rhoden's pick for lieutenant governor.

Rhoden announced his choice Wednesday morning at the Capitol in Pierre, two days after he was sworn in as governor. Rhoden succeeded former Gov. Kristi Noem, who resigned Saturday to become secretary of the federal Department of Homeland Security.

Rhoden's nomination of Venhuizen is subject to approval by the Legislature.

"Tony is a problem solver for the people of South Dakota," Rhoden said in a press release. "He is never shy to show leadership and take on challenging issues."

Venhuizen is a 42-year-old attorney and native of Armour, a small town in southeastern

South Dakota. He's also the son-in-law of Republican former Gov. Dennis Daugaard. Venhuizen and his wife, Sara, have three school-age children.

He earned his bachelor's degree in political science and history from South Dakota State University in 2005 and his juris doctorate from the University of South Dakota Knudson School of Law in 2008.

Venhuizen served for 10 years in the Governor's Office, including time as chief of staff to Daugaard and Noem.

Since 2023, Venhuizen has served as a state representative from District 13 and as vice chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, which takes a lead role in crafting the state budget. He also chaired the Legislature's 100th Session Planning Committee in 2024. He resigned his seat in the legislature Wednesday, which will allow Rhoden to appoint a replacement.

Rhoden acknowledged Wednesday to reporters that throughout his and Venhuizen's service in state government, the two haven't agreed on everything. Rhoden said finding "a person with integrity" was more important than that.

"Sometimes we weren't on the same side, but we always had a lot of mutual respect," Rhoden said.

Beyond his experience in government, Venhuizen is president of the board of directors of the South Dakota Historical Society Foundation, a member of the board of directors of the Trail of Governors Foundation and of the SDSU Research Park, and a former member of the board of directors of the Greater

Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce.

As a hobby, Venhuizen maintains the SoDak Governors blog, where he writes about South Dakota political history. He also regularly updates a historical reference book he wrote, "The Governors of South Dakota."

Rhoden mentioned Venhuizen's historical expertise Wednesday.

"He may know more about South Dakota's history than anyone I've ever met. And he uses that knowledge to help shape where our state is heading in the future."

Venhuizen thanked Rhoden for the opportunity to serve.

"It's a pretty surreal feeling," Venhuizen said. "I'm not sure I've entirely absorbed it. But I'm looking forward to it."

The choice adds potential intrigue to the 2026 campaign for governor. Rhoden will serve the remainder of Noem's term through that year, and will have to choose whether to seek election.

Rhoden said Wednesday he has not made a decision about that.

"And I have no reason to not be honest with you," he added.

Meanwhile, Venhuizen said years ago while he was a student at SDSU that he wanted to be governor someday, and U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, has long been considered a potential future candidate for governor. Current Attorney General Marty Jackley may also be interested in another run for governor after running unsuccessfully against Noem in a 2018 Republican gubernatorial primary.

Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.

COMMENTARY

Republican legislators pursue a back-door way to dump Medicaid by Dana Hess

South Dakota's Republican-dominated Legislature has never been a fan of expanded Medicaid. Now a proposed constitutional amendment making its way through the Capitol offers a back-door way for them to shut it down. That piece of legislation, House Joint Resolution 5001, has some momentum. It passed out of the House State Affairs Committee on an 11-2 vote and was endorsed by the full House on a vote of 59-7.

Medicaid is a federal-state partnership designed to provide health insurance for low-income people. In 2022, South Dakota voters endorsed a constitutional amendment that allowed the state to join the federal government's expanded Medicaid program. Expanded Medicaid offers coverage to adults whose incomes are up to 138% of the poverty level.

Republicans in the Legislature have never been happy with the voters' decision to join expanded Medic-



State Rep. Tony Venhuizen, R-Sioux Falls, speaks on the South Dakota House floor on Jan. 21, 2025. (Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

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aid. In 2024, they backed a constitutional amendment — ultimately approved by voters — seeking a work requirement for able-bodied adults on expanded Medicaid if the federal government were to allow it. With Donald Trump back in the White House, that may become a reality.

According to a South Dakota Searchlight story, total Medicaid enrollment in the state as of November was 148,303 with 28,726 on expanded Medicaid. The state's Medicaid budget is about \$2 billion with the federal government paying about \$1.4 billion.

Expanded Medicaid was created in 2014 as part of the Affordable Care Act or Obamacare. As an incentive for states to join, the federal government pays 90% of the cost. That's the problem, according to Rep. Tony Venhuizen, a Sioux Falls Republican. Venhuizen is sponsoring HJR 5001, a constitutional amendment that would allow South Dakota to drop out of expanded Medicaid if the federal government's participation drops below its 90% payment.

"All along there has been an assumption that the 90-10 share is not going to go anywhere, but I no longer think that's a safe assumption," Venhuizen told the House State Affairs Committee. "We all know that since the election, there has been a lot of talk about getting federal spending under control."

The new presidential administration seems to have a well-developed fetish for cutting costs. However, it is hard to follow the logic that says a billionaire should be tasked with the job of telling the rest of us what government services we can do without.

Venhuizen has a point when he says that cutting the federal share of expanded Medicaid would be an easy way for the government to save some money. It was tough to nail down how much it would cost South Dakota at the committee hearing. Venhuizen testified that a 10% cut in the federal share would cost the state \$20 million. A proponent of the legislation from the state Bureau of Finance and Management said that every cut of 1% in the fed's share would cost the state \$4 million. Multiply either one of those figures by the 41 states that have expanded Medicaid and it adds up to the federal government being able to save some serious money.

Venhuizen is right on a couple of other counts. It's dangerous to have a federal program enshrined in the state constitution. If something goes wrong, it would take an amendment to fix it and elections only roll around every two years. And he's right when he says that it could get too expensive for the state budget if the federal government decides to change how much it pays for expanded Medicaid.

He borders on disingenuous, however, when he maintains that while passage of the constitutional amendment would take expanded Medicaid out of the constitution, it wouldn't necessarily kill the program. He told the committee that the Legislature could allow it to continue.

This is the same Legislature that stubbornly refused to consider the expanded health insurance program for low income South Dakotans. Throughout opponent testimony about the resolution, it was mentioned that the Legislature had many chances to enact expanded Medicaid but never did.

It took a vote of the people to expand Medicaid in South Dakota. They had to take action because the Legislature wouldn't. At the very least those voters, and the people enrolled in expanded Medicaid, deserve some straight talk about what will happen if Venhuizen's amendment becomes part of the constitution.

Dana Hess spent more than 25 years in South Dakota journalism, editing newspapers in Redfield, Milbank and Pierre. He's retired and lives in Brookings, working occasionally as a freelance writer.

RFK Jr. turnabout on vaccines, abortion slammed at HHS confirmation hearing

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 29, 2025 7:53 PM

WASHINGTON — Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s alternating views on vaccines, reproductive rights and public health issues were a central focus at his first confirmation hearing Wednesday, with Democratic senators expressing dismay at his nomination and Republicans signaling he'll likely have their support.

Kennedy pledged to bring "radical transparency" to the Department of Health and Human Services if



Robert F. Kennedy Jr., President Donald Trump's nominee for secretary of Health and Human Services, testifies during his Senate Finance Committee confirmation hearing at the Dirksen Senate Office Building on Jan. 29, 2025, in Washington, D.C. (Photo

by Win McNamee/Getty Images)

confirmed by the U.S. Senate, though he didn't detail his plans for large-scale health care programs like Medicare and Medicaid during the nearly four-hour hearing.

Kennedy repeatedly testified before the Finance Committee that he wants to reduce chronic illnesses throughout the country and let scientific research lead the way.

But Democratic senators were skeptical he would improve the country's overall health outcomes if confirmed as HHS secretary, listing off several of his past claims not backed by research or medicine.

"For a long time the nation has been locked in a divisive health care debate about who pays. When health care costs reach 20%, there are no good options, only bad ones," Kennedy said. "Shifting the burden

around between government and corporations and insurers and providers and families is like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic."

Kennedy said that if confirmed he would try to ensure federal spending on nutrition programs goes to "healthy foods" and bolster scrutiny of "chemical additives in our food supply."

"We will remove financial conflicts of interest from our agencies. We will create an honest, unbiased, gold standard science at HHS, accountable to the president, to Congress and to the American people," Kennedy added. "We will reverse the chronic disease epidemic and put the nation back on the road to good health."

Vermont independent Sen. Bernie Sanders questioned how senators or Americans could trust what Kennedy said during the hearing, given his rapid change in opinion on vaccine safety and the government's role in abortion access, compared to comments made just last year.

"Tell me why you think people should have confidence in your consistency and in your work, when you really made a major U-turn on an issue of that importance in such a short time?" Sanders said.

'Conspiracy theories, quacks, charlatans'

Finance Committee ranking member Ron Wyden, an Oregon Democrat, rebuked Kennedy for some of his prior comments on vaccine safety, saying he "embraced conspiracy theories, quacks, charlatans."

"Mr. Kennedy has changed his views so often, it is nearly impossible to know where he stands on so many of the basic issues that impact Americans' daily lives," Wyden said.

Kennedy testified at several points during the hearing that he supports certain vaccines, including measles and polio, and science-backed research into medical treatments.

"I support vaccines. I support the childhood schedule. I will do that," Kennedy said. "The only thing I want is good science and that's it."

New Hampshire Democratic Sen. Maggie Hassan said Americans should be proud that vaccines have

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largely eradicated deadly diseases within the United States, including polio and smallpox.

"I am extremely concerned that as secretary, you would be able to halt critical vaccine research and to exploit parents' natural worries by advising them not to vaccinate their children," Hassan said. "This will lead to more children getting sick and some will even die.

"Before the measles vaccine about 500 American children died a year from measles. This is too much of a risk for our country and there is no reason that any of us should believe that you have reversed the anti-vaccine views that you have promoted for 25 years."

Abortion pill

Kennedy, who made several different statements about abortion access during his unsuccessful run for president, pledged during the hearing to implement President Donald Trump's agenda on reproductive rights, whatever that might be.

Anti-abortion groups are advocating for the Trump administration to restrict access to medication abortion, a two-drug regimen consisting of mifepristone and misoprostol that's approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration up to 10 weeks gestation. The FDA is housed within HHS.

"President Trump has asked me to study the safety of mifepristone," Kennedy said. "He has not yet taken a stand on how to regulate it. Whatever he does, I will implement those policies. I will work with this committee to make those policies make sense."

The FDA originally approved mifepristone in 2000 and made several changes to prescribing guidelines in 2016.

Those changes included increasing the gestational limit from seven to 10 weeks and making dosage and timing changes for both pharmaceuticals. The updated guidelines allowed qualified health care providers with the ability to prescribe medications to do so with mifepristone, not just doctors. And the requirement for three in-person doctor's office visits was removed.

Numerous medical organizations, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, the American Medical Association and the Society for Maternal-Fetal Medicine filed briefs to the Supreme Court last year attesting to the safety and efficacy of mifepristone in a case that ultimately left access to medication abortion intact.

Kennedy also said during the hearing that he supports Trump's policies on the Title X family planning grants program, including blocking federal funding from going to any organizations that perform or refer patients for abortions.

Federal law prevents taxpayer dollars from going to abortions, with exceptions for rape, incest or the life of the pregnant patient.

Emergency medical treatment

Kennedy didn't appear familiar with a federal law that ensures patients access to emergency health care regardless of insurance status.

The law, known as the Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act, or EMTALA, was a point of strong disagreement between Republican-controlled states and the Biden administration after the Supreme Court ended the constitutional right to abortion in 2022.

It is the subject of an ongoing case that made its way up to the Supreme Court before being sent back to the circuit court, which heard arguments in December.

Nevada Democratic Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto asked Kennedy a series of questions about protections under EMTALA during the hearing, starting with whether a woman experiencing a heart attack should receive care under that federal law regardless of her insurance status.

Kennedy said yes. But he said he didn't know if the law would protect a woman experiencing life-threatening bleeding from an incomplete miscarriage whose doctor said she needed an abortion.

Kennedy struggled to answer another question from Cortez Masto about what authorities HHS has to enforce EMTALA at hospitals that receive Medicare funding, saying he thought he had budget power but

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nothing else.

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, she said, "actually investigates complaints of EMTALA violations, as well as the Health and Human Services inspector general, who, by the way, was just recently fired by Donald Trump."

"So you will be enforcing EMTALA laws, and it's important that you understand their impact and don't play politics with the patient presenting at the ER based on a position that this administration has taken," Cortez Masto said.

Cassidy questions on Medicaid

Kennedy similarly struggled to answer questions from Louisiana Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy on Medicare and Medicaid, in an exchange that could lead to significant hurdles for his confirmation if Cassidy does not support him.

Cassidy — a doctor and chairman of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, which holds its confirmation hearing for Kennedy on Thursday — repeatedly asked Kennedy how he'd improve Medicaid.

Kennedy listed off his criticisms of the program, before he said states should experiment with pilot programs and that the goals should be value-based care, transparency and accountability.

Kennedy said there were also many options through telemedicine and artificial intelligence before talking about AI nurses.

Kennedy, when asked by Cassidy about people who are eligible for both Medicare and Medicaid, said he thinks the answer to that is "that the programs are consolidated, that they're integrated, and the care is integrated."

But Kennedy, when pressed on how he would handle that, didn't have an answer. He also got basic facts about Medicaid, including that costs are shared between the federal and state governments, incorrect.

"I'm not exactly sure, because I'm not in there," Kennedy said. "I mean, it is difficult to integrate them, because Medicare is under fee-for-service and is paid for by employer taxes. Medicaid is fully paid for by the federal government, and it's not fee-for-service. So I do not know the answer to that. I look forward to exploring options with you."

Kennedy said in response to a question from Cassidy about the differences between traditional Medicare and Medicare Advantage that people have the choice "right now," though he said he expects more people would like to be on Medicare Advantage if it wasn't for the more expensive price.

COVID-19 claims

Another, potentially damaging exchange for Kennedy's confirmation prospects, came when Colorado Democratic Sen. Michael Bennet asked a series of questions about previous statements Kennedy has made on various public health issues.

"Mr. Kennedy, did you say that COVID-19 was a genetically engineered bioweapon that targets Black and white people, but spared Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese people?" Bennet asked.

Kennedy responded that he "didn't say it was deliberately targeted."

Kennedy said he "probably" had made comments that Lyme disease was a military engineered bioweapon.

Kennedy said he wasn't sure if he had written in one of his books that it is "undeniable that African AIDS is an entirely different disease from Western AIDS," following a question from Bennet.

Kennedy, however, denied making statements that pesticides cause children to become transgender.

Bennet said he would have those prior Kennedy statements entered into the committee's official record.

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

Trump orders Education Department to guide states on use of federal funds for school choice

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - JANUARY 29, 2025 5:49 PM

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump signed executive orders Wednesday that prioritize school choice funding and seek to end what the administration sees as “radical indoctrination in K-12 schooling.”

Trump is carrying through on education-related campaign promises he made as part of his sweeping vision to “save American education.” These efforts mark the latest in a deluge of wide-ranging executive orders the president began signing since he took office last week.

One executive order directs the U.S. Education Department secretary “to issue guidance regarding how States can use Federal formula funds” to support K-12 school choice initiatives within the next two months.

Linda McMahon, Trump’s pick for Education secretary, has yet to sit before a Senate panel for a confirmation hearing.

McMahon — a former World Wrestling Entertainment executive, the prior head of the Small Business Administration during Trump’s first administration and a wealthy donor — could be pivotal to carrying out Trump’s sweeping education agenda.

The order also directs the Education secretary to “include education freedom as a priority in discretionary grant programs, as appropriate and consistent with applicable law.”

Trump is also tasking the Department of Health and Human Services with issuing guidance on how states receiving block grants “can use them to expand educational choice and support families who choose educational alternatives to governmental entities, including private and faith-based options.”

He is also requiring Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth to review how any “military-connected families” could use Department of Defense funds to attend a school of their choice and must submit a plan to describe these mechanisms and the steps to implement them.

Trump is asking the same for the Department of the Interior — requiring that the agency’s next leader review how anyone eligible to attend a school within the Bureau of Indian Education can use federal funds to attend a school of their choosing.

Former North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum, Trump’s pick to lead the department, appears to be on a smooth path to becoming the next Interior secretary.



The Lyndon Baines Johnson Department of Education Building pictured on Nov. 25, 2024. (Photo by Shauneen Miranda/States Newsroom)

‘Radical indoctrination’ in K-12 schools

Meanwhile, Trump signed a sweeping executive order that aims to bar federal funding for schools that teach “discriminatory equity ideology,” which the administration describes as “an ideology that treats in-

dividuals as members of preferred or disfavored groups, rather than as individuals, and minimizes agency, merit, and capability in favor of immoral generalizations.”

The order also requires the respective secretaries of Education; Defense; and Health and Human Services; to provide Trump with an “ending indoctrination strategy” in the next 90 days.

The plan would include recommendations for “eliminating Federal funding or support for illegal and discriminatory treatment and indoctrination in K-12 schools.”

Trump also signed another executive order Wednesday that takes additional measures to try to combat antisemitism on college campuses.

Shauneen Miranda is a reporter for States Newsroom’s Washington bureau. An alumna of the University of Maryland, she previously covered breaking news for Axios.

Newest round of Trump moves targets federal employees, care for transgender kids

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - JANUARY 29, 2025 3:25 PM

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump’s latest actions included an offer to buy out a large swath of the federal workforce, and an order narrowing medical options for transgender children, and some transgender adults.

Millions of government employees received an email Tuesday evening instructing them to reply with the word “resign” by Feb. 6 for a “dignified, fair departure” that promises full pay and benefits through September 2025, with the option of continuing to work from home.

The offer was not extended to military personnel, U.S. Postal Service workers, or “those in positions related to immigration enforcement and national security,” and other “specifically excluded” jobs.

According to a copy of the email reviewed by States Newsroom, those who choose to remain as part of the “reformed federal workforce” will be expected to return to the office in person five days a week and be “reliable, loyal, trustworthy” employees.

Workers who break the law or engage in “other misconduct will be prioritized for appropriate investigation and discipline, including termination,” according to the email.

The unsigned memo also warns that while some federal agencies and military branches may grow, the administration expects others to shrink.

“At this time we cannot give you full assurance regarding the certainty of your position or agency but



President Donald Trump signs executive orders in the Oval Office of the White House on Jan. 20, 2025, in Washington, D.C.

(Photo by Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images)

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should your position be eliminated you will be treated with dignity and will be afforded the protections in place for such positions," according to the email, which was sent from hr@opm.gov.

Union warns against 'hasty decision'

The offer drew criticism, including from Democratic Sen. Tim Kaine of Virginia, who said on the Senate floor Wednesday that Trump "has no authority to make that offer."

The American Federation of Government Employees, a union that represents 800,000 federal and D.C. employees, advised its members in a social media post to "NOT to make a hasty decision to resign until you have further details."

A statement from the union's national president, Everett Kelley, said the "purging" of government workers will have "vast, unintended consequences that will cause chaos for the Americans who depend on a functioning federal government."

"This offer should not be viewed as voluntary. Between the flurry of anti-worker executive orders and policies, it is clear that the Trump administration's goal is to turn the federal government into a toxic environment where workers cannot stay even if they want to," Kelley said.

The federal government employs around 3 million people, making it the 15th-largest employer in the country, according to USAFacts.org.

Blocking funds for trans care for kids

Adding to a cascade of executive orders signed during his first nine days in office, Trump issued a directive late Tuesday that aims to limit treatment options for transgender children and adults under the age of 19.

The dictate is the latest in a string of orders by Trump to govern gender from the Oval Office.

On Monday, Trump banned openly transgender people from serving in the armed forces. On the night of his inauguration, the president declared the federal government will only recognize two sexes, male and female, ending "gender ideology extremism."

According to Trump's latest gender-related order, the government will "not fund, sponsor, promote, assist, or support the so-called 'transition' of a child from one sex to another, and it will rigorously enforce all laws that prohibit or limit these destructive and life-altering procedures."

The order defines a "child" as being under age 19, although most states recognize 18 as the legal age of adulthood.

Under the directive, heads of federal health agencies must pull research and educational grants from any medical schools or hospitals that continue to offer hormone treatments, often called puberty blockers, or gender transition surgery to patients under 19 years old.

Additionally, the order directs the U.S. attorney general — who will likely be former Florida AG Pam Bondi — to work with Congress on legislation that would "enact a private right of action for children and the parents of children whose healthy body parts have been damaged by medical professionals" who prescribed hormone treatments or transition surgery. The legislation should "include a lengthy statute of limitations," the order states.

DOJ instructions

The decree also instructs the Department of Justice to "prioritize" investigating cases of female genital mutilation, prosecutable under a federal law meant to protect girls in the United States from the religious or cultural custom of removing portions or all of the genitalia.

Trump's order ensures that neither Medicare nor Medicaid can cover hormone therapy and certain surgical procedures for recipients under 19, and that insurance benefits offered to federal employees also do not offer coverage for those under 19 receiving the specified treatments.

The directive also mentions a ban on such health coverage for the trans children of U.S. service members, but that prohibition was already made explicit in Congress' most recent annual defense authorization package.

The executive order titled "Protecting Children from Chemical and Surgical Mutilation" gives the next secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services three months to publish a review of "best practices for promoting the health of children who assert gender dysphoria, rapid-onset gender dysphoria, or other identity-based confusion" — but specifically labels any guidance from the World Professional Association for Transgender Health as "junk science."

Trump has nominated Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. as the nation's next health secretary.

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

Extension of temporary protections for Venezuelan immigrants revoked by Noem for Trump administration

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - JANUARY 29, 2025 2:55 PM

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Homeland Security late Tuesday revoked an extension of temporary protective status for nearly 600,000 Venezuelans, according to an unpublished Federal Register document obtained by States Newsroom.

The New York Times first reported on the decision.

DHS Secretary Kristi Noem, whom the U.S. Senate confirmed to lead the agency on Saturday, canceled the 18-month protections of temporary protected status. A country under TPS is deemed too dangerous to return to due to war, disaster or other unstable conditions.

It means more than 600,000 Venezuelans, who had TPS status renewed

until October 2026, due to a last-minute action by former President Joe Biden, will have that extension undone. It comes as President Donald Trump has directed his administration to carry out highly publicized immigration enforcement actions in cities across the United States.

The president has said his administration will conduct mass deportations of undocumented people as well as immigrants let into the country under various legal pathways crafted under the Biden administration, including the TPS extension for Venezuelans.

The decision to revoke the renewal is effective immediately, according to the document.

Because of the instability of the Venezuelan government, those nationals have fled to the U.S. in recent years, with TPS designation in 2021 and an expanded redesignation in 2023, creating two separate filing processes for people from the same country.



Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem speaks during her confirmation hearing before the Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee on Capitol Hill on Jan. 17, 2025, in Washington, D.C. (Photo by Eric Thayer/Getty Images)

Venezuelans who had TPS status in 2023 will have protections until April 2, and Noem will have until Saturday to make a decision to extend protections, according to the document.

Those nationals from Venezuela who had TPS status in 2021 will have protections until Sept. 10, and Noem will have until July 12 to make a decision about renewing the designation, according to the document.

In the document, Noem argued that former DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas made his decision to renew TPS for Venezuela too early as her reasoning for revoking the extension.

The move is likely to face legal challenges. During the first Trump administration, DHS tried to end TPS for Haiti, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Sudan, but the courts blocked those attempts in 2018.

In a statement, Nevada's Democratic Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto argued that DHS did not have the legal authority to revoke the TPS extension for Venezuela.

"The Trump administration does not have the authority to revoke this TPS extension – it's cruel, misinformed, and illegal," she said.

Noem noted in her confirmation hearing that she disagreed with the Biden administration's decision to renew TPS recipients from Venezuela. She criticized the TPS program, and said those countries should have their designation reevaluated.

"This program has been abused and manipulated by the Biden administration, and that will no longer be allowed," Noem said during her confirmation hearing.

There are currently 17 countries under TPS status – Afghanistan, Burma, Cameroon, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Haiti, Honduras, Lebanon, Nepal, Nicaragua, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Syria, Ukraine, Venezuela and Yemen.

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Second federal judge seems to be prepared to block Trump spending pause

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - JANUARY 29, 2025 12:55 PM



President Donald Trump attends inauguration ceremonies in the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 20, 2025, in Washington, D.C.

(Photo by Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

WASHINGTON — A second federal judge appears ready to issue an order blocking the Trump administration from freezing funding on grant and loan programs, despite a move by the Office of Management and Budget to rescind a controversial memo Wednesday just before the hearing.

Chief Judge John J. McConnell Jr. of the U.S. District Court in Rhode Island opted not to issue his ruling during the virtual hearing, saying that he first wanted the Democratic attorneys general who filed the suit to suggest how such an order might be worded. He then wants to hear from the Justice Department lawyer arguing the case on behalf of the Trump administration about the scope of that possible order.

McConnell, who was appointed by former President Barack Obama, said the state attorneys general had convinced him that the Trump administration was likely to continue with the funding halt detailed in the now-revoked OMB memo in some way, based

on a social media post from White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt.

"That hasn't changed based on comments by the president's press secretary," McConnell said. "And so

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I'm inclined to grant the restraining order, though I'm struggling with how it would be worded and what effect it would have."

A ruling from McConnell would be the second order blocking the Trump administration from implementing a spending pause on certain grant and loan programs.

District Judge Loren L. AliKhan on Tuesday issued a short-term administrative stay preventing President Donald Trump's administration from starting the spending freeze. She then set a hearing in that case, brought by organizations that receive federal funding, for Feb. 3.

The original memo, released Monday evening by the Office of Management and Budget, led to widespread confusion and frustration among organizations like Meals on Wheels and grantees that rely on funding from the Department of Veterans' Affairs, as well as members of Congress from both political parties.

Memo rescinded

The Trump administration's Office of Management and Budget rescinded that memo Wednesday, though comments from Leavitt just afterward led to even more confusion just before the hearing began.

Leavitt wrote in a social media post that OMB rescinding the memo was "NOT a rescission of the federal funding freeze."

"It is simply a rescission of the OMB memo," Leavitt wrote. "Why? To end any confusion created by the court's injunction."

"The President's EO's on federal funding remain in full force and effect, and will be rigorously implemented," she added.

Separately, Leavitt issued a written statement to reporters that seemed to suggest rescinding the OMB funding freeze memo was meant to get around AliKhan's order.

"In light of the injunction, OMB has rescinded the memo to end any confusion on federal policy created by the court ruling and the dishonest media coverage," Leavitt wrote in a statement. "The Executive Orders issued by the President on funding reviews remain in full force and effect and will be rigorously implemented by all agencies and departments. This action should effectively end the court case and allow the government to focus on enforcing the President's orders on controlling federal spending. In the coming weeks and months, more executive action will continue to end the egregious waste of federal funding."

Appropriators praise withdrawal of memo

Maine Republican Sen. Susan Collins, chairwoman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, welcomed OMB's action before Leavitt's post and the hearing.

"I am pleased that OMB is rescinding the memo imposing sweeping pauses in federal programs," Collins wrote in a statement. "While it is not unusual for incoming administrations to review federal programs and policies, this memo was overreaching and created unnecessary confusion and consternation."

Senate Appropriations Committee ranking member Patty Murray, D-Wash., released a statement that the Trump administration reversal was the right decision. That was also before Leavitt weighed in.

"This is an important victory for the American people whose voices were heard after massive pressure from every corner of this country — real people made a difference by speaking out," Murray wrote. "Still, the Trump administration — through a combination of sheer incompetence, cruel intentions, and a willful disregard of the law — caused real harm and chaos for millions over the span of the last 48 hours which is still ongoing."

White House assurances

OMB's decision to rescind the memo Wednesday followed the White House making public assurances Tuesday that the spending freeze wouldn't impact Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid and direct food assistance programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

Two separate lawsuits seeking to block the OMB memo from taking effect on Tuesday evening at 5 p.m. were filed in federal district court.

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The lawsuit filed by the National Council of Nonprofits, American Public Health Association and Main Street Alliance led to federal District Court Judge AliKhan placing a temporary hold on the planned spending freeze until Feb. 3 at 5 p.m.

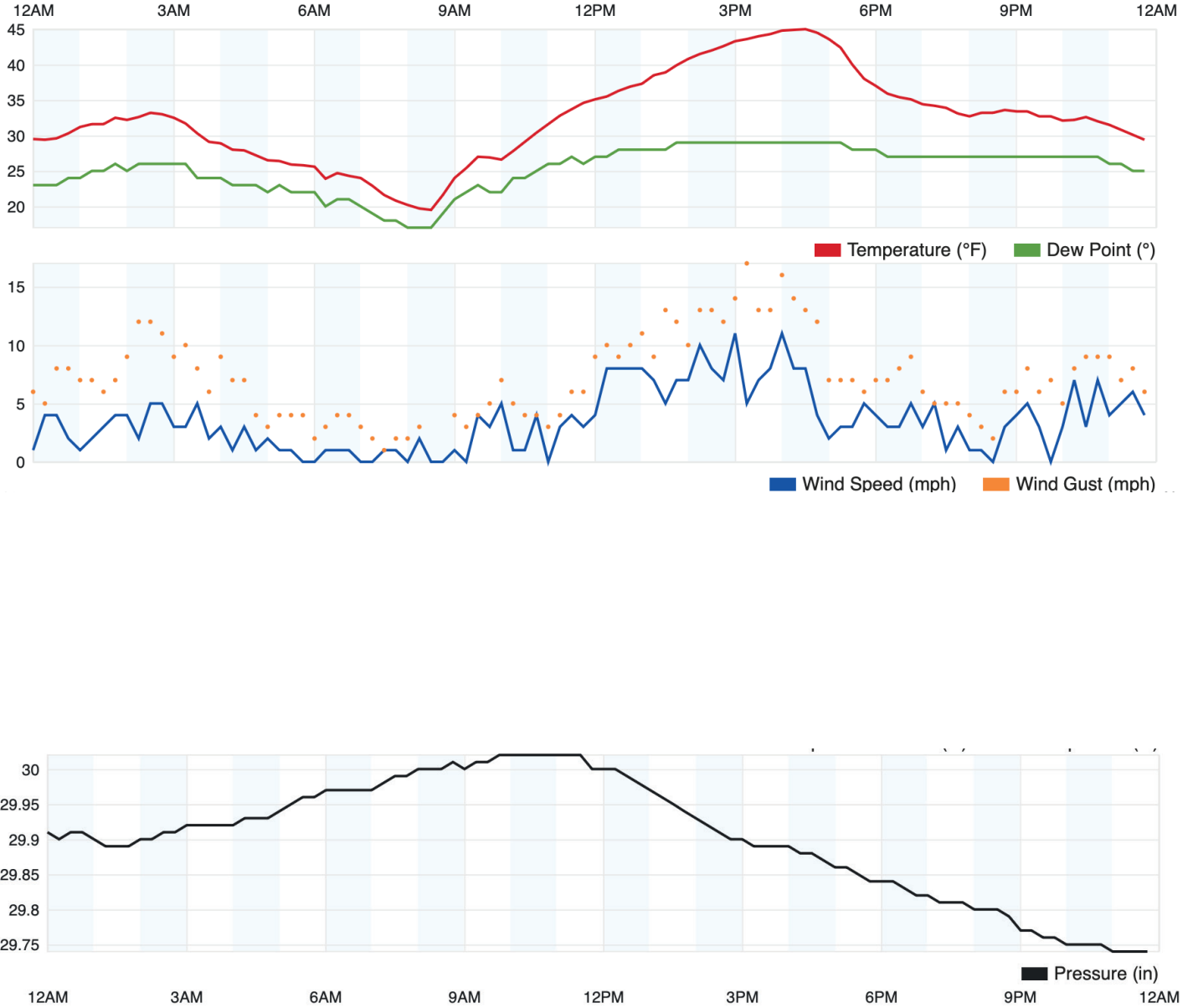
The second lawsuit, heard Wednesday, was filed by Democratic attorneys general from New York, Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Nevada, North Carolina, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, Washington, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia.

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

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 46 °F

Sunny

Tonight



Low: 19 °F

Increasing
Clouds

Friday



High: 29 °F

Partly Sunny

Friday Night



Low: 19 °F

Mostly Cloudy

Saturday



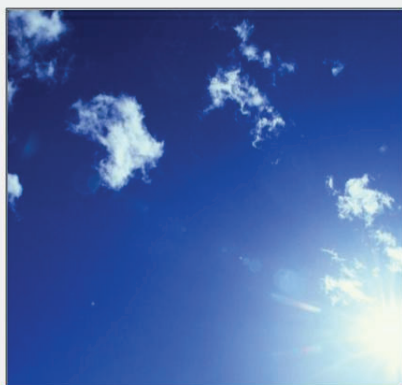
High: 41 °F

Slight Chance
Snow then
Partly Sunny

Above Average Temps Through Saturday

Today

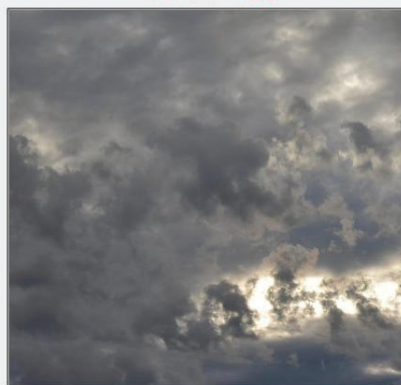
Mostly sunny with highs in the 40s to around 50



Temps 10-25° above normal

Friday

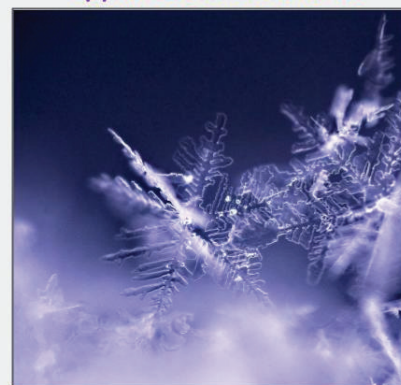
Increasing clouds over northern/northeastern SD with highs in the upper 20s to lower 40s



Temps 5-10° above normal

Saturday

15-25% chance of light rain/snow over far northeastern SD into west central MN. Highs upper 30s to around 50



Temps 10-20° above normal



National Weather Service Aberdeen, South Dakota

The end of the week will consist of dry weather before a 15-25% chance of light precipitation is possible over far northeastern SD into west central MN on Saturday. Enjoy these ongoing above average temps as well because early next week highs will only be in the teens to around 20, which is about 5 to 15 degrees below average!

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 45 °F at 4:19 PM

Low Temp: 19 °F at 8:22 AM

Wind: 17 mph at 3:07 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 9 hours, 45 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 55 in 1931

Record Low: -37 in 2019

Average High: 25

Average Low: 2

Average Precip in Jan.: 0.53

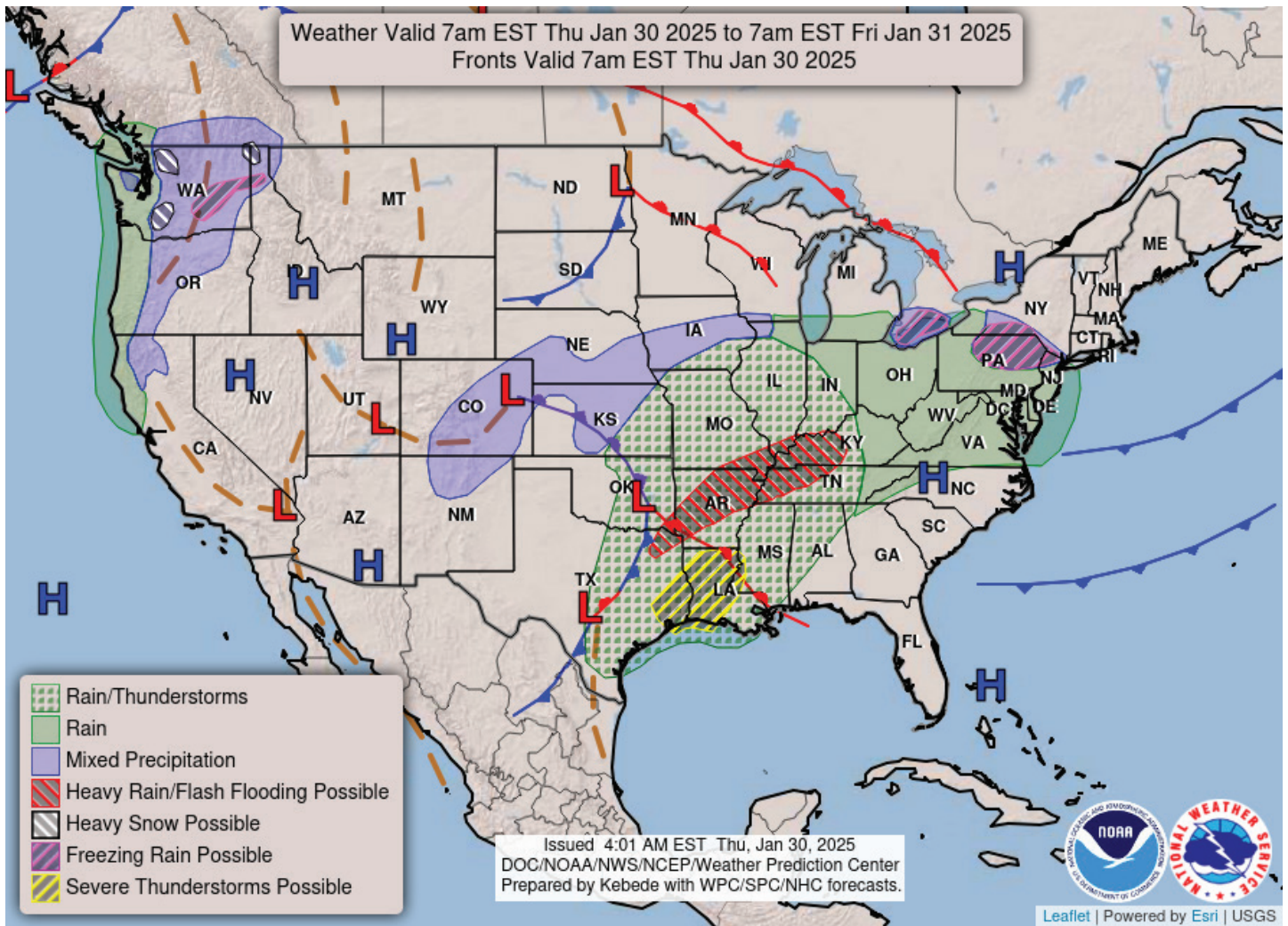
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.53

Precip Year to Date: 21.71

Sunset Tonight: 5:38:16 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:52:03 am



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Today in Weather History

January 30, 2001: Widespread freezing rain, accumulating from 1/8 to 1/2 inch, changed over to snow late in the evening of the 29th. The snow accumulated from 6 to 12 inches over much of central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota. The combination of ice and snow caused significant travel problems, school and flight cancellations and delays, business closings, and numerous vehicle accidents. Several highways were closed along with large portions of Interstates 29 and 90. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Murdo, 14 SSW Hayes, and 8 E of Eden, 7 inches at Castlewood and 5 NE of Peever, 8 inches at Miller, Gann Valley, Iona, Watertown, Ortonville, and 2 NW Stephan. Nine inches of snowfall accumulated 18 S of Harrold with 10 inches at Tulare and Kennebec, 11 inches at Clark, Clear Lake, and Wheaton, 12 inches at Carpenter, Willow Lake, Milbank, and Browns Valley, and 13 inches at Wilmot.

January 30, 2011: Heavy snow of 6 to 9 inches fell across part of northeast South Dakota from the afternoon of the 30th to the 31st. Travel was disrupted, especially along Interstate-90. Some snowfall amounts included 6 inches at Webster, Summit, and Clear Lake; 7 inches at Watertown and Milbank; 8 inches at Wilmot and Sisseton; and 9 inches at Bryant, Waubay, and Andover.

1607: The Bristol Channel floods in England resulted in the drowning of many people and the destruction of a large amount of farmland and livestock. Recent research has suggested that the cause may have been a tsunami. Cardiff was one of the most badly affected towns, with the foundations of St. Mary's Church destroyed.

1936 - Birmingham, AL, established a single storm record and 24 hour record with 11 inches of snow. (29th-30th) (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1954: A tornado touched down near White Point Beach, Nova Scotia. A great deal of hail and lightning was reported along the coast near Liverpool, Nova Scotia.

1966: The Blizzard of 1966 impacted New York and paralyzed the region. The train service was disrupted. Numerous highways, the New York State Thruway from Albany to the Pennsylvania state line, and the Buffalo Airport and other airports throughout western and central New York were closed. The Syracuse-Oswego area's hardest hit, where Bob Sykes, a meteorology professor at the State University of New York at Oswego, reported a whopping 102.4 inches! Some schools in Orleans County were closed for the entire week following the blizzard. Economic loss from the storm was estimated at \$35 million. Winds gusting to 60 mph and temperatures in the teens, and heavy and blowing snow created severe blizzard conditions.

1977 - The great "Buffalo Blizzard" finally abated after three days. The storm added a foot of new snow to 33 inches already on the ground. Winds gusting to 75 mph reduced visibilities to near zero, produced snow drifts twenty-five feet high, and kept wind chill readings 50 degrees below zero. The blizzard paralyzed the city, and caused 250 million dollars damage. (David Ludlum)

1987 - A winter storm brought more heavy snow to the North Atlantic Coast Region, with 13.6 inches reported at Hiram ME. January proved to be the snowiest of record for much of Massachusetts. Worcester MA reported an all-time monthly record of 46.8 inches of snow. (National Weather Summary)

1988 - Strong southerly winds, gusting to 53 mph at Kansas City MO, spread warm air into the central U.S. Nineteen cities reported record high temperatures for the date. Snow and strong northwest winds ushered cold arctic air into the north central states. The temperature at Cutbank plunged from 54 degrees to a morning low of 7 degrees below zero. (National Weather Summary)

1989 - The temperature at McGrath, AK, dipped to 62 degrees below zero, and Fairbanks reported a reading of 51 degrees below zero, with unofficial readings in the area as cold as 75 degrees below zero. The massive dome of bitterly cold air began to slide down western Canada toward the north central U.S. Strong southwest winds ahead of the arctic front pushed the temperature at Great Falls MT to 62 degrees, and gusted to 124 mph at Choteau MT, overturning trucks and mobile homes, and a dozen empty railroad cars. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - A major winter storm produced heavy snow from Indiana to New England. It was the biggest storm in two and a half years for eastern New York State. Snowfall totals in the mountains of Maine ranged up to 20 inches at Guilford and Lovell. Other heavy snowfall totals included 17 inches at Utica NY, and 19 inches at Bethel VT, Ludlow VT, and New London NH. The storm claimed three lives in eastern New York State, and four lives in Vermont. (National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

During an inspection of his soldiers prior to a parade, Alexander the Great said to one of them, "Your name is Alexander. My name is Alexander. Either change your name or change your way of living!"

Another leader spoke of a Name and the honor it deserved. King David wrote, "He guides me along right paths bringing honor to his name."

Names are important for many reasons. In Scripture the word name or words that have the same meaning as name occur nearly 1,100 times. Slightly half of that number refer to the name of God or God's Son. But the use of the word name in the Bible always carries with it one's identity or reputation.

Luke writes, "It was there at Antioch that the believers were first called 'Christians'" or Christ-ones – emphasizing the fact there was something very different, yet something very similar, about those who were believers in Christ. This young church in Antioch included a mixture of Jews and Gentiles whose languages were Greek and Aramaic. And though their languages were different they had one thing in common: Christ. Yet together they lived Christlike lives that reflected His unending, always obvious love. Their lives were so different because of Christ that they had to be given a new name.

Question: Do you qualify to be called Christian?

Prayer: Lord, we often falter and fail in our lives that bear the name of Your Son. Forgive us for those times when our lives do not reflect Your love and Your life. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. Acts 11:26

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: 01.28.25

10 19 31 47 56 6

MegaPlier: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$59,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 42 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.29.25

9 20 23 42 45 2

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$23,190,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 57 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.29.25

1 20 25 30 34 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 17 Hrs 12 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.29.25

5 10 27 30 34

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$23,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 12 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.29.25

18 28 41 63 68 4

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 41 Mins 53 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 01.29.25

8 12 31 33 38 18

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$89,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 41 Mins 53 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

Bullock's 31 lead South Dakota past Omaha 91-87

By The Associated Press undefined

VERMILLION, S.D. (AP) — Quandre Bullock put up 31 points as South Dakota beat Omaha 91-87 on Wednesday night ending the Mavericks' nine-game winning streak.

Bullock added six rebounds for the Coyotes (13-10, 4-4 Summit League). Isaac Bruns shot 9 of 14 from the field, including 2 for 5 from 3-point range, and went 3 for 3 from the line to add 23 points. Chase Forte shot 4 of 13 from the field and 6 of 13 from the free-throw line to finish with 14 points, while adding four steals.

The Mavericks (13-10, 7-1) were led in scoring by Marquel Sutton, who finished with 29 points, 12 rebounds and three blocks. JJ White added 18 points and 10 assists for Omaha. Tony Osburn also had 15 points.

Both teams play Denver next, South Dakota on the road on Thursday and Omaha at home on Saturday.

Main theme for South Dakota politics in 2025? Buckle up.

South Dakota News Watch undefined

Sioux Falls, SD (South Dakota News Watch)

Noem, Thune prepare for new roles in Washington as South Dakota awaits a new governor and early 2026 election intrigue.

Though it's an off year in election terms, 2025 will pack a considerable punch within the scope of South Dakota politics.

The drama begins in January, when Gov. Kristi Noem is scheduled to begin committee hearings in Washington after being appointed as secretary of the Department of Homeland Security by incoming President Donald Trump, whose inauguration is Jan. 20.

Noem's proposed executive branch role is just part of South Dakota's influence in the nation's capital. Sen. John Thune was chosen by his Republican colleagues as Senate Majority Leader in November, and Rep. Dusty Johnson has emerged as a close adviser to Speaker Mike Johnson in the House of Representatives.

In Pierre, the surging populist GOP wing assumes control of legislative leadership as Lt. Gov. Larry Rhoden prepares to take the reins from Noem in a challenging budget year, with the session starting Jan. 14.

Amid this backdrop, candidates will start plotting for 2026, when South Dakota will elect a new governor as well as hold races for U.S. Senate and U.S. House and constitutional offices such as attorney general, secretary of state and state treasurer.

Here's a quick rundown of what to expect as a jam-packed political year begins:

Noem's appointment to Homeland Security is considered high priority by the Trump administration as it seeks to hit the ground running on proposed immigration reforms.

The South Dakota governor's confirmation timeline is right behind Trump's choices for secretary of Defense (Pete Hegseth) and secretary of State (Marco Rubio), with those national security picks expected to have committee hearings the week starting Jan. 13.

Noem has met with members of the Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs, which is chaired by Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky and will consider her nomination.

She cannot be formally nominated until Trump is sworn in Jan. 20, and the committee can't vote until that occurs. So the earliest that her appointment can be confirmed by the committee and sent to the full Senate is likely Jan. 21 or 22.

Republicans hold a 53-47 majority in the Senate, which means they can lose three GOP votes and still pass measures or appointees, with Vice President-elect J.D. Vance breaking ties.

If Noem survives, as most expect, Trump's team wants her to be publicly active out of the gate, which likely means a trip to the Southern border to stress a crackdown on illegal immigration.

As a member of the House, Dusty Johnson is not involved in the confirmation process. But he told News

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Watch that he's confident South Dakota's governor will hold up under the "advise and consent" scrutiny of the Senate.

"There are certainly some appointments that are more controversial in nature," Johnson said. "(Noem) is a pretty straightforward, traditional, conservative pick, and I would think she's in excellent shape. She knows how to make decisions and doesn't get scared at the prospect of making a tough call."

As for how the 53-year-old Noem will handle a job that puts her in charge of a network of 22 agencies and 260,000 employees tasked with keeping the United States safe from outside threats, there are differences of opinion.

Jeh Johnson, who served as Homeland Security secretary under President Barack Obama from 2013-17, told News Watch in November that he wishes Noem success "in promoting the department's missions and its people."

But Johnson, former general counsel of the Department of Defense, added a note of caution as Noem prepares to join an administration that has vowed to carry out mass deportations of illegal immigrants in the country, facing likely legislative and legal hurdles along the way.

"I fear she will be placed in the untenable position of having to publicly defend the Trump administration's most controversial and harshest immigration enforcement policies," Jeh Johnson said. "I suspect there will be many days when she wishes she were back in South Dakota."

Thune is settling into his role as Senate majority leader, a job he apprenticed for while serving as a right-hand man for former longtime Republican leader Mitch McConnell of Kentucky, who remains in the Senate.

One of Thune's biggest challenges will be managing the demands and expectations of Trump, who has called for quick action from Senate Republicans on confirming Cabinet posts and getting in step with White House prerogatives.

Thune would prefer to insulate the Senate from such pressure under the constitutional balance of power. That wish was granted in December, when 38 GOP senators voted against Trump's preferred bill to extend government funding while also suspending the debt limit for two years, which would have eased the path for White House priorities such as border spending and tax cuts.

Congress later passed a temporary funding bill that did not address the debt ceiling, despite Trump saying on social media that he would support primary challenges against Republicans who opposed his wishes.

Thune's rocky relationship with Trump, dating back to the 2016 presidential campaign and inflamed by the U.S. Capitol riot of Jan. 6, 2021, has seen signs of recent repair.

Thune and Trump were seen hanging out together in a private suite at the Army-Navy football game on Dec. 14, and Thune also visited the President-elect at his Mar-a-Lago resort in Florida recently to discuss legislative strategy.

Another fragile alliance, the one involving Thune and Noem that highlights their contrasting political styles, is not necessarily under repair but is being mitigated for what both consider the greater good of Republican leadership in Washington.

Thune met with Noem to discuss her Homeland Security appointment and the shared recognition that many of Trump's immigration aims will run through the Senate and Noem's office if she's confirmed.

Thune has listed border security as one of his top political priorities entering the 2025 session, along with tax relief, military strength and energy deregulation.

Though the 2026 primary for South Dakota governor is still 18 months away, the race has been bubbling beneath the surface for months.

Dusty Johnson has been the most active among potential contenders, building a campaign war chest of more than \$5.5 million while wrangling top-level South Dakota donors in anticipation of a race that could begin as early as spring 2025.

Other likely candidates include Rhoden and South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley as well as a contender from the populist wing, with state Rep. Scott Odenbach of Spearfish mentioned frequently after recently being named House majority leader.

Odenbach worked closely with Speaker of the House Jon Hansen of Dell Rapids to bolster anti-abortion and landowner rights initiatives while urging the ouster of "establishment" legislative incumbents in the

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2024 election, all of which were successful efforts.

Jackley, who saw Noem run to the right in defeating him for the 2018 gubernatorial nomination, is determined to better position himself this time. He has assembled volunteer campaign staff for whether he runs for governor or attorney general in 2026, showcasing hardline stances against illegal immigration, abortion and gun control.

The 54-year-old Sturgis native has made the pilgrimage to Mar-a-Lago and has a working relationship with former Florida Attorney General Pam Bondi, the U.S. attorney general nominee who is part of Trump's current inner circle.

Most political observers agree that a Trump endorsement could be a game-changer in any South Dakota statewide race, and the president-elect has supported conservative state AGs before in their pursuit of higher office.

Barring such a development, running for governor could be an uphill climb for Jackley, who had about \$500,000 in his campaign coffers at the last reporting date and limited options for coveted in-state donors after Johnson's early efforts.

"One thing I learned from high school and college athletics is that my coach would tell me, "Run your own race,"" Jackley told News Watch. "So it doesn't make any difference to me if somebody else is running for governor. I'm going to do what is best for me and the state, and that decision won't be affected by other individuals."

Johnson has insisted that he's in no hurry to formally launch a gubernatorial campaign. One political insider noted that there's no advantage to "hanging out there as a punching bag for 14 or 15 months, especially when you've got so much money and you're well known."

He has hired a media consultant to help keep him well-positioned amid a temperamental Republican electorate in South Dakota, with the goal of fending off Trump-fueled challenges against him.

The congressman shared with top supporters an internal poll from Axis Research that showed him at 31% among 306 "known Republican primary voters" in South Dakota from Nov. 10-12, compared to 22% for Jackley, 10% for Rhoden and 7% for former state legislator and U.S. House candidate Taffy Howard. The poll showed 31% as undecided, with a margin of error of 5.6 percentage points.

Johnson's visibility as a sitting U.S. congressman gives him an early edge, said Jon Schaff, a political science professor at Northern State University in Aberdeen. But the undecided numbers and the fact that Rhoden hasn't become governor yet means there's a long way to go.

"My strong suspicion is that Dusty is way ahead of the other figures in name recognition, giving his support a bit of an artificial strength," Schaff told News Watch. "As other candidates raise money and increase their name recognition, the numbers may change."

A Mason-Dixon poll co-sponsored by News Watch in October showed Johnson with a favorability rating of 51% among Republicans in the state, well behind Noem (76%) and Trump (72%). Those results bolstered the conventional wisdom that he needs to win over hard-right voters to secure the GOP primary.

For now, Johnson is focused on his work in Congress, where he has emerged a key dealmaker as Republican leadership walks the tightrope of a razor-thin majority in the House. He has emphasized his coordination with the Trump administration as it seeks to carry out its agenda in Congress.

"Right now, 99% of my time is focused on this first 100 days (of Trump's presidency)," Johnson, 48, told News Watch. "You know, shame on us if we don't secure the border, cut regulations and push back on the Chinese Communist Party. And if I take my eye off those things, our chance of success won't be as good."

One of the state's biggest political stories in 2025 could be the ascension of Rhoden, who will likely become the first South Dakota governor to assume office in the middle of a legislative session in Pierre.

The 65-year-old Meade County rancher is already sizing up a Legislature fraught with budgetary battles and potential Republican infighting. The 2024 election was a triumph for limited government populists, who seized leadership roles and will test the remaining influence of pro-business institutionalists when it comes to pipelines, prison projects and property tax.

Rhoden, a legislative veteran who ran unsuccessfully for U.S. Senate in 2014, will have ample opportunity

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to prove his political dexterity in the current GOP environment, setting the tone for a potential re-election bid.

The Union Center resident has assembled a "kitchen cabinet" to prepare for his new role. That group of close advisers includes Steve Westra, former commissioner of the Governor's Office of Economic Development; Board of Regents president and former state legislator Tim Rave; and Sioux Falls lawyer and lobbyist Matt McCaulley.

The search for a lieutenant governor has focused on Sioux Falls to provide a West River/East River balance come election time. Rhoden's preferred choice is Westra, but there are concerns about whether his past GOED battles with limited-government legislators would complicate his confirmation.

Christine Erickson, a former state legislator and Sioux Falls city councilor who has West River roots, has also been considered for the role.

From an electoral view, Rhoden has a chance to use the increased visibility of the governor's office as a launching pad for 2026. While not a polished speaker, his status as a "true-blue cowboy from Union Center" is seen by political insiders as a potentially effective counter to Dusty Johnson's bookish zeal.

Rhoden's ability to raise money and encourage allies may hinge on how he handles the upcoming legislative session. Having served in both the House and Senate, he understands the process well enough to navigate the choppy waters of a Republican party divide.

He'll need to complement those efforts with the executive mettle and mature leadership that South Dakotans want to see as the face of their state moving forward.

Plenty of comparisons have been made to Walter Dale Miller, another West River rancher and veteran legislator who served as lieutenant governor under Gov. George Mickelson. Miller took the reins of leadership at age 67 after Mickelson was killed in a plane crash in April 1993.

Miller ran for governor as an incumbent in 1994 and was challenged by Bill Janklow, a former governor and more savvy politician who won by a margin of 54% to 46%, setting up his return to Pierre for two terms.

The general consensus is that 70-year-old U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, who is up for re-election in 2026, will enter the fray at least one more time to seek a third term in Washington.

This means that Rounds, who has publicly criticized Trump's stances at times in the past, might need to tread lightly to avoid a populist primary challenge in a state where opposing Trump too stridently can alter political fortunes.

Thune, by contrast, isn't up for re-election until 2028, the final year of Trump's term.

Rounds has not ruled out running for governor as a means of returning home to Pierre, where he served as a state legislator and was South Dakota governor from 2003-2011.

The gubernatorial option was viewed by some as a contingency plan for Rounds if Noem decided to run for Senate, though Trump's presidential win and Noem's administration role shifts that scenario.

The names most frequently mentioned for U.S. House in 2026, assuming Dusty Johnson runs for governor, are state Sen. Casey Crabtree of Madison and state Rep. Tony Venhuizen of Sioux Falls, former chief of staff to Daugaard and Noem.

Howard, who challenged Johnson from the right in the 2022 U.S. House primary and finished with 41% of the vote, is also a possibility for the 2026 race.

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Middle East latest: Hostage releases begin in Gaza Strip

By The Associated Press undefined

Hamas handed captive Israeli soldier Agam Berger over to the Red Cross in the Gaza Strip, the first of eight hostages set to be released today as part of a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

Hamas is set to free two more Israeli hostages as well as five Thai captives, and Israel is to release another 110 Palestinian prisoners, in the third such exchange since fighting paused earlier this month.

Berger, 20, was abducted alongside four other female soldiers, who were freed on Saturday.

The tenuous ceasefire between Israel and Hamas is aimed at ending the war in Gaza and securing the release of dozens of hostages held by the militant group, as well as hundreds of Palestinians imprisoned or detained by Israel.

Under the ceasefire, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians have jubilantly returned to northern Gaza over the past three days. However, their homecoming has been bittersweet as nearly everyone has friends or relatives who died, and many northern neighborhoods have been transformed into an apocalyptic landscape of devastation by more than 15 months of war.

Here's the latest:

Israel says it intercepted Hezbollah surveillance drone

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military says it has intercepted a surveillance drone launched toward Israeli airspace by the Hezbollah militant group in Lebanon.

Israel and Hezbollah reached a ceasefire in late November that ended some 14 months of fighting. Under the deal, both sides were to withdraw forces from southern Lebanon within 60 days.

The deadline passed this week with Israeli troops still in Lebanon. But the U.S. said the sides had agreed to extend the ceasefire through Feb. 18 while Israel continues its withdrawal.

Israel and Hezbollah have repeatedly accused each other of violating the deal.

Red Cross arrives at site of second hostage handover

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip — Red Cross vehicles arrived at a location in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis where hostages are set to be released.

The second handover site is in front of the destroyed home of slain Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. Hundreds of militants from Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad group arrived earlier with a convoy in a show of force, and thousands of people gathered to watch, some from the tilted rooftops of bombed-out buildings.

Israeli soldier Agam Berger released in Gaza Strip

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Hamas handed captive Israeli soldier Agam Berger over to the Red Cross at a ceremony in the heavily destroyed urban refugee camp of Jabaliya in northern Gaza.

Berger, 20, was abducted alongside four other female soldiers, who were freed on Saturday.

At a gathering in Tel Aviv, people cheered, clapped and whistled as they saw images of Berger being released on a TV screen, next to a large clock that's counted the days the hostages have been in captivity.

Some held signs saying "Agam we're waiting for you at home."

A short time later, Israel confirmed that Berger was with its military.

Red Cross arrives at site of hostage release

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Red Cross vehicles arrived at the northern refugee camp of Jabaliya, where hundreds of masked militants and onlookers had gathered ahead of a planned release of hostages held in Gaza.

Hamas set up two locations for the release, one in Jabaliya and the other in the southern city of Khan Younis in front of the destroyed home of slain Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar.

Video shows hostages set to be released

JERUSALEM — The Islamic Jihad militant group has released a brief video of two hostages set to be released Thursday as part of the ceasefire in the Gaza Strip.

The video, without sound, shows Arbel Yehoud, 29, and Gadi Moses, 80, smiling and embracing one another. They were among scores of people abducted in Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack that triggered the war.

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Islamic Jihad is a smaller and more extreme militant group allied with Hamas. It took part in the Hamas-led Oct. 7 attack.

Mother of Thai hostage hears he's about to be freed

BANGKOK — Khammee Lamnao, the mother of Thai hostage Surasak Lamnau, said the Thai embassy in Israel had called her Wednesday to let her know her son was one of the five who were to be released. "I cannot wait to see my son," the 53-year-old said. "I've been waiting for him."

Surasak had been working in the agricultural sector in Israel for 15 months when he was taken hostage during the October 2023 attack.

Thirty-one Thai nationals are believed to have been taken hostage when Hamas attacked Israel in October, 2023. Of those, 23 have been released, and two of the remaining hostages have been confirmed dead.

Five surviving hostages are due to be released, and it is not clear at the moment what the status of the sixth person is.

There were about 30,000 Thai workers — mostly laborers in the agricultural sector — in Israel prior to the Oct. 7 attack by Hamas, when militants stormed through a border fence and killed hundreds of Israelis and foreign nationals, including 41 Thai workers.

At least 7,000 Thai workers are known to have returned home on government evacuation flights, but many others decided to stay for the opportunity to earn wages far higher than at home.

Who's set to be released today?

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — The Israelis set to be released are Agam Berger, 20, a female soldier; Arbel Yehoud, a 29-year-old civilian woman; and Gadi Moses, an 80-year-old man. The names of the Thai hostages who were set to be freed were not released.

Yehoud was at the center of the dispute about the sequence of releases that briefly rocked the ceasefire over the weekend. Israel says she was supposed to have been freed Saturday and delayed the opening of crossings to northern Gaza when she was not. Berger was abducted alongside four other female soldiers, who were freed on Saturday.

Of the 110 people set to be released from prisons in Israel, 30 are serving life sentences after being convicted of deadly attacks against Israelis. Zakaria Zubeidi, a prominent former militant leader and theater director who took part in a dramatic jailbreak in 2021 before being rearrested days later, is also among those set to be released.

Ceasefire holds for now but next phase will be harder

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Today's exchange is part of a deal that paused fighting in Gaza on Jan. 19. Israeli forces have pulled back from most of Gaza, allowing hundreds of thousands of people to return to what remains of their homes and humanitarian groups to surge assistance.

It calls for Hamas to release a total of 33 hostages, including women, children, older adults and sick or wounded men, in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. Israel says Hamas has confirmed that eight of the hostages to be released in this phase are dead.

The initial Phase One ceasefire paused fighting for six weeks, calling for the sides to use that time to negotiate a second phase in which Hamas would release the remaining hostages and the ceasefire would continue indefinitely. The war could resume in early March if an agreement is not reached.

Negotiating a phase two deal could be difficult. Hamas says it won't release the remaining hostages without an end to the war and a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza, after reasserting its rule over Gaza within hours of the truce.

Meanwhile, Israel says it is still committed to destroying Hamas, and a key far-right partner in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition is already calling for the war to resume after the ceasefire's first phase.

Hamas frees the first of 8 more hostages as Gaza truce holds.

Israel is set to release 110 prisoners

By MOHAMMAD JAHJOUH, WAFAA SHURAFU and JOSEPH KRAUSS Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip (AP) — Hamas-led militants freed the first of eight hostages on Thursday in the latest release since a ceasefire in the Gaza Strip took hold earlier this month. Israel was expected to release another 110 Palestinian prisoners.

The truce is aimed at winding down the deadliest and most destructive war ever fought between Israel and Hamas, whose Oct. 7, 2023, attack into Israel sparked the fighting. It has held despite a dispute earlier this week over the sequence in which the hostages were released.

Hamas handed female Israeli soldier Agam Berger, 20, to the Red Cross after parading her in front of a crowd in the heavily destroyed urban refugee camp of Jabaliya in northern Gaza. The Israeli government later confirmed that Berger was with its forces.

Berger was among five young, female soldiers abducted in the Oct. 7 attack. The other four were released on Saturday.

People cheered, clapped and whistled at a square in Tel Aviv where supporters of the hostages watched Berger's handover on big screens next to a large clock that's counted the days the hostages have been in captivity. Some held signs saying: "Agam we're waiting for you at home."

Red Cross vehicles later arrived at a handover point in the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis, in front of the destroyed home of slain Hamas leader Yahya Sinwar. Hundreds of militants from Hamas and the smaller Islamic Jihad group had earlier arrived with a convoy in a show of force, and thousands of people gathered to watch, some from the tilted rooftops of bombed-out buildings.

The other two Israelis set to be released Thursday are Arbel Yehoud, 29, and Gadi Moses, an 80-year-old man. Five Thai nationals are also expected to be freed, but have not been officially identified.

A number of foreign workers were taken captive along with dozens of Israeli civilians and soldiers during Hamas' attack. Twenty-three Thais were among more than 100 hostages released during a weeklong ceasefire in November 2023. Israel says eight Thais remain in captivity, two of whom are believed to be dead.

Of the people set to be released from prisons in Israel, 30 are serving life sentences after being convicted of deadly attacks against Israelis. Zakaria Zubeidi, a prominent former militant leader and theater director who took part in a dramatic jailbreak in 2021 before being rearrested days later, is also among those set to be released.

Israel said Yehoud was supposed to have been freed Saturday and delayed the opening of crossings to northern Gaza when she was not.

The United States, Egypt and Qatar, which brokered the ceasefire after a year of tough negotiations, resolved the dispute with an agreement that Yehoud would be released Thursday. Another three hostages, all men, are set to be freed Saturday along with dozens more Palestinian prisoners.

On Monday, Israel began allowing Palestinians to return to northern Gaza, the most heavily destroyed part of the territory, and hundreds of thousands streamed back. Many found only mounds of rubble where their homes had been.

Ceasefire holds for now but next phase will be harder

In the first phase of the ceasefire, Hamas is set to release a total of 33 Israeli hostages, including women, children, older adults and sick or wounded men, in exchange for nearly 2,000 Palestinian prisoners. Israel says Hamas has confirmed that eight of the hostages to be released in this phase are dead.

Palestinians have cheered the release of the prisoners, who they widely see as heroes who have sacrificed for the cause of ending Israel's decades-long occupation of lands they want for a future state.

Israeli forces have meanwhile pulled back from most of Gaza, allowing hundreds of thousands of people to return to what remains of their homes and humanitarian groups to surge assistance.

The deal calls for Israel and Hamas to negotiate a second phase in which Hamas would release the remaining hostages and the ceasefire would continue indefinitely. The war could resume in early March if

an agreement is not reached.

Israel says it is still committed to destroying Hamas, even after the militant group reasserted its rule over Gaza within hours of the truce. A key far-right partner in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's coalition is already calling for the war to resume after the ceasefire's first phase.

Hamas says it won't release the remaining hostages without an end to the war and a full Israeli withdrawal from Gaza.

Tens of thousands killed

Hamas started the war when it sent thousands of fighters storming into Israel. The militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted around 250.

Israel's ensuing air and ground war among the deadliest and most destructive in decades. More than 47,000 Palestinians have been killed, over half of them women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not say how many of the dead were militants.

The Israeli military says it killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence, and that it went to great lengths to try to spare civilians. It blames civilian deaths on Hamas because its fighters operate in dense residential neighborhoods and put military infrastructure near homes, schools and mosques.

The Israeli offensive has transformed entire neighborhoods into mounds of gray rubble, and it's unclear how or when anything will be rebuilt. Around 90% of Gaza's population has been displaced, often multiple times, with hundreds of thousands of people living in squalid tent camps or shuttered schools.

Passenger jet with 64 aboard collides with Army helicopter while landing at Reagan Airport near DC

By LOLITA C. BALDOR, TARA COPP and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Va. (AP) — An American Airlines jet carrying 60 passengers and four crew members collided Wednesday with an Army helicopter while landing at Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, prompting a large search-and-rescue operation in the nearby Potomac River. There were multiple fatalities, according to a person familiar with the matter, but the precise number of victims was unclear as rescue crews hunted for any survivors.

Three soldiers were onboard the helicopter, an Army official said.

There was no immediate word on the cause of the collision, but all takeoffs and landings from the airport were halted as dive teams scoured the site and helicopters from law enforcement agencies across the region flew over the scene in a methodical search for bodies.

Images from the river showed boats around the partly submerged wing and what appeared to be the mangled wreckage of the plane's fuselage.

"We are going to recover our fellow citizens," District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser said at a somber news conference at the airport in which she declined to say how many bodies had been recovered.

The person who told The Associated Press that there had been multiple deaths was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the investigation and spoke to on condition of anonymity.

Sen. Roger Marshall of Kansas said, "When one person dies it's a tragedy, but when many, many, many people die it's an unbearable sorrow."

President Donald Trump said he had been "fully briefed on this terrible accident" and, referring to the passengers, added, "May God Bless their souls."

Passengers on the flight included a group of figure skaters, their coaches and family members who were returning from a development camp that followed the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Wichita.

"We are devastated by this unspeakable tragedy and hold the victims' families closely in our hearts," U.S. Figure Skating said in a statement.

The Federal Aviation Administration said the midair crash occurred before 9 p.m. EST when a regional jet that had departed from Wichita, Kansas, collided with a military helicopter on a training flight while on approach to an airport runway. It occurred in some of the most tightly controlled and monitored airspace in the world, just over three miles south of the White House and the Capitol.

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Investigators will try to piece together the aircrafts' final moments before their collision, including contact with air traffic controllers as well as a loss of altitude by the passenger jet.

American Airlines Flight 5342 was inbound to Reagan National at an altitude of about 400 feet and a speed of about 140 miles per hour when it suffered a rapid loss of altitude over the Potomac River, according to data from its radio transponder. The Canadian-made Bombardier CRJ-701 twin-engine jet, manufactured in 2004, can be configured to carry up to 70 passengers.

A few minutes before landing, air traffic controllers asked the arriving commercial jet if it could land on the shorter Runway 33 at Reagan National and the pilots said they were able. Controllers then cleared the plane to land on Runway 33. Flight tracking sites showed the plane adjust its approach to the new runway.

Less than 30 seconds before the crash, an air traffic controller asked the helicopter if it had the arriving plane in sight. The controller made another radio call to the helicopter moments later: "PAT 25 pass behind the CRJ." Seconds after that, the two aircraft collided.

The plane's radio transponder stopped transmitting about 2,400 feet short of the runway, roughly over the middle of the river.

Video from an observation camera at the nearby Kennedy Center showed two sets of lights consistent with aircraft appearing to join in a fireball.

"I know that flight. I've flown it several times myself," said Sen. Jerry Moran of Kansas. He said he expected that many people in Wichita would know people who were on the flight.

"This is a very personal circumstance," he said.

The collision occurred on a warm winter evening in Washington, with temperatures registering as high as 60 degrees Fahrenheit, following a stretch days earlier of intense cold and ice. On Wednesday, the Potomac River was 36 degrees Fahrenheit, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The National Weather Service reported that wind gusts of up to 25 mph were possible in the area throughout the evening.

American Airlines CEO Robert Isom expressed "deep sorrow" for the crash and said the company was focused on the needs of passengers, crew, first responders and families and loved ones of those involved.

Some 300 first responders were on scene. Inflatable rescue boats were launched into the Potomac River from a point along the George Washington Parkway, just north of the airport, and first responders set up light towers from the shore to illuminate the area near the collision site. At least a half-dozen boats were scanning the water using searchlights.

"It's a highly complex operation," said D.C. fire chief John Donnelly. "The conditions out there are extremely rough for the responders."

The U.S. Army described the helicopter as a UH-60 Blackhawk based at Fort Belvoir in Virginia. The helicopter was on a training flight. Military aircraft frequently conduct training flights in and around the congested and heavily-restricted airspace around the nation's capital for familiarization and continuity of government planning.

The crash is serving as a major test for two of the Trump administration's newest agency leaders. Pete Hegseth, sworn in days ago as defense secretary, posted on social media that an investigation has been "launched immediately" by the Army and the Defense Department. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, just sworn in earlier this week, said at a somber news conference at the airport early Thursday that his agency would provide all possible resources to the investigation.

The last major fatal crash involving a U.S. commercial airline occurred in 2009 near Buffalo, New York. Everyone aboard the Bombardier DHC-8 propeller plane was killed, including 45 passengers, 2 pilots and 2 flight attendants. Another person on the ground also died, bringing the total death toll to 50. An investigation determined that the captain accidentally caused the plane to stall as it approached the airport in Buffalo.

Reagan Airport will reopen at 11 a.m. Thursday, the Federal Aviation Administration announced. The FAA has previously said it would be closed until 5 a.m. Friday.

Located along the Potomac River, just southwest of the city, Reagan National is a popular choice because it's much closer than the larger Dulles International Airport, which is deeper in Virginia.

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Depending on the runway being used, flights into Reagan can offer passengers spectacular views of landmarks like the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the National Mall and the U.S. Capitol. It's a postcard-worthy welcome for tourists visiting the city.

The incident recalled the crash of an Air Florida flight that plummeted into the Potomac on January 13, 1982, that killed 78 people. That crash was attributed to bad weather.

The Latest: Passenger jet collides with helicopter while landing at DC's Reagan National Airport

By The Associated Press undefined

An American Airlines jet with 60 passengers and four crew members aboard collided Wednesday with an Army helicopter while landing at Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, prompting a large search-and-rescue operation in the nearby Potomac River.

There was no immediate word on casualties or the cause of the collision, but takeoffs and landings from the airport near Washington were halted as helicopters from law enforcement agencies across the region flew over the scene in search of survivors.

Here's the latest:

Group of figure skaters and coaches were on the jet

Passengers on the jet included a group of figure skaters, their coaches and family members who were returning from a development camp held after the national U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Wichita, U.S. Figure Skating said in a statement.

"We are devastated by this unspeakable tragedy and hold the victims' families closely in our hearts," the organization said. It did not provide more details.

'We don't know yet,' fire chief says of possible survivors

Officials offered few details on the status of the victims as they concluded their early-morning press briefing Thursday.

"I can't say anything about the rescue operation right now," said Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser, as reporters continue to press for updates on the passengers.

She also declined to comment on the condition of aircraft, which remains submerged in the Potomac River.

Asked if there are any survivors, Fire and EMS Chief John A. Donnelly, responded: "We don't know yet. But we're working."

Crews in plane crash response face 'rough' conditions

Officials who held a press conference at Reagan National Airport did not announce any deaths, but they all had a somber tone.

Sen. Roger Marshall of Kansas said "when one person dies it's a tragedy, but when many, many, many people die it's an unbearable sorrow."

Washington Mayor Muriel Bowser would not say whether any bodies were recovered from the crash.

There are currently about 300 responders working on the rescue operation

Washington Fire and EMS Chief John A. Donnelly said at the early Thursday news conference that conditions are "extremely rough for responders," with cold weather and intense wind.

The Potomac River is about 8 feet deep where the aircraft crashed after their collision.

"The water is dark. It is murky," Connelly said.

Trump says collision 'looks like it should have been prevented'

In a post on Truth Social, Trump questioned the tactics of the military helicopter and the air traffic controllers — both agencies that report to him as the president.

Writing that the "airplane was on a perfect and routine line of approach for an extended period of time" on a "CLEAR NIGHT," Trump questioned, "why didn't the helicopter go up or down or turn," and "why didn't the control tower tell the helicopter what to do instead of asking if they saw the plane."

"What a terrible night this has been. God Bless you all!" he added in a subsequent post.

AP source: Multiple people killed in midair collision

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There were multiple fatalities after the midair collision, a person familiar with the matter told The Associated Press. The person was not authorized to publicly discuss details of the investigation and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

Authorities are still conducting a search-and-rescue operation in an attempt to find survivors in the water and around the crash site.

-Mike Balsamo

Helicopter was on training flight

The U.S. Army said the helicopter that collided with a passenger jet was a UH-60 Blackhawk based at Fort Belvoir in Virginia. A crew of three soldiers were onboard the helicopter, an Army official said. The helicopter was on a training flight.

Military aircraft frequently conduct training flights in and around the congested and heavily-restricted airspace around the nation's capital for familiarization and continuity of government planning.

'There was a lot of sadness' in terminal after passenger jet crash

Erie County Executive Mark Poloncarz was waiting to catch his flight back to Buffalo, New York, when he saw through the terminal window some emergency vehicles moving out below.

"It didn't seem anything too strange at that point," Poloncarz said. "And then about a minute or so after that, there was an announcement of a full-ground stop, that there would be no flights landing and no flights taking off. And then we started to see a lot of emergency vehicles heading towards the river."

Poloncarz and others soon saw reports on social media of a plane crash, while rumors began to swirl.

"When flights get delayed, people get aggravated and upset. But there was no one getting aggravated or upset because I think we all realized pretty quickly the magnitude of what occurred. The terminal grew pretty quiet. There was a lot of sadness."

Last fatal U.S. commercial airline crash was in 2009

The last fatal crash involving a U.S. commercial airline occurred in 2009 in New York, according to the National Transportation Safety Board.

Everyone aboard the Bombardier DHC-8 propeller plane was killed, including 45 passengers, 2 pilots and 2 flight attendants. Another person on the ground also died, bringing the total death toll to 50. An investigation determined that the captain accidentally caused the plane to stall as it approached the airport in Buffalo.

Audio shows no response from helicopter after air traffic control warning

Less than 30 seconds before the crash, an air traffic controller asks the helicopter if it has the arriving plane in sight: "PAT25, do you have the CRJ in sight?"

The controller makes another radio call to PAT25 moments later: "PAT 25 pass behind the CRJ."

The two aircraft collide seconds later.

The audio from flight tracking sites doesn't record any response from the helicopter, if any, to the warnings from air traffic control.

The plane's radio transponder stopped transmitting about 2,400 feet (730 meters) short of the runway, roughly over the middle of the river.

JUST IN: 60 passengers and 4 crew were aboard passenger jet that collided with helicopter, American Airlines says
Trump on aircraft accident: 'May God Bless their souls'

President Donald Trump says he's been briefed on the 'terrible accident' at Reagan National Airport.

In a statement late Wednesday, Trump thanked first responders for their "incredible work," noting that he was "monitoring the situation and will provide more details as they arise."

"May God Bless their souls," he added

Noem says all available Coast Guard resources being deployed

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said she would be deploying all available resources from the U.S. Coast Guard for search and rescue efforts.

"We are actively monitoring the situation & stand ready to support local responders," Noem said in a post on X.

Reagan Washington National a popular airport

Reagan Washington National is located along the Potomac River, just southwest of the city. It's a popular choice because it's much closer than the larger Dulles International Airport, which is deeper in Virginia.

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Details on the passenger jet

American Airlines flight 5342 was inbound to Reagan National at an altitude of about 400 feet and a speed of about 140 miles per hour when it suffered a rapid loss of altitude over the Potomac River, according to data from its radio transponder.

The Canadian-made Bombardier CRJ-701 twin-engine jet was manufactured in 2004 and can be configured to carry up to 70 passengers.

Trump is briefed on the crash

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt says President Donald Trump has been briefed on the crash. 'Tower, did you see that?'

In audio from the air traffic control tower around the time of the crash, a controller is heard asking the helicopter, "PAT25 do you have the CRJ in sight," in reference to the passenger aircraft.

"Tower, did you see that?" another pilot is heard calling seconds after the apparent collision."

The tower immediately began diverting other aircraft from Reagan.

JUST IN: Helicopter that collided with passenger jet was flown by Army, AP source says

Passenger jet with 64 aboard collides with Army helicopter while landing at Reagan Airport near DC

By LOLITA C. BALDOR, TARA COPP and ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Va. (AP) — An American Airlines jet carrying 60 passengers and four crew members collided Wednesday with an Army helicopter while landing at Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, prompting a large search-and-rescue operation in the nearby Potomac River. There were multiple fatalities, according to a person familiar with the matter, but the precise number of victims was unclear as rescue crews hunted for any survivors.

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"We are going to recover our fellow citizens," District of Columbia Mayor Muriel Bowser said at a somber news conference at the airport in which she declined to say how many bodies had been recovered.

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The Federal Aviation Administration said the midair crash occurred before 9 p.m. EST when a regional jet that had departed from Wichita, Kansas, collided with a military helicopter on a training flight while on

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approach to an airport runway. It occurred in some of the most tightly controlled and monitored airspace in the world, just over three miles south of the White House and the Capitol.

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Some 300 first responders were on scene. Inflatable rescue boats were launched into the Potomac River from a point along the George Washington Parkway, just north of the airport, and first responders set up light towers from the shore to illuminate the area near the collision site. At least a half-dozen boats were scanning the water using searchlights.

"It's a highly complex operation," said D.C. fire chief John Donnelly. "The conditions out there are extremely rough for the responders."

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The crash is serving as a major test for two of the Trump administration's newest agency leaders. Pete Hegseth, sworn in days ago as defense secretary, posted on social media that an investigation has been "launched immediately" by the Army and the Defense Department. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, just sworn in earlier this week, said at a somber news conference at the airport early Thursday that his agency would provide all possible resources to the investigation.

The last major fatal crash involving a U.S. commercial airline occurred in 2009 near Buffalo, New York. Everyone aboard the Bombardier DHC-8 propeller plane was killed, including 45 passengers, 2 pilots and 2 flight attendants. Another person on the ground also died, bringing the total death toll to 50. An investigation determined that the captain accidentally caused the plane to stall as it approached the airport in Buffalo.

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The incident recalled the crash of an Air Florida flight that plummeted into the Potomac on January 13, 1982, that killed 78 people. That crash was attributed to bad weather.

A Russian drone strikes an apartment building in Ukraine, killing at least 4

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A Russian drone blasted a hole in an apartment building in northeastern Ukraine during a nighttime attack, killing at least four people and injuring nine others, officials said Thursday.

The Shahed drone blew out a wall and surrounding windows in the apartment block in Sumy, a major city, just after 1 a.m., the Sumy regional administration said. Four people were rescued from the rubble, and a child was among the injured, it said, adding that 120 people were evacuated.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called it "a terrible tragedy, a terrible Russian crime."

The war between Russia and Ukraine, which enters its fourth year next month and shows no signs of ending, has killed more than 10,000 Ukrainian civilians, according to the United Nations.

Civilians have also endured hardship caused by Russian attacks on the power grid that have denied them heating and running water. Many have been evacuated from areas along the roughly 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line where Ukrainian defenses are straining to hold the bigger Russian army at bay.

Russia launched more than 80 drones at Ukraine overnight, the air force reported, in what are common nighttime barrages. Most of the drones were shot down or stopped by electronic jamming, it said.

In Ukraine's southern Odesa region, Russian drones damaged a hospital and two apartment buildings, regional head Oleh Kiper wrote on Telegram. No one was injured, he said.

A New Zealand mountain is granted personhood, recognizing it as sacred for Māori

By CHARLOTTE GRAHAM-McLAY Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — A mountain in New Zealand considered an ancestor by Indigenous people was recognized as a legal person on Thursday after a new law granted it all the rights and responsibilities of a human being.

Mount Taranaki — now known as Taranaki Maunga, its Māori name — is the latest natural feature to be granted personhood in New Zealand, which has ruled that a river and a stretch of sacred land are people before. The pristine, snow-capped dormant volcano is the second highest on New Zealand's North Island at 2,518 meters (8,261 feet) and a popular spot for tourism, hiking and snow sports.

The legal recognition acknowledges the mountain's theft from the Māori of the Taranaki region after New Zealand was colonized. It fulfills an agreement of redress from the country's government to Indigenous people for harms perpetrated against the land since.

How can a mountain be a person?

The law passed Thursday gives Taranaki Maunga all the rights, powers, duties, responsibilities and liabilities of a person. Its legal personality has a name: Te Kāhui Tupua, which the law views as "a living and indivisible whole." It includes Taranaki and its surrounding peaks and land, "incorporating all their physical and metaphysical elements."

A newly created entity will be "the face and voice" of the mountain, the law says, with four members from local Māori iwi, or tribes, and four members appointed by the country's Conservation Minister.

Why is this mountain special?

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"The mountain has long been an honored ancestor, a source of physical, cultural and spiritual sustenance and a final resting place," Paul Goldsmith, the lawmaker responsible for the settlements between the government and Māori tribes, told Parliament in a speech on Thursday.

But colonizers of New Zealand in the 18th and 19th centuries took first the name of Taranaki and then the mountain itself. In 1770, the British explorer Captain James Cook spotted the peak from his ship and named it Mount Egmont.

In 1840, Māori tribes and representatives of the British crown signed the Treaty of Waitangi — New Zealand's founding document — in which the Crown promised Māori would retain rights to their land and resources. But the Māori and English versions of the treaty differed — and Crown breaches of both began immediately.

In 1865, a vast swathe of Taranaki land, including the mountain, was confiscated to punish Māori for rebelling against the Crown. Over the next century hunting and sports groups had a say in the mountain's management — but Māori did not.

"Traditional Māori practices associated with the mountain were banned while tourism was promoted," Goldsmith said. But a Māori protest movement of the 1970s and '80s has led to a surge of recognition for the Māori language, culture and rights in New Zealand law.

Redress has included billions of dollars in Treaty of Waitangi settlements — such as the agreement with the eight tribes of Taranaki, signed in 2023.

How will the mountain use its rights?

"Today, Taranaki, our maunga, our maunga tupuna, is released from the shackles, the shackles of injustice, of ignorance, of hate," said Debbie Ngarewa-Packer, a co-leader of the political party Te Pāti Māori and a descendant of the Taranaki tribes, using a phrase that means ancestral mountain.

"We grew up knowing there was nothing anyone could do to make us any less connected," she added.

The mountain's legal rights are intended to uphold its health and wellbeing. They will be employed to stop forced sales, restore its traditional uses and allow conservation work to protect the native wildlife that flourishes there. Public access will remain.

Do other parts of New Zealand have personhood?

New Zealand was the first country in the world to recognize natural features as people when a law passed in 2014 granted personhood to Te Urewera, a vast native forest on the North Island. Government ownership ceased and the tribe Tūhoe became its guardian.

"Te Urewera is ancient and enduring, a fortress of nature, alive with history; its scenery is abundant with mystery, adventure, and remote beauty," the law begins, before describing its spiritual significance to Māori. In 2017, New Zealand recognized the Whanganui River as human, as part of a settlement with its local iwi.

How much support did the law receive?

The bill recognizing the mountain's personhood was affirmed unanimously by Parliament's 123 lawmakers. The vote was greeted by a ringing waiata — a Māori song — from the public gallery, packed with dozens who had traveled to the capital, Wellington, from Taranaki.

The unity provided brief respite in a tense period for race relations in New Zealand. In November, tens of thousands of people marched to Parliament to protest a law that would reshape the Treaty of Waitangi by setting rigid legal definitions for each clause. Detractors say the law — which is not expected to pass — would strip Māori of legal rights and dramatically reverse progress from the past five decades.

Donald Trump sounds the same. His White House — so far — couldn't be more different

By JILL COLVIN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The marathon Q&A sessions are back, along with the cream Oval Office rug and the Diet Coke button on the Resolute Desk. So, too, are the late-night social media posts that ricochet across the globe and the barrage of executive orders.

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But in 10 days, Donald Trump has frozen federal spending and hiring, offered buyouts to more than two million government workers, and ended federal diversity and transgender-rights efforts. He's fired nearly two dozen independent inspectors general, rewritten American maps, pardoned Jan. 6 protesters who assaulted police, announced plans to detain migrants at Guantánamo Bay, and undone years of his predecessors' actions with the stroke of his Sharpie pen.

Trump 2.0 looks and sounds a lot like he did during his first go-around. But this time, the president is far more experienced and surrounded by a team that's spent years planning for its White House return, unleashing a fusillade of action that is testing the bounds of presidential power, sowing confusion and drawing fury from Democrats unsure how to stop him.

"He seems much more comfortable, almost relaxed in how he's doing the job," according to Sean Spicer, Trump's first White House press secretary, who said Trump is showing a new "level of confidence," having spent four years in office.

"I think he has the people, the policies and the process down. He knows who can get his agenda done, who he wants to surround himself with, the policies he wants to advance, and the process to get that enacted," said Spicer, who now hosts a show on YouTube.

An emboldened president

Trump no longer needs to worry about reelection. The Constitution bars a third term. He faces little resistance from a unified Republican Congress, which controls both chambers. The Supreme Court, a third of which he nominated, has ruled that he and future presidents have expansive immunity from legal consequences.

But beyond that, Trump has lived through a stunning four years, surviving a pair of assassination attempts, including one in which a would-be assassin's bullet grazed his ear. He was indicted four times, became the first former president to be convicted of a crime — and nonetheless was returned to the highest office in the land after being written off in the wake of his 2020 loss. The conviction resulted in no jail time and the other cases are dismissed or on hold.

That has left Trump more emboldened than ever — and with a long to-do list. He's launched into a frenetic pace of appearances that is a dramatic departure from his predecessor, Joe Biden, who often faded from public view by his own staff's design.

Trump's first presidential trip, for instance, began with him surveying hurricane damage in North Carolina, where he threatened to get rid of the Federal Emergency Management Agency and said he wanted concessions from Democrat-led states in exchange for disaster assistance.

He later toured fire-ravaged Los Angeles, where he clashed with local officials on live television, making false assertions about water policies and minimizing concerns about hazardous waste — all while wearing a black version of his signature "MAGA" campaign hat.

"Trump 2.0 is amazing. He gives zero f—, drops truth bombs, and it's glorious to watch," quipped Matt Rooney, a pro-Trump writer and radio host, marveling at one moment on the trip, Trump's back-and-forth in California with a Democratic congressman berating the nation's largest state about its handling of wildfires.

The next day, Trump was in Las Vegas. After touting his plan to end taxes on tips, he made a surprise visit to the floor of the Circa Resort & Casino, where he was welcomed with loud cheers and a "USA!" chant. One man approaching a nearby roulette table bellowed, "Give me \$47 on No. 47!"

Though his team said he was there to thank waiters and dealers, Trump appeared more interested in the gamblers. He gathered with the crowd around a craps table, where a game was already underway.

"Throw the dice," he told the player, Alex Winnik, as he watched the action.

Aides to Trump's third campaign — many of whom now occupy the White House — had tried to cultivate such moments, hoping they might go viral on social media like his stop to make fries at a McDonald's or his appearances at mixed martial arts fights and football games. Those moments helped Trump reach Americans who don't typically watch the news or engage with traditional media sources.

The next day, Trump was playing host to lawmakers at the House Republicans' annual policy retreat, held at his golf club in Doral, Florida.

Ready to take action, out to take revenge

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Much of Trump's first term was consumed by backbiting and leaks from rival factions trying to push their own causes. Courts repeatedly halted his efforts, notably in his first days, when he tried to ban travelers from several majority-Muslim countries.

This time, his team, helmed by chief of staff Susie Wiles, appears in public as united and drama-free.

Trump aides and outside allies, including The Heritage Foundation and the America First Policy Institute, spent years crafting their own blueprints for a Trump return, drafting hundreds of executive orders and other actions in a bid to avoid the early failures of his first term, when chaos rained and slipshod orders were routinely blocked by the courts. Trump has plucked staff from those organizations to fill his Cabinet and White House.

"These guys are much more coordinated, organized and know how to execute," said Spicer, who lasted six months as Trump's first press secretary. "It's a much more focused and disciplined team."

Trump's team has so far backtracked on one major move, a memo pausing all federal grant funding for an ideological review. The White House rescinded the memo less than two days after it caused widespread confusion among organizations that rely on that funding.

But Trump still has scores to settle.

After spending the last four years first in political exile and then in fight mode on the campaign trail, Trump is now making good on his promises and enacting the revenge he spent years seeking.

Within hours of being sworn in, he pardoned more than 1,500 people who were convicted or charged in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, including many who attacked police as they tried to stop the certification of his 2020 election loss to Biden.

He has also moved to punish critics, revoking the security clearances of dozens of high-level former government officials. He stripped protective security details from his former national security adviser John Bolton and others who had a role in planning the assassination of Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and his onetime deputy.

That drew a rare rebuttal from some Republican allies who warned that credible security threats from Iran remain, potentially putting their lives in danger.

And in an effort to minimize resistance, Trump has worked to exile Biden holdovers and others not fully bought into his agenda.

It's a long way from eight years ago, when Trump's victory over Democrat Hillary Clinton caught almost everyone — including him — off guard.

"He's learned so much about how to govern and how not to govern in the first term — plus he's had another four years to stew about it and think about what he wants to accomplish — that it's obviously a far more active and aggressive administration than the first time around," veteran Republican pollster Whit Ayres said. "It's just been a breathtaking barrage of initiatives and executive orders, of comments that have captured the world's attention. It's been quite the whirlwind."

Tulsi Gabbard, Trump's pick to oversee US spy agencies, will face grilling at confirmation hearing

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Tulsi Gabbard, President Donald Trump's pick to be director of national intelligence, is expected to face tough questions from lawmakers Thursday over past comments about Russia and a 2017 visit with Syria's now-deposed leader.

The back-and-forth during Gabbard's confirmation hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee could reveal whether she has successfully assuaged concerns from lawmakers of both parties — or whether worries about her experience and background will sink her nomination to oversee 18 U.S. intelligence agencies.

Gabbard, a former Democratic congresswoman from Hawaii, is a lieutenant colonel in the National Guard who deployed twice to the Middle East and ran for president in 2020. She has no formal intelligence experience, however, and has never run a government agency or department.

It's Gabbard's comments, however, that have posed the biggest challenge to her confirmation. Gabbard

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has repeatedly echoed Russian propaganda used to justify the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine and criticized Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a corrupt autocrat.

She's been accused of spreading Russian disinformation by Republican lawmakers and has even won praise in Russian state-controlled media.

A 2017 visit with Syrian President Bashar Assad is another point of contention. Assad was recently deposed as his country's leader following a brutal civil war in which he was accused of using chemical weapons. Following her visit, Gabbard faced criticism that she was legitimizing a dictator and then more questions when she said she was skeptical that Assad had used chemical weapons.

As a lawmaker, Gabbard sponsored legislation that would have repealed a key surveillance program known as Section 702, which allows authorities to collect the communications of suspected terrorists overseas.

Gabbard said the program could be violating the rights of Americans whose communications are swept up inadvertently, but national security officials say the program has saved lives.

She now says she supports the program, noting new safeguards designed to protect Americans' privacy.

While lawmakers from both parties have raised concerns about Gabbard's nomination, Republicans have increasingly come to support her. Given thin Republican margins in the Senate, she will need almost all GOP senators to vote yes in order to win confirmation.

Sen. Tom Cotton, chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee, said that while he understands there are questions about Gabbard's past views, questions about her loyalty to the U.S. are inappropriate.

"She's passed five different background checks. I reviewed the latest one. It's clean as a whistle," the Arkansas Republican said on "Fox News Sunday." "It's fine for people to have policy differences and ask questions about those differences. I hope no one would impugn Ms. Gabbard's patriotism or her integrity."

FireAid, a benefit for LA wildfire relief, is almost here. Here's how to watch and donate

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Some of the biggest names in music will come together Thursday for the FireAid benefit concert that is raising money for Los Angeles-area wildfire relief efforts.

FireAid will take over two Inglewood, California, venues — the the Kia Forum starting at 6:00pm PST and the Intuit Dome starting at 7:30pm PST.

Whether you were lucky enough to grab tickets before they sold out, or you're gearing up to watch the live stream — here's everything you need to know ahead of the event.

How to watch

FireAid will be broadcast and streamed live on Apple Music, Apple TV+, Max, iHeartRadio, KTLA+, Netflix/Tudum, Paramount+, Prime Video, the Amazon Music Channel on Twitch, SiriusXM, Spotify, SoundCloud, Veeps and YouTube. It will also be shown at select AMC Theatre locations in the U.S.

Who is performing?

Billie Eilish, Gracie Abrams, Jelly Roll, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, Lil Baby, Olivia Rodrigo, Peso Pluma, Rod Stewart, Stevie Wonder, Sting, Tate McRae and Earth, Wind & Fire will perform at the Intuit Dome.

Alanis Morissette, Anderson .Paak, Dawes, Graham Nash, Green Day, John Fogerty, Joni Mitchell, No Doubt, Pink, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, Stephen Stills, Stevie Nicks, the Black Crowes and John Mayer will perform at the Kia Forum.

Mayer and Dave Matthews were originally scheduled to perform live together for the first time, but on Wednesday, the official Dave Matthews Band Instagram account announced that "due to a critical illness in the family," Matthews will no longer take the stage.

There will also be special guests.

The folk rock band Dawes were directly affected by the Eaton fire. Actor-singer Mandy Moore, who is married to Dawes' Taylor Goldsmith, posted on social media to share that a portion of their Altadena house and Goldsmith's home recording studio were destroyed. Taylor Goldsmith's brother and bandmate, Griffin Goldsmith and his pregnant wife also lost their home in the fire.

Is it just a concert?

Between the performances, there will be celebrity and non-celebrity speakers, including those who lost their homes, first responders and firefighters.

There will also be packages spotlighting those impacted.

How will donations work?

Those who cannot attend the concerts or watch the live feed can contribute donations via FireAidLA.org. The link, which is open now, will also be up on the screen for the duration of the broadcast.

All of the proceeds will go to those affected. A 501(c)(3) was set up, and contributions to FireAid will be distributed under the Annenberg Foundation, which with FireAid has assembled a small committee to advise.

Trump's FBI director pick, Kash Patel, to face skeptical Democrats at Senate confirmation hearing

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Kash Patel, President Donald Trump's pick to lead the FBI, will encounter deeply skeptical questioning from Democratic senators Thursday about his loyalty to the president and stated desire to overhaul the bureau as he faces a high-stakes hearing that will help determine his path toward confirmation.

Patel, a Trump loyalist who has railed against the FBI over its investigations into the president and claimed that Jan. 6 rioters were mistreated by the Justice Department, was picked in November to replace Christopher Wray, who led the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency for more than seven years.

A former aide to the House Intelligence Committee and an ex-federal prosecutor who served in Trump's first administration, Patel has alarmed critics with rhetoric — in dozens of podcasts and books he has authored — in which he has demonstrated fealty to Trump, lambasted the decision-making of the agency he's now been asked to lead and identified by name officials he believes should be investigated.

In one such podcast interview last year, he said that if he were in charge of the FBI, he would "shut down" the bureau's headquarters building on Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., and "reopen it the next day as a museum of the 'deep state.'"

"And I'd take the seven thousand employees that work in that building and send them across America to go chase down criminals. Go be cops," he added.

Patel has for years been a loyal ally to Trump, finding common cause over their shared skepticism of government surveillance and the "deep state" — a pejorative catchall used by Trump to refer to government bureaucracy.

He was part of a small group of supporters during Trump's recent criminal trial in New York who accompanied him to the courthouse, where he told reporters that Trump was the victim of an "unconstitutional circus."

That close bond would depart from the modern-day precedent of FBI directors looking to keep presidents at arm's length.

Several Democratic senators on the Judiciary Committee who have met with Patel, including Sen. Dick Durbin of Illinois, have issued statements sounding the alarm and signaling their opposition to the pick. The lawmakers foreshadowed their interest in Patel by directing numerous questions about him to Pam Bondi, Trump's pick for attorney general, when she had her own confirmation hearing earlier this month.

"I'm deeply concerned about his fitness to serve as FBI Director. He has neither the experience, the judgment, nor the temperament to head this critical agency," Durbin said in a statement.

Republican allies of Trump, who share the president's belief that the FBI has become politicized, have rallied around Patel and pledged to support him, seeing him as someone who can shake up the bureau and provide needed change.

Sen. Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican who will introduce Patel on Thursday, said that he had spent hours with him "pinning down every single thing I expect to see in the hearing."

"So much so," he added, "that I've created a bingo card for all the things that I know the Democrats

are going to say about him that I believe are unfair, and I think he's ready to respond to."

Tillis said that Patel is ready to respond to questions about his book, including the enemies list and the people mentioned in its glossary.

What to know about Guantánamo Bay, the base where Trump will send 'criminal aliens'

By TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

President Donald Trump, who made the deportation of immigrants a central part of his campaign and presidency, said Wednesday that the U.S. will use a detention center at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, to hold tens of thousands of the "worst criminal aliens."

"We're going to send them out to Guantánamo," Trump said at the signing of the Laken Riley Act.

He later signed a presidential memorandum and said he'd direct federal officials to get facilities ready to receive criminal immigrants in the US illegally. Border czar Tom Homan said U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement would run the facility. Still, details of the plan weren't immediately clear.

Here's a look at the U.S. naval base, widely known as "Gitmo," and its history:

How does the US government use the base at Guantánamo Bay?

While the U.S. naval base in Cuba is best known for the suspects brought in after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, it has a small, separate facility used for decades to hold migrants.

The Migrant Operations Center is used for people intercepted trying to illegally reach the U.S. by boat. Most are from Haiti and Cuba.

The center takes up a tiny part of the base, includes just a handful of buildings and has nowhere near the capacity to house the 30,000 people Trump said could be sent there.

"We're just going to expand upon that existing migrant center, Homan told reporters.

The migrant detention center operates separately from the military's detention center and courtrooms for foreigners detained under President George W. Bush during what that administration called its "war on terror." That facility houses 15 detainees, including accused 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed. That's down from its peak of nearly 800.

Who will be held at Guantánamo?

The migrant detention facilities at Guantánamo will be used for "the worst of the worst," administration officials said.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem and Homan both used the phrase when speaking to reporters outside the White House.

A White House statement was less specific, saying the expanded facility would "provide additional detention space for high-priority criminal aliens unlawfully present in the United States, and to address attendant immigration enforcement needs."

An administration official, speaking on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly on the matter, said it would be used to house "dangerous criminals" and people who are "hard to deport."

A number of countries refuse to accept some immigrants the U.S. tries to deport.

Trump has repeatedly spoken about the dangers Americans face from the estimated 11 million immigrants living in the U.S. illegally. While immigrants are regularly charged with committing major crimes, they are a tiny percentage of the overall population. Peer-reviewed academic studies have generally found no link between immigration and violent crime, though conclusions vary.

What else is known about the Migrant Operations Center?

Not much. The nonprofit International Refugee Assistance Project said in a report last year that people are held in "prison-like" conditions. It said they were "trapped in a punitive system" indefinitely, with no accountability for the officials running it.

Deepa Alagesan, a senior supervising attorney with the group, said Wednesday that they believed it is

used to hold a small number of people — “in the double digits,” she estimated.

The prospect of using it for far more immigrants worried her.

“It’s definitely a scary prospect,” she said.

Does the U.S. have sufficient detention space for Trump’s plans?

Trump has vowed to deport millions of people living illegally in the U.S., but the current Immigration and Customs Enforcement budget only has enough funds to detain about 41,000 people.

ICE detains immigrants at its processing centers and privately operated detention facilities, along with local prisons and jails. It has no facilities geared toward the detention of families, who account for roughly one-third of arrivals on the southern U.S. border.

During Trump’s first term, he authorized the use of military bases to detain migrant children. In 2014, then-President Barack Obama temporarily relied on military bases to detain immigrant children while ramping up privately operated family detention centers to hold many of the tens of thousands of Central American families caught illegally crossing the border.

U.S. military bases have been used repeatedly since the 1970s to accommodate the resettlement of waves of immigrants fleeing Vietnam, Cuba, Haiti, Kosovo and Afghanistan.

What do lawyers in Sept. 11 cases say?

The decision to send immigrants to Guantánamo “should horrify us all,” said a legal advocacy group that since the Sept. 11 attacks has represented dozens of men detained at the base.

Trump’s order “sends a clear message: migrants and asylum seekers are being cast as the new terrorist threat, deserving to be discarded in an island prison, removed from legal and social services and supports,” Vince Warren, the executive director of the New York-based Center for Constitutional Rights, said in a statement.

What is the reaction in Cuba?

The U.S. has leased Guantánamo from Cuba for more than a century. Cuba opposes the lease and typically rejects the nominal U.S. rent payments.

Government officials criticized the news Wednesday, with President Miguel Díaz-Canel deeming the decision “an act of brutality” on X and describing the base as “located in illegally occupied #Cuba territory.”

Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez said on X, “The US government’s decision to imprison migrants at the Guantánamo Naval Base, in an enclave where it created torture and indefinite detention centers, shows contempt for the human condition and international law.”

Trump White House rescinds memo freezing federal money after widespread confusion

By CHRIS MEGERIAN, ZEKE MILLER and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump’s budget office on Wednesday rescinded a memo freezing spending on federal loans and grants, less than two days after it sparked widespread confusion and legal challenges across the country.

The memo, which was issued Monday by the Office of Management and Budget, had frightened states, schools and organizations that rely on trillions of dollars from Washington.

Administration officials said the pause was necessary to review whether spending aligned with Trump’s executive orders on issues like climate change and diversity, equity and inclusion programs.

But on Wednesday, they sent out a two-sentence notice rescinding the original memo. The reversal was the latest sign that even with unified control of Washington, Trump’s plans to dramatically and rapidly reshape the government have limits.

Administration officials insisted that despite the confusion, their actions still had the intended effect by underscoring to federal agencies their obligations to abide by Trump’s executive orders.

“The Executive Orders issued by the President on funding reviews remain in full force and effect and will be rigorously implemented by all agencies and departments,” White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said, blaming the confusion on the courts and news outlets, not the administration. “This action should

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effectively end the court case and allow the government to focus on enforcing the President's orders on controlling federal spending."

The vaguely worded order, legal pause and eventual cancellation left organizations confused and worried again about what might be next.

Nourishing Hope, which runs food pantries, home meal delivery and an online food market in Chicago, gets roughly 20% of its food budget from the federal government. CEO Kellie O'Connell said the biggest issue when the memo surfaced was getting clear and accurate information so they could figure out how to plan for the coming months.

If their federal funds were frozen, O'Connell said, they could make it a few weeks. But the wider concern was the possible end of assistance, like food stamps, which would increase demand on her organization.

"If that were to significantly diminish or get eliminated, it will be nearly impossible for the charity food system to step up," she said of food stamps. "It would be potentially catastrophic for our communities."

On Tuesday, Trump administration officials said programs that provide direct assistance to Americans, including Medicare, Social Security, student loans and food stamps, would not be affected.

However, they sometimes struggled to provide a clear picture. Leavitt initially would not say whether Medicaid was exempted from the freeze, but the administration later clarified that it was.

The White House's change in direction caught Congress off guard, particularly Trump's Republican allies who had defended him throughout the brief saga.

"This is Donald Trump. He throws hand grenades in the middle of the room, and then cleans it up afterwards," said Sen. Kevin Cramer of North Dakota. "I just think the guy's a genius."

Cramer acknowledged the initial memo may have generated too much political heat, with red and blue states raising alarms over the funding freeze. But the senator suggested Trump "maybe didn't understand the breadth" of what had been proposed.

But Democrats said the White House had overreached beyond what Americans want.

"Most people voted for cheaper eggs," said Sen. Martin Heinrich of New Mexico. "They did not vote for this chaos."

The funding pause was scheduled to go into effect at 5 p.m. Tuesday. It was stayed by a federal judge until at least Monday after an emergency hearing requested by nonprofit groups that receive federal grants.

An additional lawsuit by Democratic state attorneys general was also pending, and a hearing was held Wednesday in federal court in Rhode Island. Chief Judge John J. McConnell said he was inclined to issue an order blocking any attempt at a funding pause, saying there was the possibility of "irreparable harm."

After the initial memo was distributed Monday, federal agencies were directed to answer a series of yes or no questions about each program by Feb. 7. The questions included "does this program promote gender ideology?" and "does this program promote or support in any way abortion?"

Although Trump had promised to turn Washington upside-down if elected to a second term, the effects of his effort to pause funding were being felt far from the nation's capital. Organizations like Meals on Wheels, which receives federal money to deliver food to the elderly, were worried about getting cut off. Even temporary interruptions in funding could cause layoffs or delays in public services.

Barbara Teed, 73, of Bloomington, Minnesota, said she felt "panic, absolute panic" when she learned the freeze could affect her.

Teed lives with her 38-year-old son, Ryan, who has Down syndrome. Both receive meals from Bloomington-Eden Prairie Meals On Wheels.

"This is sometimes my only meal of the day. So it's really, really important to me," said Teed.

Reynier Prieto, whose 5-year-old son, Liam, attends the Head Start program at Easterseals South Florida, said the program is helping address speech development issues so that Liam can hopefully attend public school next year.

"It's the most important thing for our life right now," Prieto said. "That's the way that we can go out of our home and work, and we know that he's in good hands."

Losing a program like Head Start could be bad for many families, and government officials should take

the time to examine each one that receives federal money, Prieto said.

"Programs like this, they need to review it and make sure that it's not cut because this actually helps the community," Prieto said.

Democratic critics of the order celebrated the memo's rescinding.

"This is an important victory for the American people whose voices were heard after massive pressure from every corner of this country," said Sen. Patty Murray of Washington. She said Trump had "caused real harm and chaos for millions."

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer of New York said, "Americans fought back and Donald Trump backed off."

While signing Laken Riley Act, Trump says he'll send 'worst criminal aliens' to Guantanamo

By WILL WEISSERT Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump on Wednesday signed the Laken Riley Act into law, giving federal authorities broader power to deport immigrants in the U.S. illegally who have been accused of crimes. He also announced at the ceremony that his administration planned to send the "worst criminal aliens" to a detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

The bipartisan act, the first piece of legislation approved during Trump's second term, was named for Riley, a 22-year-old Georgia nursing student who was slain last year by a Venezuelan man in the U.S. illegally.

"She was a light of warmth and kindness," Trump said during a ceremony that included Riley's parents and sister. "It's a tremendous tribute to your daughter what's taking place today, that's all I can say. It's so sad we have to be doing it."

Trump has promised to drastically increase deportations, but he also said at the signing that some of the people being sent back to their home countries couldn't be counted on to stay there.

"Some of them are so bad that we don't even trust the countries to hold them because we don't want them coming back, so we're gonna send 'em out to Guantanamo," Trump said. He said that he'd direct federal officials to get facilities in Cuba ready to receive immigrant criminals.

"We have 30,000 beds in Guantanamo to detain the worst criminal aliens threatening the American people," the president said.

The White House announced a short time later that Trump had signed a presidential memorandum on Guantanamo. Migrant rights groups quickly expressed dismay.

"Guantanamo Bay's abusive history speaks for itself and in no uncertain terms will put people's physical and mental health in jeopardy," Stacy Suh, program director of Detention Watch Network, said in a statement.

Trump said the move would double U.S. detention lockup capacities, and Guantanamo is "a tough place to get out of."

The Guantanamo facility could hold "dangerous criminals" and people who are "hard to deport," said a Trump administration official speaking on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to speak publicly on the matter.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said his department can set up a detention center "very rapidly" and called Guantanamo Bay "a perfect spot."

"We don't want illegal criminals in the United States, not a minute longer than they have to be," he said Wednesday evening on Fox News' "Jesse Watters Primetime." "Move them off to Guantanamo Bay, where they can be safely maintained until they are deported to their final location, their country of origin."

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said the administration would seek funding via spending bills Congress will eventually consider.

The U.S. military base has been used to house detainees from the U.S. war on terrorism for years. But authorities have also detained migrants at sea at a facility known as the Migrant Operations Center on Guantanamo, a site the U.S. has long leased from the Cuban government. Many of those housed there

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have been migrants from Haiti and Cuba.

The U.S. has leased Guantanamo land from Cuba for more than a century. Cuba opposes the lease and typically rejects the nominal U.S. rent payments. Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel said Trump wanting to ship immigrants to the island is “an act of brutality.”

“The U.S. government’s decision to imprison migrants at the Guantanamo Naval Base, in an enclave where it created torture and indefinite detention centers, shows contempt for the human condition and international law,” Cuban Foreign Minister Bruno Rodríguez wrote in a post on X.

The Supreme Court ruled in 2008 that enemy combatants in the war on terror held without charge at the military prison at Guantanamo had the right to challenge their detention in federal court. But the justices did not decide whether the president had the authority to detain people at all.

Before Trump took office, the Democratic administrations of Barack Obama and Joe Biden worked to reduce the number of terrorism suspects held at Guantanamo.

Laken Riley was out for a run in February 2024 when she was killed by Jose Antonio Ibarra, a Venezuelan national who was in the country illegally. Ibarra was found guilty in November and sentenced to life without parole.

Ibarra had been arrested for illegal entry in September 2022 near El Paso, Texas, and released to pursue his case in immigration court. Federal officials say he was arrested by New York police in August 2023 for child endangerment and released. Police say he was also issued a citation for shoplifting in Georgia in October 2023.

The act quickly passed the newly Republican-controlled Congress with some Democratic support even though opponents said it possibly could lead to large roundups of people for offenses as minor as shoplifting.

The swift passage, and Trump’s quickly signing it, adds to the potent symbolism for conservatives. To critics, the measure has taken advantage of a tragedy and could lead to chaos and cruelty while doing little to fight crime or overhaul the immigration system.

Riley’s mother thanked Trump while holding back tears.

“He said he would secure our borders and he would never forget about Laken and he hasn’t,” she said.

Several top Republican lawmakers and Noem attended the signing ceremony, as did Democratic Sen. John Fetterman of Pennsylvania, a cosponsor.

Under the new law, federal officials would have to detain any immigrant arrested or charged with crimes such as theft or assaulting a police officer, or offenses that injure or kill someone. State attorneys general could sue the U.S. government for harm caused by federal immigration decisions — potentially allowing the leaders of conservative states to help dictate immigration policy set by Washington.

Some Democrats have questioned whether it is constitutional. The ACLU says the law can allow people to be “mandatorily locked up — potentially for years — because at some point in their lives, perhaps decades ago, they were accused of nonviolent offenses.”

Hannah Flamm, interim senior director of policy at the International Refugee Assistance Project, said the measure violates immigrants’ basic rights by allowing for detaining people who have not been charged with wrongdoing, much less convicted.

“The latent fear from the election cycle of looking soft on crime snowballed into aiding and abetting Trump’s total conflation of immigration with crime,” Flamm said.

She also noted, “I think it is pivotal to understand: This bill, framed as connected to a tragic death, is pretext to fortify a mass deportation system.”

Rihanna makes first court appearance at the trial of her partner A\$AP Rocky, as accuser testifies

By ANDREW DALTON AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Rihanna appeared for the first time at the trial of her longtime partner A\$AP Rocky, on the day of its most important testimony — the description by a former friend of the moment Rocky allegedly fired a gun at him.

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The singer superstar, who has two toddler sons with the rapper Rocky, sat out of view of the courtroom's cameras, between Rocky's mother and sister, in the downtown Los Angeles criminal courthouse. Security brought her in surreptitiously to avoid crowds Wednesday morning.

Rocky, whose legal name is Rakim Athelston Mayers, has been standing trial on two felony charges that he fired a handgun at the former friend, who is known by the name A\$AP Relli and was born Terell Ephron. If convicted, Rocky could get up to 24 years in prison.

Rihanna watched Wednesday as Relli testified about the moment Rocky allegedly fired a gun at him on a Hollywood street in 2021.

He had been shouting angrily at Rocky, who was walking away after an initial confrontation and scuffle, when Rocky pulled a gun from his waistband and held it in the air, Relli testified.

"He turned around and then it was like BOOM!" he told the jury. "The whole thing was like a movie, he kind of like pointed down and he shot the first shot."

He said "I felt my hand hot" and later added, "I was hit. Or I was grazed. I didn't have a hole or nothing."

The trial's key witness said he grabbed one of their mutual friends who were with Rocky after the first shot was fired and stood behind him for protection. He said he did not see Rocky fire the second shot, and Rocky ran away moments later.

When jurors were being selected, prosecutors asked them whether Rihanna's connection to the case, especially if she appeared in court, would affect their ability to deliver a guilty verdict.

Nearly all those questioned had heard of her — far more than had heard of Rocky — and some described themselves as fans, but all said they felt it would not affect their decisions.

It was not clear whether they could see Rihanna or were aware of her presence as they watched the testimony. She wore a long black dress with buttons on the front that resembled a winter overcoat, and had a pair of glasses on her head that she put on during the prosecution's questioning.

Earlier in the trial, which began on Jan. 21, Relli said he and Rocky, members of A\$AP, a crew of creators at a New York high school, had been close but their relationship eroded after Rocky became famous.

He said their relationship had been strained for years and was getting worse in the days leading up to the incident, but he was still "furious" when Rocky pulled a gun on him after a scuffle that began the moment the two met up near the W Hotel. He dared him to use it.

When Rocky walked away, he testified that he followed and shouted after him, until the shots were fired.

Rocky's lawyer says the shots he fired were not even from a real gun — they were blanks from a starter pistol that he carried as a prop. The lawyer said Relli knew this, and that was why he was so fearless walking after him.

"Oh it was a real gun," Relli testified Wednesday, saying he knew because of his scraped hand.

He said he felt free to follow and shout at Rocky because "I felt like because he put it away and we're on a busy street in Hollywood. He's definitely not gonna shoot it."

Since the shooting, and his decision to go to police and testify, he has gotten death threats and has been shunned as a snitch, he said, and the modest music management career he built fell apart.

"It's been a living hell," Relli said.

About an hour after the shooting, Relli returned to the scene and said he photographed and recovered two shell casings. Earlier, while responding to a report of a shooting, police did not find any.

He sent a text to Rocky that was shown in court saying "U try killing me."

Rocky denied it in his reply.

"Bro wtf is u talkin bout why u tell ppl I shot at u."

He sent Rocky photos of the shell casings and his grazed hand.

Rocky said he was making stuff up and speaking "all type of nonsense" and was trying to "extort" him.

The court day ended after just a few hours of testimony because of scheduling issues. Rihanna was shuffled out through a restricted exit by deputies, and Rocky left separately through the main courthouse doors.

The defense will begin their cross-examination of Relli on Thursday.

Raised in Harlem, Rocky's rap songs became a phenomenon in New York in 2011. He had his mainstream breakthrough when his first studio album went to No. 1 on the Billboard 200 in 2013. The second one, in 2015, did the same.

He's set to have his biggest career year as a multimedia star. This Sunday, he's nominated for a Grammy Award for best music video for his song "Taylor Swift," at the ceremony at Crypto.com Arena just two miles (3 kilometers) from the Los Angeles courthouse where his trial's being held.

He's also set to headline the Rolling Loud Music Festival, to star opposite Denzel Washington in a film directed by Spike Lee, and to co-chair the Met Gala in May.

But the prospect of a conviction and the possibility of a lengthy prison sentence casts a shadow over all of it.

Rocky and Rihanna, both 36, have two sons together: 2-year-old RZA Athelston Mayers and 1-year-old Riot Rose Mayers. She revealed she was pregnant with the younger boy after headlining the Super Bowl halftime show in 2023 with a visible baby bump.

The singer and the rapper, who are both fashion moguls, first became close when he provided a verse to her 2012 song "Cockiness (Love It)" and they performed it at the MTV Video Music Awards. They became a couple in 2020.

Are we all aliens? NASA's returned asteroid samples hold the ingredients of life from a watery world

By MARCIA DUNN AP Aerospace Writer

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. (AP) — Asteroid samples fetched by NASA hold not only the pristine building blocks for life but also the salty remains of an ancient water world, scientists reported Wednesday.

The findings provide the strongest evidence yet that asteroids may have planted the seeds of life on Earth and that these ingredients were mingling with water almost right from the start.

"That's the kind of environment that could have been essential to the steps that lead from elements to life," said the Smithsonian Institution's Tim McCoy, one of the lead study authors.

NASA's Osiris-Rex spacecraft returned 122 grams (4 ounces) of dust and pebbles from the near-Earth asteroid Bennu, delivering the sample canister to the Utah desert in 2023 before swooping off after another space rock. It remains the biggest cosmic haul from beyond the moon. The two previous asteroid sample missions, by Japan, yielded considerably less material.

Small amounts of Bennu's precious black grains — leftovers from the solar system's formation 4.5 billion years ago — were doled out to the two separate research teams whose studies appeared in the journals *Nature* and *Nature Astronomy*. But it was more than enough to tease out the sodium-rich minerals and confirm the presence of amino acids, nitrogen in the form of ammonia and even parts of the genetic code.

Some if not all of the delicate salts found at Bennu — similar to what's in the dry lakebeds of California's Mojave Desert and Africa's Sahara — would be stripped away if present in falling meteorites.

"This discovery was only possible by analyzing samples that were collected directly from the asteroid then carefully preserved back on Earth," the Institute of Science Tokyo's Yasuhito Sekine, who was not involved in the studies, said in an accompanying editorial.

Combining the ingredients of life with an environment of sodium-rich salt water, or brines, "that's really the pathway to life," said McCoy, the National Museum of Natural History's curator of meteorites. "These processes probably occurred much earlier and were much more widespread than we had thought before."

NASA's Daniel Glavin said one of the biggest surprises was the relatively high abundance of nitrogen, including ammonia. While all of the organic molecules found in the Bennu samples have been identified before in meteorites, Glavin said the ones from Bennu are valid — "real extraterrestrial organic material formed in space and not a result of contamination from Earth."

Bennu — a rubble pile just one-third of a mile (one-half of a kilometer) across — was originally part of a much larger asteroid that got clobbered by other space rocks. The latest results suggest this parent body had an extensive underground network of lakes or even oceans, and that the water evaporated away,

leaving behind the salty clues.

Sixty labs around the world are analyzing bits of Bennu as part of initial studies, said the University of Arizona's Dante Lauretta, the mission's chief scientist who took part in both studies.

Most of the \$1 billion mission's cache has been set aside for future analysis. Scientists stress more testing is needed to better understand the Bennu samples, as well as more asteroid and comet sample returns. China plans to launch an asteroid sample return mission this year.

Many are pushing for a mission to collect rocks and dirt from the potentially waterlogged dwarf planet Ceres in the main asteroid belt. Jupiter's moon Europa and Saturn's moon Enceladus also beckon as enticing water worlds. Meanwhile, NASA has core samples awaiting pickup at Mars, but their delivery is on hold while the space agency studies the quickest and cheapest way to get them here.

"Are we alone?" McCoy said. "That's one of the questions we're trying to answer."

Former US Sen. Bob Menendez gets 11 years in prison for taking bribes and acting as agent of Egypt

By LARRY NEUMEISTER and MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Former U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez was sentenced Wednesday to 11 years in prison for accepting bribes of gold and cash and acting as an agent of Egypt — crimes his lawyer said he's been mocked for as "Gold Bar Bob."

The judge delivered the sentence after Menendez tearfully addressed the court, saying he'd lost everything he cared about, except his family. The Democrat resigned last year after becoming one of only a handful of U.S. senators ever convicted while in office.

"You were successful, powerful, you stood at the apex of our political system," U.S. District Judge Sidney H. Stein told Menendez in a packed Manhattan courtroom. "Somewhere along the way, and I don't know when it was, you lost your way and working for the public good became working for your good."

The ex-senator was convicted of selling his once-considerable clout for bribes worth a fortune. FBI agents who searched his house found \$480,000, some of it stuffed inside boots and pockets of clothing, and gold bars worth an estimated \$150,000.

Prosecutors said that in exchange for the loot, which also included a luxury car, Menendez did corrupt favors for three New Jersey businessmen. They said he tried to protect associates from criminal investigations, helped two of them in business deals with foreign powers, and also met with Egyptian intelligence officials and took steps to help that country access millions of dollars in U.S. military aid.

"What's been the result?" Stein said. "You lost your senate seat. You lost your chairmanship and you lost your good name."

Menendez, 71, portrayed himself to the judge as a sympathetic figure, stressing his decades of public service and declaring that he was chastened by the experience. Afterward, talking to reporters with TV cameras and microphones outside, he turned defiant.

"I am innocent," he proclaimed, vowing to appeal.

Menendez, who beat a prosecution in another corruption case a decade ago, aligned himself with President Donald Trump's recent criticisms of the judicial system, particularly in New York City.

"This process is political and it's corrupted to the core. I hope President Trump cleans up the cesspool and restores the integrity to the system," Menendez said, reading from a sheet of paper.

The judge ordered him to report to prison June 6.

New Jersey Gov. Phil Murphy, a Democrat, said that despite Menendez's accomplishments, "he will be remembered for putting his own interests and financial gain ahead of the public interest." Menendez's successor, Democratic U.S. Sen. Andy Kim, said the sentencing is a reminder that nobody should be above the law, "no matter your title or the power you hold."

Two of the men convicted of bribing Menendez also got substantial prison terms Wednesday. The judge sentenced real estate developer Fred Daibes to seven years in prison. Wael Hana, an entrepreneur, was sentenced to eight years.

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Daibes, 67, tearfully told Stein his conviction had left him "borderline suicidal." Hana professed that he was innocent.

A third businessman pleaded guilty and testified against Menendez at a trial last year. Menendez' wife, Nadine, faces a March trial on many of the same charges.

A dozen U.S. senators have been indicted while in office, but only four before Menendez were convicted and had those convictions stand up on appeal.

Menendez resigned last August, a month after his conviction, but he'd been sapped of his power by then. After he was charged in 2023, he was forced to surrender his powerful post as chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

His trial traced his dealings with Egyptian officials and his quest to aid three men who showered him with lucrative gifts found during a 2022 raid on his home in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.

Prosecutor Paul Monteleoni said Menendez committed a "truly grave breach of the trust" by serving Egypt's interests as he worked to protect a meat certification monopoly Hana had established with the Egyptian government.

"His time in the Senate was a privilege. It should have been its own reward — or would have been if he wasn't corrupt," Monteleoni said.

Among other things, Menendez provided Egyptian officials with information about U.S. Embassy staff in Cairo and ghostwrote a letter to senators encouraging them to lift a hold on \$300 million in military aid to Egypt.

For other bribes, prosecutors said, Menendez attempted to persuade a federal prosecutor in New Jersey to go easy on Daibes, a politically influential real estate developer accused of bank fraud.

Businessman Jose Uribe testified that he helped Nadine Menendez get a Mercedes-Benz convertible after the senator sought to pressure state prosecutors to drop criminal probes of his associates.

Menendez has insisted that his interactions with Egyptian officials were normal for the head of the Foreign Relations Committee and that he always put American interests first. He denied taking any bribes and said the gold bars belonged to his wife.

"Your honor, I am far from a perfect man. I have made more than my share of mistakes and bad decisions," Menendez told the judge. "I've done far more good than bad. I ask you, your honor, to judge me in that context."

Stein said he took Menendez's public service, age and health into consideration when deciding his punishment, which could have been as much as 24 to 30 years in prison under sentencing guidelines.

Menendez's lawyers described how the son of Cuban immigrants emerged from poverty and the trauma of his father's suicide when he was 23 to become "the epitome of the American Dream" — rising from mayor of Union City, New Jersey, to decades in Congress — before his conviction "rendered him a national punchline."

"Despite his decades of service, he is now known more widely as Gold Bar Bob," defense lawyer Adam Fee told the judge.

Fed hold rates steady, sees inflation as 'elevated,' as Powell declines comment on Trump

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve left its benchmark interest rate unchanged Wednesday after cutting it three times in a row last year, a sign of a more cautious approach as the Fed seeks to gauge where inflation is headed and what policies President Donald Trump may pursue.

In a statement, the Fed said the job market is "solid," and noted that the unemployment rate "has stabilized at a low level in recent months." The Fed also appeared to toughen its assessment of inflation, saying that it "remains somewhat elevated." Both a healthier job market and more stubborn inflation typically would imply fewer Fed rate cuts in the coming months.

In a news conference Wednesday, Fed Chair Jerome Powell largely deflected questions about recent

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comments from President Trump, including one from last week, when Trump said he would lower oil prices and then “demand” lower rates. He also said he would speak with Powell about it.

“I’m not going to have any response or comment on whatever the president said,” Powell said. Asked if Trump had communicated his desire for lower rates directly to Powell, the Fed chair said he had “no contact.”

Regarding the Fed’s key rate, Powell conveyed a more deliberate approach, noting that the economy is mostly healthy — the unemployment rate is a low 4.1% and growth topped 3% at an annual rate in the fall.

“With ... the economy remaining strong, we do not need to be in a hurry to adjust our policy stance,” Powell said.

Asked about the potential impact of the sharp policy changes Trump has proposed regarding tariffs, immigration, tax cuts, and deregulation, Powell said Fed policymakers are “waiting to see which policies are enacted.”

“We don’t know what will happen,” he added. “We need to let those policies be articulated before we can even begin to make a plausible assessment of what their implications for the economy will be.”

Kathy Bostjancic, chief economist at Nationwide Financial, said Powell’s comments suggest the Fed won’t cut rates again until the middle of this year.

“We are all in wait and see mode, including the Fed,” she said.

The Fed reduced its rate last year to 4.3% from 5.3%, in part out of concern that the job market was weakening. Hiring had slowed in the summer and the unemployment rate ticked up, leading Fed officials to approve an outsized half-point cut in September. Yet hiring rebounded last month and the unemployment rate declined slightly, to a low 4.1%.

Powell has said it is harder to gauge where inflation is headed, in part because of increased uncertainty around what policies Trump will adopt and how quickly they will affect the economy. Higher tariffs and tax cuts could push inflation higher, while deregulation could possibly reduce it.

The Fed typically keeps interest rates high to slow borrowing and spending and cool inflation.

In December, Fed officials signaled they may reduce their rate just twice more this year. Goldman Sachs economists believes those cuts won’t happen until June and December.

In November, inflation was just 2.4%, according to the Fed’s preferred measure, not far from its 2% target. But excluding the volatile food and energy categories, core prices rose a more painful 2.8% from a year earlier. The Fed pays close attention to core prices because they are often a better guide to inflation’s future path.

Powell said the Fed wants to see “real progress on inflation or ... some weakness in the labor market before we before we consider” making further cuts.

In a post to his Truth Social account late Wednesday, Trump criticized the Fed for failing to curtail inflation, saying he would do so by “unleashing American Energy production, slashing Regulation, rebalancing international Trade, and reigniting American Manufacturing.”

During the news conference, Powell was also asked about Trump’s executive orders intended to limit diversity, equity, and inclusion programs, which Powell has previously backed.

“As has been our practice over many administrations, we are working to align our policies with the executive orders as appropriate and consistent with applicable law,” he said.

Powell also addressed the Fed’s decision earlier this month to leave the Network for Greening the Financial System, an international group that sought to address how financial regulators and banks could address climate change. The Fed had joined the group in 2020.

Powell said the group’s goals had expanded to things like addressing biodiversity that were “way beyond” the Fed’s mission.

“I think that the the activities of the NGFS are not a good fit for the Fed, given our current mandate,” he said.

Most other central banks in developed countries are cutting their interest rates. The European Central Bank, for example, is widely expected to reduce borrowing costs at its next meeting on Thursday. The

Bank of Canada said Wednesday it has also cut its rate, and the Bank of England is also expected to do so next month.

The Bank of Japan, however, is actually raising its rate from a rock-bottom level. Japan has finally experienced some inflation after decades of slower growth and bouts of deflation.

A Fed rate cut in March is still possible, though financial markets' futures pricing puts the odds of that happening at under 20%.

As a result, American households and businesses are unlikely to see much relief from high borrowing costs anytime soon. The average rate on a 30-year mortgage slipped to just below 7% last week after rising for five straight weeks. The costs of borrowing money have remained high economywide even after the Fed reduced its benchmark rate.

That is because investors expect healthy economic growth and stubborn inflation will forestall future rate cuts. They recently bid up the 10-year Treasury above 4.80%, its highest level since 2023.

Powell acknowledged that higher rates have made it harder for many would-be homebuyers to afford a home, and said that would likely continue.

The stock and bond markets had muted reactions to the Fed's decision, which was widely expected.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. struggles to answer questions on Medicare and Medicaid at confirmation hearing

By AMANDA SEITZ Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In a contentious confirmation hearing to become the nation's top health official, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. struggled to answer questions about Medicare and Medicaid, programs that affect tens of millions of Americans, or to provide details about how he would work to drive down health care costs.

Kennedy had faced a well-funded opposition campaign from Republicans and Democrats who highlighted his anti-vaccine rhetoric and support of abortion access. Democrats questioned his past remarks, while Republicans praised him for his ideas to reduce food additives and hopes to research a rise in diseases.

As President Donald Trump's choice to be Secretary of Health and Human Services, he ended Wednesday's three-hour hearing before the Senate Finance Committee with strong endorsements from Republicans for him to lead the department that accounts for \$1.7 trillion in federal spending.

But Kennedy needs backing from nearly all Republicans to land the job. And one key vote from Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, a physician who heads up the Health, Education, Labor and Pension committee that Kennedy will sit before Thursday, appeared still uncertain.

Kennedy had no answers for Cassidy, who asked the nominee to share plans for Medicaid reform, a multibillion-dollar taxpayer-funded program that covers health care for about 80 million people, including children. Republicans have said they might need to make deep cuts to Medicaid to fund Trump's proposals.

After Cassidy pressed him several times, Kennedy finally replied, "I don't have a broad proposal for dismantling the program."

He went on to misstate how the biggest programs at the agency work, eliciting corrections from senators throughout the hearing. Medicaid, he wrongly said, is fully paid for by the federal government — it's not; states and federal taxpayers fund it. Later, he talked about Medicaid's "high premiums and high deductibles," although the virtually-free program has neither. He appeared confused about questions on the hundreds of community health clinics the agency funds in cities across the country or the role it plays in a federal law that mandates emergency rooms to stabilize anyone who presents at their facility.

And on some of the most controversial questions — like his plans for abortion — he deferred to Trump. Kennedy, a longtime Democrat, had previously said during his failed presidential bid that he supported access to abortion but on Wednesday he said that every abortion is a "tragedy."

Views on vaccines still the biggest issue for Democrats

Kennedy tried to assure senators that he supports childhood vaccines, pointing out that his children are vaccinated. "I believe that vaccines play a critical role in health care," Kennedy told the committee.

Republicans didn't ask about Kennedy's views on vaccines. Democrats, though, repeatedly brought up

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previous remarks or evidence that Kennedy has discouraged their use. The accusations often led to a terse back-and-forth and outbursts from the audience.

Democrats also pointed to Kennedy's writings, podcast appearances and other comments to show that Mr. Kennedy has embraced conspiracy theories and unproven alternative remedies, especially when it comes to the safety and efficacy of vaccines. Sen. Michael Bennet of Colorado pressed Kennedy over controversial and false claims he's made about COVID-19, pesticides and AIDS. Kennedy acknowledged some of the statements and denied others.

Bennet retorted, "This is a job where it is life and death for the kids that I used to work with in Denver public schools and for families all over this country that are suffering."

Senator Bernie Sanders, an independent from Vermont who caucuses with Democrats, said he endorsed Kennedy's slogan, "Make America Healthy Again" but the comedy stopped there. He accused Kennedy of being hypocritical over his vaccine views. To prove his point, Sanders displayed a photo of baby onesies that say "Unvaxxed Unafraid" selling on the website of the Children's Health Defense, the anti-vaccine advocacy group that Kennedy headed up until recently.

Kennedy said he had nothing to do with the product, and pointed out he is no longer with the group.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., repeatedly asked Kennedy if he would agree to not collect money off lawsuits against drugmakers after disclosing in ethics filings that he would continue to collect legal fees from a lawsuit against Merck, over Gardasil, its human papillomavirus vaccine that prevents cervical cancer. He made \$850,000 from the arrangement last year. If approved as health secretary, Warren raised several changes Kennedy could make that might enrich profits off such lawsuits, including appointing anti-vaccine advocates to vaccine advisory panels, removing vaccines from recommendations or changing the way the vaccine injury compensation program works.

He would not commit to Warren's ask.

"No one should be fooled here, as Secretary of HHS Robert Kennedy will have the power to undercut vaccines and vaccine manufacturing across our country," Warren charged.

Sen. Tina Smith of Minnesota, meanwhile, asked Kennedy to explain his unfounded suggestions that a dramatic increase in school shootings in recent decades could be linked to an increase in antidepressant use.

"These statements you've made linking antidepressants to school shootings reinforce the stigma that people who experience mental health face every single day," said Smith, who shared she benefitted from using the drugs as a young woman.

Republicans saw little cause for concern, much appetite for support

Some Republicans said Kennedy emerged unscathed after what they viewed as a pile-on of attacks by Democratic senators. If Democrats vote in a block against Kennedy, he can only lose four Republican votes and still win confirmation.

There had been some opposition to his nomination from conservatives, notably former Vice President Mike Pence, over Kennedy's support for abortion rights. Under close watch was Republican Sen. James Lankford, a Republican of Oklahoma who opposes abortion.

He and Kennedy have had "some disagreement on the issue of life," Lankford said, but Kennedy assured him repeatedly he would follow Trump's lead on the issue.

Abortion was a flashpoint for Democrats, however, who zeroed in on his plans around the abortion pill. Kennedy said Trump has asked him to study the safety of the medication, which anti-abortion advocates have lobbied to be further restricted. Democrats countered that the drug has been studied for a quarter-century.

Kennedy said he wants to use the National Institutes of Health to conduct more research on food additives, and he would work closely with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to take a look at the federally-funded school lunch program as well as food assistance for the poor.

But he promised not to ban certain foods. His boss, after all, would be unhappy if he did.

"I don't want to take food away from anybody," he said. "If you like a cheeseburger — a McDonald's cheeseburger and a diet Coke like my boss — you should be able to get them."

Takeaways from RFK Jr.'s first confirmation hearing as Trump's nominee for health secretary

By LAURAN NEERGAARD and MATTHEW PERRONE AP Medical Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — Robert F. Kennedy Jr. was pressed to clarify his views on vaccines, abortion and public health priorities in the first of two Senate hearings as he tries to make the case to become President Donald Trump's health secretary.

Kennedy is seeking to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, the \$1.7 trillion agency that funds medical research, public health outreach, food and drug safety, hospital oversight, funding for community health care clinics as well as Medicare and Medicaid.

Republicans on the Senate Finance Committee expressed hope Kennedy could help reduce chronic diseases and health care costs. Democrats repeatedly used quotes and transcripts from his books and public appearances to pin him down on several issues, especially vaccines and abortion.

Sen. Ron Wyden, a Democrat, argued that "from abortion to universal health care, Mr. Kennedy has changed his views so often it's nearly impossible to know where he stands."

On Thursday Kennedy will appear before the Senate's Health, Education, Labor and Pension Committee.

Some takeaways from Wednesday's hearing:

Senators wanted to know: Where does Kennedy stand on vaccines now?

Kennedy insisted he's not opposed to vaccines despite a long history of calling them dangerous – and Democrats weren't buying it.

"Frankly you frighten people," said Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island.

"I am not anti-vaccine," Kennedy told the committee. He also said, "I support the measles vaccine. I support the polio vaccine. I will do nothing as HHS secretary that makes it difficult or discourages people from taking either of those vaccines."

But before he was nominated, Kennedy sought to discredit vaccines. He has said "COVID shots are a crime against humanity," told FOX News he still believes in the debunked idea that vaccines can cause autism, and urged people in 2021 to "resist" CDC guidelines on when kids should get vaccines.

And during the hearing Kennedy said that "most experts agree" that 6-year-olds shouldn't get COVID-19 vaccines because they're not at risk. That's not true of the experts who set vaccine policy: The Food and Drug Administration authorized COVID-19 shots for children as young as age 6 months and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends children get vaccinated.

"Most experts agree that COVID vaccines are safe and effective for children," Dr. James Campbell of the American Academy of Pediatrics said after hearing Kennedy's remark.

Sen. Maggie Hassan, a Democrat from New Hampshire, grilled Kennedy about changing his position.

"There is no reason that any of us should believe that you have reversed the anti-vaccine views that you have promoted for 25 years," she said.

Kennedy was pressed on his shifting views on abortion

Kennedy's nomination has been met with criticism from both abortion rights advocates and anti-abortion forces as his stance seemed to have shifted.

During the hearing, several Democrats pushed Kennedy about changing his views to better appeal to Trump.

"I've never seen any major politician flip on that issue quite as quickly as you did when Trump asked you to be HHS secretary," said Sen. Bernie Sanders of Vermont.

Sen. Michael Bennet, a Democrat from Colorado, questioned Kennedy's shifting views on abortion by quoting his previous statements that abortion should be left up to the pregnant woman, not the government.

Hassan said she was confused: "You have clearly stated in the past that bodily autonomy is one of your core values. The question is: Do you stand for this value or not?"

Kennedy repeatedly leaned on the phrase: "I have always believed abortion is a tragedy" — including during questioning from Republican Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma.

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Republicans expressed hope Kennedy could fix a troubled health care system

In his opening remarks, Idaho Senator Mike Crapo, the Finance committee's chairman, praised Kennedy's "commitment to combatting chronic conditions" and said prioritizing disease prevention "will save lives, reduce costs and build a healthier, stronger country."

Sen. Ron Johnson of Wisconsin, who was vocal in criticizing vaccine requirements during the COVID-19 pandemic, brought up a conversation he had with Kennedy when the former Democrat was considering joining forces with Trump. The senator called it an answer to his prayers.

"We need to heal and unify this divided nation," Johnson said. "Can't we come together as a nation and do this?"

Kennedy repeatedly called for "more research" on long-established therapies

Again and again on Wednesday, Kennedy suggested he simply wants to do more research on vaccines, drugs and other products that have already been vigorously studied by government and independent scientists.

Kennedy said that Trump asked him to study the safety of mifepristone, the abortion pill that has been used more than 6 million times in the U.S. to terminate pregnancies.

The FDA approved the drug in 2000 after a four-year review and has repeatedly reaffirmed its safety after reviewing dozens of studies in tens of thousands of women.

"Here are the safety studies that tell us mifepristone is safe and effective," Hassan said, brandishing a pile of what she said were 40 of them.

Kennedy again called for additional research when questioned about his unsupported claims that increased school shootings could be related to higher prescribing of antidepressants.

Kennedy said his remarks were misrepresented and that he was suggesting antidepressants might play a role among other factors, such as social media.

"I don't think anyone can answer that question right now" Kennedy said.

Antidepressants and other prescription drugs are subject to multiple, large clinical trials that evaluate their safety and efficacy before they are approved. Additionally, the FDA has multiple systems for monitoring emerging side effects with drugs after they are on the market and regularly issues updates and alerts to address risks.

On Alzheimer's, Kennedy also misstated the state of the science and research.

A sticky gunk called amyloid plays a role in Alzheimer's disease but Kennedy wrongly claimed the National Institutes of Health ignores any other potential culprits.

"The NIH shut down studies of any other hypothesis," Kennedy said.

But the NIH's \$3.8 billion budget for Alzheimer's and similar dementias includes researching a range of other factors that may underlie how Alzheimer's develops.

Senators used Kennedy's own words against him

Reading from podcast transcripts and his own writings, Bennet asked Kennedy about his prior statement that COVID-19 was engineered to target white and Black people while sparing Ashkenazi Jews and Chinese people.

Kennedy denied saying it was "deliberately targeted."

Bennet also asked Kennedy about a claim that Lyme disease is "likely a militarily engineered bioweapon."

"I probably did say that," Kennedy responded.

Leader of rebels who toppled Syrian President Bashar Assad is named country's interim president

By ABBY SEWELL and OMAR ALBAM Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria (AP) — The Syrian factions that toppled President Bashar Assad last month named an Islamist former rebel leader as the country's interim president on Wednesday in a push to project a united front as they face the monumental task of rebuilding Syria after nearly 14 years of civil war.

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The former insurgents also threw out Syria's constitution, adopted under Assad, saying a new charter would be drafted soon.

The appointment of Ahmad al-Sharaa, who was once aligned with al-Qaida, as Syria's president "in the transitional phase" came after a meeting of the former insurgent factions in Damascus, the Syrian capital.

The announcement was made by the spokesperson for Syria's new, de facto government's military operations sector, Col. Hassan Abdul Ghani, the state-run SANA news agency said. The exact mechanism under which the factions selected al-Sharra as interim president was not clear.

Formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, al-Sharaa is the head of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, which led the lightning offensive that toppled Assad in early December. The group was once affiliated with al-Qaida but has since denounced its former ties.

In recent years, al-Sharaa has sought to cast himself as a champion of pluralism and tolerance and promised to protect the rights of women and religious minorities.

The United States had previously placed a \$10 million bounty on al-Sharaa but canceled it last month after a U.S. delegation visited Damascus and met with him. Top U.S. diplomat for the Middle East, Barbara Leaf said after the meeting that al-Sharaa came across as "pragmatic."

Speaking at Wednesday's meeting, al-Sharaa, who was in military uniform, stressed the "heavy task and a great responsibility" that Syria's new rulers face.

"If the victor is arrogant after his victory and forgets the favor of Allah upon him, it will lead him to tyranny," he said, according to a video released hours later.

Among the priorities for rebuilding Syria, he said, will be "filling the power vacuum legitimately and legally" and "maintaining civil peace by seeking transitional justice and preventing revenge attacks" in the wake of Assad's disastrous reign.

Syrians took to the streets in Damascus and elsewhere to celebrate the announcement, honking car horns and in some cases firing in the air. Many expressed support for al-Sharaa.

"This person is someone who is intelligent and has a good understanding and he was the leader of the battle that freed Syria," said Abdallah al-Sweid, who was among those celebrating at Umayyad Square in Damascus. "He is someone who deserves to be president."

Others — even those who had rejoiced at Assad's ouster — appeared critical of the way the appointment was made and the lack of clarity on next steps.

"The problem is not in the decisions. The problem is in the timing, the previous promises and the confusion," said Mohammad Salim Alkhateb, an official with the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces — a group formed by members of the opposition to Assad in exile.

Qatar was the first to react to al-Sharaa's appointment, which had been expected, saying it welcomed decisions aimed at "enhancing consensus and unity among all Syrian parties." The statement added that this should help pave the way for a "peaceful transfer of power through a comprehensive political process."

Western nations, although they have moved to restore ties with Damascus after Assad was overthrown, are still somewhat circumspect about Syria's new Islamist rulers.

Abdul Ghani, the spokesman, also announced Wednesday that Syria's constitution — adopted in 2012, under Assad's rule — was annulled. He said al-Sharaa would be authorized to form a temporary legislative council until a new constitution is drafted.

All the armed factions in the country would be disbanded, Abdul Ghani said, and would be absorbed into state institutions.

Since Assad's fall, HTS has become the de facto ruling party and has set up an interim government largely composed of officials from the local government it previously ran in rebel-held Idlib province.

The interim authorities have promised they would launch an inclusive process to set up a new government and constitution, including convening a national dialogue conference and invite Syria's different communities, though no date has been set.

As the former Syrian army collapsed with Assad's downfall, al-Sharaa has called for creation of a new unified national army and security forces, but questions have loomed over how the interim administration can bring together a patchwork of former rebel groups, each with their own leaders and ideology.

Even knottier is the question of the U.S.-backed Kurdish groups that have carved out an autonomous enclave early in Syria's civil war, never fully siding with the Assad government or the rebels seeking to topple him. Since Assad's fall, there has been an escalation in clashes between the Kurdish forces and Turkish-backed armed groups allied with HTS in northern Syria.

The Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces were not present at Wednesday's meeting of the country's armed factions Wednesday and there was no immediate comment from the group.

At the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos this month, Asaad al-Shibani, Syria's new foreign minister and HTS official, said the country needs the international community's help as it begins rebuilding after the brutal civil war.

Longtime AP international journalist Earleen Fisher, whose career spanned five decades, dies at 78

By TED ANTHONY AP National Writer

Earleen Fisher, an editor and writer whose career across five decades with The Associated Press gave her a front-row seat to some of the late 20th century's most chaotic and challenging news stories, has died. She was 78 and counted Yasser Arafat and the Dalai Lama among her interviews.

Fisher died peacefully Wednesday morning at The Maples at Waterford Crossing nursing home in Goshen, Indiana, of complications from Parkinson's disease, said her cousin, Phil Dowty. She had been ill from Parkinson's for a number of years.

She retired in 2004 after 32 years at the AP, a career that took her from her native Indiana to New York as an editor on the agency's old General Desk with stints in Tel Aviv and Beirut — and ultimately to bureau chief jobs in India, Cyprus and Egypt, where she eventually oversaw all coverage of the Middle East.

Fisher oversaw Middle East operations for the AP during tense times of war and conflict in the 1980s. She expected the best from her people but cared about them immensely along the way, recalled longtime AP international correspondent Robert Reid, who worked with her frequently.

"Earleen was a fantastic editor. She was firm, and she wouldn't pull any punches, but she was willing to sit down with people and go over their material and show how it should be done," said Reid, editor-in-chief of Stars & Stripes.

Good with breaking news and customers alike

Fisher was a progressive traditionalist, always intent on moving the AP forward, suggesting new ideas but steadfastly unwilling to veer from the agency's bedrock principles of accuracy and speed — sometimes no small accomplishment in the context of covering nations and societies at war.

Fisher was also known for her enthusiastic interactions with AP customers. In 2003, just days after Saddam Hussein vanished during the United States' invasion of Iraq, Fisher traveled to Baghdad to oversee operations and welcome back a local newspaper as an AP customer. Her entourage was received with tea and hospitality, and the staff listened intently as she talked about AP coverage and how it could help them thrive in a new Iraq. "I can see you love what you do," the newspaper's editor told her.

"Earleen Fisher was not only a beautiful writer and talented editor but as the first — or one of the first — women to head a major AP international bureau, she was also very successful at selling AP's news, photo and video services to newspapers and television stations across the Middle East and in India," said Edith M. Lederer, the AP's longtime chief U.N. correspondent, who was friends with Fisher for 50 years and traveled with her frequently.

"I marveled at her almost photographic memory and reveled in our travels in Asia, and her love of history, mysteries, and her cats," Lederer said.

She began reporting in high school

Earleen Marie Fisher began reporting for her hometown newspaper, The Milford (Ind.) Mail, as a sophomore in high school. At Indiana University, she worked for the Indiana Daily Student, becoming managing editor her senior year. AP hired her as a part-time newswoman in Indianapolis that spring and gave her a

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full-time job after graduation.

She transferred to AP's New York headquarters in 1971 to work as a supervisor on the U.S. news report. In 1977, Fisher moved to Cairo as a freelance writer, working for the AP, The New York Times and the Voice of America. She covered the rise of Egyptian president Anwar Sadat and the signing of the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty.

She rejoined the AP in 1980, working in Beirut and Tel Aviv.

In 1985, she returned to New York, working as a supervisor on the foreign desk. In 1987, she was appointed bureau chief in New Delhi, where she directed news coverage for India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan and the Maldives. During that period, she had this to say about the Dalai Lama: He "combines the piety of a simple priest with the pragmatism of a politician."

In 1992, she became chief of the AP's Middle East Services, based first in Cyprus and later in Cairo. She directed news coverage for 16 countries. Under her leadership, the bureau covered stories such as the Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Years after being posted in Beirut, Fisher returned there to take stock of how it was doing. She wrote in 1993: "In the nation whose new name became a synonym for death and destruction, people are doing what would have been unthinkable a few years ago — building and repairing things that break."

After leaving the AP in 2004, Fisher taught at the American University in Cairo, and worked in Beirut on a U.S.-funded media development program for the Middle East and North Africa. She retired to Indiana in 2007.

"Earleen left a huge and positive mark on all the reporters and editors she worked with. Her clearheaded coverage of the Middle East in particular helped AP stand out there for many years," said Paul Haven, AP's vice president for global news gathering.

Fisher is a member of the Indiana Journalism Hall of Fame.

She is survived by her brother, Rex, also of Milford, Indiana. Funeral services are scheduled for Sunday afternoon at Mishler Funeral Home in Milford, with burial to follow immediately afterward.

Kansas unveils a mural honoring 'rebel women' who campaigned for voting rights

TOPEKA, Kan. (AP) — Kansas has a new mural in its Statehouse honoring women who campaigned for voting rights for decades before the 1920 ratification of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution granted those rights across the nation.

Gov. Laura Kelly and other state officials unveiled the "Rebel Women" painting that spans an entire wall on the first floor on Wednesday, the anniversary of Kansas' admission as the 34th U.S. state in 1861.

While Kansas Day is traditionally marked with renditions of the official state song, "Home on the Range," Wednesday's event also featured the women's voting rights anthem, "Suffrage Song," to the tune of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic."

A 2022 law authorized the mural, and artist Phyllis Garibay-Coon, of Manhattan, in northeastern Kansas, won the contest with a depiction of 13 prominent Kansas suffragists. A few women in the crowd of several hundred people were dressed as 19th century campaigners who were active before statehood.

Kansas prides itself as entering the union as an anti-slavery free state, but it also was more progressive than other states in gradually granting women full voting rights. Women could vote in school elections in 1861 and in city elections in 1887, and the nation's first woman mayor, Susanna M. Salter, was elected in Argonia, Kansas, that year. Voters amended the state constitution in 1912 to grant women full voting rights.

Tulsi Gabbard's views on Russia, Syria, Trump and government surveillance — in her own words

By DAVID KLEPPER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As an unconventional pick to lead the nation's intelligence service, Tulsi Gabbard is expected to face tough questions about her past comments on Syria, Russia, foreign surveillance and President Donald Trump when she goes before lawmakers at her confirmation hearing Thursday.

The former Democratic congresswoman from Hawaii is Trump's nominee to be the next director of national intelligence, a job created after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks that oversees and coordinates the work of more than a dozen intelligence agencies.

Gabbard, a lieutenant colonel in the National Guard who served two tours in the Middle East, has alarmed some intelligence and national security officials in the U.S. and elsewhere with comments sympathetic to Russia and criticism of a critical surveillance program.

Here's a look at Gabbard in her own words:

On Syria and visits with Assad

Gabbard traveled to Syria in 2017 to meet with then-President Bashar Assad, a visit that angered lawmakers from both parties who said she helped legitimize an accused war criminal and key ally of Russia and Iran.

Gabbard has defended the trip and her belief that meeting with adversaries can result in dialogue and peace. Assad fled Syria in December after being ousted following his country's brutal civil war.

"When the opportunity arose to meet with him, I did so because I felt that it's important that if we profess to truly care about the Syrian people, about their suffering, then we've got to be able to meet with anyone that we need to if there is a possibility that we can achieve peace," Gabbard told CNN at the time.

She later said she was "skeptical" that Assad's regime used banned chemical weapons to strike his own people, despite that being the repeated conclusion of U.S. authorities and independent analysts.

"I have not seen that independent investigation occur and that proof presented showing exactly what happened and there are a number of theories of exactly what happened that day," Gabbard said of Assad's attack during a CNN appearance in 2017.

In a 2019 interview on MSNBC, she said, "Assad is not the enemy of the United States because Syria does not pose a direct threat to the United States."

Following Assad's ouster, Gabbard has echoed Trump, who has said Assad fell because Russia pulled its support during its war in Ukraine, a conflict Trump has said he hopes to resolve.

"I stand in full support and wholeheartedly agree with the statements that President Trump has made," she told reporters in December. "My own views and experiences have been shaped by my multiple deployments and seeing firsthand the cost of war."

Trump, she said, "is fully committed as he has said over and over to bringing about an end to wars, demonstrating peace through strength."

On Russia and Ukraine

Gabbard has repeated Russia's arguments about its invasion of Ukraine, suggesting Moscow had justification to send troops into the neighboring country. She also endorsed Russian claims that the U.S. and Ukraine were involved in dangerous biological research before the war.

She has criticized the government of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a "corrupt autocracy" and has expressed sympathy for Russia's position, given Ukraine's desire to join NATO, the Western military alliance.

"This war and suffering could have easily been avoided if Biden Admin/NATO had simply acknowledged Russia's legitimate security concerns," she posted on Twitter at the start of Russia's invasion in 2022.

Soon after the war started, Russian state media advanced the false claim that the U.S. was involved in clandestine bioweapons research in Ukraine. The conspiracy theory relied on the existence of U.S.-funded labs that weren't secret and were involved in traditional public health research and efforts to prevent pandemics.

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Gabbard did not make that distinction when she suggested that the labs could “release and spread deadly pathogens” — echoing similar Russian conspiracy theories about the labs.

“These labs need to be shut down immediately, and the pathogens that they hold need to be destroyed,” she said. Her comments drew a sharp rebuke from lawmakers, including some Republicans, who said she was parroting Russian propaganda.

Gabbard later said she had only been referring to traditional public health research, and not secret biolabs. But her comments were taken seriously in Russia, where the state-controlled media has often praised Gabbard. One article last year called her “superwoman.”

On Edward Snowden

Gabbard has praised Edward Snowden, a former National Security Agency contractor who fled to Russia after he was charged in 2013 with illegally exposing government surveillance methods. Considered a traitor by many security officials, Snowden has been hailed as a heroic whistleblower by others.

Gabbard sponsored legislation to end Snowden’s prosecution, putting her at odds with Senate Republicans who have criticized Snowden’s actions. Snowden received Russian citizenship in 2022.

“If it wasn’t for Snowden, the American people would never have learned the NSA was collecting phone records and spying on Americans. As president, I will protect whistle-blowers who expose threats to our freedom and liberty,” Gabbard wrote on social media in 2019.

On government surveillance

As a member of Congress, Gabbard tried to repeal a surveillance program used to spy on suspected terrorists and foreign agents overseas — a program she now says she supports as she seeks Senate confirmation.

The program, known as Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, permits the U.S. government to collect without a warrant the communications of non-Americans located outside the country for the purpose of gathering foreign intelligence. National security officials say 702, which was first authorized in 2008, has saved lives by preventing terror attacks, while also helping the government stay ahead of foreign cyberattacks or espionage.

Gabbard introduced legislation in 2020 that would have repealed the law, which she said made it too easy to obtain the private communications of Americans without a warrant.

“Protection of our civil liberties is essential,” she said about her bill, which did not pass. “Join us in making sure that our constitutional rights are upheld.”

Her opposition has concerned lawmakers from both parties who said her criticism of the surveillance program would be a liability for her nomination as intelligence chief.

Gabbard now says she supports Section 702 and has called it a “crucial” intelligence tool. She said her view changed after Congress added protections to the law.

“My prior concerns about FISA were based on insufficient protections for civil liberties, particularly regarding the FBI’s misuse of warrantless search powers on American citizens,” she told CNN on Jan. 10. “If confirmed as DNI, I will uphold Americans’ Fourth Amendment rights while maintaining vital national security tools like Section 702 to ensure the safety and freedom of the American people.”

On her support for Trump

Gabbard’s loyalty to Trump represents an about-face from just a few years ago, when she ran for president as a Democrat and ended up endorsing her party’s 2020 nominee, Joe Biden.

In 2019, she voted “present” during Trump’s first impeachment hearing, but while she declined to vote to impeach, she rebuked his conduct as president, saying he had “violated public trust.”

“There is no question in my mind that Donald Trump is unfit to serve as president and commander in chief. I’ve said this over and over again,” Gabbard said in 2019.

Gabbard was a Democrat when she served in Congress, representing her home state of Hawaii. In 2022, she became an independent, saying the Democratic Party was dominated by an “elitist cabal of warmongers” and “woke” ideologues.

She subsequently campaigned for several high-profile Republicans and became a contributor to Fox News.

“Today’s Democratic Party is unrecognizable from the party I joined 20 years ago,” she said when ex-

plaining her decision.

When she endorsed Trump last year, Gabbard said he had "the courage to meet with adversaries, dictators, allies and partners alike in the pursuit of peace, seeing war as a last resort," adding that under Biden, the U.S. was "closer to the brink of nuclear war than we ever have been before."

She also has criticized criminal prosecutions of Trump, saying Biden's administration was "conditioning us to accept a dictatorship by rationalizing their own use of of our Justice Department to target President Trump."

Hamas will free 3 Israelis and 5 Thais in next hostage release Thursday

By TIA GOLDENBERG and SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Hamas will release three Israelis, including two women and an 80-year-old man, as well as five Thai nationals during the next hostage release set for Thursday, Israel and Hamas said Wednesday as their tenuous ceasefire moves ahead.

The Israeli women are Arbel Yehoud, 29, and Agam Berger, 20, and the man is Gadi Moses. The identities of the Thai nationals were not immediately known.

A number of foreign workers were taken captive along with dozens of Israeli civilians and soldiers during Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack that set off the war in Gaza. Twenty-three Thai hostages were released in the first ceasefire in November 2023. Israel says eight remain.

Thursday's release would keep up the momentum of the ceasefire that began earlier this month and paused the 15-month war in Gaza.

Hamas is releasing hostages in phases in exchange for almost 2,000 Palestinian prisoners held by Israel. The prisoners range from individuals detained over minor offenses in recent months to senior militants serving life sentences after being convicted of deadly attacks on Israeli civilians. Some have been held without charge or trial.

Hostages and prisoners will be released twice this week

The deal had been negotiated for months under the Biden administration but was finally sealed after incoming President Donald Trump threatened there would be "hell to pay" if the hostages weren't returned.

Trump's Mideast envoy, Steve Witkoff, was in Israel on Wednesday and met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who heads to Washington next week as the first foreign leader to meet Trump in his second term.

The White House meeting on Feb. 4 comes a day after talks on the ceasefire's more difficult second phase, aimed at ending the war, are meant to resume.

Thursday's hostage release wasn't originally scheduled but came as a result of a standoff between Israel and Hamas over the identities of the hostages released last weekend.

Israel had demanded that Yehoud, a civilian, be part of that group. When she wasn't freed, it held up the return of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians to war-battered northern Gaza.

International mediation efforts brought about the plan for an additional release on Thursday and cleared the way for Palestinians to stream north. Another release occurs Saturday, which Netanyahu's office said would free male hostages. Dozens of Palestinian prisoners are set to be freed both Thursday and Saturday.

Among the prisoners slated for release Thursday is Zakaria Zubeidi, a prominent former militant leader and theater director whose dramatic jailbreak in 2021 thrilled Palestinians and stunned the Israeli security establishment.

Egypt rejects Trump's suggestion that it take in Palestinians

The pause in fighting has exposed the vastness of the destruction to Gaza's urban landscape, prompting Trump's suggestion over the weekend that neighboring Jordan and Egypt take in displaced Palestinians so that "we just clean out that whole thing," calling the territory "a demolition site."

Egypt and Jordan, important U.S. allies, have rejected the suggestion, defying a U.S. president who has shown little patience for dissent from international partners. The Palestinians also rejected it amid fears

it would undermine the notion of Palestinian statehood.

In his first public comments on the issue, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi on Wednesday called the idea "an injustice" and said the transfer of Palestinians "can't ever be tolerated or allowed." He said the solution is the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Trump has said he would urge the leaders of both countries, which are major recipients of U.S. aid, to accept the idea, saying the resettlement could be temporary or long term.

It is not clear if Trump could force Egypt or Jordan to agree, but he has threatened hefty tariffs against other American allies to get his way. Egypt and Jordan receive billions of dollars in American aid each year. Military assistance to Egypt and Israel was exempted from a U.S. funding freeze to global aid programs.

Palestinians fear they may never return if they leave

The war has killed more than 47,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children, according to local health authorities, who do not distinguish between civilians and combatants in their count. The fighting has obliterated vast areas of Gaza, displacing some 90% of its 2.3 million population, often multiple times.

During its attack, Hamas took 250 people hostage and killed roughly 1,200.

The theme of displacement has been recurrent in Palestinian history, and the idea of staying on one's land is integral to the Palestinian identity. Palestinians fear that if they leave, they may never be allowed to return.

Those fears have been compounded by far-right members of Israel's government who support rebuilding Jewish settlements in Gaza, from which Israel withdrew troops and settlers from in 2005. Netanyahu says that idea is unrealistic.

Egypt and Jordan have each made peace with Israel but support the creation of a Palestinian state in the occupied West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem. They fear that the permanent displacement of Gaza's population could make that impossible.

Fear hits east Jerusalem as Israel moves to close UN Palestinian refugee agency

By ISABEL DEBRE Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — In the Shuafat refugee camp, a hardscrabble district in east Jerusalem surrounded by a concrete wall, cars inched their way toward an Israeli checkpoint.

Intense security makes venturing out of the camp exasperating. But 42-year-old Areej Taha didn't need to leave for medical treatment Monday. She had her toothache treated and picked up her insulin shots at a U.N.-run neighborhood clinic a block from where her kids were finishing their day at a U.N.-run school.

In the absence of municipal services, the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees, known as UNRWA, is the main provider of decent free healthcare and education to residents of Shuafat camp. If UNRWA left, Taha said, "I don't want to have to think about what we would do."

But those services and everything from garbage pickup to water-system maintenance may begin disappearing after a pair of Israeli laws come into effect Thursday banning UNRWA from operating on Israeli territory and prohibiting Israeli officials from any contact with the agency.

The most immediate impact will be in east Jerusalem, which Israel seized during the 1967 Mideast war and annexed in a move not recognized by most of the world. UNRWA's headquarters there faces immediate shutdown. The bans passed by the Israeli legislature in October also threaten UNRWA's operations across the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, where it is the lifeline for some 2 million Palestinians, most of whom are homeless from the 15-month Israel-Hamas war.

Israel has long criticized UNRWA, contending it perpetuates Palestinians' refugee status. The campaign against the agency has intensified from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other right-wing politicians since Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack on southern Israel. Israeli claims that around a dozen of UNRWA's 13,000 employees in Gaza participated in the attack and that many others support or sympathize with Hamas.

The agency denies knowingly aiding armed groups and says it acts quickly to purge any suspected militants among its staff.

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Palestinian parents are flabbergasted

How the legislation will be implemented and whether UNRWA operations will have to halt was unclear Wednesday, hours before the laws go into effect. Even UNRWA officials said they didn't know what will happen.

Israeli government spokesman David Mencer flatly said Wednesday that UNRWA will be banned from operating in Israel "in 48 hours."

Leeron Iflah, deputy director-general of Israel's Jerusalem Affairs Office, told The Associated Press that "starting next week, all the kids in UNRWA schools will get placed in all kinds of schools in east Jerusalem."

But an Israeli government official with knowledge of the law's details said there was no intention to physically shut institutions, only that it will become harder for the agency to operate without coordinating with Israeli authorities. The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the plans.

A total shutdown would end primary healthcare for up to 80,000 Palestinians in east Jerusalem through some two dozen medical centers, UNRWA officials say. It would also halt education and vocational training for up to 1,000 kids in the middle of a school year.

"Now he's supposed to leave school? Go where? How? He just started liking school," said municipal worker Karim Hawash, looking over at his 13-year-old son who was kicking a soccer ball against the wall in Shuafat camp. "Already the schools here are so overcrowded."

There are no municipal schools inside the camp, meaning kids who leave UNRWA schools would have to make their way in and out daily through the Israeli checkpoints to still-unknown destinations.

Beginning of the end?

The immediate effect on UNRWA's work in the West Bank or Gaza Strip is unknown but aid workers say the crackdown threatens UNRWA's role as the backbone of humanitarian logistics in the region.

Shutting down the headquarters "will impact everything that we are able to do," Jonathan Fowler, UNRWA's senior communications manager, said from the east Jerusalem compound.

The agency provides a vast sweep of basic services to 1.1 million Palestinians in the West Bank and 2 million in Gaza. During the Israel-Hamas war, it has been the main agency ensuring delivery of food, medical supplies and other aid that Gaza's population relies on to survive.

UNRWA uses storage facilities in Israel for Gaza-bound aid convoys and needs to communicate with Israeli authorities who control access to Gaza to move material in and out — now threatened by the crackdown.

Mencer said "aid needs to be redirected" to other U.N. agencies and other NGOs operating in Gaza.

In the West Bank as well, UNRWA employees "won't have freedom of movement like they did before," said Arie King, a deputy mayor of Jerusalem. "They cannot get in and out of Israel through the borders, the checkpoints."

Controversial agency

Born from one of the most sensitive issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the fate of Palestinian refugees, UNRWA is no stranger to controversy.

When roughly 700,000 Palestinians fled or were forced from their homes during the 1948 war over Israel's creation, an event Arabs call the Nakba, or "catastrophe," Israel refused to let them return. Arab governments resisted their integration.

In 1949, the U.N. General Assembly created UNRWA to help this population sleeping in the open and clutching their house keys. It was meant to be temporary, until a political end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict could be reached. But the system became permanent.

The roughly 1 million Palestinians who landed on UNRWA's rolls after fleeing the wars in 1948 and 1967 have become almost 6 million, in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. The dozens of tent camps that UNRWA set up decades ago across the Middle East have been built up into dense neighborhoods of apartment blocks and humming markets.

"The international community has decided over and over that we should continue doing what we do because there has not been a just and lasting solution," Fowler said. "There are not the sort of functioning state structures that can provide these kinds of services."

Israel has long argued that the agency perpetuates the conflict by maintaining a steadily growing refu-

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gee population. President Donald Trump has also been hostile to the agency, cutting off funding during his first term.

UNRWA's defenders believe Israel's efforts to eliminate the agency have to do with wanting Palestinian refugees to give up hopes of returning to old homes in what is now Israel. Home to 7 million Jews, Israel says a large-scale return of Palestinian refugees would end its Jewish majority.

In Shuafat refugee camp, Palestinians whose families fled there in 1948 have the coveted blue IDs of Jerusalem residents, allowing them to travel anywhere Israeli citizens may go. They pay taxes to the Israeli municipality and are subject to Israeli law.

But in 2002, when Israel erected its separation barrier with the stated purpose of keeping out suicide bombers, Shuafat camp was left outside the wall, severed from the rest of the city by checkpoints and stranded in a political and bureaucratic limbo.

The camp's population exploded as Palestinians from the West Bank, although not allowed to live there, realized that no one was enforcing the rules.

Israeli officials insist they're committed to improving services for Palestinians in east Jerusalem but say it's a long road.

"It can't work in one day," Iflah said when asked how the municipality planned to replace UNRWA in Shuafat camp.

In just a few days, though, Taha will need more insulin.

With no blue ID — meaning she can't enter Jerusalem — she doesn't know what she'll do.

Cold-stunned green sea turtles are recovering at a Florida marine life center

By CODY JACKSON and FREIDA FRISARO Associated Press

JUNO BEACH, Fla. (AP) — An arctic blast that brought a rare snowfall to northern Florida last week left green sea turtles as far south as St. Augustine suffering from a condition known as cold stunning.

Seventeen sea turtles that were found stranded along Florida's northeastern Atlantic Coast were brought to the Loggerhead Marinelife Center in Juno Beach, north of West Palm Beach, where they are rehabbing.

"When it's cold on land, it's also cold in the ocean. And that led to a number of turtles being beached or very debilitated and just floating in the water," said Dr. Heather Barron, the chief science officer and veterinarian at the center.

The staff named the rescued turtles after beverages, and they painted their new names on the back of their shells. Veterinarians are treating them with antibiotics, fluids and intravenous nutrition.

While it snowed as far south as northern Florida, which is extremely rare, the frigid temperatures reached South Florida. That meant cold-stunned turtles were also found along Palm Beach County's coastline.

"It is quite unusual for this to happen in Florida. Sea turtles do migrate, and typically they're migrating down to Florida for this time of year because of warmer water," Barron said.

By Wednesday morning, Espresso, Pickle Juice and Ginger Beer were basking in the sunshine in the center's "Party Tank."

The turtles arrived in Juno Beach on Friday from the Marine Science Center in Volusia County, Florida. They all suffered from cold stunning, which causes sea turtles to lose mobility and become lethargic. Most of the 17 turtles are expected to be released back into the ocean in a few weeks.

Last year, turtles from Massachusetts were brought to Florida to rehab while suffering from cold stunning.

Trump makes moves to expand his power, sparking chaos and a possible constitutional crisis

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

Just a little over a week into his second term, President Donald Trump took steps to maximize his power, sparking chaos and what critics contend is a constitutional crisis as he challenges the separation of powers

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that have defined American government for more than 200 years.

The new administration's most provocative move came this week, as it announced it would temporarily halt federal payments to ensure they complied with Trump's orders barring diversity programs. The technical-sounding directive had enormous immediate impact before it was blocked by a federal judge, potentially pulling trillions of dollars from police departments, domestic violence shelters, nutrition services and disaster relief programs that rely on federal grants. The administration on Wednesday rescinded the order.

Though the Republican administration denied Medicaid was affected, it acknowledged the online portal allowing states to file for reimbursement from the program was shut down for part of Tuesday in what it insisted was an error.

Legal experts noted the president is explicitly forbidden from cutting off spending for programs that Congress has approved. The U.S. Constitution grants Congress the power to appropriate money and requires the executive to pay it out. A 50-year-old law known as the Impoundment Control Act makes that explicit by prohibiting the president from halting payments on grants or other programs approved by Congress.

"The thing that prevents the president from being an absolute monarch is Congress controls the power of the purse strings," said Josh Chafetz, a law professor at Georgetown University, adding that even a temporary freeze violates the law. "It's what guarantees there's a check on the presidency."

Democrats and other critics said the move was blatantly unconstitutional.

"What happened last night is the most direct assault on the authority of Congress, I believe, in the history of the United States," Sen. Angus King, an independent from Maine, said Tuesday.

While some Republicans were critical, most were supportive.

"I think he is testing the limits of his power, and I don't think any of us are surprised by it," said Sen. Kevin Cramer, a North Dakota Republican who is close with Trump.

At first blush, the Trump administration appeared to be following the correct procedures in identifying potential spending cuts, and the Impoundment Control Act outlines a procedure for how they could become permanent, said Rachel Snyderman, a former official at the Office of Management and Budget who is now at the Bipartisan Policy Center.

Congress must eventually sign off on any cuts the administration wants to make, Snyderman said, though she noted that no president since Bill Clinton, a Democrat, has been successful in getting that done. Congress did not act on \$14 billion in impoundment cuts Trump proposed during his prior term, she said.

"We have to see what the next steps are," Snyderman said.

The attempt to halt grants came after Trump, who during the campaign pledged to be "a dictator on day one," has taken a number of provocative moves to challenge legal constraints on his power. He fired the inspectors general of his Cabinet agencies without giving Congress the warning required by law, declared that there is an immigrant "invasion" despite low numbers of border crossings, is requiring loyalty pledges from new hires, challenged the constitutional guarantee of birthright citizenship and is moving career staff out of key positions at the Department of Justice to ensure his loyalists control investigations and prosecutions.

On Tuesday evening, the new administration made its latest move, trying to prune the federal workforce by offering pay until the end of September for those who agree to resign by the end of next week.

The Trump actions have all led to a cascade of court challenges contending he has overstepped his constitutional bounds. A federal judge in Seattle has already put on hold Trump's attempt to revoke birthright citizenship, calling it a blatant violation of the nation's foundational legal document. On Tuesday, nonprofit groups persuaded a federal judge in Washington to put the administration's spending freeze order on hold until a fuller hearing on Feb. 3.

Democratic attorneys general also rushed to court to block the order. New Mexico Attorney General Raul Torrez, a Democrat, said the swiftness of the court action against Trump's spending freeze demonstrates the "carelessness" of the order.

"My hope is that the president, working with Congress, can identify whatever his priorities are and can work through the normal constitutional order that is well established that limits the power of Democratic

and Republican presidents," he said.

The grant freeze — administration officials described it as a "pause" — fit with a long-sought goal of some Trump allies, including his nominee to run the Office of Management and Budget, Russell Vought, to challenge the constitutionality of the Impoundment Control Act. They contend the president, as the person in charge of distributing funds, should be able to have some control over how the money goes out.

Though there's little doubt the new administration wanted a court fight over its power to control spending, experts agree that this was likely not the way they hoped to present it.

"This is a really sloppy way of doing this," said Bill Galston, of the Brookings Institution, adding that he thought it was an administration error. "This is just classic Trump. He believes it's better to be fast and sloppy than slow and precise."

In her first press conference, Trump's new press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, on Tuesday urged organizations that need the grants to call the administration and show how their operations are "in line with the president's agenda."

"It's incumbent on this administration to make sure, again, that every penny is accounted for," Leavitt said.

Republican lawmakers largely took the freeze in stride.

"This isn't a huge surprise to me," said Rep. Dusty Johnson of South Dakota during the House Republican retreat at one of the president's Florida golf resorts. "Clearly, Donald Trump campaigned in no small part on the idea that the Biden administration was putting out a lot of money that was not consistent with Donald Trump's values."

But Democrats and others were furious at the move, which seemed designed to undercut congressional authority.

"If President Trump wants to change our nation's laws, he has the right to ask Congress to change them," Sen. Bernie Sanders, an independent from Vermont, said in a statement. "He does not have the right to violate the United States Constitution. He is not a king."

Chafetz, of Georgetown University, said the lack of pushback from Republican members of Congress was especially alarming because the legislative branch is the one whose powers are most at risk in the latest power play.

Even if Trump loses the legal battle, Chafetz said, he and his followers might feel like they've won by pushing things to this extreme.

"Damaging the institutions they don't like," he said, "seems to be their whole theory of governance."

Pauses on US foreign aid and other grants send funders and nonprofits scrambling

By THALIA BEATY Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Freezing foreign aid. Withdrawing from the Paris climate agreement. Prohibiting nonprofits that receive U.S. foreign aid from providing abortions.

Then Monday, the new Trump administration announced a freeze on all federal loans and grants, though that pause has been rescinded.

Nonprofits of all sizes are now grappling with how these changes will impact their missions — with some even stepping in to replace a very small part of the funding the U.S. government is withholding.

The U.S. government is the largest single global humanitarian funder, giving \$13.9 billion in 2024, and largest supporter of U.N. agencies, meaning any changes to foreign assistance have sweeping impacts across geographies and issues. The State Department and U.S. Agency for International Development are the main agencies that oversee foreign assistance, which Trump paused for 90 days to review if every grant and dollar aligns with his foreign policy.

Yuriy Boyechko, who founded the New Jersey-based nonprofit, Hope for Ukraine, said he woke up to a barrage of messages on Sunday from the grassroots organizations he works with in Ukraine. They feared what would happen if USAID stops making grants there.

He pointed specifically to programs sending trucks of firewood to rural areas that don't have electricity.

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The people who remain are often elderly and poor, he said, and use the wood both to heat their homes and to cook.

"I really don't know how they're going to get through the winter," he said.

The organizations that make the deliveries are mostly volunteer run, Boyechko said, and don't have the capacity to buy the wood or fuel needed to transfer it without regular funding from USAID's office in Kyiv. He suggested that anyone who is concerned about the funding for humanitarian aid in Ukraine call their representatives or the White House.

"What made America great and what makes America great is generosity. And this is not a good move for America, and this is not a good move for humanity as a whole," he said, noting that Ukraine has really relied on the U.S. for its support.

USAID said "all programs and grants without a waiver approved by the Secretary of State," are paused, but did not specifically say whether humanitarian aid to Ukraine would be halted.

In fiscal year 2023, the most recent data available, \$68 billion had been obligated in U.S. foreign aid to programs ranging from disaster relief to health and pro-democracy initiatives in 204 countries and regions.

It is not the first time billionaire philanthropist Mike Bloomberg has stepped in after Trump announced he was withdrawing from the landmark Paris climate agreement. The former New York City mayor pledged on Jan. 23 to fund the U.S. government's share of the budget for the main offices of U.N. Climate Change. He also covered the cost of the U.S. commitment from 2016 to 2019, in the amount of \$10.25 million.

"Being able to step in to be nimble and quick, not to replace the role of government, but just to show what's possible and to continue to move progress forward when governments are not, is really important to Bloomberg Philanthropies," said Antha Williams, who leads its environment program.

The U.N. climate body was established as part of the historic 2015 climate agreement that aims to keep warming under 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) above pre-industrial levels. It organizes the annual climate negotiations, where countries set emissions reduction targets and commit to financing climate adaptation and mitigation measures, and tracks progress toward those goals.

Williams said Bloomberg Philanthropies wanted to offer certainty to U.N. Climate Change that their budget would be met.

In addition to funding the U.N. Climate Change secretariat, Bloomberg Philanthropies will continue to support a coalition now named America is All In. It brings together local governments, companies and universities, who report on progress toward climate goals, which the federal government will stop doing after pulling out of the agreement.

Joanna Depledge, a historian of international climate negotiations, called that reporting "critical, as it provides a picture of trends in emissions and therefore progress made toward," the Paris agreement targets.

Communication from USAID and the State Department with their grantees and contractors has been sparse, according to attorneys and consultants who work with foreign aid recipients. The publication Devex, which reports on international development, convened a webinar of experts on foreign aid on Monday to field questions about how to comply with stop work orders, how to manage cash flows, the likelihood of receiving a waiver.

Susan Reichle, a retired senior USAID officer, said organizations need to make the case that their work is important not just to the agency, but to the American people and to Congress.

"Every day that goes by that the U.S. is not leading and meeting its obligations, whether contractual obligations or cooperative agreements or grants, we are actually hurting our national security," she said.

Some organizations are hit by both the pause on foreign aid and the order called the Global Gag Rule that prohibits nonprofits receiving U.S. foreign assistance from providing abortion services or even talking about abortion as a potential option.

MSI Reproductive Choices, an international nonprofit that provides reproductive health services, did not sign onto the rule under the last Trump administration, meaning that it hasn't won that much U.S. funding in recent years. Still, a mobile health clinic they run in Zimbabwe is funded through the U.S. embassy there, and Beth Schlachter, senior director of U.S. external relations, said that work would stop unless

another funder comes forward.

However, she said no amount of philanthropic funding can make up for the loss or pause of U.S. funds, meaning large donors are facing very difficult choices.

"Given the breadth of what's just happened in the last week, it's not as if other donors are only looking at gaps in reproductive health services now. They're looking across the range of their development concerns," she said.

Frontier makes a second bid for Spirit as budget airlines struggle

By MICHELLE CHAPMAN AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — No-frills, budget airlines often lead the industry in customer complaints, according to government data, so if one were to disappear would it be missed by travelers?

That is a question U.S. regulators will be asking after Frontier Airlines said Wednesday that it wanted to buy Spirit Airlines, which sought bankruptcy protection late last year.

Spirit said almost immediately that it's not interested in the sale, and an attempted merger between the two airlines came to nothing in 2022, yet Frontier has not indicated it is ready to take 'no' for an answer.

Other discount airlines are on much better financial footing than Spirit, but they too are lagging far behind the full-service airlines when it comes to recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic. Most industry experts think Frontier Airlines and other so-called ultra-low-cost carriers will fill the vacuum and that there is still plenty of competition to prevent prices from spiking.

And the most profitable U.S. airlines have begun winning over a larger share of travelers scouring for deals with new ticket offerings.

Frontier Group Holdings Inc., the parent company of Frontier Airlines, said Wednesday that the proposed deal would include newly issued Frontier debt and common stock.

Frontier tried to merge with Spirit in 2022 but was outbid by JetBlue. However, the Justice Department sued to block the \$3.8 billion JetBlue deal, saying it would drive up prices for Spirit customers who depend on low fares, and a federal judge agreed in January. JetBlue and Spirit dropped their merger bid two months later.

Spirit filed for bankruptcy protection in November. The biggest U.S. budget airline, Spirit filed a Chapter 11 bankruptcy petition after working out terms with bondholders. The airline has lost more than \$2.5 billion since the start of 2020 and faces looming debt payments totaling more than \$1 billion in 2025 and 2026.

The biggest U.S. airlines have snagged some of Spirit's budget-conscious customers by offering their own brand of bare-bones tickets. And fares for U.S. leisure travel — Spirit's core business — sagged this past summer because of a glut of new flights.

Frontier is optimistic that it can get a deal done this time around.

"This proposal reflects a compelling opportunity that will result in more value than Spirit's standalone plan by creating a stronger low fare airline with the long-term viability to compete more effectively and enter new markets at scale," Frontier Chair Bill Franke said in a statement. "We stand ready to continue discussions with Spirit and its financial stakeholders and believe that we can promptly reach agreement on a transaction."

Frontier said that since it submitted its offer, it has had talks with members of Spirit's board, management team, and representatives of Spirit's financial stakeholders.

In a regulatory filing, Spirit said that it had received a proposal from Frontier earlier this month and after reviewing it, found that the offer would be less beneficial to its shareholders than its existing plan. It said that barring any new developments, it would move forward with its own plans to exit Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection.

Shares of Frontier Group rose 6% Wednesday.

Trump looks to repurpose federal money to expand school choice programs

By COLLIN BINKLEY and ZEKE MILLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Private school vouchers and other school choice initiatives would expand under an order coming from President Donald Trump telling government agencies to repurpose federal dollars.

The Education Department is being told to use discretionary money to prioritize school choice programs and give states new guidance on how they can use federal money to support K-12 voucher programs.

The executive order that he plans to sign Wednesday could free up some pockets of federal money to be used on school choice, but it is not clear how far he could move the needle with federal money alone. The vast majority of school funding comes from state and local sources, and school choice policies are generally the purview of state governments.

The order says traditional public schools have failed students and that the new administration will reverse course “by opening up opportunities for students to attend the school that best fits their needs.”

Other agencies, including the departments of Defense and Health and Human Services and the Bureau of Indian Education, would be directed to help states and families find ways to use existing federal money for school choice programs.

The signing, as conservative groups are celebrating National School Choice, comes the same day that results from a national exam found that America’s students have continued to fall behind in reading and made little improvement in math in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The order cites the National Assessment of Educational Progress finding that 70% of eighth-grade students were not proficient in reading and 72% were not proficient in math.

Responding to the results, the Trump administration said it is “committed to reorienting our education system to fully empower states, to prioritize meaningful learning and provide universal access to high-quality instruction.”

Trump campaigned on a promise to expand school choice, long a key part of the Republican education agenda. He promised to create “massive funding preferences” for states that adopt universal school choice — a policy that lets almost all families use taxpayer-funded education money to attend private schools, homeschooling or other options beyond local public schools.

Arizona became the first state to adopt universal school choice in 2022 and several Republican-states have followed. Opponents say the policy is designed to gut public education.

During his first term, Trump also tried to expand school choice and he made Betsy DeVos, a prominent school choice advocate, as education secretary. DeVos worked with governors to expand state policies but failed to get Congress to pass legislation that would have provided tax breaks for donations made to scholarships for private schools or other education options.

Trump has nominated billionaire professional wrestling mogul Linda McMahon to serve as his next education chief. McMahon, whose Senate hearing has not been scheduled yet, has called for an expansion of school choice policies.

This year’s hottest Super Bowl ticket? Advertising space, Fox says

By MAE ANDERSON AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Get ready for an onslaught of ads full of celebrities, cute animals and snack brands during breaks in the action at Super Bowl 59 on Feb. 9, when the Philadelphia Eagles face the Kansas City Chiefs at the Caesars Superdome in New Orleans.

Anheuser-Busch, Meta, PepsiCo, Frito-Lay, Taco Bell, Uber Eats and others will vie to win over the more than 120 million viewers expected to tune in for the broadcast on Fox and via the free livestream on Tubi.

Demand for ad space was robust this year, said Mark Evans, executive vice president of ad sales for Fox Sports, with ad space selling out in November and a waitlist for marketers ready to take the space of anyone who pulled out.

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The high demand seems to have pushed prices to a record, with a few ad spots reportedly selling for a record \$8 million and even \$8 million-plus for 30 seconds. Fox declined to comment on the specific price tag for 30 seconds, which can vary depending on placement and other factors. But in an earnings call in November, CEO Lachlan Murdoch said ad space had sold out at "record pricing." Last year, a 30-second spot went for around a reported \$7 million.

The Super Bowl is a hot ticket for advertisers because the live viewing audience is so large. Last year, an estimated 123.7 million viewers tuned into the game, according to Nielsen.

Evans said the mix of ad categories for the most part includes the usual suspects: beverages, snacks, tech companies and telcos. There will be a focus on AI in more commercials, he said, and slightly more pharmaceutical companies advertising this year.

One category that's down is movie promos and streamers. Another traditionally big category for the Super Bowl, automakers, are mainly sitting it out after a tough year in the sector, with only Stellantis' Jeep and Ram brands having announced an appearance.

The California wildfires in January made the lead up to the game less predictable than usual. State Farm pulled out of its planned advertising to focus on the fires. And some other advertisers faced production delays. But Evans said accommodations were made wherever possible.

"These are unique circumstances. ... So we're being as accommodating as possible to try to make sure that everybody can get done what they need to get done," he said. "But more importantly, you know, don't put themselves or anybody else in harm's way because of it."

Advertisers are expected to begin releasing their ads in the days ahead of the game. One of the first ads to debut was an ad for Budweiser, featuring a Clydesdale foal that helps make a beer delivery.

Another Anheuser-Busch brand, Michelob Ultra, also released its ad, which shows Willem Dafoe and Catherine O'Hara as pickleball hustlers.

Hellmann's ad brings Meg Ryan and Billy Crystal back together for a reprise of the Katz's Deli scene in "When Harry Met Sally."

Teasers have abounded this year, from an Uber Eats teaser starring Charli XCX and Martha Stewart to Chris Hemsworth and Chris Pratt touting Meta's Smart Glasses.

What US adults think of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and his views on vaccines, fluoride and raw milk

By LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s anti-vaccine advocacy is outside the mainstream. His previous statements on abortion could alienate Republicans. But a new poll finds that not all of his controversial health goals are unpopular — in fact, at least one has broad support among Democrats and Republicans.

As Kennedy's Senate confirmation hearings begin, his bid to become the nation's top health official could depend on how staunchly he sticks to these personal beliefs during questioning. He has already softened some of his long-held views.

He's facing some skepticism from the public, according to a new survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research. Only about 3 in 10 US adults approve of President Donald Trump nominating him to be secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services. About 4 in 10 disapprove, while about one-quarter are either neutral or don't know enough to say.

But he has points of strength, too. Trump's choice of Kennedy is especially popular among Republicans: About 6 in 10 approve, compared to about 1 in 10 Democrats. And while many Americans disagree with some of Kennedy's controversial health stances — including beliefs around reevaluating childhood vaccine recommendations and changing guidelines around fluoride in drinking water and raw milk consumption — some of his other stances, like reformulating processed foods, are broadly popular.

Here's what AP-NORC polling shows about which of Kennedy's priorities are likely to be popular among U.S. adults and which might be less well-received.

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More oppose than support reevaluating widely used vaccines

Kennedy has long been a vaccine skeptic, and he and Trump have falsely claimed that childhood vaccines are dangerous and tied to rising autism rates. His opposition to vaccines is broad, and he has said that "there's no vaccine that is safe and effective."

AP-NORC polling suggests that reevaluating vaccine recommendations would be unpopular with many Americans.

About 4 in 10 Americans "strongly" or "somewhat" oppose reconsidering the government's recommendations around widely used vaccines, like the flu vaccine, and about 3 in 10 are in favor. Another 3 in 10 Americans, roughly, are neutral.

Republicans are more likely than Democrats to favor reconsidering government recommendations for widely used vaccines, although their support isn't overwhelming. About 4 in 10 Republicans favor reevaluating vaccine recommendations, compared with about 2 in 10 Democrats.

Wide support for restrictions on ingredients in processed foods

One of Kennedy's ideas is popular across the board: getting some chemicals out of processed foods. Kennedy has vowed to ban certain food additives and crack down on ultra-processed foods that are tied to obesity and diabetes rates.

About two-thirds of Americans "somewhat" or "strongly" favor restricting or reformulating processed foods to remove ingredients like added sugar or dyes. This is an area where Democrats and Republicans agree: About 7 in 10 in each group favor the restrictions.

Support is particularly high among U.S. adults with a higher household income, though research from the National Institutes of Health has indicated that ultra-processed foods are consumed at higher rates in low-income groups. Roughly 8 in 10 adults with a household income of \$100,000 or more per year support the restrictions, compared with about half of Americans with a household income of \$30,000 or less.

More oppose than support removing raw milk restrictions

Kennedy indicated before the election that he would be keen to end the Food and Drug Administration's "aggressive suppression" of raw milk. The FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention have called raw milk one of the "riskiest" foods people can consume because of the possibility for contamination.

This is a proposal for which he'd have to do some convincing to get the public on board. About 4 in 10 U.S. adults "strongly" or "somewhat" oppose removing restrictions on the sale of unpasteurized or raw milk. About 2 in 10 Americans favor this idea, with Republicans being more likely than Democrats to be in support. But even Republicans are split: About 3 in 10 are in favor, and about 3 in 10 are opposed.

Americans generally want Medicare and Medicaid to cover weight loss drugs

Kennedy has criticized prescription weight loss drugs like Ozempic, saying higher-quality food could solve the obesity problem in the U.S., but in December he pivoted, saying the drugs "have a place" in making sure people are not obese, in addition to lifestyle changes.

Americans see weight loss drugs as a good solution for adults who are obese. About half of U.S. adults say it's "very good" or "somewhat good" for adults to use weight loss drugs if they are struggling with obesity or a weight-related health condition. And about half also favor Medicare and Medicaid covering the cost of these drugs if they are prescribed for weight loss for people with obesity.

More oppose than support removing fluoride from drinking water

Kennedy has said he wants the federal government to advise local governments against putting fluoride in their drinking water. The CDC has said small amounts of added fluoride in drinking water prevent cavities and tooth decay.

More Americans are opposed than in favor of removing fluoride from drinking water, but many don't have an opinion on the issue, leaving room for shifts in either direction. About 4 in 10 Americans oppose removing fluoride from the water supply, and about one-quarter are in favor. An additional one-third are neutral, saying they don't favor or oppose it. About one-third of independents and Republicans favor it, compared with about 2 in 10 Democrats.

The idea of removing fluoride from drinking water is particularly unpopular with adults 60 and older, and

the data suggests that younger Americans might be more open to it. About half of adults 60 or older oppose removing fluoride from the water, compared with about 4 in 10 adults between the ages of 30 and 59. Only about 2 in 10 adults under 30 are opposed to this.

Kennedy's views on abortion may be at odds with Republicans

Kennedy has previously expressed support for abortion rights, which contradicts the beliefs of many of the Republican lawmakers who will need to confirm him, though he has said that he will follow Trump's directives on the topic.

He's in a bit of a bind on the issue. About 6 in 10 voters in November's election said abortion should be legal in all or most cases, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of more than 120,000 voters. About one-third said it should be illegal in all or most instances. But like the Republican senators who will be questioning him, conservative voters see the issue differently. Among Republican voters, about 6 in 10 said abortion should be illegal in at least "most" cases, and only about 4 in 10 said it should be mostly legal.

Passenger plane catches fire at South Korean airport.

All 176 people on board are evacuated

By HYUNG-JIN KIM Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — A passenger plane caught fire before takeoff at an airport in South Korea late Tuesday, but all 176 people on board were safely evacuated, authorities said.

The Airbus plane operated by South Korean airline Air Busan was preparing to leave for Hong Kong when its rear parts caught fire at Gimhae International Airport in the southeast, the Transport Ministry said in a statement.

The plane's 169 passengers, six crewmembers and one engineer were evacuated using an escape slide, the ministry said.

The National Fire Agency said in a release that three people suffered minor injuries during the evacuation. The fire agency said the fire was completely put out at 11:31 p.m., about one hour after it deployed firefighters and fire trucks at the scene.

The cause of the fire wasn't immediately known. The Transport Ministry said the plane is an A321 model.

Tuesday's incident came a month after a Jeju Air passenger plane crashed at Muan International Airport in southern South Korea, killing all but two of the 181 people on board. It was one of the deadliest disasters in South Korea's aviation history.

The Boeing 737-800 skidded off the airport's runway on Dec. 29 after its landing gear failed to deploy, slamming into a concrete structure and bursting into flames. The flight was returning from Bangkok and all of the victims were South Koreans except for two Thai nationals.

The first report on the crash released Monday said authorities have confirmed traces of bird strikes in the plane's engines, though officials haven't determined the cause of the accident.

Tiger poachers use fishing boats to smuggle body parts out of Malaysia, study shows

By DAVID RISING Associated Press

BANGKOK (AP) — Commercial fishing fleets have been playing a key role in trafficking parts of tigers poached in Malaysia, according to research released Wednesday that could help enforcement efforts to save the critically endangered cat.

The fishing boats are part of a network of routes used by sophisticated teams of poachers to move parts of illegally killed Malayan Tigers and other poached animals to Vietnam, according to the study by conservation organizations Panthera and ZSL in conjunction with Malaysia's Sunway University.

Through interviews with more than four dozen people involved in the operations, including poachers and those who brokered sales of the illicit goods, researchers found that fishing boats were able to carry larger consignments, cheaper, and less likely to be checked by customs than land or air routes.

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"To really crack a problem and insert the right intervention that's going to have any impact you have to understand the thing inside out," said Panthara's Rob Pickles, the lead author of the study, in a phone interview from Kuala Lumpur. "That's what we hope that this study does — contribute to that depth of understanding of the problem to allow us to tailor the interventions."

From a population estimated at some 3,000 tigers in the middle of the 20th century, the latest estimates are that there are only about 150 of the cats left in Malaysia and they have already gone extinct in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam over the last 25 years.

In addition to poaching, tigers have lost much of their habitat to deforestation, and they have been falling victim in recent years to the canine distemper virus while a major source of food, the wild boar, has been decimated by the African swine fever virus.

"It's their last gasp," Pickles said. "This is the last chance to turn things around."

The tigers live in the forests of peninsular Malaysia, which is connected by land to Thailand to the north. They have also been targeted by poachers from Malaysia, Cambodia and Thailand, but researchers said the Vietnamese teams operate on a "different order of magnitude."

Almost all from the poor, rural and rugged province of Quang Binh, where many took to the jungles to escape relentless American bombing during the Vietnam War, the poachers use well-honed bushcraft skills to live as small teams in the forests for three to five months at a time on poaching excursions.

They capture wild tigers with heavy steel snares made of wires as thick as a person's index finger, as well as other animals.

Once caught, the tigers are killed and processed largely for their bones, which are boiled for days until they become a gelatinous glue-like substance that is pressed into small blocks and sold for perceived medicinal benefits. Claws and teeth are used to make amulets.

As Malaysia went on lockdown during the COVID pandemic, poaching operations came to a near standstill. The researchers were able to use the time to find and interview more than 50 individuals involved in the operations for the study, which was done in two phases concluding in 2024.

Researchers learned that fishing boats were also used to carry bear paws and bile, live civets, wild boar tusks and meat, pangolins, monitor lizards and turtles.

One person told researchers the fishing boats were ideal to send larger items like tiger skins.

"Nobody checks," the interviewee was quoted as saying. "In addition, people can go back by boat so many things also can be brought back by this route."

Malaysia and Vietnam have both been increasing maritime controls recently, making trafficking by fishing boats riskier.

Malaysian authorities have also had success in catching poachers and have substantially increased punishments for wildlife crime in recent years, though the study also found that the managers who send the teams into the forests are rarely caught and can easily recruit replacements.

Researchers also learned that many Vietnamese poachers take on significant debt to travel to Malaysia.

They recommend that in addition to focusing more on fishing boats, authorities should target potential poachers in their home villages in Quang Binh with information about the increasing risks and diminishing returns to try and dissuade them from coming to Malaysia in the first place.

Officials in Malaysia and Vietnam, both of which were celebrating public holidays this week, did not respond to requests for comment on the survey and its recommendations.

"We can't arrest our way out of a problem or over-rely on the criminal justice system," said ZSL's Gopalasamy Reuben Clements, a co-author of the report.

"We need to explore other approaches, such as highly targeted behavioral change interventions, that can run in parallel to arrests and prosecutions."

A mysterious meeting with Syrian president is at the center of spy chief's nomination fight

By BYRON TAU Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — When Tulsi Gabbard returned to Washington from a clandestine sit-down with Syria's then-president Bashar Assad eight years ago this month, she was greeted with a flurry of criticism.

Lawmakers and civil society groups chastised Gabbard, then a Hawaii congresswoman, for her meeting with an avowed U.S. adversary whose administration has been credibly accused of war crimes and major human rights abuses. A Republican congressman even called the meeting a "disgrace."

At the time, Gabbard defended the trip by saying she had gone to try to find a peaceful resolution to a long and bloody conflict. But the details of what the pair discussed remain a mystery — dogging Gabbard to this day and has taken on new salience as rebels have swept Assad from power and President Donald Trump has nominated her to be the nation's spy chief.

Gabbard can afford to only lose votes from three Republican senators if all Democrats oppose her nomination. Several GOP lawmakers have refused to say how they will vote. Echoing other Republicans, Sen. Lindsey Graham told NBC's "Meet the Press" over the weekend that he needed to see how Gabbard handled her confirmation hearing, slated for Thursday, before making a decision. Among the top questions Graham wants answered: "Why did you go to Syria? What did you do regarding Assad?"

A key moment in Gabbard's eight-year stint on Capitol Hill, the Assad sit-down also provides insights into the nominee's worldview and is emblematic of an unorthodox and iconoclastic approach to politics that has fueled her rise from progressive favorite to one of Trump's most vocal defenders in the 2024 campaign. Since arriving in Washington in 2013 as a Democratic legislator representing Hawaii, Gabbard has routinely staked out foreign policy and national security positions that put her on the opposite side of every presidential administration, including Trump's.

Bipartisan questions about Gabbard and trip

Lawmakers of both parties have said Gabbard's meeting with Assad raises questions about the judgment and worldview of someone tapped to be Trump's director of national intelligence. Trump and his allies have brushed off criticism of Gabbard's face-to-face with Assad. "I met with Putin. I met with President Xi of China. I met with Kim Jong-un twice. Does that mean that I can't be president?" Trump said on NBC in December, adding that Gabbard is a "highly respected person."

Alexa Henning, a spokesperson for the Trump transition, said the trip was approved by the House ethics panel at the time, included debriefings with top U.S. officials and congressional leaders upon her return, and has generated very little interest from senators in the nominee's private meetings on Capitol Hill.

But those who study national security issues say there has never been as enigmatic a choice for the post as Gabbard.

And it's not just about her trip to Syria. Among her most controversial positions: She's called for pardoning intelligence contractor Edward Snowden, who leaked numerous highly classified programs in 2013, and she has advocated unwinding key intelligence programs that spy agencies have come to rely on. (A transition spokeswoman says she's changed her position on the intelligence law.)

Critics over the years have accused her of taking stances sympathetic to Russia. And she has advocated against the prosecution of Wikileaks founder Julian Assange, a bête noir of the U.S. spy agencies for more than a decade who ran an organization that Trump's former CIA director Mike Pompeo called a "hostile intelligence service." Assange pleaded guilty last year to publishing U.S. military secrets in a deal with federal prosecutors that secured his release, ended his high-profile case, and allowed him to avoid prison time in the U.S.

"She's a highly unusual choice to be director of national intelligence," Jamil N. Jaffer, executive director of the National Security Institute at George Mason University and a former senior Capitol Hill staffer and Bush administration official.

"President Trump has nominated a bunch of people that are mainstream and will get through because nobody's going to object to them," Jaffer said. "Then there's a few that leave you scratching your head."

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Gabbard's rise

A combat veteran and a one-time rising star in the Democratic Party and a progressive darling, Gabbard has drifted rightward and found common cause with Trump and other populist figures in his political orbit.

One of the throughlines in Gabbard's career is her skepticism about the wisdom of using U.S. power abroad. That view has won her plaudits in certain circles on both the progressive left and Trump's MAGA base, amid a roiling debate in both political parties over whether the U.S. should play a leadership role in global affairs or look more inward.

Gabbard came to Congress in 2013, just as the Syria conflict took center-stage in U.S. foreign policy. The conflict grew out of the regional Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 but unlike some of the other authoritarian governments in the region, the Assad regime clung to power with assistance from Iran and Russia.

Over time, Gabbard would transition from questioning the wisdom or legality of certain aspects of U.S.-Syria policy to questioning the facts being presented to the public.

In 2015, Gabbard was part of a congressional trip led by Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., to the Turkish-Syrian border to see the impact of the war. As part of that trip, they visited Gaziantep, where civilians from Syria were receiving medical treatment across the border in Turkey.

Mouaz Mustafa, who is the executive director for the Syrian Emergency Task Force and who was serving as a translator for Gabbard and other members of Congress on that visit to the border, recalled a conversation between the congresswoman and several young girls who were getting treatment from injuries sustained in airstrikes by regime forces. When the girls recounted being injured by Syrian airplanes, Gabbard questioned their story, Mustafa claimed.

"Her response was, 'How do you know it was Assad and Russia and not ISIS?'" Mustafa recalled of the exchange. "Ludicrous question: ISIS doesn't have airplanes." Henning, the spokeswoman for the Trump transition, denied the exchange occurred.

Two years later, she echoed similar doubts about the Trump administration's assessment that the Assad regime used sarin gas to attack civilians. A United Nations panel and numerous other foreign governments came to the same conclusion. The Trump administration conducted airstrikes in response to the attack, an attack Gabbard opposed.

The Syria Trip

She departed on her 2017 trip to Syria just before Trump took office. It was arranged by two Arab-American brothers, Bassam and Elias Khawam. According to people who know the Khawams but did not want to speak publicly against fellow members of the tight-knit Arab-American community, they are Lebanese-Americans with a history of activism in Arab American political circles particularly on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

Bassam has also long been active in U.S. politics. Since 2005, he's donated more than \$40,000 to mostly Democratic political candidates according to federal campaign finance records — though he's occasionally crossed party lines, supporting Ralph Nader's 2008 Green Party presidential bid, Republican Justin Amash for Congress and Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign.

The Khawams also have ties to a foreign political movement: the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, a right-wing nationalist movement that advocates the integration of Lebanon into an enlarged Syria state. The party was allied for a time with the Assad regime — and the brothers were part of a broader split inside the Arab-American community over how to respond to the Syrian civil war.

Some Arab Americans saw Assad as a bulwark against terrorism — seeing the anti-Assad forces as tied to Islamic terrorists while many others were appalled by decades of authoritarian rule and human rights violations and supported any effort to oust the Assads.

"In the U.S., there are segments of the Syrian diaspora that support the Assad regime. This includes Syrian Christians and some Syrian Muslims. That community has mobilized in various ways to support the regime," said Steven Heydemann, a Middle East expert who is a professor at Smith College and a fellow at the nonpartisan Brookings Institution. "Seeing Gabbard as someone who could further their cause, (the Khawams) brought her to Syria to emphasize their narrative and attempt to temper U.S. opposition."

Democratic U.S. Rep. Dennis Kucinich, who received campaign donations over the years from the Kha-

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wams, joined Gabbard on the trip. Kucinich, like Gabbard, is a Democrat-turned-independent and a long-time critic of U.S. foreign policy. The two are political allies, having endorsed each other's various runs for office. He did not respond to calls seeking comment — but the trip was a major controversy during his unsuccessful 2018 run for Ohio governor.

Gabbard did not publicize her trip before she left, and upon her return, she described it as a "fact-finding" mission. Even her own staff was unaware of her plans and struggled to reconstruct the trip when she began filing required congressional disclosure forms, according to a Washington Post report. She did not disclose many details about what she discussed in her meetings in Lebanon and Syria. Under questioning from reporters upon her return, she admitted she sat down with Assad.

"When the opportunity arose to meet with him, I did so because I felt that it's important that if we profess to truly care about the Syrian people, about their suffering, then we've got to be able to meet with anyone that we need to if there is a possibility that we can achieve peace," Gabbard told CNN at the time. In 2019, she went further, saying in an interview on MSNBC: "Assad is not the enemy of the United States because Syria does not pose a direct threat to the United States."

Gabbard's official itinerary filed three weeks after she returned in a disclosure report to Congress showed two meetings with Assad that lasted a total of two hours — plus an additional meeting with the first lady of Syria, the Syrian foreign minister and the Syrian ambassador to the United Nations. In Lebanon, she also met with a wide variety of civil society figures.

To Gabbard's supporters and allies, she was merely expressing a realpolitik critique of the U.S. rush to push out Assad — a conflict that she feared might lead to another protracted war. "In no way was she defending Assad. She has called him a brutal dictator," said Henning, the Trump transition spokeswoman.

But others saw her rhetoric as echoing talking points and policy positions held by America's adversaries, particularly Russia. The Kremlin was among Assad's strongest backers in terms of political and military support. Hillary Clinton called her a "Russian asset" in 2019 — a charge that led Gabbard to file a libel lawsuit against the former secretary of state that was later dropped.

More recently, Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley called Gabbard a "Russian, Iranian, Syrian, Chinese sympathizer."

Senate Republicans have been more muted in their criticism since her nomination was announced. But they nevertheless hope to glean some answers about her discussions with Assad, who fled to Russia after his regime was toppled.

Sen James Lankford, a Republican from Oklahoma who sits on the intelligence panel that will consider her nomination, said on CNN: "We'll have lots of questions. She met with Bashar Assad. We'll want to know what the purpose and what the direction for that was."

Police say at least 30 people have died in a stampede at the massive Maha Kumbh festival in India

By RAJESH KUMAR SINGH and SHEIKH SAALIQ Associated Press

PRAYAGRAJ, India (AP) — At least 30 people were killed and many more injured in a stampede at the world's largest religious gathering early Wednesday, police said, as millions of pilgrims rushed to dip in sacred waters during the Maha Kumbh festival in northern India.

Police officer Vaibhav Krishna in Prayagraj city said another 60 injured were rushed to hospitals.

Wednesday was a sacred day in the six-week Hindu festival, and authorities expected a record 100 million devotees to engage in a ritual bath at the confluence of the Ganges, the Yamuna and the mythical Saraswati rivers. Hindus believe that a dip at the holy site can cleanse them of past sins and end the process of reincarnation.

The stampede happened when pilgrims tried to jump barricades erected for a procession of holy men, Uttar Pradesh state's top elected official, Yogi Adityanath, said in a televised statement.

The event's main draw is the thousands of ash-smearing Hindu ascetics who make massive processions

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toward the confluence to bathe.

Indian authorities took more than 16 hours to release casualty figures, even as Prime Minister Narendra Modi acknowledged the loss of lives, calling the incident "extremely sad" and extending his condolences.

"Suddenly there was pushing in the crowd, and we got trapped. A lot of us fell down and the crowd went uncontrolled," the Press Trust of India news agency quoted pilgrim Sarojini as saying. "There was no chance for escape, there was pushing from all sides," she said.

Distressed families lined up outside a makeshift hospital, desperate for news of missing loved ones. Clothes, blankets and backpacks were strewn around the site of the stampede.

Millions continued to throng the 4,000-hectare (15-square mile) pilgrimage site despite the stampede, even as police urged them over megaphones to avoid the confluence. Adityanath urged people to take baths at other riverbanks instead.

"The situation is now under control, but there is a massive crowd of pilgrims," Adityanath said, adding that 90 million to 100 million pilgrims were at the site.

About 30 million people had taken the holy bath by 8 a.m. Wednesday, he said.

The Maha Kumbh festival, held every 12 years, started on Jan. 13. Authorities expect more than 400 million people to throng the pilgrimage site in total. Nearly 150 million people have already attended, including Defense Minister Rajnath Singh and Home Minister Amit Shah and celebrities like Coldplay's Chris Martin.

A sprawling tent city has been built on the riverbanks to accommodate the millions of visitors, with roads, electricity and water, 3,000 kitchens and 11 hospitals.

About 50,000 security personnel are stationed in the city to maintain law and order and manage crowds, and more than 2,500 cameras monitor crowd movement and density so officials can try to prevent such crushes.

Several opposition leaders criticized the federal and the state government, both led by Modi's Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata party, and blamed the stampede on "mismanagement" and "VIP culture" — the latter referring to what they say is preferential treatment for politicians and celebrities.

"The government should make better arrangements to meet the needs of common devotees," Indian opposition leader Rahul Gandhi wrote on social platform X.

The 45-day festival is a significant cultural event for India's Hindus, who make up nearly 80% of the country's more than 1.4 billion people. It's also a prestige event for Modi, whose ruling party boasts of promoting Hindu cultural symbols.

The Maha Kumbh festival has had stampedes in the past. In 2013, at least 40 pilgrims who were taking part in the festival were killed in a stampede at a train station in Prayagraj.

Deadly stampedes are relatively common around Indian religious festivals, where large crowds gather in small areas. In July at least 116 people died, most of them women and children, when thousands at a religious gathering in northern India stampeded at a tent camp in Hathras town.

Today in History: January 30, Gandhi assassinated in New Delhi

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Jan. 30, the 30th day of 2025. There are 335 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Jan. 30, 1948, Indian political and spiritual leader Mohandas K. Gandhi, 78, was shot and killed in New Delhi by Nathuram Godse (neh-too-RAHM' gahd-SAY'), a Hindu extremist.

Also on this date:

In 1649, England's King Charles I was executed for high treason.

In 1933, Adolf Hitler was named chancellor of Germany.

In 1945, during World War II, a Soviet submarine torpedoed the German ship MV Wilhelm Gustloff in the Baltic Sea, killing over 9,000, most of them war refugees; roughly 1,000 people survived.

In 1968, the Tet Offensive began during the Vietnam War as Communist forces launched surprise attacks against South Vietnamese towns and cities.

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In 1969, The Beatles staged an unannounced concert atop Apple headquarters in London that would be their last public performance.

In 1972, 13 Catholic civil rights marchers were shot and killed by British soldiers in Northern Ireland on what became known as "Bloody Sunday."

In 2017, President Donald Trump fired Acting U.S. Attorney General Sally Yates after she publicly questioned the constitutionality of his controversial refugee and immigration ban and refused to defend it in court.

In 2020, health officials reported the first known case in which the new coronavirus was spread from one person to another in the United States.

Today's birthdays: Actor Gene Hackman is 95. Actor Vanessa Redgrave is 88. Former U.S. Vice President Dick Cheney is 84. Musician Phil Collins is 74. Actor Charles S. Dutton ("Roc") is 74. Golf Hall of Famer Curtis Strange is 70. Actor Ann Dowd ("The Handmaid's Tale") is 69. Comedian Brett Butler ("Grace Under Fire") is 67. Singer Jody Watley is 66. Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Mike Johnson is 53. Actor Christian Bale is 51. Actor Olivia Colman is 51. Actor Wilmer Valderrama ("That '70s Show") is 45. Rapper-musician Kid Cudi is 41.