

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Saturday, Feb. 8

Girls Basketball at DAK XII/NEC Clash at Madison. Groton Area vs. Elk Point-Jefferson at 2:45 p.m.  
Common Cents Community Thrift Store, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m., 209 N Main

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



## Sunday, Feb. 9

### SUPER BOWL SUNDAY

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

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship with communion/milestones/Souper Bowl of Caring, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.

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

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

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

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

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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.**

## **Alaska Plane Crash**

Rescue crews yesterday recovered the wreckage of a downed small passenger plane that went missing over the Bering Sea off Alaska's western coast. All 10 people aboard the aircraft are presumed to be dead. The incident is the third major US aviation tragedy since last week.

The aircraft, operated by regional carrier Bering Air, had nine passengers and a pilot on board when its altitude dropped and its position was lost 12 miles offshore around 4 pm local time Thursday. The cause of the crash is unclear. The plane took off from Unalakleet, Alaska, and was crossing the Norton Sound, an inlet of the Bering Sea, on its way to Nome, Alaska—typically less than an hourlong flight. Weather conditions included light snow, gusty winds, and limited visibility.

The incident comes after a US Army helicopter and an American Airlines regional jet collided Jan. 29 near Washington, DC's Reagan National Airport, killing 67 people. Two days later, at least seven people died when a medical transport plane crashed in a Philadelphia neighborhood shortly after takeoff.

## **US economy adds 143,000 jobs in January, short of expectations.**

The nonfarm payroll growth for last month is down from 307,000 jobs added in December and below economists' estimates of 169,000. The unemployment rate fell slightly to 4% from 4.1% in December. Average hourly earnings rose 0.5% month over month and 4.1% year over year—both higher than expected.

## **UK to demolish Grenfell Tower eight years after deadly fire.**

The UK government is set to take down the remains of the London social housing unit after a June 2017 fire—the deadliest in Britain since World War II—killed 72 people (see overview). Some families of the victims oppose the decision, hoping to preserve the building as a memorial, but officials argue redeveloping the site will help the community heal.

## **Gastrointestinal outbreak on Caribbean cruise sickens over 90 people.**

The outbreak has affected 89 passengers and two crew members on Royal Caribbean's Radiance of the Seas cruise, which departed from Tampa, Florida, earlier this month. Passengers have predominantly been experiencing diarrhea and vomiting. The CDC was notified of the outbreak Tuesday and is monitoring the situation.

## **Heavy weekend snow and ice to strike US Midwest and Northeast.**

The US Midwest and Northeast are bracing for a series of winter storms, with some areas, including parts of Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan, New York, Connecticut, and Rhode Island seeing over 5 inches of snow. A wintry mix of sleet and freezing rain is expected in other regions, making roads slippery and travel hazardous.

## **New York governor closes poultry markets after bird flu detected in NYC.**

Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) ordered a weeklong shutdown of live bird markets in New York City, Westchester, and Long Island Friday after seven cases of avian flu were detected. The move, aimed at preventing the spread of the avian influenza, will remain in effect through Feb. 14. The CDC maintains risk to the public is low.

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## Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Richard B. in Springfield, New Jersey.

"My daughter left her handbag with her phone and passport in the back of a taxi in Paris on the eve of a Sunday. Flight with her family was scheduled for 1 pm the next day. At 2:30 am, our phone rings in New Jersey with a 510 area code. When it rings a second time, my wife answered. A voice says, 'Please don't hang up as I have been trying to call someone for the last 6 hours. I work for Boeing in Seattle and my sister lives on the outskirts of Paris and has Felice U.'s pocket book. She doesn't speak English but would like to return it. Her husband found it in the back of his cab.'"

"Our daughter contacted her concierge and arrangements were made for the brother-in-law to come to the hotel. This was accomplished by 10 am and they made the plane home in time. We still are not sure how the man in Seattle was able to trace us to NJ but his detective work and persistence in attempting to find someone is amazing. Upon their return, my daughter and her family found multiple calls from him on the home phone and my son-in-law's cell phone documenting his persistent efforts. There are, indeed, good people in this world."

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## GFP Announces Online Walleye Fishing Challenge

The South Dakota Game, Fish and Parks is announcing a groundbreaking, online, walleye fishing challenge. The Midwest Walleye Challenge, hosted by Anglersatlas.com and the MyCatch app, will include South Dakota, Nebraska, Iowa, Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan, and will run from April 1 - June 29.

This online challenge is part of a multi-state research project aimed to assess the walleye fishery across the Midwest. This is a Citizen Science event, so anglers reporting all of their catches is very important. Reporting all catches ensures that the data collected are representative of the angler's actual fishing effort and qualifies them for more prizes.

"South Dakota has many waters which cannot all be surveyed each year. Anglers can provide walleye lengths to show biologists what is present in more waterbodies than we can reach," said Brian Blackwell, regional fisheries biologist.

In addition to information on lakes not surveyed for the year, Blackwell said that on lakes GFP did survey, they can compare angler-caught fish lengths to the Department's sampling efforts.

"Reported catches will also provide data on walleye recruitment," said Blackwell. "We can use this information to see if young year classes are present and to what extent."

"Another important use of this data is to see where anglers are fishing and could result in increased fish management and access improvements or projects," Blackwell said.

The South Dakota angler data can be compared to other regional states participating in the Walleye Challenge.

"We think this is a great way to get information from the people who are out fishing," Blackwell said. "Our anglers love our quality fisheries, and this is a way for them to share their knowledge and data with us."

The Midwest Walleye Challenge is \$25 to enter, but upon entering their first fishing outing, participants will receive a \$20 gift certificate to Discount Tackle.

Coming up on GDILIVE.COM

Groton Area  
Tigers  
**GT**



Saturday, Feb. 08

**Girls DAK XII-NEC Clash**

**at Madison**

**2:45 p.m.**

**Groton Area**

**vs.**

**Elk Point-Jefferson**

Sponsored by Agtegra, Avantara Groton, Bierman Farm Service, BK Custom T's & More, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Farmers Union Co-op of Ferney and Conde, 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.**

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**Tina's Baskets! Text/Call at 605-397-7285 to reserve your basket now. They are going fast! Cash, check or Venmo.**



**2. White vase with sour suckers. \$7.50**



**3. Kit Kat Cake with Valentine suckers on top. \$35**



**4. Hersheys Cake, two tier with strawberry hard candy. \$40**



**7. Valentine container with fake roses and white bears. \$5**



**8. Reeses candy bars with Valentine suckers. \$50**



**9. Heart basket with assorted candy. \$15**



**10. Vase filled with strawberry drops and chocolate rose candy. \$9**



**12. Valentine's love balloon with fake flowers, MMs, skittles. \$15**



**14. Mini chip ahoy's cookies, be mine valentines book, a bear with a love heart on it and some hot wheels in it. \$12**



**15. Betsie Voucher book, puppy, mini chocolate hearts. Behind the dog a bag of heart bear gummies and a small box of mix chocolates. \$12**

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BROWN COUNTY  
BROWN COUNTY COMMISSION AGENDA  
REGULAR MEETING TUESDAY

February 11, 2025, 8:45 A.M.

COMMISSIONER'S CHAMBERS, COURTHOUSE ANNEX - 25 MARKET STREET, ABERDEEN SD

1. Call To Order - Pledge of Allegiance
2. Approval of the Agenda
3. Scott Meints, Emergency Management Director
  - a. Life Saving Awards
4. Opportunity for Public Comment
5. Dirk Rogers, Highway Superintendent
  - a. Bid Openings for
    - i. Gravel
    - ii. Hot Mix
    - iii. Road Oil
    - iv. Equipment Rental
6. Patricia Kendall, Dacotah Prairie Museum Director
  - a. Discuss Parking Lot for Museum Expansion
7. Approve & Authorize Chairman to sign for the Landfill
  - a. 2024 Annual Compliance Certification Report/2024 Operations Report – Air Emissions Inventory
  - b. Houston Engineering Monitoring & Consulting Services for 2025
8. Consent Calendar
  - a. Approval of General Meeting Minutes of February 4, 2025
  - b. Claims/Payroll
  - c. HR Report
  - d. Claim Assignments
  - e. Leases
  - f. Set Hearing Date/Authorize Publication for Special Event Liquor License Permit
  - g. Abatements
  - h. Travel Requests
9. Other Business
10. Executive Session (if requested per SDCL 1-25-2)
11. Adjourn

Brown County Commission Meeting

**Please join my meeting from your computer, tablet, or smartphone.**

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Public comment provides an opportunity for the public to address the county commission.

Presentations may not exceed 3 minutes.

Public comment will be limited to 10 minutes (or at the discretion of the board) - Public comment will be accepted virtually when the virtual attendance option is available.

Official Recordings of Commission Meetings along with the Minutes can be found at <https://www.brown.sd.us/node/454>

## Vermillion's Free-Throw Mastery Lifts Tanagers Over Groton Area

VERMILLION - In a game defined by precision at the free-throw line, the Vermillion Tanagers secured a 75-65 victory over the Groton Area Tigers on Friday night. While the Tigers held the early momentum, Vermillion's consistency at the charity stripe proved to be the difference-maker.

### Strong Start for Groton

After an early 2-2 tie, Groton Area came out firing, taking a 22-14 lead at the end of the first quarter. The Tigers executed well offensively, moving the ball efficiently and knocking down shots from beyond the arc. Ryder Johnson led the charge, providing a steady scoring presence throughout the contest.

However, Vermillion responded in the second quarter, tying the game at 22 before ultimately edging ahead by halftime, 39-33. The Tanagers' ability to get to the free-throw line started to emerge as a major factor, and Groton's foul trouble loomed large.

### Third Quarter Battle

The third quarter was a back-and-forth thriller, featuring three ties and three lead changes. Both teams traded blows in a high-intensity stretch, with Groton determined to stay in contention. As time wound down, Carter Hansen delivered a clutch shot at the buzzer, giving Vermillion a slim 54-51 advantage heading into the final period.

### Free Throws Seal the Game for Vermillion

The fourth quarter belonged to Trey Hansen, who was nearly automatic from the line. Hansen drained 9 of his 11 free-throw attempts in the quarter alone, finishing the game with an impressive 34 points, including 19-of-21 from the stripe. Carter Hansen added another 4-of-6 free throws in the final minutes, ensuring Vermillion kept control.

Groton's foul struggles caught up with them, as they committed 23 team fouls throughout the game. The Tanagers capitalized, making 28 of 35 free throws- an outstanding 80% -which proved to be the decisive factor.

### Individual Performances

Alongside Trey Hansen's dominant 34-point outing, Carter Hansen contributed 17 points. Landon Cerny added 9, Gabe Larson had 8, and Luke Jensen chipped in 7 for the Tanagers.

For Groton, Ryder Johnson delivered a stellar 28-point performance, also dishing out six assists and recording a block. Gage Sippel provided 11 points and four rebounds, while Becker Bosma had 9 points and grabbed a team-high seven rebounds. Karson Zac added 8 points before fouling out with just over five minutes remaining.

The Tigers shot well from the field, going 12-of-22 (55%) on two-pointers and 11-of-28 (39%) from beyond the arc. However, their 8-of-12 performance from the free-throw line (67%) was no match for Vermillion's efficiency.

### JV & C-Team Action

Groton Area found success in the junior varsity matchup, securing



**Gage Sippel**

(Photo by Paul Kosel)



**Jayden Schwan**

(Photo by Paul Kosel)

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a 40-24 victory after a dominant 17-point run that extended from the second to third quarter. Easton Weber led the Tigers with 17 points, while Jayden Schwan and Logan Warrington each added 5.

In the C-team contest, Groton also emerged victorious with a 35-30 win. Asher Johnson paced the Tigers with 12 points, and Anthony Tracy followed with 8.

## Looking Ahead

With the win, Vermillion improves to 13-3 on the season, continuing their strong campaign. Groton Area, now 10-5, will look to regroup and bounce back in their next contest, hosting Leola-Frederick on Tuesday.

- story compiled by ChatGPT

Ryder Johnson: 28 points, 1 rebounds, 6 assists, 3 fouls 1 block.  
Gage Sippel: 11 points, 4 rebounds, 2 fouls.  
Becker Bosma: 9 points, 7 rebounds, 5 assists, 2 fouls.  
Karson Zak: 8 points, 2 rebounds, 2 assists, 5 fouls.  
Keegen Tracy: 3 points, 1 rebound 5 assists, 1 steal, 4 fouls.  
Easton Weber: 3 points, 2 fouls.  
Jayden Schwan: 3 points, 2 rebounds, 2 fouls.  
Turner Thompson: 1 foul.  
Taylor Diegel: 1 foul.  
2-pointers: 12-22 55%, 3-pointers: 11-28 39%, Free Throws: 8-12 67%, 17 rebounds, 12 turnovers, 18 assists, 1 steal, 23 fouls, 1 block.

Vermillion: Trey Hansen 34, Carter Hansen 17, Landon Cerney 9, Gabe Larsen 8, Luke Jensen 7.

Field Goals: 20-31 65%, Free Throws: 28-35 80%, 11 fouls, 11 points.

3-Pointers: Groton Area: Ryder Johnson 4, Becker Bosma 3, Keegen Tracy 1, Karson Zak 1, Easton Weber 1, Jayden Schwan 1. Vermillion: Carter Hansen 2, Gabe Larsen 2, Landon Cerney 1, Luke Jensen 1, Trey Hansen 1.

Junior Varsity: Groton Area 40, Vermillion 24.  
Groton Area: Easton Weber 17, Jayden Schwan 5, Logan Warrington 5, Ryder Schelle 3, Ethan Kroll 3, Asher Johnson 3, Anthony Tracy 2, Jordan Schwan 2.  
Vermillion: Spencer Blanchette 6, Henry Orr 6, Tysen Hovden 5, Cameron Bottolfson 3, Grant Roerig 2, Daxton Christensen 2.

C Game: Groton Area 35, Vermillion 30  
Groton Area: Asher Johnson 12, Anthony Tracy 8, Jordan Schwan 6, Ethan Kroll 4, Connor Kroll 3, Jace Johnson 2.  
Vermillion: Luca Solomon 10, Tysen Hovden 7, Henry Orr 5, Grant Roerig 2, Daxton Christensen 2, Shane Slattery 2, Cameron Bottolfson 2.

All three games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. Varsity sponsors were 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. Hefty Seed sponsored the junior varsity game while the C game was sponsored for the grandparents watching.



**Ryder Johnson**

(Photo by Paul Kosel)





## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

### Committee advances bills requiring Ten Commandments and state motto in SD schools

**Commandments bill nears final passage; motto bill, which took its first step, would require display of 'Under God, the People Rule'**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 7, 2025 1:14 PM**

Bills requiring public schools in South Dakota to display and teach the Ten Commandments and to post the words "Under God, the People Rule" in every classroom were endorsed by a legislative committee on Friday in Pierre.

The bills passed in the face of significant opposition from public education groups, and from an education lobbyist who spoke as a parent.

"Why is my daughter in kindergarten having the word 'adultery' put on her classroom wall?" Sioux Falls parent Sam Nelson asked lawmakers on the House Education Committee, referencing the Ten Commandments. "Why is the word 'murder' on her classroom wall? That's a me thing to talk about, and I'd like you to keep it that way."

"Under God, the People Rule" is the state motto. Lawmakers passed a bill in 2019 requiring public schools to display the national motto, "In God We Trust."

The Ten Commandments legislation would replace existing language in state law allowing local school boards to choose whether to display the Ten Commandments.

The two bills now head to the House floor for a vote. The vote will be the last for the Ten Commandments bill, which passed 8-7, before final consideration by Gov. Larry Rhoden. Whether he will sign the bill remains unclear.

The Ten Commandments bill would require 8-by-14-inch posters with "easily readable font." Schools would have to additionally display a three-part, roughly 225-word statement near the posters containing information about the commandments' historical significance.

The bill would also require the Ten Commandments to be taught as part of history and civics classes three times during a student's education — at least once during each of the elementary, middle and high school years. Further would require instruction on the state and federal constitutions, the U.S. Bill of Rights, and the Declaration of Independence.

The bill would require the Ten Commandments to be presented "as a historical legal document, including the influence of the Ten Commandments on the legal, ethical, and other cultural traditions of Western civilization."

Supporters of the legislation argue the Ten Commandments are historically significant, so they should be taught throughout a kids' educational stages and displayed in every classroom across the state.

Opponents said the bill is an unconstitutional government endorsement of religion.

The bill's sponsor, Sen. John Carley, R-Piedmont, said the commandments were foundational in shaping American law and culture. He said early American textbooks, like the New England Primer and McGuffey Readers featured the Ten Commandments.

"This isn't a forced religion," Carley said. "It's restoring tradition and history. It's bringing back a transformational display to our schools."

Supporters pointed to a 2022 U.S. Supreme Court ruling *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, which they said instituted a "history and tradition" standard for religious displays in public schools. The ruling

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upheld a football coach's post-game prayer as protected free speech and religious expression, emphasizing it was personal, voluntary and not coercive.

David Barton, the founder of Texas-based WallBuilders, said the court ruled that "If you can show something has been historical and traditional in America, we're going to presume constitutionality." Barton has advocated for similar bills around the country.

The bill does not include funding for the curriculum or displays. Carley said the funding would come from private donations.

"We've already got donors lined up to cover the costs for every school in South Dakota," Carley said. He told lawmakers those donors wish to be anonymous for the time being.

## Looking to history

Opponents said the bill is not about history — it's about imposing a specific religious view in public schools. "These are moral guidelines," said Rev. Lauren Stanley, assistant to the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of South Dakota. "This is not a historical legal document."

Stanley said the founding fathers were clear: "Religious values were not to be part of the founding of this county."

The First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution prohibits laws "respecting an establishment of religion." South Dakota's constitution says "No person shall be compelled to attend or support any ministry or place of worship against his consent nor shall any preference be given by law to any religious establishment or mode of worship." It goes on to say that "No money or property of the state shall be given or appropriated for the benefit of any sectarian or religious society or institution."

Opponents said the bill is an unconstitutional violation of that "separation of church and state" concept the founders of the U.S. and South Dakota strived to adhere to.

"If this bill passes, it is so likely to face litigation — not only in federal court, but in our own state courts as well," said Samantha Chapman of the ACLU of South Dakota.

Beyond the constitutional and legal concerns, opponents also argued the bill undermines the concept of "local control" by forcing an unfunded statewide mandate on school districts.

"What I don't want to tell them is, 'Texas thinks this is a good idea, so now you have to do it,'" said Rob Monson of the South Dakota School Administrators Association. "Don't let Texas tread on our freedom by taking away our local decision-making."

The House is expected to vote on the bill next week.

## South Dakota's motto

Next up in Friday's committee hearing came a bill requiring every public school classroom to display the state motto, "Under God, the People Rule." Alternatively, schools can display the state seal, which includes the motto.

Rep. Phil Jensen, R-Rapid City, is the House sponsor for both of the bills that passed the committee on Friday.

Criticism forced Jensen to lose his vice chairmanship of the committee on Wednesday, which came after he introduced a bill to defund the Huron School District.

Jensen's bill to require every public school classroom to display the state motto passed 12-3. There was no opponent testimony presented.

*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.*

## **Busloads of public broadcasting supporters make case to avoid \$3.6 million state budget cut**

**BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 7, 2025 1:08 PM**

PIERRE — Supporters of South Dakota Public Broadcasting made their pitch Friday at the Capitol to avoid a \$3.6 million budget cut that they said would undermine public safety, government transparency, education, high school activities and local storytelling.

The state agency receives state and federal funding, along with money raised by its affiliated nonprofit, the Friends of SDPB. Friends CEO Ryan Howlett told members of the Legislature's budget committee that the state funding cut would imperil federal matching funds, and the combined reduction in state and federal funding would trigger "grim" local programming cuts that would hinder fundraising.

"It's not just a \$3.6 million budget cut," Howlett said. "It's much more substantial than that because of the domino effect."

He estimated that the combined effect of the lost state, federal and privately raised money would shrink the organization's total budget from \$11 million to \$4 million, and reduce its workforce from 76 to 26.

That would effectively diminish the network to a pass-through for national programming on radio and television, Howlett said. Locally produced shows would end, and the organization would no longer be able to broadcast dozens of state high school events ranging from all-state orchestra to football championship games.

It's SDPB's willingness and ability to cover all 40 to 50 state-level high school events — not just a few of the popular sports — that makes the agency a vital partner of the South Dakota High School Activities Association, said Executive Director Dan Swartos.

"We're not going to find another over-air partner who is able to do that," Swartos said.

Lawmakers learned about a lesser-known aspect of SDPB's work from its director of engineering and operations, SeVern Ashes. He explained that SDPB's statewide network of broadcast towers is a backbone for the state and national Emergency Alert System, with alerts received and triggered by SDPB, and then relayed by other broadcasting systems.

If the budget cut is adopted, Ashes said, "the state would have to find an alternative" for the system.

The network also live-streams, records and archives every legislative committee hearing and floor session of the state House and Senate, plus the meetings of dozens of state boards and commissions. The agency would not be able to operate that system with its reduced funding, Howlett said.

Kayla Klein, representing the Early Learner South Dakota advocacy group, testified about the value of SDPB's free educational programming and resources for parents, homeschoolers and child care providers. She drew smiles in the committee room with a story about her young son using something he learned on the PBS show "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" to help her through a difficult day: "He turned to me and said, 'Mom: When you feel so mad that you want to roar, take a deep breath and count to four.'"

Eric Erickson, vice president of corporate partnerships for the Friends of SDPB, said the educational programming, the high school activities broadcasts, the podcasts and documentaries that SDPB produces about South Dakota news and history, and other SDPB programming are worthy of state support.

"The stories we do are not profitable — they're important," he said.

The hearing was one of many that the Legislature's Joint Appropriations Committee conducts as it works to prepare the annual state budget. Members listened and asked questions but took no action and made no public comments indicating support or opposition to the SDPB budget cut.

This year's legislative session began last month and continues through mid-March. The budget bill typically takes most of the session to draft, with many decisions occurring in the final weeks and days of the session.

Republican former Gov. Kristi Noem proposed the public broadcasting cut in December before she departed last month to become the secretary of the federal Department of Homeland Security. The state is facing a difficult budget year due to declining sales tax revenue, the depletion of pandemic aid from the

federal government and rising Medicaid costs.

New Gov. Larry Rhoden, who was Noem's lieutenant governor, acknowledged last month in a speech to the Legislature that "there is concern about some specifics in the budget proposal."

"I will work with our budget office to try to restore some of those cuts," he said at the time, without going into specifics.

After Friday's budget hearing, SDPB leaders gathered with two busloads of supporters for a picture on the Capitol Rotunda steps. Rhoden's lieutenant governor, Tony Venhuizen, joined them.

In a brief interview with South Dakota Searchlight, Venhuizen said revenue projections are looking a little worse than when Noem proposed her budget.

"In a tough budget year, you have to prioritize and make tradeoffs, and there are all sorts of cuts being proposed that nobody really wants to make," Venhuizen said. "We'll just see what happens over the next couple of weeks."

*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.*

## South Dakota cities could stop fluoridating drinking water under bill passed by committee

**BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 7, 2025 11:21 AM**

A bill that would make fluoridation of drinking water optional for South Dakota cities is headed to the Senate chamber.

Cities add fluoride to tap water to prevent tooth decay and strengthen teeth, in South Dakota and throughout the United States. Research shows that community water fluoridation reduces cavities by around 25%, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention calls water fluoridation one of the top 10 public health achievements of the 20th century.

Senate Bill 133, introduced by Aberdeen Republican Sen. Carl Perry, would allow municipalities controlling a public water supply or a person controlling a private water supply to determine the amount of fluoride in their drinking water. Currently, the South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources regulates fluoride levels and testing methods

The bill would cap water fluoridation at 4 milligrams per liter, the limit already imposed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. South Dakota cities would not be required to include any fluoride in the municipal drinking water, so some could discontinue the practice.

Skeptics of fluoridation benefits have raised concerns about excessive fluoride consumption for years. President Donald Trump tapped outspoken water fluoridation opponent Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to lead the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The U.S. Senate has yet to confirm his nomination.

Perry told lawmakers that the federal government could change fluoridation policy under Kennedy's influence, so South Dakota "should be ahead of that."

Several dental and medical organizations opposed the bill, saying it would lead to more health problems in the state. South Dakota Municipal League, South Dakota Association of Rural Water Systems, South Dakota Department of Health, and South Dakota Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources also opposed the bill.

Ensuring access to safe and reliable drinking water is the "primary" public health initiative for the state Department of Agriculture and Natural Resources, said Mark Mayer, water director for the department.

"We feel that community water system fluoridation is one of the safest, most beneficial and cost effective ways to prevent tooth decay," Mayer said.

The legislation passed out of the Senate Health and Human Services Committee 6-1 "without recommendation" after an attempt to defeat the bill failed. That means that a majority of senators must agree to place it on the calendar before it's debated, said Brookings Republican Sen. Tim Reed, otherwise the

bill dies.

*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.*

## Attempted cap on SD school administrator pay fails, but highlights disparity with teachers

**BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 7, 2025 2:46 PM**

PIERRE — A state senator brought attention to a disparity in educator compensation in South Dakota but lost her attempt Friday to cap administrator salaries at three times the average pay of teachers.

The Senate vote against the bill from Sen. Sue Peterson, R-Sioux Falls, was 22-13.

Peterson said South Dakota's teachers rank 49th nationally in average pay, while administrators rank 16th.

"Our teachers are last and our administrators are near the top. That's wrong," Peterson said.

In opposition comments, senators acknowledged the problem but criticized the proposed solution, saying a fix should come from local school boards.

Sen. Jamie Smith, D-Sioux Falls, is a former teacher who voted against the bill.

"Pushing somebody else down is not how to raise everybody else," he said.

*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.*

## Lawsuits multiply against Trump barrage of orders as Democrats struggle to fight back

**BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - FEBRUARY 7, 2025 7:49 PM**

WASHINGTON — Less than three weeks into his second term, President Donald Trump and those working under his auspices — most prominently billionaire Elon Musk — are making no apologies for barreling over institutions and flouting the law.

The Trump administration's sweeping actions tee up a major test for the guardrails Americans, red or blue, count on — fair application of the law, privacy of tax and benefit information, civil rights in schools, labor laws in the workplace.

Protests led by Democratic lawmakers, former officials and activists have popped up in the nation's capital and around the U.S. — from Georgia to Maine to Utah, and several other states. Democrats outnumbered in the U.S. House and Senate during the past week have tried to gain attention with tactics like barging into the House speaker's office and rallying outside agencies.

Senate Democrats gave speeches overnight Wednesday into Thursday objecting to the nomination of Project 2025 architect Russ Vought as director of the Office of Management and Budget. Vought was confirmed on a party-line vote, 53-47.

With opponents unable to deploy more than these limited defenses, and many powerful Republican lawmakers either shrugging or downright agreeing, the federal courts have emerged during the past weeks as the only obstacles to some of Trump's more provocative moves. That has included the president's orders to freeze many federal grants and loans, corner federal workers into slap-dash career decisions and outright strip the Constitution of birthright citizenship.

Casey Burgat, a George Washington University legislative affairs professor, said, "Historically, presidents are stopped when members of Congress think they're going too far."

"Congress could stop it today, but again, that would take Republicans signing on. The courts are probably the best option, given that Congress seems to be unwilling to do that," Burgat said.

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Republicans indeed cheered Trump along the campaign trail as he promised to stamp out diversity and inclusion, orchestrate mass deportations, maintain tax cuts for corporations, amp up tariffs and close legal immigration pathways.

The majority of Americans backed this campaign pitch. Trump handily won the Electoral College over his Democratic opponent, former Vice President Kamala Harris, and squeaked by with 49.8% of the popular vote. Voters in all seven swing states backed Trump.

That likely will leave it to the third branch of government, the courts, to determine just how much upheaval and constitutional crisis the United States can withstand — though there as well Republicans hold the upper hand, with a 6-3 conservative majority on the Supreme Court.

A legal tracker by the online forum Just Security as of Friday registered 37 lawsuits already lodged against the administration, beginning on Inauguration Day.

Here is a rundown of just some of the executive orders unleashed since Jan. 20 and the legal pushback:

## Breaking into Americans' data

When Trump signed an executive order on his first night in office to establish the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, he aimed to make good on his campaign promise to put the world's richest man — and major campaign donor — Musk in charge of cutting \$2 trillion in federal spending.

DOGE is not an actual department because only Congress, not the executive branch, has the power to create new government agencies. Musk, at the helm of DOGE, was not vetted or confirmed by senators.

Musk is a "special government employee," according to White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt, who told reporters Feb. 3 that she is "not sure" of Musk's security clearances. The White House did not respond to States Newsroom follow-up requests for terms of Musk's special government employee status, signed ethics agreements or financial disclosures.

The White House defended Musk's actions in a statement, saying DOGE is "fulfilling President Trump's commitment to making government more accountable, efficient, and, most importantly, restoring proper stewardship of the American taxpayer's hard-earned dollars. Those leading this mission with Elon Musk are doing so in full compliance with federal law, appropriate security clearances, and as employees of the relevant agencies, not as outside advisors or entities. The ongoing operations of DOGE may be seen as disruptive by those entrenched in the federal bureaucracy, who resist change. While change can be uncomfortable, it is necessary and aligns with the mandate supported by more than 77 million American voters."

But details of Musk's far reach across numerous federal agencies are steadily coming to light. Musk and his DOGE appointees gained access to the U.S. Treasury's central payment system that processes everything from tax returns to Social Security benefits.

Two unions and a retirement advocacy group, together representing millions of Americans, sued Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, arguing he granted access to Americans' personal information, including bank account and Social Security numbers, that is protected by federal privacy law.

A federal judge on Thursday ordered the Treasury Department to limit Musk's access to "read only" status for just two DOGE personnel — Tom Krause, a former tech executive, and software engineer Marko Elez.

Elez resigned Thursday after the Wall Street Journal linked him to a deleted social media account that was brimming with racist statements as recently as the fall of 2024. Elez, 25, worked for Musk at SpaceX and X, according to the publication WIRED, which uncovered that Musk filled DOGE with several engineers barely out of college.

Vice President J.D. Vance advocated on X Friday for Elez's return to DOGE. Musk agreed: "He will be brought back. To err is human, to forgive divine." The White House did not immediately respond to States Newsroom on whether Elez will be rehired.

## Gutting the feds

Within days after Trump's inauguration, Musk's team reportedly asked the Treasury Department to block all funds appropriated for the U.S. Agency for International Development but was denied by a top career

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official, according to CNN.

Musk's team broke into the USAID's Washington, D.C., headquarters over the weekend of Feb. 1 to access agency records. The data security personnel who tried to stop them were subsequently placed on leave.

Musk declared on his platform X: "USAID is a criminal organization. Time for it to die." Meanwhile, USAID's X platform disappeared, as did its website.

Congress created the global humanitarian agency in 1961 and appropriated roughly \$40 billion for its programs in 2023, according to the Congressional Research Service. The agency's expenditures hover around 2% of all federal spending.

By Thursday, the New York Times was reporting that the Trump administration planned to keep only 290 of the agency's approximately 10,000 employees.

Together the American Foreign Service Association and the American Federation of Government Employees on Thursday filed suit against Trump, Bessent, Secretary of State Marco Rubio, and related federal agencies for "unconstitutional and illegal actions" that have "systematically dismantled" USAID.

"These actions have generated a global humanitarian crisis by abruptly halting the crucial work of USAID employees, grantees, and contractors. They have cost thousands of American jobs. And they have imperiled U.S. national security interests," the plaintiffs wrote in the complaint filed in U.S. District Court in the District of Columbia.

A federal district judge temporarily blocked the USAID layoffs late Friday.

The turmoil at USAID also came amid targeted threats at the Department of Justice.

Federal Bureau of Investigation agents sued Tuesday to keep their identities secret after acting deputy Attorney General Emil Bove — who last year represented Trump in his case against the DOJ — requested records of all agents who were involved in investigating Trump and the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol attack, according to the Wall Street Journal.

## 'Fork in the road'

Employees across nearly every federal agency — now including the intelligence communities — received an email beginning Jan. 28 titled "Fork in the Road."

The offer, bearing the same subject line as the memo Musk sent to Twitter employees in 2022, contained a "deferred resignation" for federal employees who preferred not to return to the office in-person full-time and abide by new pillars that include being "reliable, loyal, trustworthy."

The offer promised full pay and benefits until Sept. 30 with hardly any obligation to continue working. Employees were told they had until Feb. 6 to decide.

A federal judge extended the deadline after four large government employee unions sued, arguing the offer is "arbitrary and capricious in numerous respects."

In just one example, the lawsuit points out, Congress' temporary funding package for most federal agencies expires March 14, causing questions about whether deferred resignation paychecks are guaranteed.

"I think there's real uncertainty that they can promise that the money to pay the salaries is actually going to be available," said Molly Reynolds, an expert in congressional appropriations at the left-leaning Brookings Institution.

## Pause on grants and loans

While federal employees wonder about their livelihoods, state and local governments, early childhood schools and numerous social safety net nonprofits were sent into panic when the Trump administration announced it planned to freeze trillions in federal grants and loans.

The Jan. 27 memo from the OMB set off widespread confusion over which programs would face the cut, including questions over whether millions could lose services through community health centers, Head Start, low-income home heating assistance funds — and anything else for which Congress has appropriated funds, for example, small business loans.

A federal judge in Rhode Island blocked the order on Jan. 31, making clear that a law on the books

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since 1974 gives the president a legal pathway to ask Congress to rescind funds that have already been allocated and signed into law.

"Here, there is no evidence that the Executive has followed the law by notifying Congress and thereby effectuating a potentially legally permitted so-called 'pause,'" Chief Judge John J. McConnell Jr. of the U.S. District Court in Rhode Island wrote in the 13-page ruling.

Article 1 of the Constitution gives Congress the "power of the purse," and the 1974 Impoundment Control Act governs how the executive branch can challenge funding.

Trump's newly installed OMB director, Vought, has repeatedly argued the 1974 law is unconstitutional.

Reynolds told States Newsroom that power of the purse is the "biggest remaining sort of bulwark of congressional power and congressional authority."

"In addition to a number of these things being potentially illegal on an individual level, overall, we're just in this world where, depending on how things unfold, we are in for a really profound rebalancing of power between Congress and the presidency," Reynolds said.

## Another stab at the Constitution

As Trump's second Inauguration Day stretched into the evening, he signed a flurry of immigration-related executive orders and some are already facing legal challenges.

The president's order to end the constitutional right of citizenship under the 14th Amendment by redefining birthright citizenship has been met with a nationwide injunction.

"Today, virtually every baby born on U.S. soil is a U.S. citizen upon birth. That is the law and tradition of our country. That law and tradition are and will remain the status quo pending the resolution of this case," wrote Judge Deborah L. Boardman of the U.S. District Court for the District of Maryland.

House Republicans, separately, introduced a bill to end birthright citizenship, and welcomed legal challenges to the measure in the hopes that it heads to the Supreme Court, where Trump has picked three of the six conservative justices.

Another executive order, which declared an "invasion" at the southern border and has effectively shut down the ability for immigrants without legal status to claim asylum, is being challenged in a major lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union.

## Can the president root out diversity?

Since Inauguration Day, Trump has issued several orders aimed at limiting options at school, work and the doctor's office for particular groups of Americans.

He campaigned on a vision to "save American education," and end DEI and "gender ideology extremism."

Not even 24 hours after the first major tragedy of his presidency — the Jan. 29 midair collision between an Army helicopter and commercial airliner — Trump pointed his finger at diversity, equity and inclusion as the cause. The president blamed the deadly crash at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport that killed 67 on diversity hires, singling out people with disabilities.

On Feb. 5 he issued an executive order that bars transgender athletes from competing on women's sports teams consistent with their gender identity. The effort — which aims to deny federal funds for schools that do not comply — is sure to face legal challenges.

Other orders are already facing lawsuits.

Trump's pledge to "keep men out of women's sports" reflects only part of his broader anti-trans agenda. He took significant steps in January via executive orders to prohibit openly transgender service members from the U.S. military and restrict access to gender-affirming care for kids.

Washington state Attorney General Nick Brown sued the Trump administration Feb. 7 for its late January order that cuts federal funding to hospitals or medical schools that provide gender-related care for transgender children and young adults that the order defines as age 19 and under.

Trump is also facing multiple lawsuits from active U.S. troops, and those seeking to join, over an order banning openly transgender people from serving in the U.S. military.



Per Trump's order on Jan. 27, "[A]doption of a gender identity inconsistent with an individual's sex conflicts with a soldier's commitment to an honorable, truthful, and disciplined lifestyle, even in one's personal life."

Six transgender service members argued in a complaint filed Jan. 28 that Trump's order "invokes no study of the effectiveness of transgender service members over the past four years, of their ability to serve, or of their integrity and selflessness in volunteering to serve their country, and the directive's stated rationale is refuted by substantial research and testimony, as well as by years of capable and honorable service by transgender service members without issue."

*Ariana Figueroa, Jennifer Shutt and Shauneen Miranda contributed to this report.*

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

## Democratic AGs allege Trump administration is freezing federal funds despite court order

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 7, 2025 7:41 PM

WASHINGTON — Democratic attorneys general from throughout the country on Friday asked a federal judge to enforce a temporary restraining order he issued late last month, alleging the Trump administration is not complying with the court's ruling.

The top Democrat on the U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee also raised questions about the ongoing pause in some grants and loans.

The attorneys general wrote in an emergency motion that "there has been an ever-changing kaleidoscope of federal financial assistance that has been suspended, deleted, in transit, under review, and more since entry of the Order."

They asked Chief Judge John J. McConnell Jr. of the U.S. District Court in Rhode Island, who issued the temporary restraining order on Jan. 31, to order the Trump administration "to immediately restore funds and desist from the federal funding pause until the preliminary injunction motion can be heard and decided, a process which is proceeding expeditiously in separate proceedings before this Court."

McConnell is giving the Department of Justice until Sunday to respond.

### Head Start programs stalled, meetings canceled

The attorneys general wrote in their 21-page emergency motion filed with McConnell on Friday that "(d)espite the Court's order, Defendants have failed to resume disbursing federal funds in multiple respects."

They wrote the Trump administration hasn't begun distributing funding Congress approved in the Inflation Reduction Act or the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, also known as the bipartisan infrastructure law.

They alleged the National Institutes of Health "abruptly cancelled an advisory committee review meeting with Brown University's School of Public Health for a \$71 million grant on dementia care research, saying 'all federal advisory committee meetings had been cancelled.'"

Head Start programs in Michigan and Vermont were unable to access funds on Feb. 5, they wrote.

The brief also says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Health Resources and Services Administration "renewed stop work orders to a University of Washington program doing global HIV prevention work" on Feb. 5 and Feb. 6.

The attorneys general wrote they tried to work through the delay in funding with the Trump administration but were unsuccessful, in part, due to differing interpretations of Judge McConnell's temporary restraining order.

### Fight over freeze

The Office of Management and Budget released a two-page memo in late January announcing that a funding freeze on trillions of dollars in grant and loan programs was set to begin Tuesday, Jan. 28 at 5 p.m.

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The memo led to confusion throughout the country as organizations that receive federal funding tried to determine if they would be affected. Members of Congress were also unsure about which programs would be paused and which wouldn't, despite being in the branch of government that controls spending.

Just before the freeze was set to take effect, Judge Loren L. AliKhan of the U.S. District Court of the District of Columbia issued a short-term administrative stay preventing the Trump administration from beginning the funding freeze.

That separate lawsuit was filed by the National Council of Nonprofits, American Public Health Association, Main Street Alliance and Sage.

OMB then withdrew the memo, but White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt posted on social media that 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.

The Department of Justice moved to dismiss both cases after the OMB memo was rescinded, but both judges declined.

McConnell later issued a temporary restraining order in the lawsuit filed by the Democratic attorneys general from 22 states and the District of Columbia. That was followed by a separate temporary restraining order from AliKhan.

## 'Businesses left wondering'

U.S. Sen. Patty Murray of Washington state, ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said Friday entire local economies are at risk.

"The uncertainty alone over the fate of these investments is putting jobs on the chopping block, hurting American businesses left wondering whether contracts they've inked mean anything, and jeopardizing entire local economies," Murray wrote in a statement. "What Trump is doing could shutter critical infrastructure projects in virtually every community, kill good-paying jobs, choke off funding for farmers, stop innovation in its tracks, leave massive holes in local communities' budgets, and so much more.

"Once again: if Donald Trump or Elon Musk want to gut funding that's creating good-paying jobs all across America, they can take their case to Congress and win the votes they need to do it. Defying the constitution to unilaterally rip away your tax dollars is not how this works."

Murray released a five-page document detailing some of the areas where the Trump administration's funding freeze continues to affect grant and loan programs.

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

## U.S. Senate GOP unveils budget details to jumpstart border security, energy legislation

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT - FEBRUARY 7, 2025 1:42 PM

WASHINGTON — Senate Budget Committee Chairman Lindsey Graham on Friday released the text of the budget resolution that will lay the groundwork for Republicans in Congress to overhaul border security, boost defense funding and address energy extraction — if the two chambers can broker a deal.

The South Carolina Republican announced earlier this week he would move ahead with the first steps in the Senate amid an ongoing stalemate in the House GOP over both process and policy.

House Republicans gathered at the White House for hours Thursday, searching for a way to unite over campaign promises they hope to pass in one large package, though Graham's budget moves forward with a two-package plan.

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Graham's decision to jump ahead of the House appeared to spur some motivation in that chamber, though the House has yet to release a budget resolution or announce consensus between the centrist and far-right members within its conference.

"To those who voted for and support real border security and a stronger defense in a troubled world, help is on the way," Graham wrote in a statement. "This budget resolution jumpstarts a process that will give President Trump's team the money they need to secure the border and deport criminals, and make America strong and more energy independent."

## Committee to meet next week

The Senate Budget Committee plans to mark up the 61-page budget resolution on Wednesday and Thursday. After that, it will likely go to the Senate floor for debate and a marathon all-night amendment voting session, and then head to the House.

The House and Senate must agree on a budget resolution before they can officially begin the reconciliation process, which allows lawmakers to pass legislation in the Senate without having to go through procedural votes that require the support of at least 60 senators. That means the legislation would not need the support of Democrats in the chamber controlled by Republicans 53-47.

The two chambers adopting separate budget resolutions would not meet the requirements, though they could go to conference to sort out their disagreements before holding floor votes again in each chamber on one final budget resolution.

The Senate budget resolution would provide reconciliation instructions to the Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry; Armed Services; Commerce, Science and Transportation; Energy and Natural Resources; Environment and Public Works; Finance; Health, Education, Labor and Pensions; Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs; and Judiciary committees.

## Where savings in spending would be made

The reconciliation instructions don't provide much insight into how exactly each committee will draft its section of the reconciliation package, but the instructions do begin to clarify how much each committee will have to spend on its bill or to find in savings to help pay for the overall cost.

For example, the Senate Armed Services Committee is told to draft its piece of the package in a way that doesn't increase the deficit by more than \$150 billion, so that committee's bill will likely cost about that much.

The Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, or HELP, Committee appears to be one of the committees expected to provide some savings, since its reconciliation instructions call on the panel to reduce the deficit by at least \$1 billion. That committee, led by Republican Sen. Bill Cassidy of Louisiana, has a large jurisdiction including the Department of Health and Human Services and its programs such as Medicaid and Medicare.

The committees that will be able to spend money in the reconciliation package include Commerce, Science and Transportation with a price tag of \$20 billion; Environment and Public Works with a topline of \$1 billion; Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs with a funding level of \$175 billion; and Judiciary with a spending allocation of \$175 billion.

The Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry Committee is charged with finding at least \$1 billion in savings; Energy and Natural Resources must draft a bill saving at least \$1 billion; and Finance is asked to provide another \$1 billion or more in cost-cutting. Finance, which is led by GOP Sen. Mike Crapo of Idaho, also holds jurisdiction over the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services.

Those committees must draft and vote to send their pieces of the reconciliation package to the Senate Budget Committee before March 7.

## Two-step approach

The instructions indicate Graham is moving forward with the two-step approach to reconciliation that

Senate Republicans and even many House GOP lawmakers have been pushing for.

Their proposal for two packages — the first focused on border security, defense spending and energy policy and a second focused on taxes — is in contrast to Speaker Mike Johnson's wishes.

Johnson, a Louisiana Republican, wants Congress to pass all of the GOP's policy changes in one package. An inability to agree on process would block any path forward for the policy changes, unless GOP leaders were to negotiate with Democrats.

*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.*

## Fires and floods are eviscerating US communities, intensifying the housing crisis

**Climate change is the world's fastest-growing driver of homelessness**

**BY: ROBBIE SEQUEIRA - FEBRUARY 7, 2025 7:17 AM**

After nearly a month, the Eaton and Palisades wildfires that ravaged California have been contained. But for Southern California and state agencies, another challenge lies ahead: helping people find homes.

The wildfires levied significant long-term damage, with thousands of homes destroyed, billions in damages and a worsening of the state's housing and homelessness crises. Even before the fires, California already had a shortage of 1.2 million affordable homes, with Los Angeles County alone facing a deficit of 500,000 units.

"This tragic loss will certainly make the housing crisis more acute in multiple ways," said Ryan Finnigan, an associate research director at the Turner Center for Housing Innovation at the University of California, Berkeley. "L.A. continues to need vastly more affordable housing, and people displaced from lost affordable units might need the most support to become stably housed again."

Even those displaced from market-rate or high-end housing will face challenges in an already tight market, with thousands searching for housing at once — likely driving prices even higher for everyone.

Natural disasters are worsening the U.S. housing crisis, upending the home insurance market, and reducing housing options — particularly for lower-income residents. And that trend will likely grow as disasters become more frequent and severe.

Climate change, experts warn, is the world's fastest-growing driver of homelessness, displacing millions of people annually. In 2022 alone, disasters forced 32.6 million people worldwide from their homes, according to a 2023 report by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre.

If trends continue, 1.2 billion people globally could be displaced due to disasters by 2050, according to the international think tank Institute for Economics & Peace.

The consequences are already playing out.

After the 2023 Maui wildfires, homelessness in Hawaii rose by 87%. With Los Angeles' fires destroying about six times as many homes, experts predict that California's homeless population will surge dramatically in 2025.

"Natural disasters cause a massive spike in homelessness," said Jeremy Ney, a macroeconomics policy strategist who studies American inequality. "The primary goal of relief organizations like the Red Cross is to prevent people from becoming permanently unhoused — but for many, it can take a decade or more to recover."

### **A long path to recovery**

According to the Migration Policy Institute, 3.2 million U.S. adults were displaced or evacuated because of natural disasters in 2022, with more than 500,000 still unable to return home by the end of the year.

The recovery timeline can be grueling. In North Carolina, state officials managing Hurricane Helene's recovery warned that key federal funding for home reconstruction could be delayed for months — possibly

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into next fall, according to NC Newsline.

In the event of a disaster, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, known as FEMA, focuses on shorter-term relief, offering emergency shelters, disaster unemployment assistance and grants for rebuilding. State agencies, though, are tasked with the long-term projects, such as making infrastructure repairs and developing housing initiatives, said Samantha Batko, a senior fellow in the Housing and Communities Division at the Urban Institute.

"Disaster relief programs like FEMA focus on short-term recovery, whereas homelessness response systems struggle with long-term systemic challenges," said Batko. "People who live in unsheltered places during disasters, like on street corners or in cars, have higher exposure to ash [from fires] and debris, which leads to more health issues and emergency room visits."

At the time of the Eaton fire, Los Angeles' Skid Row was home to roughly 2,200 unsheltered people, experiencing some of the worst air quality effects, according to Batko, who co-authored a report on the issue for the institute.

Los Angeles' homelessness crisis was already dire: Last year, Los Angeles County had just 27,000 shelter beds for 75,000 unhoused residents. The fires have now left thousands more without homes, further straining an already overwhelmed system.

"The relevant governments — state and federal agencies, L.A. County and its 88 cities — must be on the same page to mount an organized and effective response," said Finnigan, of the Turner Center for Housing Innovation.

There may be another twist coming.

When President Donald Trump visited western North Carolina last month, he floated the idea of eliminating FEMA and leaving disaster response to the states, with federal reimbursement of some costs. He has since signed an executive order calling for a full assessment of FEMA and recommendations for "improvements or structural changes." State emergency managers quickly responded that they need FEMA's involvement.

## Insurance challenges

Disaster recovery is not equal: Homeowners with insurance typically rebound the fastest, as policies cover much of the rebuilding costs. But as climate disasters intensify, the insurance market has begun to unravel. In 2023, insurers lost money on homeowners' coverage in 18 states — more than a third of the country — according to a New York Times analysis.

It's led to an insurance crisis — rising premiums, reduced coverage or insurers pulling out altogether — a trend that began in California, Florida and Louisiana but that has spread across the country.

Even before this winter's fires, these insurance issues would have been a defining legislative issue for California, predicted Alexandra Alvarado, director of education and marketing at the American Apartment Owners Association, an industry lobbying group.

"There's a great anxiety from ... property owners on whether they will be insured or covered when another wildfire or a similar event costs them their home, and whether it's worth it to rebuild and start over," Alvarado told Stateline in December. "I think it's going to be on the radar of lawmakers not just in our state, because we're seeing this play out in other states as well."

During the fires, California Insurance Commissioner Ricardo Lara reminded insurers of their legal duty to cover mudslide damage caused by recent wildfires, as colder, wetter weather raises risks, particularly for Los Angeles County wildfire survivors.

Already, State Farm, the largest home insurer in California, has asked the state to approve "emergency" rate hikes because of the fires, seeking an average 22% increase for homeowners and 15% for renters.

## Barriers for lower-income residents

The long-term recovery process is filled with hurdles — especially for low-income and marginalized communities.

Lower-income households are disproportionately vulnerable to climate disasters; they're also dispropor-

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tionately harmed. Residents may reside in older, high-risk homes that are more susceptible to destruction. In some places, lower-income neighborhoods were built in low-lying flood plains because land was cheaper or red-lining kept families of color from living elsewhere.

Many households cannot afford homeowners or flood insurance, and strict eligibility criteria may prevent them from qualifying for disaster relief loans, said Katie Arrington, a disaster recovery expert for Boulder County, Colorado.

Renters, mobile home residents and uninsured households often can't afford homes comparable to the ones lost to disaster. Without financial safety nets, many displaced residents face an impossible choice: endure months or years of instability, or leave their community altogether.

"People with insurance have an easier time recovering than people without it. Homeowners, in general, recover more easily than renters," Arrington said. "There's a spectrum, from homeowners with full insurance to renters without insurance, and each group faces very different recovery timelines."

One major barrier to recovery for renters is the post-disaster surge in housing costs. A Brookings Institution report published in October 2023 shows that effective rents typically rise 4% after a disaster and remain elevated for at least five years.

In the past few weeks in Los Angeles, fire-affected neighborhoods such as Venice and Santa Monica saw rents surge by 60-100% within days, fueling calls for stronger enforcement of California's anti-price gouging laws.

California lawmakers in January allocated billions in funding to state and federal government relief efforts and put an immediate moratorium on evictions. The governor's office also has issued an executive order prohibiting Los Angeles-area landlords from evicting tenants who provide shelter to survivors of the Los Angeles-area firestorms.

## Experience and luck

For many municipalities, past experience is the only real preparation for disaster recovery. And sometimes, a bit of luck helps, too.

In 2021, the Marshall Fire in Colorado forced the evacuation of 35,000 residents in Boulder County and destroyed nearly 1,000 buildings. County officials say their response benefited from both preparation and circumstance.

"Some of our success was due to experience, but some of it was luck. We had a vacant county-owned building available to house the disaster assistance center, which allowed us to act quickly," said Arrington, the disaster response manager for Boulder County. "If we had needed to rent or find a less-central location, the response would have been slower."

Across the U.S., states are grappling with similar challenges.

In North Carolina, state-led efforts such as the Back@Home program helped rapidly rehouse approximately 100 displaced households after Hurricane Florence in 2018, and later helped nearly 800 households find more permanent homes. The program has since become a model for addressing disaster-fueled displacement.

Similarly, after Tropical Storm Helene last fall, Asheville, North Carolina, allocated \$1 million in rental assistance to prevent displacement. While Red Cross and state-run shelters were scheduled to close by Nov. 10, the city coordinated with the WNC Rescue Mission to keep one shelter open longer for the remaining displaced residents.

By Dec. 31, 2024, all nine remaining shelter participants had secured exit plans — ensuring no one was left without a place to go, according to the city's spokesperson, Kim Miller.

Hawaii also has launched large-scale relief initiatives. In response to the 2023 Maui fire, HomeAid Hawaii, in partnership with the state, developed interim housing solutions for 1,500 displaced residents for up to five years.

"Disaster-driven homelessness requires targeted programs that meet the needs of people at risk," said Batko, of the Urban Institute. "States must integrate housing policy into emergency preparedness, or

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they'll find themselves overwhelmed when the next disaster strikes."

In Colorado, Boulder County has managed to rebuild or begin construction on about two-thirds of the homes that were lost.

Boulder County is aiming for an ambitious 90% recovery rate, meaning 9 of 10 displaced households will find a new homes in the area. But even that success comes with a twinge of mourning for what was lost.

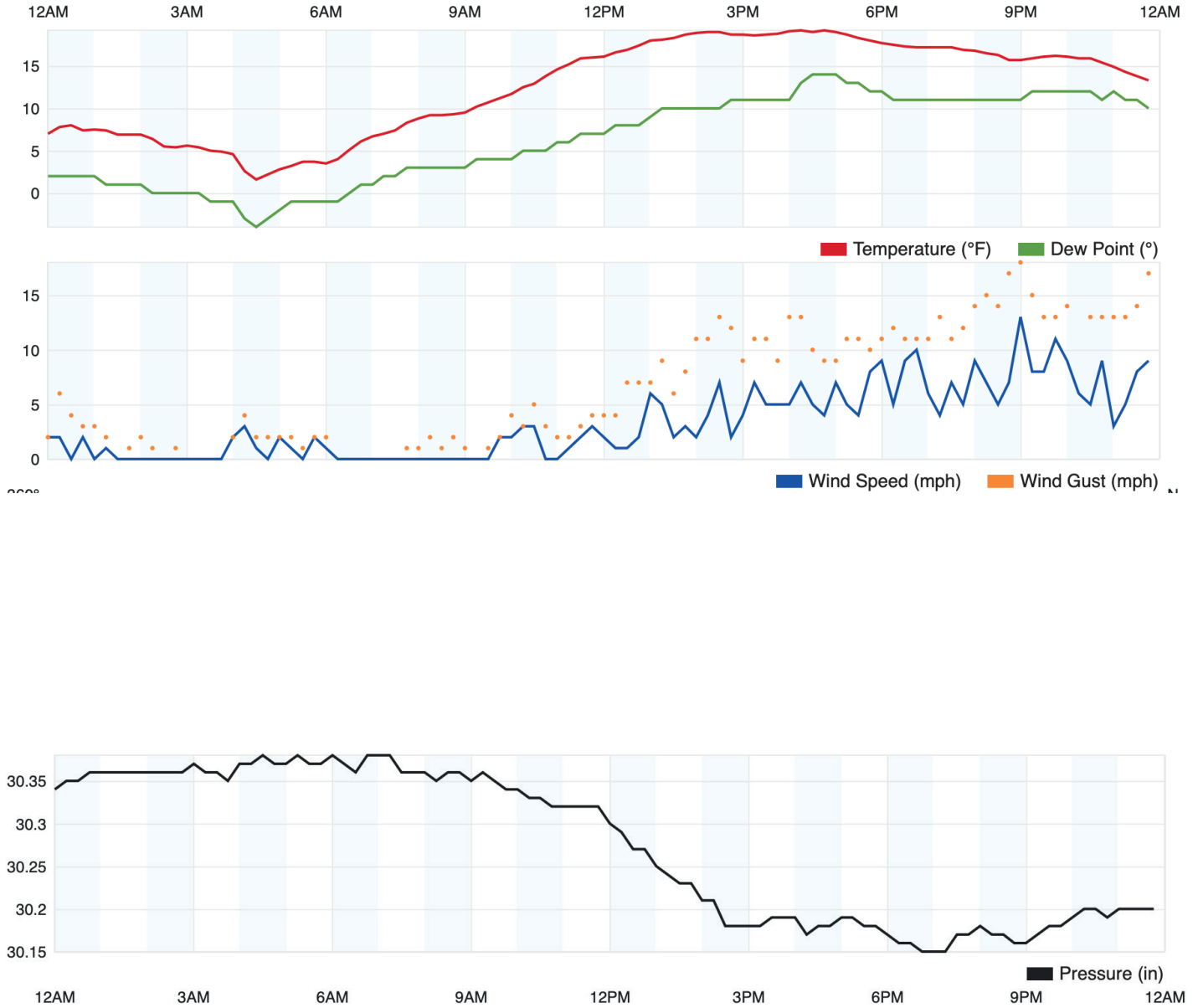
"We started this recovery with a goal to get close to 90%, so we're proud," Arrington said. "But we also recognize that some parts of the community have changed forever."

*Robbie Sequeira is a staff writer covering housing and social services for Stateline.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs





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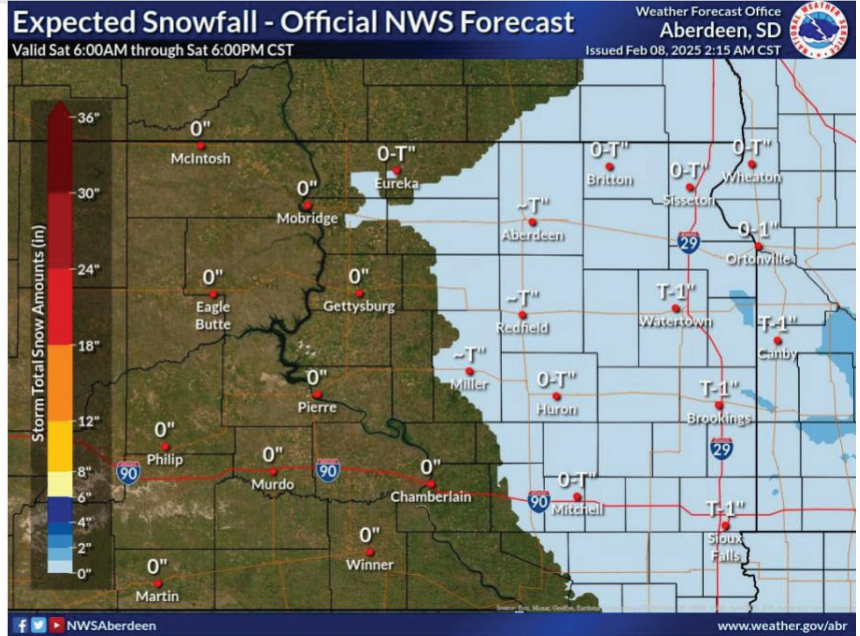
Saturday	Saturday Night	Sunday	Sunday Night	Monday
				
<b>High: 14 °F</b>	<b>Low: -8 °F</b>	<b>High: 18 °F</b>	<b>Low: -7 °F</b>	<b>High: 7 °F</b>
Snow Likely then Mostly Sunny	Mostly Clear	Sunny	Mostly Clear	Chance Snow



## Expected Additional Snowfall Amounts

February 8, 2025  
3:24 AM

- Snow will be coming to an end during the mid morning hours
- Additional accumulations of less than an inch are expected
- Drifting and blowing snow may continue to impact travel. If you are planning to drive, slow down and take extra time to get to your destination



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Snow will be coming to an end during the mid morning hours today. Additional accumulation are expected to be less than an inch. Drifting and blowing snow may continue to impact travel so plan ahead if you are driving and leave extra time to reach your destination.

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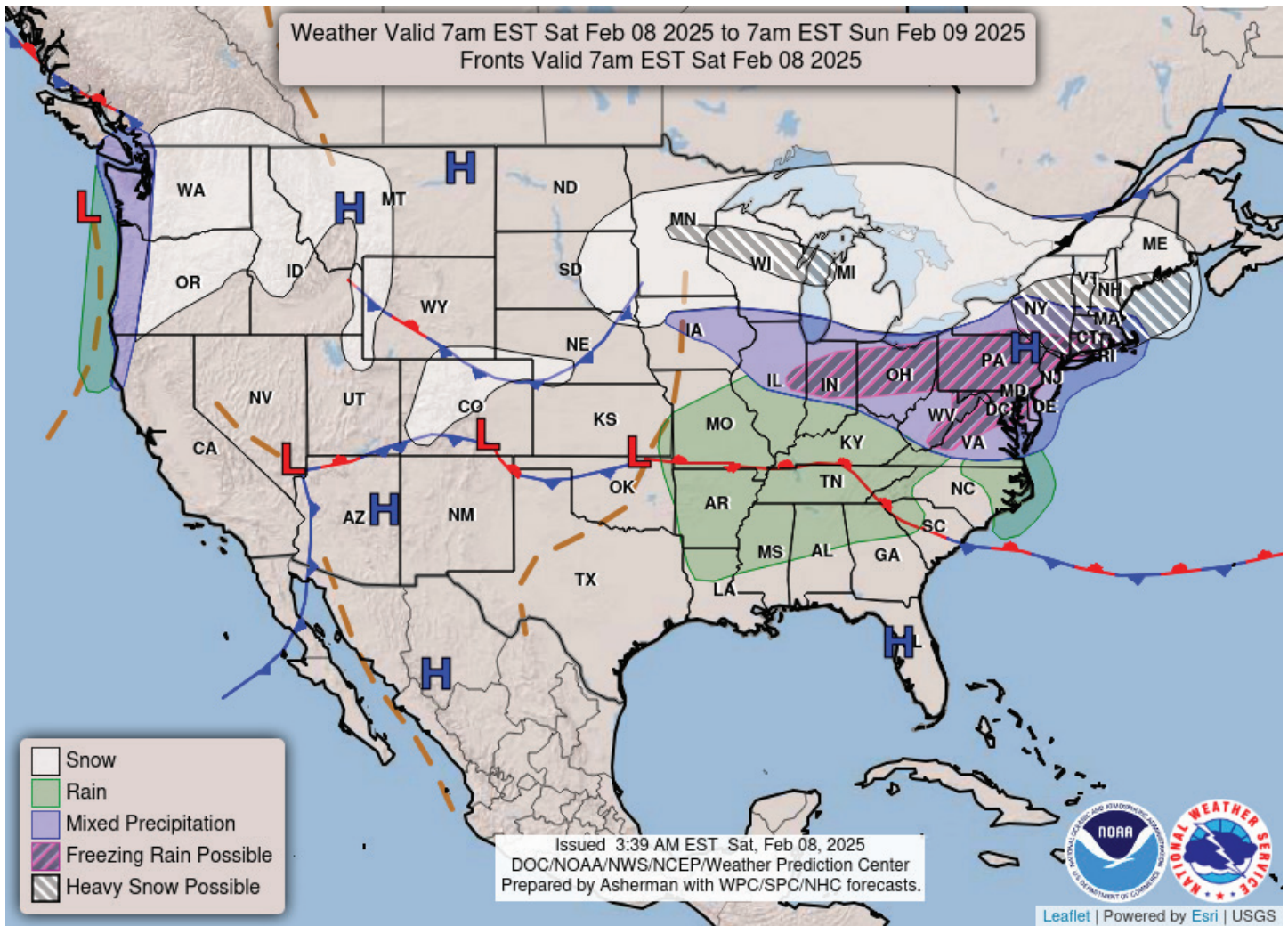
## Yesterday's Groton Weather

**High Temp: 19 °F at 4:05 PM**  
**Low Temp: 2 °F at 4:28 AM**  
**Wind: 18 mph at 8:56 PM**  
**Precip: : 0.00**

## Today's Info

Record High: 62 in 2000  
Record Low: -46 in 1895  
Average High: 27  
Average Low: 4  
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.16  
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.14  
Average Precip to date: 0.71  
Precip Year to Date: 0.14  
Sunset Tonight: 5:51:19 pm  
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:40:23 am

Day length: 10 hours, 09 minutes



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## Today in Weather History

February 8-9, 1909: Sioux Falls and the surrounding area experienced one of the largest snowfalls on record. Officially the storm dropped 21" of snow in Sioux Falls. Unfortunately, the snowfall was accompanied by high winds, which created large drifts. Click [HERE](#) for more information from South Dakota Public Broadcasting.

February 8, 2000: A very warm air mass was over central and northeast South Dakota, where record highs were set in Aberdeen, Pierre, and Sisseton. Aberdeen rose to 62 degrees, Sisseton rose to 53 degrees, and Pierre rose to a warm 69 degrees.

1835 - A severe cold wave gripped the southeastern U.S. The mercury dipped to 8 above at Jacksonville FL, and to zero at Savannah GA. Orange trees were killed to the roots. (David Ludlum)

1936 - The temperature at Denver CO plunged to a record 30 degrees below zero. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1956: From February 1-8, heavy snow fell over the Panhandle of Texas. Snowfall amounts include 43 inches in Vega, 24 inches in Hereford, and 14 inches in Amarillo. The storm caused 23 deaths and numerous injuries. It snowed continuously for 92 hours in some locations.

1968: The highest 1-day snow at the Savannah Airport in South Carolina occurs on this date when 3.6 inches of snow fell. Records began in 1871.

1985 - Blue Canyon, CA, set a 24-hour February snowfall record by receiving 42 inches of snow from February 7th-8th.

1987 - A powerful storm produced blizzard conditions in the Great Lakes Region. Winds gusted to 86 mph at Janesville WI and Cleveland OH received 12 inches of snow. North winds of 50 to 70 mph raised the water level of southern Lake Michigan two feet, and produced waves 12 to 18 feet high, causing seven million dollars damage along the Chicago area shoreline. It was the most damage caused by shoreline flooding and erosion in the history of the city of Chicago. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 - Arctic air invaded the north central U.S. Hibbing MN reported a morning low of 30 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989: Mammoth traffic jams in the Los Angeles area as freak snow struck California. The snow was reported from the beaches of Malibu to the desert around Palm Springs.

1989 - A winter storm over California produced snow from the beaches of Malibu to the desert canyons around Palm Springs, and the snow created mammoth traffic jams in the Los Angeles Basin. Sixteen cities in the western U.S. reported record low temperatures for the date. Marysville CA reported an all-time record low reading of 21 degrees above zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1990 - Unseasonably mild weather prevailed across the south central and eastern U.S. Twenty-two cities, including five in Michigan, reported record high temperatures for the date. The afternoon high of 53 degrees at Flint MI surpassed their previous record by ten degrees, and the high of 66 degrees at Burlington IA exceeded their old record by eight degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

2005: Snow falls on the Jordanian capital and surrounding regions, blocking roads and closing schools. Parts of northern Iran and Tehran were paralyzed after being hit by several days of record snowfall, with dozens of flights canceled and critical roads also cut off.

2009 - Snow falls at levels above elevations of 11,000 feet on the Big Island's Mauna Loa and Mauna Kea in Hawaii. The Weather Doctor

2013 - A nor'easter produced heavy snowfall over the New England states. In Boston, Massachusetts, total snowfall reached 24.9 inches, the fifth-highest total ever recorded in the city. New York City officially recorded 11.4 inches of snow at Central Park, and Portland, Maine, set a record of 31.9 inches. Hamden, Connecticut, recorded the highest snowfall of the storm at 40 inches.



## GIVING AND RECEIVING

It was well past midnight. There were few travelers, the weather was nearly unbearable with driving rains and freezing temperatures. A woman stood beside her broken down car trying to flag down someone going into the city.

Finally, a motorist stopped and invited the woman, who was soaking wet and trembling with chills, into his car. He took her to a taxi stand, and as she hurriedly exited from his car, she took time to ask him to write down his name and address.

A week later he received a giant TV and stereo with a note that read: "Thank you for assisting me. Because of your kindness I was able to make it to my dying husband's bedside just before he passed away. God bless you. Mrs. Nat King Cole."

Nearly a thousand years before Jesus was born, Solomon wrote, "Give generously, for your gifts will return to you later." In his wisdom, he summarized an important fact of life for all of us: Life involves risk and opportunity and has no guarantees.

However, he encouraged us to seize the moment to do good for others. He certainly did not support a stingy, self-centered lifestyle. Even though we do not know what may happen tomorrow, he would urge us to share with others whatever we have right now and learn to trust in God for tomorrow.

We show our love and trust when we give to others.

Prayer: Help us, Lord, to realize we have so much we do not deserve. May our hearts be as open to meeting the needs of others as much as Your heart is open to us. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Give generously, for your gifts will return to you later. Ecclesiastes 11:1

*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: 02.07.25

4 24 32 41 55 16

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$110,000,000**

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

4 13 17 44 45 5

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$23,520,000**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 22 Mins 59 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.07.25

14 18 21 29 31 10

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 37 Mins 59 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

19 20 22 30 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$29,000**

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 37 Mins 59 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

13 24 40 41 50 4

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 6 Mins 59 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.05.25

19 27 30 50 62 14

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$133,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 6 Mins 59 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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## Upcoming Groton Events

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

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## News from the **AP** Associated Press

### Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

#### **GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL**

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 53, Colome 12  
Bennett County 62, St. Francis Indian 33  
Brandon Valley 52, Rapid City Central 17  
Britton-Hecla 50, Langford 45  
Edgemont 52, Newell 43  
Ethan 52, Kimball-White Lake 18  
Faulkton 52, James Valley Christian School 6  
Gayville-Volin High School 55, Bridgewater-Emery 28  
Harrisburg 57, Aberdeen Central 44  
Hill City 50, Chadron, Neb. 26  
Hitchcock-Tulare 50, Sunshine Bible Academy 6  
Mitchell 50, Sturgis Brown High School 30  
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 47, Chamberlain 28  
Parkston 53, Gregory 19  
Potter County 56, Sully Buttes 42  
Scotland/Menno 46, Irene-Wakonda 45  
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 66, Rapid City Stevens 45  
Sioux Falls Washington 63, Watertown 38  
Sioux Valley 60, Flandreau 46  
Spearfish 62, Huron 52  
T F Riggs High School 75, Yankton 34  
Tiospa Zina 48, Flandreau Indian 29  
Tri-State, N.D. 49, Florence-Henry 47  
West Central 63, Madison 28  
Wilmot 64, Ipswich 58  
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=  
Aberdeen Christian vs. Herreid-Selby, ppd. to Feb 7th.

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

### Friday's Scores

The Associated Press

#### **BOYS PREP BASKETBALL**

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 51, Colome 20  
Brandon Valley 60, Rapid City Central 50  
Britton-Hecla 61, Langford 53  
Canistota 56, Sioux Falls Lutheran 54  
Chamberlain 54, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 38  
Clark-Willow Lake 64, Sisseton 31  
Edgemont 58, Newell 41  
Estelline-Hendricks 66, Colman-Egan 62  
Ethan 60, Kimball-White Lake 42  
Garretson 55, McCook Central-Montrose 54



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Gayville-Volin High School 63, Bridgewater-Emery 58  
Gregory 49, Parkston 28  
Harrisburg 57, Aberdeen Central 29  
Hill City 56, Chadron, Neb. 48  
Huron 67, Spearfish 54  
Irene-Wakonda 66, Scotland/Menno 52  
James Valley Christian School 69, Faulkton 58  
Milbank 48, Aberdeen Roncalli 38  
Mitchell 72, Sturgis Brown High School 55  
New Underwood 69, Crazy Horse 57  
Sioux Falls O’Gorman 49, Rapid City Stevens 40  
Sioux Falls Washington 59, Watertown 43  
St Thomas More 58, Douglas 40  
St. Francis Indian 64, Bennett County 24  
Sunshine Bible Academy 55, Hitchcock-Tulare 45  
Tiospa Zina 55, Flandreau Indian 47  
Vermillion 75, Groton 65  
Viborg-Hurley 68, Freeman Academy-Marion 38  
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=  
New England, N.D. vs. Lemmon High School, ppd.

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

## Hamas releases 3 more Israeli hostages for dozens of Palestinian prisoners under Gaza ceasefire

By WAFAA SHURAF, MOHAMMAD JAHJOUH and TIA GOLDENBERG Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip (AP) — Hamas-led militants released three gaunt, frail-looking Israeli civilian men they held for the past 16 months on Saturday, and Israel was freeing dozens of Palestinian prisoners as part of a fragile agreement that has paused the war in the Gaza Strip.

Before a crowd of hundreds, armed Hamas fighters led Eli Sharabi, 52, Ohad Ben Ami, 56, and Or Levy, 34, onto a stage, where they were forced to make a public statement before being handed over to the Red Cross.

The three were among about 250 people abducted during the Hamas-led attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, that sparked the war. They appeared to be in much poorer physical condition than any of the 18 other hostages released so far during the ceasefire that began Jan. 19.

Hostages’ condition sparks concern

The hostages’ emaciated condition and the stage-managed ceremony — a departure from previous hostage releases where the captives were not made to speak — sparked outrage in Israel.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office said “we will not accept the shocking scenes” that played out. The statement did not lay out punitive measures.

Israeli opposition leader Yair Lapid said the “difficult scenes” were reason to extend the truce with Hamas and bring home the dozens of remaining hostages.

In an apparent response to concerns over the released hostages’ health, Hamas’ military wing, the Qasam Brigades, claimed it had “made efforts to preserve their lives despite the (Israeli) bombardment.”

Many Palestinians released from Israeli jails during the ceasefire have also appeared gaunt and pale, and have alleged abuses and mistreatment in Israeli custody.

The current phase of the truce, which runs until early March, does not appear to have been affected by U.S. President Donald Trump’s stunning proposal to transfer the Palestinian population out of Gaza, welcomed by Israel but vehemently rejected by the Palestinians and most of the international community.

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But it could complicate talks over the second and more difficult phase, when Hamas is to release dozens more hostages in return for a lasting ceasefire. Hamas may be reluctant to free more captives — and lose its main bargaining chip — if it believes the U.S. and Israel are serious about depopulating the territory, which rights groups say would violate international law.

This was the fifth swap of hostages for prisoners during the ceasefire. Before Saturday, 18 hostages and more than 550 Palestinian prisoners had been freed.

The gaunt appearance of the three hostages “evoke the horrifying pictures from the liberation of the camps in 1945, the darkest chapter of our history,” said the Hostages Families Forum, a group representing relatives of most of the captives. “We have to get all of the hostages out of hell. There can be no more delays.”

The first phase of the ceasefire calls for the release of 33 hostages and nearly 2,000 prisoners, the return of Palestinians to northern Gaza and an increase in humanitarian aid to the devastated territory. Last week, wounded Palestinians were allowed to leave Gaza for Egypt for the first time since May.

Who was released on Saturday?

Sharabi and Ben Ami were both captured from Kibbutz Beerli, one of the hardest-hit farming communities, during the Hamas-led attack. Levy was abducted from the Nova music festival, where he was taking shelter in a safe room when the militants arrived.

Sharabi’s wife and two teenage daughters were killed in the attack. His brother Yossi was also abducted and died in captivity. Levy’s wife was killed during the attack and his now 3-year-old son has been cared for by relatives.

It is unclear whether either man knows about what happened to their families.

Ben Ami, a father of three, was kidnapped with his wife, Raz, who was released during a weeklong ceasefire in November 2023.

Relatives of the hostages cheered, clapped and cried as they watched live footage of their loved ones being released.

Levy’s brother, Michael, said his brother’s young son, Almog, was already told his father was on his way.

“Mogi, we found daddy,” Michael Levy said he told the boy, using his nickname, in an interview with Israeli Channel 12. “We haven’t seen happiness like that in him for a long time.”

The 183 Palestinian prisoners being released by Israel on Saturday include 18 people serving life sentences for deadly attacks on Israelis, 54 serving long-term sentences and 111 Palestinians from Gaza who were detained after the Oct. 7 attack but not tried for any crime. All are men and are aged between 20 and 61.

Virtually every Palestinian has a friend, relative or acquaintance who has been imprisoned.

More than 100 hostages were released during a weeklong ceasefire in November 2023. More than 70 are still in Gaza, and Israel has said 34 of those are believed to be dead. Israel says Hamas has confirmed eight of the 33 to be released during the first phase of the truce are dead.

Ceasefire’s next phase is uncertain

It is not clear whether Israel and Hamas have begun negotiating a second phase of the ceasefire, which calls for releasing the remaining hostages and extending the truce indefinitely. The war could resume in early March if no agreement is reached.

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

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

In the Oct. 7 attack, some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed. More than 47,000 Palestinians have been killed in Israel’s retaliatory air and ground war, 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. It blames civilian deaths on Hamas because its fighters operate in residential neighborhoods.

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Senior militants among Palestinian prisoners set for release

Of the 72 prisoners being released Saturday, five are from east Jerusalem, 14 from the Gaza Strip and the remaining 53 from the occupied West Bank. Seven are to be transferred to Egypt ahead of further deportation.

A total of 47 prisoners were being freed Saturday from Ofer prison in the West Bank, and transferred to Palestinian custody near Ramallah where scores of relatives, friends and supporters welcomed some of them cheering and clapping. One extremely frail-looking prisoner was loaded directly from a bus into an ambulance for emergency treatment.

The Palestinian security prisoners were detained over offenses ranging from bomb attacks to involvement in militant organizations, in some cases dating back decades.

They include Iyad Abu Shakhdam, 49, who has been locked up for nearly 21 years over his involvement in Hamas attacks in crowded civilian areas that killed dozens of Israelis during the Palestinian uprising of the early 2000s. That included a notorious 2004 suicide bus bombing in Israel's southern desert city of Beersheba that killed 16 people, including a 4-year-old.

Another is Jamal al-Tawil, a prominent Hamas politician in the occupied West Bank and former mayor of the village of al-Bireh, abutting Ramallah.

He has spent nearly two decades in and out of Israeli jail, with the military reporting his last arrest in 2021 over his alleged participation in violent riots and efforts to entrench Hamas' leadership in the West Bank. He was transferred to administrative detention, a repeatedly renewable six-month period in which suspects are held without charge or trial.

Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza and east Jerusalem in the 1967 Mideast war. The Palestinians want all three territories for their future state.

## **Trump says he wants to negotiate about Ukraine. It's not clear if Putin really does**

By EMMA BURROWS Associated Press

Nearly three years after President Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine, his troops are making steady progress on the battlefield. Kyiv is grappling with shortages of men and weapons. And the new U.S. president could soon halt Ukraine's massive supply of military aid.

Putin is closer than ever to achieving his objectives in the battle-weary country, with little incentive to come to the negotiating table, no matter how much U.S. President Donald Trump might cajole or threaten him, according to Russian and Western experts interviewed by The Associated Press.

Both are signaling discussions on Ukraine — by phone or in person — using flattery and threats.

Putin said Trump was "clever and pragmatic," and even parroted his false claims of having won the 2020 election. Trump's opening gambit was to call Putin "smart" and to threaten Russia with tariffs and oil price cuts, which the Kremlin brushed off.

Trump boasted during the campaign he could end the war in 24 hours, which later became six months. He's indicated the U.S. is talking to Russia about Ukraine without Kyiv's input, saying his administration already had "very serious" discussions.

He suggested he and Putin could soon take "significant" action toward ending the war, in which Russia is suffering heavy casualties daily while its economy endures stiff Western sanctions, inflation and a serious labor shortage.

But the economy has not collapsed, and because Putin has unleashed the harshest crackdown on dissent since Soviet times, he faces no domestic pressure to end the war.

"In the West, the idea came from somewhere that it's important to Putin to reach an agreement and end things. This is not the case," said Fyodor Lukyanov, who hosted a forum with Putin in November and heads Moscow's Council for Foreign and Defense policies.

Talks on Ukraine without Ukraine

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy says Putin wants to deal directly with Trump, cutting out Kyiv.

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That runs counter to the Biden administration's position that echoed Zelenskyy's call of "Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine."

"We cannot let someone decide something for us," Zelenskyy told AP, saying Russia wants the "destruction of Ukrainian freedom and independence."

He suggested any such peace deal would send the dangerous signal that adventurism pays to authoritarian leaders in China, North Korea and Iran.

Putin appears to expect Trump to undermine European resolve on Ukraine. Likening Europe's leaders to Trump's lapdogs, he said Sunday they will soon be "sitting obediently at their master's feet and sweetly wagging their tails" as the U.S. president quickly brings order with his "character and persistence."

Trump boasts of his deal-making prowess but Putin will not easily surrender what he considers Russia's ancestral lands in Ukraine or squander a chance to punish the West and undermine its alliances and security by forcing Kyiv into a policy of neutrality.

Trump may want a legacy as a peacemaker, but "history won't look kindly on him if he's the man who gives this all away," said Sir Kim Darroch, British ambassador to the U.S. from 2016-19. Former NATO spokesperson Oana Lungescu said a deal favoring Moscow would send a message of "American weakness."

Echoes of Helsinki

Trump and Putin last met in Helsinki in 2018 when there was "mutual respect" between them, said former Finnish President Sauli Niinistö, the summit host. But they are "not very similar," he added, with Putin a "systematic" thinker while Trump acts like a businessman making "prompt" decisions.

That could cause a clash because Trump wants a quick resolution to the war while Putin seeks a slower one that strengthens his military position and weakens both Kyiv and the West's political will.

Zelenskyy told AP that Putin "does not want to negotiate. He will sabotage it." Indeed, Putin has already raised obstacles, including legal hurdles and claimed Zelenskyy has lost his legitimacy as president.

Putin hopes Trump will "get bored" or distracted with another issue, said Boris Bondarev, a former Russian diplomat in Geneva who quit his post after the invasion.

Russian experts point to Trump's first term when they said Putin realized such meetings achieved little.

One was a public relations victory for Moscow in Helsinki where Trump sided with Putin instead of his own intelligence agencies on whether Russia meddled in the 2016 election. Another was in Singapore in 2019 with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un when he failed to reach a deal to halt Pyongyang's nuclear program.

Previous peace talks

The Kremlin last year said a draft peace agreement that Russia and Ukraine negotiated in Istanbul early in the conflict — but which Kyiv rejected — could be the basis for talks.

It demanded Ukraine's neutrality, stipulated NATO deny it membership, put limits on Kyiv's armed forces and delayed talks on the status of four Russian-occupied regions that Moscow later annexed illegally. Moscow also dismissed demands to withdraw its troops, pay compensation to Ukraine and face an international tribunal for its action.

Putin hasn't indicated he will budge but said "if there is a desire to negotiate and find a compromise solution, let anyone conduct these negotiations."

"Engagement is not the same as negotiation," said Sir Laurie Bristow, British ambassador to Russia from 2016-20, describing Russia's strategy as "what's mine is mine. And what's yours is up for negotiation."

Bondarev also said Putin sees negotiations only as a vehicle "to deliver him whatever he wants," adding it's "astonishing" that Western leaders still don't understand Kremlin tactics.

That means Putin is likely to welcome any meeting with Trump, since it promotes Russia as a global force and plays well domestically, but he will offer little in return.

What Trump can and can't do

Trump said Zelenskyy should have made a deal with Putin to avoid war, adding he wouldn't have allowed the conflict to start if he had been in office.

Trump has threatened Russia with more tariffs, sanctions and oil price cuts, but there is no economic

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"wonder weapon" that can end the war, said Richard Connolly, a Russian military and economic expert at London's Royal United Services Institute.

And the Kremlin is brushing off the threats, likely because the West already has heavily sanctioned Russia. Trump also can't guarantee Ukraine would never join NATO, nor can he lift all Western sanctions, easily force Europe to resume importing Russian energy or get the International Criminal Court to rescind its war crimes arrest warrant for Putin.

Speaking to the Davos World Economic Forum, Trump said he wants the OPEC+ alliance and Saudi Arabia to cut oil prices to push Putin to end the war. The Kremlin said that won't work because the war is about Russian security, not the price of oil. It also would harm U.S. oil producers.

"In the tradeoff between Putin and domestic oil producers, I'm pretty sure which choice Trump will make," said Alexandra Prokopenko, a fellow at the Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center in Berlin.

Trump could pressure Russia by propping up the U.S. oil industry with subsidies and lift the 10% trade tariffs imposed on China in exchange for Beijing limiting economic ties with Moscow, which could leave it "truly isolated," Connolly said.

Europe also could underscore its commitment to Kyiv – and curry favor with Trump – by buying U.S. military equipment to give to Ukraine, said Lord Peter Ricketts, a former U.K. national security adviser.

Lukyanov suggested that Trump's allies often seem afraid of him and crumble under his threats.

The "big question," he said, is what will happen when Putin won't.

## **Federal judge blocks Elon Musk's DOGE from accessing sensitive US Treasury Department material**

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE Associated Press

A federal judge early Saturday blocked Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency from accessing Treasury Department records that contain sensitive personal data such as Social Security and bank account numbers for millions of Americans.

U.S. District Judge Paul A. Engelmayer issued the preliminary injunction after 19 Democratic attorneys general sued President Donald Trump. The case, filed in federal court in New York City, alleges the Trump administration allowed Musk's team access to the Treasury Department's central payment system in violation of federal law.

The payment system handles tax refunds, Social Security benefits, veterans' benefits and much more, sending out trillions of dollars every year while containing an expansive network of Americans' personal and financial data.

Engelmayer, who was appointed by President Barack Obama, also said anyone prohibited from having access to the sensitive information since Jan. 20 must immediately destroy all copies of material downloaded from Treasury Department systems.

He set a hearing for Feb. 14.

The White House previously did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the lawsuit being filed.

Musk's Department of Government Efficiency, also known as DOGE, was created to discover and eliminate what the Trump administration has deemed to be wasteful government spending. DOGE's access to Treasury records, as well as its inspection of various government agencies, has ignited widespread concern among critics over the increasing power of Musk, while supporters have cheered at the idea of reining in bloated government finances.

Musk has made fun of criticism of DOGE on his X social media platform while saying it is saving taxpayers millions of dollars.

New York Attorney General Letitia James, whose office filed the lawsuit, said DOGE's access to the Treasury Department's data raises security problems and the possibility for an illegal freeze in federal funds.

"This unelected group, led by the world's richest man, is not authorized to have this information, and they explicitly sought this unauthorized access to illegally block payments that millions of Americans rely

on, payments for health care, child care and other essential programs," James said in a video message released by her office Friday.

James, a Democrat who has been one of Trump's chief antagonists, said the president does not have the power to give away American's private information to anyone he chooses, and he cannot cut federal payments approved by Congress.

Also on the lawsuit are Arizona, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nevada, New Jersey, North Carolina, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Wisconsin.

The suit alleges that DOGE's access to the Treasury records could interfere with funding already appropriated by Congress, which would exceed the Treasury Department's statutory authority. The case also argues that the DOGE access violates federal administrative law and the U.S. Constitution's separation of powers doctrine.

It also accuses Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent of changing the department's longstanding policy for protecting sensitive personally identifiable information and financial information to allow Musk's DOGE team access to its payment systems.

"This decision failed to account for legal obligations to protect such data and ignored the privacy expectations of federal fund recipients," including states, veterans, retirees, and taxpayers, the lawsuit says.

Connecticut Attorney General William Tong said it's not clear what DOGE is doing with the information in the Treasury systems.

"This is the largest data breach in American history," Tong said in a statement Friday. "DOGE is an unlawfully constituted band of renegade tech bros combing through confidential records, sensitive data and critical payment systems. What could go wrong?"

The Treasury Department has said the review is about assessing the integrity of the system and that no changes are being made. According to two people familiar with the process, Musk's team began its inquiry looking for ways to suspend payments made by the U.S. Agency for International Development, which Trump and Musk are attempting to dismantle. The two people spoke with The Associated Press on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

Separately, Democratic lawmakers are seeking a Treasury Department investigation of DOGE's access to the government's payment system.

Also, labor unions and advocacy groups have sued to block the payments system review over concerns about its legality. A judge in Washington on Thursday temporarily restricted access to two employees with "read only" privileges. \_\_\_ Associated Press writer Dave Collins in Hartford, Connecticut, contributed to this report.

## **Crews rush to recover commuter plane found crashed on Alaska sea ice before expected snow and wind**

By BECKY BOHRER and HALLIE GOLDEN Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — Just hours after finding 10 people dead in western Alaska from one of the deadliest plane crashes in the state in 25 years, authorities raced to recover their remains and the wreckage of the small commuter plane from unstable sea ice before expected high winds and snow.

"The conditions out there are dynamic, so we've got to do it safely in the fastest way we can," Jim West, chief of the Nome Volunteer Fire Department, said Friday.

The Bering Air single-engine turboprop plane was traveling from Unalakleet to the hub community of Nome when it disappeared Thursday afternoon. It was found the next day after an extensive search with all nine passengers and the pilot dead.

As the community tried to process the deadly event, crews worked swiftly on unstable, slushy sea ice to recover the bodies and the wreckage with less than a day before bad weather was expected. Officials said a Black Hawk helicopter would be used to move the aircraft once the bodies were removed.

Among those killed in the crash were Rhone Baumgartner and Kameron Hartvigson. They had traveled

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to Unalakleet to service a heat recovery system vital to the community's water plant, according to the Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium.

"These two members of our team lost their lives serving others," David Beveridge, vice president of environmental health & engineering for the organization, said in a statement. "The loss of these two incredible individuals and everyone else on board the plane will be felt all over Alaska."

The other people's names have not been released.

All 10 people on board the plane were adults, and the flight was a regularly scheduled commuter trip, according to Lt. Ben Endres of the Alaska State Troopers.

A photo provided by the Coast Guard showed the plane's splintered body and debris lying on the sea ice. Two people in brightly colored emergency gear circled the wreckage.

"It's hard to accept the reality of our loss," U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski said during an evening news conference.

Nome Mayor John Handeland choked up as he discussed the deaths and the response effort.

"Nome is a strong community, and in challenging times we come together and support each other. I expect the outpouring of support to continue in the coming days as we all work to recover from this tragic incident," Handeland said.

The Cessna Caravan left Unalakleet at 2:37 p.m. Thursday, and officials lost contact with it less than an hour later, according to David Olson, director of operations for Bering Air. There was light snow and fog, with a temperature of 17 degrees (minus 8.3 Celsius), according to the National Weather Service.

The Coast Guard said the aircraft went missing about 30 miles (48 kilometers) southeast of Nome.

Radar forensic data provided by the U.S. Civil Air Patrol indicated that about 3:18 p.m., the plane had "some kind of event which caused them to experience a rapid loss in elevation and a rapid loss in speed," Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Benjamin McIntyre-Coble said. "What that event is, I can't speculate to."

McIntyre-Coble said he was unaware of any distress signals from the aircraft. Planes carry an emergency locating transmitter. If exposed to seawater, the device sends a signal to a satellite, which then relays that message back to the Coast Guard to indicate an aircraft may be in distress. No such messages were received by the Coast Guard, he said.

Rescuers were searching the aircraft's last known location by helicopter when the wreckage was spotted, said Mike Salerno, a spokesperson for the U.S. Coast Guard. Two rescue swimmers were lowered to investigate.

Local, state and federal agencies had assisted in the search effort, combing stretches of ice-dotted waters and scouring miles of frozen tundra.

The National Transportation Safety Board was sending nine people to the scene from various states.

Flying is an essential mode of transportation in Alaska due to the vastness of the landscape and limited infrastructure. Most communities are not connected to the developed road system that serves the state's most populous region, and it's common to travel by small plane.

Some high school teams fly to sporting events against rival high schools, and goods are brought to many communities by barge or by air.

The plane's crash marks the third major U.S. aviation mishap in eight days. A commercial jetliner and an Army helicopter collided near the nation's capital on Jan. 29, killing 67 people. A medical transportation plane crashed in Philadelphia on Jan. 31, killing the six people on board and another person on the ground.

Bering Air serves 32 villages in western Alaska from hubs in Nome, Kotzebue and Unalakleet. Most destinations receive twice-daily scheduled flights Monday through Saturday.

Unalakleet is a community of about 690 people about 150 miles (about 240 kilometers) southeast of Nome and 395 miles (about 640 kilometers) northwest of Anchorage. The village is on the Iditarod trail, route of the world's most famous sled dog race, during which mushers and their teams must cross the frozen Norton Sound.

Nome, a Gold Rush town, is just south of the Arctic Circle and is known as the ending point of the 1,000-mile (1,610-kilometer) Iditarod. The city said prayer vigils would be held Friday for those on board the plane, friends and family and those involved in search efforts.

## Judge blocks Trump from placing thousands of USAID workers on leave and giving them 30-day deadline

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER and MICHAEL KUNZELMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A federal judge on Friday dealt President Donald Trump and billionaire ally Elon Musk their first big setback in their dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development, ordering a temporary halt to plans to pull thousands of agency staffers off the job.

U.S. District Judge Carl Nichols, a Trump appointee, also agreed to block an order that would have given the thousands of overseas USAID workers the administration wanted to place on abrupt administrative leave just 30 days to move families and households back to the U.S. on government expense.

Both moves would have exposed the U.S. workers and their spouses and children to unwarranted risk and expense, the judge said.

Nichols pointed to accounts from workers abroad that the Trump administration, in its rush to shut down the agency and its programs abroad, had cut some workers off from government emails and other communication systems they needed to reach the U.S. government in case of a health or safety emergency.

The Associated Press reported earlier that USAID contractors in the Middle East and elsewhere had found even “panic button” apps wiped off their mobile phones or disabled when the administration abruptly furloughed them.

“Administrative leave in Syria is not the same as administrative leave in Bethesda,” the judge said in his order Friday night.

In agreeing to stop the 30-day deadline given USAID staffers to return home at government expense, Nichols cited statements from agency employees who had no home to go to in the U.S. after decades abroad, who faced pulling children with special needs out of school midyear, and had other difficulties.

The judge also ordered USAID staffers already placed on leave by the Trump administration reinstated. But he declined a request from two federal employee associations to grant a temporary block on a Trump administration funding freeze that has shut down the six-decade-old agency and its work, pending more hearings on the workers’ lawsuit.

Nichols stressed in the hearing earlier Friday on the request to pause the Trump administration’s actions that his order was not a decision on the employees’ request to roll back the administration’s swiftly moving destruction of the agency.

“CLOSE IT DOWN,” Trump said on social media of USAID before the judge’s ruling.

The American Foreign Service Association and the American Federation of Government Employees argue that Trump lacks the authority to shut down the agency without approval from Congress. Democratic lawmakers have made the same argument.

Trump’s administration moved quickly Friday to literally erase the agency’s name. Workers on a crane scrubbed the name from the stone front of its Washington headquarters. They used duct tape to block it out on a sign and took down USAID flags. Someone placed a bouquet of flowers outside the door.

The Trump administration and Musk, who is running a budget-cutting Department of Government Efficiency, have made USAID their biggest target so far in an unprecedented challenge of the federal government and many of its programs.

Administration appointees and Musk’s teams have shut down almost all funding for the agency, stopping aid and development programs worldwide. They have placed staffers and contractors on leave and furlough and locked them out of the agency’s email and other systems. According to Democratic lawmakers, they also carted away USAID’s computer servers.

“This is a full-scale gutting of virtually all the personnel of an entire agency,” Karla Gilbride, the attorney for the employee associations, told the judge.

Justice Department attorney Brett Shumate argued that the administration has all the legal authority it needs to place agency staffers on leave. “The government does this across the board every day,” Shumate said. “That’s what’s happening here. It’s just a large number.”



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Friday's ruling is the latest setback in the courts for the Trump administration, whose policies to offer financial incentives for federal workers to resign and end birthright citizenship for anyone born in the U.S. to someone in the country illegally have been temporarily paused by judges.

Earlier Friday, a group of a half-dozen USAID officials speaking to reporters strongly disputed assertions from Secretary of State Marco Rubio that the most essential life-saving programs abroad were getting waivers to continue funding. None were, the officials said.

Among the programs they said had not received waivers: \$450 million in food grown by U.S. farmers sufficient to feed 36 million people, which was not being paid for or delivered; and water supplies for 1.6 million people displaced by war in Sudan's Darfur region, which were being cut off without money for fuel to run water pumps in the desert.

The judge's order involved the Trump administration's decision earlier this week to pull almost all USAID workers off the job and out of the field worldwide.

Trump and congressional Republicans have spoken of moving a much-reduced number of aid and development programs under the State Department.

Within the State Department itself, employees fear substantial staff reductions following the deadline for the Trump administration's offer of financial incentives for federal workers to resign, according to officials who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisal. A judge temporarily blocked that offer and set a hearing Monday.

The administration earlier this week gave almost all USAID staffers posted overseas 30 days, starting Friday, to return to the U.S., with the government paying for their travel and moving costs. Diplomats at embassies asked for waivers allowing more time for some, including families forced to pull their children out of schools midyear.

In a notice posted on the USAID website late Thursday, the agency clarified that none of the overseas personnel put on leave would be forced to leave the country where they work. But it said that workers who chose to stay longer than 30 days might have to cover their own expenses unless they received a specific hardship waiver.

Rubio said Thursday during a trip to the Dominican Republic that the government would help staffers get home within 30 days "if they so desired" and would listen to those with special conditions.

He insisted the moves were the only way to get cooperation because staffers were working "to sneak through payments and push through payments despite the stop order" on foreign assistance. Agency staffers deny his claims of obstruction.

Rubio said the U.S. government will continue providing foreign aid, "but it is going to be foreign aid that makes sense and is aligned with our national interest."

## **At 72 years old and out of the NFL, Bill Belichick makes presence known at the Super Bowl**

By DAN GELSTON AP Sports Writer

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — At 72 years old and out of the NFL, Bill Belichick still stole the show during Super Bowl week.

What's the former Patriots coach wearing on the red carpet?

Try all of his Super Bowl rings.

He was the the Bill of the ball at the NFL Honors, where Belichick not only flashed and flexed the gaudy bling earned from winning more Super Bowls over his vaunted career than any other coach in history, but earned a kindly roasting at the awards show — social media was less kind — for walking arm-in-arm with 24-year-old girlfriend Jordan Hudson.

Belichick even dumped his trademark hoodie for a burgundy sports coat while Hudson stunned in a silver sequin dress.

Stories about Belichick pop up these days about as often on TMZ as they do involving the NFL, or even his new gig as head coach at North Carolina. Hudson turned heads when she appeared to also sport one

of Belichick's Super Bowl rings — but on THAT finger — that even fueled engagement rumors on social media and other publications. The Daily Mail posted photos of Hudson "flaunting a stunning sparkler" at a charity event Wednesday in New Orleans.

Hang tight, paparazzi.

Hudson posted on Instagram that the ring she wore at Honors was a Bridgewater State University Bearcats National Cheerleaders Association Collegiate Championship ring.

Not even Tom Brady has one of those.

Like any young couple — well, OK, any couple with one young person in it — they were spotted after the show hitting Bourbon Street bars looking for a good time.

The grumpy coach who couldn't be bothered in New England with any meaningful quotes and conversation with reporters has turned into a bit of a media darling since his split with the Patriots. He clowns around and offers insights on "The Pat McAfee Show" and even hosted a pair of podcasts. He even appeared on the NFL Network on Thursday night — where he refused to pick a Super Bowl winner between the Kansas City Chiefs and Philadelphia Eagles.

"He's changed in a good way. I like it," retired Patriots tight end Rob Gronkowski told The Associated Press. "I like it big time. How he's been representing. How's he swaggy. How he's been in a new world, not coaching in the NFL. He's been spectacular. Everyone loves him now."

Belichick, who won six Super Bowls as head coach at New England and two more as an assistant with the New York Giants, even seems to have a sense of humor about himself, at least when it comes to his relationship with Hudson.

Honors host and rapper Snoop Dogg poked fun at the age gap between Belichick and Hudson during his monologue, joking he remembered the old days of the NFL when the Cowboys were good, the Chiefs were bad, "and I remember, what was it, Bill Belichick's girlfriend wasn't even born yet."

Belichick and Hudson politely laughed at the joke while the crowd "awwwed" at the punchline.

On social media, the jokes flew faster than a Saquon Barkley 60-yard touchdown run.

One person posted a picture of the two at the awards show and wrote, "You can make fun of Bill Belichick all you want, but I think it's really nice that he took his girlfriend to the NFL Awards even if it is a school night." Another posted a photo collage that included Napster and "Toy Story 2," and wrote, "All of these things are older than Bill Belichick's girlfriend."

Date nights might be harder to come by once Belichick goes back to college.

Belichick signed a five-year deal with North Carolina in December that pays him \$10 million in base and supplemental salary per year — though it is guaranteed only for the first three years, including for buyout purposes — and there is also up to \$3.5 million in annual bonuses.

That's enough scratch to buy all the rings Hudson could want to slip on — just like her boyfriend — all her fingers.

## **A 15-year-old went to a Brooklyn parade.**

### **The NYPD wrongly accused him of a mass shooting**

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Camden Lee was leaving high school football practice in September when he saw the photograph, splashed across the New York Police Department's social media accounts, that would soon upend his life.

In a crisp surveillance image, the 15-year-old stands alone in a hoodie and shorts, eyes cast down on a Brooklyn street. "The pictured individual," police declared in an accompanying caption, had "discharged a firearm" at the West Indian American Day parade, killing one person and wounding four others.

"I see the NYPD logo. I see me. I see 'suspect wanted for murder,'" Lee recalled. "I couldn't believe what was happening. Then everything went blurry."

In private, police backpedaled almost immediately. After meeting with Lee and his lawyer, they declined

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to bring charges, then quietly removed his photograph from their X and Instagram accounts. But they have not publicly acknowledged the retraction, ignoring the repeated pleas of Lee and his mother, who say their lives remain threatened by the falsehood.

The family's search for answers has raised questions about the NYPD's policies for correcting misinformation at a time when the department is already facing scrutiny for other social media misrepresentations.

"I used to have a lot of trust in the NYPD and how they do things," said Lee's mother, Chee Chee Brock, whose older son recently joined the force. "But I raised my kids to admit when they made a mistake. If you can blame an innocent kid for murder, what else can you get away with?"

The department's newly appointed chief spokesperson, Deputy Commissioner for Public Information Delaney Kempner, said she would look into the matter but did not answer a list of questions or provide further information.

It remains unclear why Lee was identified as a suspect.

The day of the shooting, Lee said, he left football practice and stopped at the annual Labor Day celebration of Caribbean culture with a teammate at around 1 p.m. Minutes later, as gunfire erupted along the route, his friend was grazed in the shoulder. The surveillance image, Lee said, showed his stunned expression after hearing gunshots for the first time, then watching his bloodied friend carted away on a stretcher.

When police published it, on Sept. 19, Lee's mother immediately contacted an attorney, Kenneth Montgomery, who offered to set up a meeting with homicide detectives that night. But police told the lawyer to bring the teen to Brooklyn's 77th precinct station the following week. At the meeting — according to Montgomery, Lee and his mother — the detectives said he was not a suspect.

"They conceded they got it wrong," Montgomery said. "But these officers were so cavalier about it. It was like they were playing a game with a kid's life."

By then the NYPD's communications division had widely distributed the photograph of Lee to media outlets and TV stations, which urged people to come forward with tips about the unnamed suspect.

In recent weeks a high-ranking department official has urged some outlets not to use the image in follow-up stories about the shooting, according to text messages shared with The Associated Press. But those conversations with reporters were "off the record," preventing news sites from explaining why the photograph was removed.

In the absence of official clarification, the photo has continued to circulate online, triggering a barrage of death threats against Lee from online sleuths who tracked down his own social media accounts.

As he got ready for school on a recent morning, Lee pulled up an Instagram page with 750,000 followers and scrolled through the comments below his photograph.

"He about to get found quick," one read. Another said simply: "He done." Others tagged friends and family of Denzel Chan, 25, who was killed in the shooting. "They deserve answers too," Lee said of Chan's loved ones.

At a news conference immediately following the shooting, NYPD Chief of Patrol John Chell said the violence was gang-related. He described the suspect as a slim man in his 20s who wore a paint-stained brown shirt and bandana. Lee, who turned 16 in January, wore neither in the photograph released weeks later.

Fearing possible gang retaliation, Brock, a single mother who works at the post office, moved her son and two daughters to a relative's home outside the city. Lee missed weeks of school, hurting his grades, as evidenced by a report card hanging on the fridge. While the family has since returned to Brooklyn, Lee has been forbidden by his mother from moving around alone.

"As a mom, the No. 1 thing I'm scared of is losing my kids to the streets or the jail system," said Brock. "So he doesn't have freedom now. When he goes to the corner store, I time him."

It has not escaped the family's attention that the mistaken identification came at a uniquely tumultuous time for city police. In the 17 days between the shooting and the release of the photo, federal agents seized phones from Police Commissioner Edward Caban, who then resigned, telling officers that the investigation "created a distraction for the department."

"There's tremendous pressure on the NYPD to serve up results in a high-profile shooting like this," said Wylie Stecklow, a civil rights attorney who is representing the family as they weigh a possible lawsuit.

"The fact that they've failed to explain how this mistake was made, and how they'll avoid it in the future, is deeply troubling."

As the department seeks to rehabilitate its image, its communications strategy has also come under fire. A recent report from the city's Department of Investigation faulted certain NYPD executives for "irresponsible and unprofessional" use of social media and called on the department to codify its policies around deleting public posts, as other city agencies have done.

In an earlier social media post, Chell, who has since been promoted to chief of department, mistakenly identified a judge he accused of letting a predator back into the community. That post, too, was deleted.

In December, just when the initial wave of attention around Lee began to subside, police announced they were upping the reward for information about the shooting to \$10,000. This time they did not circulate Lee's photo.

But without official confirmation that Lee was no longer a suspect, many news stations and newspapers ran the old image of him anyway. It remains all over the internet, including atop some news stories.

"For the photo to come out again, it brought it all back to the start," Lee said. "My mom was just thinking of letting me go on the train again."

Lately, he said, he can sense people looking at him, whispering behind back, as he walks through his neighborhood or the hallways at school. He has considered cutting his hair or buying new clothes in the hopes of passing unrecognized. Some days he prefers not to leave home at all.

"It takes me to a dark place," Lee said. "I don't feel like myself anymore. I don't have the opportunity to explain my side of the story. Everyone is so fixed on this one image of me: murderer."

## **Missing commuter plane found crashed on Alaska sea ice and all 10 aboard are dead, authorities say**

By BECKY BOHRER and HALLIE GOLDEN Associated Press

JUNEAU, Alaska (AP) — A small commuter plane that crashed in western Alaska on its way to the hub community of Nome was located Friday on sea ice, and all 10 people on board were dead, authorities said. The crash was one of the deadliest in the state in the last 25 years.

Rescuers were searching the aircraft's last known location by helicopter when the wreckage was spotted, said Mike Salerno, a spokesperson for the U.S. Coast Guard. Two rescue swimmers were lowered to investigate.

A photo provided by the Coast Guard showed the plane's splintered body and debris lying on the sea ice. Two people in brightly colored emergency gear circled the wreckage.

"It's hard to accept the reality of our loss," U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski said during an evening news conference.

Nome Mayor John Handeland choked up as he discussed the deaths and the response effort.

"Nome is a strong community, and in challenging times we come together and support each other. I expect the outpouring of support to continue in the coming days as we all work to recover from this tragic incident," Handeland said.

A prayer service was announced for later in the evening.

Already the focus was shifting to a recovery operation because of rapidly changing conditions. Officials outlined the challenges including bad weather expected in the next 18 hours and "young ice" that was slushy and not stable.

"They are on the ice as we speak," said Jim West, chief of the Nome Volunteer Fire Department. "The conditions out there are dynamic, and so we've got to do it safely and the fastest way we can."

The Bering Air single-engine turboprop plane was traveling from Unalakleet on Thursday afternoon with nine passengers and a pilot, Alaska's Department of Public Safety said. It was operating at its maximum passenger capacity, according to the airline's description of the plane.

The Cessna Caravan left Unalakleet at 2:37 p.m., and officials lost contact with it less than an hour

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later, according to David Olson, director of operations for Bering Air. There was light snow and fog, with a temperature of 17 degrees (minus 8.3 Celsius), according to the National Weather Service.

The Coast Guard said the aircraft went missing about 30 miles (48 kilometers) southeast of Nome.

Radar forensic data provided by the U.S. Civil Air Patrol indicated that about 3:18 p.m., the plane had "some kind of event which caused them to experience a rapid loss in elevation and a rapid loss in speed," Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Benjamin McIntyre-Coble said. "What that event is, I can't speculate to."

McIntyre-Coble said he was unaware of any distress signals from the aircraft. Planes carry an emergency locating transmitter. If exposed to seawater, the device sends a signal to a satellite, which then relays that message back to the Coast Guard to indicate an aircraft may be in distress. No such messages were received by the Coast Guard, he said.

All 10 people on board the plane were adults, and the flight was a regularly scheduled commuter trip, according to Lt. Ben Endres of the Alaska State Troopers.

Two people who died in the crash were on a work trip for a non-profit tribal health organization, according to Alaska's News Source. The other people's names have not been released.

Local, state and federal agencies had assisted in the search effort, combing stretches of ice-dotted waters and scouring miles of frozen tundra.

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## US employers added 143,000 jobs in unspectacular January hiring and jobless rate fell to 4%

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. employers added just 143,000 jobs last month, but the unemployment rate fell to 4% to start 2025.

The first monthly jobs report of Donald Trump's second presidency points to a solid but unspectacular labor market. January job creation dipped from the 261,000 added in November and 307,000 in December. Economists had expected about 170,000 new jobs in January.

The outlook is uncertain as Trump prepares to shake up economic policymaking by cutting federal jobs, imposing big taxes on foreign goods and deporting millions of undocumented workers. His tariffs and immigration crackdown could push up prices, potentially rekindling the inflation that turned many U.S. voters against President Joe Biden and helped return Trump to the White House.

For now, most Americans still enjoy unusual job security. But for those looking for work, the job hunt

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has been getting harder compared with the red-hot hiring days of 2021 to 2023.

Average hourly wages rose by 0.5% from December and 4.1% from January 2024, a bit hotter than forecasters had expected. That may be disappointing for the inflation fighters at the Federal Reserve. Still, some inflationary pressure from wage gains is being offset by U.S. productivity growth, which allows companies to pay more and earn fatter profits without raising prices.

"Employers are really maintaining their workforce, but they are not hiring significantly, nor are they laying off," said Gregory Daco, chief economist at the consulting firm EY Parthenon. Daco expects average job growth to slow to between 100,000 and 150,000 a month this year (down slightly from the 2024 average of 166,000 new jobs a month).

The Labor Department also revised payrolls for November and December up by a combined 100,000.

Citing the strong upward revisions from late 2024, Carl Weinberg and Mary Chen of High Frequency Economics wrote that "There is no cause for concern about the strength of the economy in today's employment report." But they added that hiring in recent months suggests the Fed will be in no hurry to cut interest rates after doing so three times in 2024.

January hiring was narrow. Healthcare (44,000 new jobs), retail (34,000) and government (32,000) together accounted for 77% of new jobs last month. Mines shed 8,000 jobs.

The Labor Department said the Los Angeles wildfires and a cold snap in the Northeast and Midwest had "no discernable" impact on the January jobs numbers.

The future is cloudier.

A federal judge on Thursday temporarily blocked President Donald Trump's plan to push out federal workers using financial incentives. A federal hiring freeze that Trump imposed Jan. 20 is a "negative for employment growth," Bradley Saunders, an economist at Capital Economics, wrote last week.

Economists are also worried about Trump's threats of a trade war against other countries. He's already imposed a 10% tax on imports from China and is threatening tariffs on Canada, Mexico and the European Union and possibly, a universal levy on all imports.

Tariffs paid by U.S. importers, but typically passed along to customers, could heat up inflation – which has fallen from the four-decade high it reached in mid-2022 but is seemingly stuck above the Fed's 2% target. If tariffs push prices higher, the Fed may cancel or postpone the two interest-rate cuts it had forecast for this year. That would be bad for economic growth and job creation.

Employers also worry about the economic fallout from Trump's promises to deport millions of immigrants working in the United States.

Coastal Luxury Outdoors, a Florida pool, maintenance and landscaping company, is struggling to find workers.

"We're highly reliant on immigrant labor, to the point where even if we see reduced demand due to tariffs and other factors, we'll still need to boost our staffing levels," said Rafi Friedman, company president.

Friedman said the company has a core administrative staff of about a dozen people and a field service staff that fluctuates by the season. More than 80% of the field workforce is Hispanic, most of them foreign born. Friedman said the company verifies their immigration status before hiring them.

"Because our work is highly seasonal, we're always replacing at least some of our workforce from year to year, and in periods of high anti-immigrant sentiment, that turnover only gets more difficult to manage," he said.

The job market has already lost momentum. American payrolls increased by 2 million last year, down from 2.6 million in 2023, 4.6 million in 2022 and a record 7.2 million in 2021 as the economy recovered from COVID-19 lockdowns. Employers are posting fewer jobs and monthly job openings have tumbled from a record 12.2 million in March 2022, to 7.6 million in December – still a decent number by historical standards.

Aujanique Star, 20, of Fife, Washington, is a pre-nursing student who has been trying to switch from her caregiving job to a position in retail for nearly a year. But after submitting as many as 20 applications, she just keeps facing rejections.

"It makes me feel more frustrated that I have all this work experience and all this loyalty towards my

jobs. ... What am I missing?" she said.

As the labor market cools, American workers are losing confidence in their ability to find better pay or working conditions by changing jobs. The number of people quitting has fallen from a record 4.5 million near the height of the hiring boom in April 2022, to December's 3.2 million, which is below pre-pandemic levels.

In regular annual revisions, the Labor Department reported Friday that job creation from April 2023 through March 2024 wasn't as good as originally reported: 589,000 fewer jobs were created over those 12 months. Preliminary estimates, released in August, had suggested the downward revisions would be bigger — 818,000 jobs.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt on Friday said the economy during Joe Biden's presidency "was far worse than anyone thought."

Yet Trump is inheriting a healthy unemployment rate and stable economy, just not one that would necessarily make him happy.

Trump is banking on tax cuts and regulatory curbs to bolster the economy. But his freezes on federal funding could halt infrastructure projects and manufacturing. His tariffs could hurt the retail sector and his spending cuts could limit hiring in the health care and government sectors.

## Trump says he's ending Biden's classified intelligence briefings in payback move

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump said Friday that he's revoking former President Joe Biden's access to government secrets and ending the daily intelligence briefings he's receiving in payback for Biden doing the same to him in 2021.

Trump announced his decision in a post on his social media platform shortly after he arrived at his Mar-a-Lago home and private club in Palm Beach for the weekend.

"There is no need for Joe Biden to continue receiving access to classified information. Therefore, we are immediately revoking Joe Biden's Security Clearances, and stopping his daily Intelligence Briefings," Trump wrote. "He set this precedent in 2021, when he instructed the Intelligence Community (IC) to stop the 45th President of the United States (ME!) from accessing details on National Security, a courtesy provided to former Presidents."

The move is the latest in a vengeance tour of Washington that Trump promised during his campaign. He has previously revoked security clearances from more than four dozen former intelligence officials who signed a 2020 letter saying that the Hunter Biden laptop saga bore the hallmarks of a "Russian information operation." He's also revoked security details assigned to protect former government officials who have criticized him, including his own former secretary of state, Mike Pompeo, who faces threats from Iran, and former infectious disease expert Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Biden didn't immediately comment on the move.

Biden ended Trump's intelligence briefings after Trump helped spur efforts to overturn the 2020 presidential election and incited the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol. At the time, Biden said Trump's "erratic" behavior should prevent him from getting the intel briefings.

Asked in an interview with CBS News what he feared if Trump continued to receive the briefings, Biden said he did not want to "speculate out loud" but made clear he did not want Trump to continue having access to such information.

"I just think that there is no need for him to have the intelligence briefings," Biden said. "What value is giving him an intelligence briefing? What impact does he have at all, other than the fact he might slip and say something?"

in 2022, federal agents searched Trump's Florida home and seized boxes of classified records. He was indicted on dozens of felony counts accusing him of illegally hoarding classified records and obstructing FBI efforts to get them back. He pleaded not guilty and denied wrongdoing. A judge dismissed the charges,

ruling the special counsel who brought them was illegally appointed, and the Justice Department gave up appeals after Trump was elected in November.

In a related matter, Trump dismissed Colleen Shogan as the archivist of the United States, White House aide Sergio Gor posted on X Friday night.

Trump had said in early January that he would replace the head of the National Archives and Records Administration. The government agency drew his anger after it informed the Justice Department about issues with Trump's handling of classified documents. Shogan, the first woman in the post, wasn't the archivist of the United States at the time the issue emerged.

In his post on Biden, Trump cited the special counsel report last year into his handling of classified documents, saying, "The Hur Report revealed that Biden suffers from 'poor memory' and, even in his 'prime,' could not be trusted with sensitive information."

He ended his post by saying, "I will always protect our National Security — JOE, YOU'RE FIRED. MAKE AMERICA GREAT AGAIN!"

Special counsel Robert Hur investigated Biden's handling of classified information and found that criminal charges were not warranted but delivered a biting critical assessment of his handling of sensitive government records. The report described Biden's memory as "hazy," "fuzzy," "faulty," "poor" and having "significant limitations." It said Biden could not recall defining milestones in his own life such as when his son Beau died or when he served as vice president.

Trump has the right to end the briefings for Biden because it is a sitting president's decision on whether a past president should continue to have access to classified information.

Steven Cheung, the president's communications director, shared Trump's post on the X social media platform and said, "Hit the road Jack and don't you come back no more!"

## **Federal prisons being used to detain people arrested in Trump's immigration crackdown**

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — President Donald Trump's administration is using federal prisons to detain some people arrested in its immigration crackdown, the federal Bureau of Prisons said Friday, returning to a strategy that drew allegations of mistreatment during his first term.

In a statement to The Associated Press, the prison agency said it is assisting U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement "by housing detainees and will continue to support our law enforcement partners to fulfill the administration's policy objectives."

The Bureau of Prisons declined to say how many immigration detainees it is taking in, or which prison facilities are being used.

"For privacy, safety, and security reasons, we do not comment on the legal status of an individual, nor do we specify the legal status of individuals assigned to any particular facility, including numbers and locations," the agency said.

Three people familiar with the matter told the AP that federal jails in Los Angeles, Miami and Philadelphia and federal prisons in Atlanta, Leavenworth, Kansas, and Berlin, New Hampshire, are among the facilities being used. The people were not authorized to speak publicly and did so on condition of anonymity. The Miami jail alone is set to receive up to 500 detainees, the people said.

An influx of immigration detainees could put yet more strain on the Bureau of Prisons, which AP reporting revealed has been plagued by severe understaffing, violence and other problems. The agency is seeking to temporarily move employees from its other facilities to help with immigrant detention.

The Bureau of Prisons is the Justice Department's biggest agency with more than 30,000 employees, 122 facilities, 155,000 inmates and an annual budget of about \$8 billion. In December, the agency said it was closing one prison and idling six prison camps to address "significant challenges, including a critical staffing shortage, crumbling infrastructure and limited budgetary resources."

A message seeking comment was left for ICE.



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Trump has vowed to deport millions of the estimated 11.7 million people in the U.S. illegally. ICE currently has the budget to detain only about 41,000 people and the administration has not said how many detention beds it needs to achieve its goals.

Many detainees are taken to ICE processing centers, privately operated detention facilities or local prisons and jails it contracts with.

On Thursday, Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said a second flight of detainees landed at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base in Cuba. Immigrant rights groups sent a letter Friday demanding access to people who have been sent to Guantanamo Bay, saying the base should not be used as a "legal black hole."

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said Wednesday that more than 8,000 people have been arrested in immigration enforcement actions since Trump's Jan. 20 inauguration. Of them, 461 were released for reasons that included medical conditions and lack of detention capacity, she said.

ICE averaged 787 arrests a day from Jan. 23 to Jan. 31, compared to a daily average of 311 during a 12-month period that ended Sept. 30 during former President Joe Biden's administration. ICE has stopped publishing daily arrests totals.

In 2018, during Trump's first term, the Bureau of Prisons reached an agreement with ICE and Customs and Border Protection to detain up to 1,600 immigrants at federal prison facilities in Arizona, California, Oregon, Washington and Texas.

Six immigrants detained under that arrangement at a medium-security federal prison in Victorville, California, sued Trump, then-Attorney General Jeff Sessions, and immigration and prison officials, alleging "punitive and inhumane" treatment.

The men, who were seeking asylum in the U.S., accused the Bureau of Prisons of providing inedible meals and spoiled milk, infringing on their ability to practice their religious faith, allowing only a few hours a week of recreation in the hot sun, and failing to provide adequate medical care.

Last October, the American Civil Liberties Union sued the Bureau of Prisons and immigration authorities under the Freedom of Information Act for records related to the use of federal prisons to detain immigrants during Trump's first term. A conference in that case is scheduled for Feb. 28.

An ongoing AP investigation has exposed serious issues in the Bureau of Prisons, including rampant misconduct, sexual abuse by staff, dozens of escapes, chronic violence, and employees ill-equipped to respond to emergencies because of staffing limitations.

Last week, El Salvador's President Nayib Bukele offered to put U.S. immigration detainees and other U.S. prisoners in his country's massive CECOT prison — even American citizens and legal residents. In a post on the social platform X, Bukele said he was offering the U.S. "the opportunity to outsource part of its prison system" in exchange for a "relatively low" fee.

Trump says he was open to the idea, but acknowledged it could be legally problematic.

"I'm just saying if we had a legal right to do it, I would do it in a heartbeat," Trump told reporters Tuesday in the Oval Office. "I don't know if we do or not, we're looking at that right now."

## Trump pauses tariffs on millions of low-value packages from China

By DIDI TANG and HALELUYA HADERO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump has paused imposing tariffs on small-value packages arriving from China, apparently to give federal agencies time to sort out how to process millions of such shipments that have come through the U.S. border every day without paying taxes.

The executive order, dated Wednesday, didn't say when the pause would end but said it would cease when the Department of Commerce could put in place "adequate systems" to "fully and expediently process and collect tariff revenue."

"It's just showing we're moving fast, and the implications are not fully understood when some of these regulations are put in place," said John Lash, group vice president of product strategy at the supply chain platform e2open, pointing out that Trump's order affected huge numbers of small packages, many in transit.

"The volumes are absolutely incredible," Lash said. "And all of a sudden, they go from not requiring filing (for tariffs) ... to actually requiring full filing, which is a complicated task."

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Ending tariff exemptions on low-cost packages from China has broad bipartisan support in Washington, and Trump pulled the plug when he raised tariffs on Chinese goods by 10% earlier this week. Goods sent through duty-free packages became subject not only to existing tariffs — 25% for many Chinese products — but also the new 10%.

It marks another pause on Trump's policies weeks into his second administration, including orders to impose tariffs on Mexico and Canada that were suspended after the two allies took steps to appease his concerns about border security and drug trafficking.

The U.S. Postal Service, which would be burdened with collecting tariffs on small packages, on Tuesday announced it would not accept parcels from mainland China and Hong Kong, only to reverse the decision the next day. It said it would work with Customs and Border Protection to implement a collection process for the new tariffs.

"It's one of those things where you put in any change so quickly it catches people unprepared," Lash said. Introduced in 1938, the so-called de minimis exception was intended to facilitate the flow of small packages valued at no more than \$5, the equivalent of about \$106 today. The threshold increased to \$200 in 1994 and \$800 in 2016. But the rapid rise of cross-border e-commerce, driven by China, has challenged the intent of the decades-old customs exception rule.

Chinese exports of low-value packages soared to \$66 billion in 2023, up from \$5.3 billion in 2018, according to a report released last week by the Congressional Research Service. And the U.S. market has been a major destination.

In 2023, for the first time, more than 1 billion such packages came through U.S. customs, up from 134 million in 2015. By the end of last year, Customs and Border Protection said it was processing about 4 million small shipments a day, many of which came from China through online retail platforms such as Shein and Temu.

Critics said the practice had allowed not only tariff evasion, but also the flow of unsafe products such as counterfeits and illicit drugs into the U.S. Supporters argued that it helped keep prices affordable for U.S. consumers and small businesses.

After Trump threw out the exemption, some analysts noted that the policy shift could lead to higher prices and delivery delays as U.S. customs officials cope with an onslaught of packages to scrutinize.

"We are talking about millions of packages every week that currently just basically get treated like domestic shipping," said Neil Saunders, a managing director with research firm GlobalData.

He said Temu has already adjusted by increasing its warehousing capabilities in the U.S. during the past year and shipping products in containers.

Lash said the end to the de minimis exception rule would change the cross-border e-commerce model when tariffs and filing paperwork drive up costs, prompting overseas sellers to turn to bulk shipping.

## **Jim Becker, AP reporter who covered Jackie Robinson and an underdog Hawaii football team, dies at 98**

By AUDREY McAVOY Associated Press

HONOLULU (AP) — Jim Becker, a world-traveling journalist who covered Jackie Robinson's big-league baseball debut and the U.S. Army's retaking of Seoul during the Korean War, died Friday. He was 98.

He died of natural causes at a Honolulu hospital, said his goddaughter Carla Escoda Brooks.

Becker served as an Associated Press bureau chief in Manila, New Delhi and Honolulu and covered Margaret Thatcher as a freelance journalist in London. But he said his most important story was about an underdog Hawaii high school football team that won a league championship, a tale he told as a Honolulu Star-Bulletin columnist.

Becker joined the AP in 1946 fresh out of the Army when he walked into the wire service's New York headquarters without an appointment and was hired to start the next day.

He watched Robinson become the first Black player on a Major League baseball team when editors sent him to the trailblazing athlete's first game as a Brooklyn Dodger.

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Nearly half of Robinson's teammates had signed a petition because they didn't want to play with a Black man. But the stadium crowd was supportive of Robinson, Becker said, adding that half of Brooklyn was Jewish "and they knew a little something about prejudice."

Becker, who was just 20 at the time, got quotes from Robinson in the clubhouse and ran them up to the AP staffer writing the story. Becker, in an interview for this obituary, recalled seeing Robinson emerge from the first base dugout and begin to play catch with a player who unbeknownst to Robinson had signed the petition.

"And I thought, he's carrying the banner of decency and dignity and fair play and the American promise," Becker said. "He's carrying it for all of us in this room, in a stadium ... And I thought, he's carrying it alone."

From the Korean War to the Dalai Lama

Becker was part of AP's Newsfeatures team, which covered the world's major news stories from a feature perspective. In 1950, his editor sent him to Korea, where the U.S. and its allies deployed forces to repel an invasion of South Korea by North Korea's Korean People's Army.

Becker embedded with the U.S. Marines. Communications were poor and the Marines used their limited radio connections for battlefield instructions. So Becker typed up his stories and put them in the breast pockets of wounded troops being evacuated for medical treatment. He attached notes asking nurses and doctors to call the nearest Associated Press office.

"I knew they would go at least to Tokyo and maybe even Honolulu. In fact, one of my stories emerged in Washington. They flew the kid to Bethesda," he said.

Becker said all his stories made it out — though not quite in order.

He later embedded with the 3rd Army Division, which recaptured Seoul. He remembered crossing the Han River with seven or eight soldiers and other correspondents and walking around a city abandoned by opposing troops.

A gifted storyteller, Becker delighted colleagues with his recounting of the Dalai Lama's 1959 entry into Indian exile. Few photos existed of the Tibetan spiritual leader at the time, and the AP and its then-archival, United Press International, raced to transmit the first pictures of his arrival in the northern town of Tezpur. Both AP and UPI chartered planes to Kolkata to rush their photographs to a "radiophoto" machine that would send the pictures around the world.

The UPI correspondent got there first after AP's pilot took a more circuitous route to avoid East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) airspace due to India-Pakistan disputes. Soon Becker began receiving a series of increasingly alarmed cables from AP editors in London informing him that UPI's Dalai Lama photos were coming in and demanding to know the whereabouts of AP's.

Becker finally transmitted AP's first photo and feared he was headed for a career change. "I can see I'm going to be on the night desk in Des Moines," Becker said.

Then editors cabled again: "URGENT BECKER UPI DALAI LAMA FULL HAired. OUR DALAI LAMA SHORN CLARIFY URGENTLY. AP PHOTOS LONDON."

"And I realized that God may have given me a chicken pilot, but he made up for it by assigning the only correspondent in Asia who was so stupid he didn't know what the Dalai Lama looked like and who had sent three radiophotos of the Indian interpreter," Becker said.

'The most important story I ever wrote'

In the 1960s, the editor of the Honolulu Star-Bulletin lured Becker from AP to be a columnist, clearing the way for what Becker called "the most important story I ever wrote."

It depicted the football team from Farrington High School — which served the hardscrabble Honolulu neighborhood of Kalihi — as they triumphed over a wealthy private school rival, Kamehameha, in the 1965 league championship.

The team's volunteer bus drivers all had day jobs driving city garbage trucks. Their trainer was a merchant seaman who missed ships during football season. Some players didn't have anything to eat for breakfast or lunch. When their coach found out, he had the school cafeteria save unused milk and bought players cereal.

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Becker tagged along to a Waikiki hotel where the coach put the team the night before the big game to get them away from gambling and distractions at home. Becker detailed the players carrying their dishes to the kitchen at a restaurant after they were done eating. And how the captain led the team in prayer, asking for guidance and for no one to be injured — either on their own team or the opposing side.

State Rep. Gregg Takayama, a 1970 graduate of Farrington and a former Star-Bulletin reporter, said the column was a source of pride for Kalihi. Back then — and to some extent now — news coverage of Kalihi focused on violence, drugs and gangs.

“The message of the story really was that, no matter your beginnings, as humble as they may be, you can do great things,” Takayama said. “And that is what was shown in the story through the team bonding, the fact that they worked as a real team in every sense of the word and made something great out of themselves.”

For decades afterward, people approached Becker to tell him how much the story meant to them or that they had a framed copy hanging in their home.

Becker’s wife of 60 years, Betty Hanson Becker, died in 2008. They didn’t have children but became godparents to Brooks, her sister Cristina Escoda and her cousin Maria Teresa Roxas when they were children and Brooks’ and Escoda’s father was Becker’s colleague in the Manila bureau. Becker is survived by Brooks and her husband Peter Brooks, Escoda and Roxas.

## **Race to sell chickens after New York City live poultry markets ordered shut due to avian flu**

By JAKE OFFENHARTZ Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Live poultry markets in New York City raced to sell off all their chickens and other fowl Friday after seven cases of avian flu were detected and state officials ordered markets in the metropolitan area to close for a week.

Gov. Kathy Hochul said there was no immediate threat to public health and that the temporary closure of bird markets in the city and its Westchester County and Long Island suburbs came out of an abundance of caution. Avian flu has hit farms nationwide, led to the slaughter of millions of birds and driven up egg prices, though officials say no cases have been detected among humans in New York.

The state order came after birds infected with the virus were found during routine inspections of live bird markets in the New York City boroughs of the Bronx, Brooklyn and Queens. Those markets have to dispose of all poultry in a sanitary manner, according to the state’s order.

Other bird markets that do not have cases will have to sell off remaining poultry within three days, clean and disinfect and then remain closed for at least five days and be inspected by state officials before re-opening.

That meant employees at La Granja, a halal-certified poultry market in Manhattan’s Harlem neighborhood, were rushing to sell the remainder of its inventory: around 200 live chickens of different varieties, along with turkeys, quail, ducks, roosters, pigeons and rabbits.

Any remaining animals would be slaughtered and given away to employees and longtime customers, according to Jose Fernandez, the owner.

“We’re going to lose money, for now,” he said. “But the law is the law. They know what they’re doing.”

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has said the virus poses low risk to the general public. The agency said there have been 67 confirmed cases of bird flu in humans in the U.S., with illnesses mild and mostly detected among farmworkers who were exposed to sick poultry or dairy cows.

Despite growing attention on the avian flu, New York City’s poultry markets appeared to be doing brisk business Friday.

Outside the Wallabout Poultry market in Brooklyn, a line of customers took numbers and picked their chickens, which employees snatched from crowded cages, weighing them upside down, before bringing them to a backroom to be slaughtered.

“I’m not worried about any bird flu,” said Stan Tara, a 42-year-old Brooklyn resident, as he purchased

a large chicken for \$22.50. "It's the same as you buy from the supermarket. A little more expensive, but at least it's fresh."

The first bird flu death in the U.S. was reported last month in Louisiana, with health officials saying the person was older than 65, had underlying medical problems and had been in contact with sick and dead birds in a backyard flock.

The H5N1 strain of bird flu has been spreading among wild birds, poultry, cows and other animals. Officials have urged people who come into contact with sick or dead birds to wear respiratory and eye protection and gloves when handling poultry.

More than 156 million birds nationwide have been affected by the outbreak, many at large farming operations that have had to slaughter their entire flocks.

Some animal rights groups, meanwhile, questioned the purpose of a state order that allowed the markets to continue selling fowl, rather than shutting them down immediately.

"The public is going into markets where no one knows if there are outbreaks of avian flu, then taking home dead birds that may or may not be infected," said Edita Birnkrant, executive director of NYCLASS, which has long raised alarms about conditions within the city's roughly 70 live animal markets. "It's ludicrous."

U.S. egg prices are likely to remain high past Easter and well into 2025, largely because of avian flu, according to CoBank, a Denver-based provider of loans and other financial services to the agriculture sector.

The highly contagious virus has affected nearly 100 million egg-laying hens in the U.S. since 2022.

But CoBank said other factors are also causing supply constraints and driving up prices, such as skyrocketing consumer demand for eggs in recent years. Fast-growing breakfast and brunch chains like First Watch are also eating up supplies.

## Flu season in the US is the most intense it's been in at least 15 years

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. winter virus season is in full force, and by one measure is the most intense in 15 years.

One indicator of flu activity is the percentage of doctor's office visits driven by flu-like symptoms. Last week, that number was clearly higher than the peak of any winter flu season since 2009-2010, when a swine flu pandemic hit the nation, according to data posted Friday morning by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Of course, other viral infections can be mistaken for flu. But COVID-19 appears to be on the decline, according to hospital data and to CDC modeling projections. Available data also suggests another respiratory illness, RSV, has been fading nationally.

The flu has forced schools to shut down in some states. The Godley Independent School District, a 3,200-student system near Fort Worth, Texas, last week closed for three days after 650 students and 60 staff were out Tuesday.

Jeff Meador, a district spokesman, said the vast majority of illnesses there have been flu, plus some strep throat. He called it the worst flu season he could remember.

So far this season, the CDC estimates, there have been at least 24 million flu illnesses, 310,000 hospitalizations and 13,000 deaths — including at least 57 children. Traditionally, flu season peaks around February.

Overall, 43 states reported high or very high flu activity last week. Flu was most intense in the South, Southwest and western states.

In Rochester, New York, the flu season has been intense but not necessarily worse than at the peak of other years, said Dr. Elizabeth Murray, a pediatric emergency medicine doctor at the University of Rochester Medical Center.

She said there's a lot of flu, but there's also still a lot of RSV and a surprising number of babies with COVID-19.

"All of the respiratory illnesses are around, with a vengeance," Murray added.

The CDC declined to let an Associated Press reporter speak to an agency flu expert about recent trends. The Trump administration ordered a temporary “pause” on health agency communications and has continued to refuse interview requests that were routinely granted in the past.

Late Friday afternoon, a CDC spokesperson acknowledged that the new data shows “the highest absolute value” of flu-like illness when compared with other seasons, but added that the statistic is complicated: That value references a baseline estimate for doctor’s office visits, but the baseline is recalculated every year. In late January, the CDC was describing the season as “moderate” in severity.

U.S. health officials recommends that everyone 6 months and older get an annual flu vaccination.

About 44% of adults got flu shots this winter, the same as last winter. But coverage of children is way down, at about 45% this winter. It’s usually around 50%, according to CDC data.

About 23% of U.S. adults were up to date in their COVID-19 vaccinations as of late January, up from about 20% at the same point in time the year before. COVID-19 vaccination rates for kids were about the same, at around 12%.

The government has not yet reported its estimates of how well this season’s flu vaccine is working.

Testing results from patients indicate that two strains of seasonal flu that are causing most illnesses — a Type A H1N1 and a Type A H3N2. Health officials are closely watching a third strain — a bird flu known as Type A H5N1 — that has sickened tens of millions of animals, but is known to have infected only 67 people in the U.S.

To avoid seasonal viruses, doctors say you should avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth because germs can spread that way. You should also wash your hands with soap and water, clean frequently touched surfaces and avoid close contact with people who are sick.

## Hamas names 3 more Israeli hostages to be freed as ceasefire deal stays on track

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — Hamas identified three more Israeli hostages it plans to free as part of the fragile ceasefire agreement, a sign the deal was moving forward Friday even as U.S. and Israeli officials continued calls to relocate Gaza’s population after the war.

The three men, captured by Hamas during its Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel, are set to be freed Saturday, in the fifth exchange of Israeli hostages for Palestinians jailed in Israel.

An Israeli official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive material, confirmed that the hostages scheduled for release are: Eli Sharabi, 52; Ohad Ben Ami, 56; and Or Levy, 34.

Israel is set to release 183 Palestinian prisoners on Saturday to fulfill its side of the agreement, according to the Hamas-linked prisoners’ office in Gaza. The terms of the deal’s first six-week phase call for Hamas to gradually free a total of 33 Israeli hostages in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.

Sharabi was taken captive from Kibbutz Beeri, a communal farm that was one of the hardest hit in the Hamas attack. His wife, Lianne, and their teenage daughters were killed by militants.

Ben Ami, a father of three, was taken hostage from the same community, where he was the kibbutz accountant. His wife, who was also captured, was released during a brief ceasefire in November 2023.

Levy, a computer programmer from the city of Rishon Lezion, was pulled by militants from a bomb shelter near the Nova music festival in southern Israel. His wife was killed during the attack. The couple’s toddler son has been under the care of family members.

Hamas has so far released 18 hostages, including five Thai citizens captured in Israel during the attack. Last week, Israel released 183 Palestinian prisoners in accordance with the deal.

Details of the planned exchange came as U.S. President Donald Trump continued talking up his widely criticized proposal to move all Palestinians from Gaza and redevelop it as an international travel destination.

The idea, which Trump characterized Friday as a “real estate transaction,” has been roundly rejected by the region’s Arab governments and by Palestinians themselves, who say forcing them from their homes would constitute ethnic cleansing.

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But Trump insisted Friday that his idea “had been very well received.” After calling originally for “permanent” resettlement of the Palestinians, his newest comments left the question of duration unresolved. “We don’t want to see everybody move back and then move out in 10 years” because of continued unrest, he said.

Israeli forces have withdrawn from most of Gaza, as specified by the ceasefire agreement, but remain in border areas. The military has warned Palestinians to avoid areas where troops are operating and has opened fire on people accused of violating the terms of the agreement.

Negotiators have yet to agree on terms for the deal’s second phase, in which Hamas would release dozens more hostages in return for more prisoners and a lasting ceasefire.

The Palestinian prisoners’ office said that of those set for release Saturday, 18 are serving life sentences, 54 have long-term sentences, and 111 are Gazans who were detained after the Oct. 7 attack.

A list of those expected to be released, distributed Friday by Palestinian authorities, included Iyad Abu Shakhdam, 49, who has been imprisoned for nearly 21 years over his involvement in Hamas militant attacks that killed dozens of Israelis in the early 2000s. He is serving 18 life sentences.

Also on the list is Jamal al-Tawil, 61, a Hamas politician and former mayor of the West Bank city of Al-Bireh who has spent nearly two decades in and out of Israeli prisons. Since his most recent arrest in 2021, he has been held without trial for allegedly organizing violent riots.

## **Trump tells Ishiba at the White House that he wants to slash the US trade deficit with Japan**

By AAMER MADHANI and MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Friday he wants to slash the U.S. trade deficit with Japan as he welcomed Japanese Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba to the White House for their first face-to-face meeting.

Trump added that he isn’t taking the possibility of levying tariffs against Japan off the table, but believes the issue can be resolved without punitive action. The United States has a \$68 billion trade deficit with Japan.

“I think it will be very easy for Japan,” Trump said at start of his Oval Office meeting with Ishiba. “We have a fantastic relationship. I don’t think we’ll have any problem. They want fairness also.”

Trump announced that Japan’s Nippon Steel’s was dropping its \$14.1 billion acquisition of the Pittsburgh-headquartered U.S. Steel and would instead be making an “investment, rather than a purchase.” Trump said he would “mediate and arbitrate” as the companies negotiate the investment. The U.S. president mistakenly referred to Nippon Steel as “Nissan,” the Japanese automaker.

President Joe Biden, before leaving office last month, blocked the purchase, citing national security concerns. Trump in December said he was “totally against the once great and powerful U.S. Steel being bought by a foreign company.” Trump told reporters Friday that he remained opposed to the Japanese company buying U.S. Steel outright.

Trump’s push to cut the trade deficit comes as he has pursued tariffs on both friends and foes in an effort to boost American manufacturing.

Ishiba, who was making a whirlwind trip to Washington to get face time with Trump, said he understands that Trump’s goal is mutually beneficial trade policy.

But the prime minister also noted Japanese companies have held the top spot for cumulative foreign direct investment in the U.S. over the last five years. He added that Japan was looking to invest more in the United States.

Ishiba also heaped praise on Trump, saying he was inspired by the “undaunted presence” of a bloodied Trump pumping his fist after surviving an assassination attempt at a July campaign rally. Ishiba added that many in Japan were also excited about his return to the White House.

“It is not only among politicians, but also among the general public as well as business leaders,” Ishiba said. “There are many that were anxiously awaiting your comeback.”

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He also said he was excited, before coming to Washington, about meeting a television celebrity like Trump. Ishiba said of Trump that "on television, he is frightening," but during their Oval Office meeting the president was actually "very sincere." He added that he didn't come to "suck up" to the president.

The pair discussed their shared security concerns about North Korea, and Trump said he would work to reestablish a relationship with that country's leader, Kim Jong Un.

"I got along with him very well," Trump said of his relations with Kim during his first term. Trump said he thought the relationship stopped a war and that many other countries supported both of them staying on cordial terms.

Trump had a series of meetings with Kim during his first term and boasted about making progress in a relationship that has been frosty for decades. But North Korea continued to build up its nuclear program and test missiles then, and the two nations didn't reestablish diplomatic relations.

Trump also said at his press conference with Japan's prime minister that he wanted to see some FBI agents fired as the Justice Department reviews how the agency handled investigations into the attack on the U.S. Capitol by Trump supporters on Jan. 6, 2021.

"I'll fire some of them, because some of them were corrupt," Trump said. He added, "it will be done quickly, and very surgically."

Before Friday's meeting, Ishiba did plenty of legwork to prepare.

He huddled this week with SoftBank CEO Masayoshi Son and OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, two executives Trump recently hosted at the White House. He sought advice from his immediate predecessor, Fumio Kishida.

Ishiba even called on the widow of Shinzo Abe, the Japanese prime minister with whom Trump bonded over rounds of golf during his first term.

"I would like to focus on building a personal relationship of trust between the two of us," Ishiba told reporters before heading to Washington.

Replicating Abe's relationship with the U.S. president is a tall order. Abe resigned as prime minister in 2020 and was assassinated by a gunman as he delivered a campaign speech in 2022. Nevertheless, Ishiba is making it a priority to connect with Trump.

Ishiba, who took office in October, is just the second world leader to visit the White House during Trump's new term. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu this week was the first hosted by Trump.

Ishiba arrived Thursday evening for his roughly 24-hour visit to Washington.

The quick trip was essential for Ishiba as he looks to ensure that the U.S. and Japan stay on solid footing with the return of Trump and his "America First" worldview. Both countries have been challenged by China's growing economic and military assertiveness in the Pacific and concerns about a nuclear-armed North Korea.

"I think Prime Minister Ishiba certainly sees this is an important and critical opportunity for him to reestablish what were exceptional bonds between President Trump and Japan in the first Trump administration," said Sen. Bill Hagerty, a Tennessee Republican who served as Trump's ambassador to Japan during his first administration.

Abe was among the few world leaders who developed a bond with Trump during his first term. Trump said Abe's July 2022 killing was a difficult moment for him.

Trump and Abe built their rapport over rounds of golf and dinners with their wives at the president's Palm Beach, Florida, resort, Mar-a-Lago. During Trump's 2019 state visit to Japan, Abe took Trump to a sumo wrestling match and arranged for him to be the first leader to meet with Japan's newly enthroned emperor.

"Shinzo was a great friend of mine," Trump said. "I couldn't have felt worse when that happened to him at a horrible event. But he also was a friend of yours, and he had tremendous respect for you."

Abe and Trump's close relationship was all the more remarkable, because Trump early in his first White House term threatened a "big border tax" on Japanese automaker Toyota if it built a plant in Mexico and derided Japan for what he deemed insufficient defense spending.



## Middle East latest: Hamas names next 3 Israeli hostages to be exchanged for Palestinian prisoners

By The Associated Press undefined

Hamas named the next three Israeli hostages it plans to release this weekend as part of the Gaza ceasefire deal with Israel. It was a sign that the first phase of the truce was moving forward as planned -- even as many observers fear that U.S. and Israeli plans to remove all the Palestinians from Gaza have imperiled the deal.

Friday's announcement came after Hamas accused Israel of overly restricting humanitarian aid deliveries to the Gaza Strip during the ceasefire — items like tents, fuel and equipment to clear debris. There was no immediate response from Israel on Hamas' allegation that it had broken the terms of the truce deal.

Elsewhere in the region, Iran's supreme leader said Friday that negotiations with America "are not intelligent, wise or honorable," after U.S. President Donald Trump suggested he wants nuclear talks with Tehran despite reimposing his "maximum pressure" approach. What happens next remains unclear, as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stopped short of issuing a direct order not to engage with Washington.

Here's the latest:

Palestinians put out names of 183 prisoners being released in exchange for Israeli hostages

RAMALLAH, West Bank — The Palestinian Authority's commission of prisoners' affairs published Friday the names of 183 Palestinian prisoners who will be released from Israeli prisons the following day in exchange for the release of three Israeli men held hostage by Hamas in Gaza.

Of the prisoners, 18 are serving life sentences, 54 have long-term sentences, and 111 are Palestinians from Gaza who were detained after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel. All are men, ranging in age from 20 to 61.

Under the terms of the ongoing six-week truce, Israel agreed to release around 1,000 Gazan detainees on the condition that they were not involved in the Hamas-led attack on Oct. 7, 2023.

Among the most prominent prisoners set to be released is Iyad Abu Shakhdam, 49, who has been imprisoned for nearly 21 years over his involvement in Hamas militant attacks that killed dozens of Israelis in the early 2000s. He is serving 18 life sentences.

Another is Jamal al-Tawil, 61, a Hamas politician and former mayor of the West Bank city of Al-Bireh who has spent nearly two decades in and out of Israeli prison. Since his most-recent arrest in 2021, he's been held in Israeli administrative detention without trial for allegedly organizing violent riots.

Both will be released Saturday into the occupied West Bank.

That exchange will be the fifth in a multiphase ceasefire deal to halt the fighting in Gaza that Israel and Hamas agreed to last month. The deal calls on Hamas to free at least 33 of the 97 remaining hostages over the first six weeks in exchange for more than 1,500 Palestinians jailed by Israel.

Father of 2 youngest Israeli hostages in Gaza calls for all the captives to be released

JERUSALEM — The father of the two youngest hostages in Gaza, whose plight has become a rallying cry for Israelis, said Friday that "everything here is dark" without his family members at home.

Yarden Bibas was released in the last hostage exchange. Israel has expressed grave concern for his family and Hamas says they were killed in an Israeli airstrike -- a claim Israel has not confirmed.

Friday's statement from Bibas, 35, came shortly after the news that Hamas named three more adult Israeli hostages to be freed Saturday.

"My family hasn't returned to me yet. They are still there," wrote Bibas, who was released in the last exchange. His young boys, Ariel and Kfir Bibas, and wife, Shiri Bibas, remain in Gaza. "My light is still there, and as long as they're there, everything here is dark."

Bibas thanked the Israeli public and the military for supporting him, then spoke to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu directly.

"I'm now addressing you with my own words, which no one dictated to me: Bring my family back," he wrote. "Bring my friends back. Bring everyone home."

Trump calls his Gaza proposal a simple 'real estate transaction'

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WASHINGTON — U.S. President Donald Trump says his suggestions that Gaza's residents could be resettled and the area redeveloped for tourism potential has "been very well received" around the globe.

The idea has actually been roundly criticized. But Trump insisted Friday that it was a simple "real estate transaction," and that the U.S. is in "no rush to do anything."

The president has suggested resettlement of Gaza's residents could be permanent -- something that even top members of his own administration have refuted.

But Trump said that, "We don't want to see everybody move back and then move out in 10 years" because of continued unrest.

The leaders of Lebanon and Syria seek to calm border clashes

BEIRUT — Lebanese President Joseph Aoun and Syria's interim President Ahmad al-Sharaa discussed fighting that has broken out on the border between the two countries Friday "and agreed to coordinate to control the situation and prevent targeting civilians," Aoun's office said in a statement.

Clashes have been ongoing for two days between Syrian security forces and Lebanese clans in the border area.

Lebanon's state-run National News Agency reported that "a number of dead and wounded" had fallen in gunbattles near the Lebanese city of Hermel - on Lebanon's far eastern border - and said that Syrian militants had tried to enter Lebanese villages.

It was unclear what militant groups the report was referring to. Syria's new government is run by former Islamist rebels, and many members of the security forces are likely drawn from the ex-insurgents' ranks.

On Thursday, two members of Syria's border security force were "kidnapped by a group of wanted people involved in smuggling weapons and contraband," according to Syria's state-run SANA news agency, although they were freed later the same day.

Hamas names the next 3 Israeli hostages to be released this weekend

JERUSALEM — Hamas has named the next three Israeli hostages it plans to release this weekend as part of the ceasefire deal, showing the agreement was moving forward Friday even as the U.S. and Israel discuss plans to relocate all of Gaza's population.

The three Israeli men are set to be freed by the militant group on Saturday. It will be the fifth exchange of hostages for Palestinians jailed by Israel since the ceasefire took effect last month.

The Hamas-linked prisoners' office in the Gaza Strip said Saturday's release of Palestinian prisoners would include 18 Palestinian prisoners sentenced to life, 54 prisoners with lengthy sentences and 111 prisoners from the Gaza Strip who were arrested and held without trial after Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023 attack on Israel that sparked the war.

An Israeli official, speaking on condition of anonymity pending an official announcement, confirmed the names received from Hamas were Eli Sharabi, 52, Ohad Ben Ami, 56, and Or Levy, 34 were scheduled for release Saturday.

Sharabi was taken captive by the militants from Kibbutz Beeri, a communal farm that was one of the hardest hit in the Hamas attack. His wife, Lianne, and their teenage daughters, Noiya and Yahel, were killed by militants while hiding in their safe room. His brother, Yossi Sharabi, who lived next door, was killed in captivity.

Ben Ami, a father to three, was taken hostage with his wife, Raz, from Kibbutz Beeri, where he was the kibbutz accountant. Raz Ben Ami was released during the brief ceasefire period in November.

Levy was pulled by the militants from a bomb shelter near the Nova music festival in southern Israel. His wife, Einav Levy, was killed during the Oct. 7 attack. Their son Almog, a toddler, is staying with his grandparents. Levy is from the city of Rishon Lezion, where he worked as a computer programmer for a startup.

The office of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confirmed that the county's military and the intelligence agency had received the list of hostages to be released and had informed their families.

Hamas says Israel is violating the ceasefire's humanitarian aid rules, a day before next hostage release

JERUSALEM — Hamas has accused Israel of overly restricting humanitarian aid deliveries during the ongoing ceasefire in the Gaza Strip, saying Friday that items like tents, fuel and equipment to clear debris

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have not made it into the devastated Palestinian territory at the scale that is needed.

There was no immediate response from Israel on Hamas' allegation that Israel had broken the terms of the truce deal. The specifics of the humanitarian aid portion of the deal have not been published, making the allegations by Hamas spokesman Abdel Latif al-Qanou hard to verify.

Hamas' accusation came as the group was scheduled to announce the names of the next group of hostages it would release from Gaza on Saturday in exchange for Palestinians jailed by Israel. The two sides have conducted four hostage-for-prisoner swaps so far.

Al-Qanou criticized Israel for stalling "in fulfilling the humanitarian protocol, especially concerning shelter, provisions, tents, rubble removal equipment, fuel and reconstruction materials." He did not go into more details.

The Israeli military agency responsible for coordinating aid deliveries to Gaza, known as COGAT, said earlier Friday that 4,200 trucks carrying humanitarian aid had moved through Gaza this week and that over 12,000 trucks had entered since the start of the ceasefire. That amount is apparently in line with the terms of the ceasefire agreement, which called for at least 600 trucks to deliver aid to Gaza daily.

COGAT has maintained a list of items that Israeli authorities consider to be "dual use," or having both civilian and military purposes, and require special permission to be brought into Gaza. Tents, it said, are not on the list. COGAT says that Israel has allowed tens of thousands of tents into Gaza in recent weeks "without restriction."

But aid workers have said that Israeli restrictions on certain crucial items persist. According to a copy of the dual-use list circulated to aid groups, those include desalination and water-collection devices, storage units, tools, ovens, water-resistant clothing and equipment for tent and shelter construction.

US draws a 'red line' over including Hezbollah in the Lebanese government, Trump's envoy says

BEIRUT — A newly appointed U.S. envoy says she hopes Lebanese authorities are committed to making sure the Hezbollah militant group isn't a part of the new government in any form.

Morgan Ortagus is a former U.S. State Department spokesperson and U.S. Navy Reserve officer. She recently assumed the role of deputy special envoy for Middle East peace in the Trump administration. Ortagus replaces Amos Hochstein who helped broker the ceasefire that ended the 14-month war between Israel and Hezbollah.

"We have set clear red lines from the United States that (Hezbollah) won't be able to terrorize the Lebanese people and that includes by being a part of the government," Ortagus said at a news conference in Beirut's southeastern suburb of Baabda after a meeting with Lebanese President Joseph Aoun.

In response, Lebanon's presidency said in a statement on X that some of what Ortagus said Friday "expresses her point of view, and the Presidency is not concerned with it."

Ortagus also commended Lebanon's commitment to reforms. Efforts to form a government led by Prime Minister-designate Nawaf Salam have stalled.

Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system allocates key positions among Christian, Shiite and Sunni factions. The dominant blocs — Hezbollah and the Amal Movement for the Shiites, and the Lebanese Forces for the Christians — are insisting on their share of ministerial portfolios.

Israel's foreign minister praises Trump's sanctions on ICC

JERUSALEM — Israel's foreign minister hailed U.S. President Donald Trump's move to sanction the International Criminal Court in a statement posted to X Friday.

Gideon Sa'ar accused the ICC of "aggressively pursuing the elected leaders of Israel, the only democracy in the Middle East," and said the court's actions were "immoral" and lacked a legal basis.

He said he "strongly commend(ed)" Trump's order, which sanctioned the ICC over its investigations of Israel and the arrest warrants it issued for top Israeli leaders for alleged war crimes.

Tens of thousands of Palestinians, including children, have been killed during the Israeli military's response to the Hamas attack Oct. 7, 2023. The order said the court lacked legal jurisdiction over the U.S. or Israel. Neither the U.S. nor Israel is a member of or recognizes the court.

ICC condemns sanctions by Trump administration and pledges to continue its work

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — The International Criminal Court has called on its member states to stand

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up against sanctions imposed by U.S. President Donald Trump.

The court said Friday that the move was an attempt to “harm its independent and impartial judicial work.”

The White House issued the executive order on Thursday in response to what it called “illegitimate and baseless actions targeting America and our close ally Israel.”

It was referring to the arrest warrant that the ICC issued last year for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over alleged war crimes in Gaza. The Hague-based court said it “condemns” the move.

The U.S. and Israel are not members of the court and do not recognize its authority.

Iran’s supreme leader criticizes proposed nuclear talks with US, upending a push to negotiation

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran’s supreme leader said Friday that negotiations with America “are not intelligent, wise or honorable” after U.S. President Donald Trump floated the idea of nuclear talks with Tehran.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also suggested that “there should be no negotiations with such a government,” but stopped short of issuing a direct order not to engage with Washington.

Khamenei’s remarks upend months of signals from Tehran to the United States that it wanted to negotiate over its rapidly advancing nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of crushing economic sanctions worth billions of dollars. Following Khamenei’s comments, the Iranian rial sunk to a record low of 872,000 rials to \$1 in aftermarket trading.

What happens next remains unclear, particularly as reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian promised as recently as Thursday to enter into a dialogue with the West.

Khamenei’s remarks to air force officers in Tehran appeared to contradict his own earlier remarks in August that opened the door to talks. However, the 85-year-old Khamenei has always been careful with remarks about negotiating with the West.

Iran has suffered military setbacks across its sphere of influence in the Middle East, with Israel’s punishing offensives against two militant groups backed by Iran – Hamas in Gaza and Hezbollah in Lebanon — and the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar Assad late last year, who Iran supported for years with money and troops.

Hamas holds funeral for deputy leader killed last year

BUREIJ, Gaza Strip — Hamas’ military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades, held a funeral Friday for its deputy leader, Marwan Issa, also known as Abu Bara’a, who was killed by an Israeli airstrike in March last year.

Crowds gathered to watch as armed al-Qassam fighters paraded through the town of Bureji. Some of the militants carried Issa’s casket, which was topped by the Palestinian flag and bore his photograph. Fighters set their rifles aside and stood in a row to perform Friday and funeral prayers.

Israeli Military spokesperson Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari said last March that Issa, who helped plan the Oct. 7 attack, had been killed when fighter jets struck an underground compound in central Gaza.

Israel says it struck Hezbollah weapons storage sites in Lebanon

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military said overnight it had struck two sites where the Lebanese militant group Hezbollah stored weapons, claiming they violated the ceasefire agreement now in its third month.

Lebanese state media reported a series of strikes in southern Lebanon and the Bekaa valley overnight but there were no reports of casualties.

U.S. presidential envoy Morgan Ortogus met with Lebanese officials in Beirut on Friday to discuss the ceasefire implementation.

Under the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hezbollah, both sides had 60 days to remove their forces from southern Lebanon and for the Lebanese army to move in and secure the area alongside U.N. peacekeepers. The original deadline expired at the end of January but Lebanon and Israel agreed to extend it to Feb. 18.

Israel says Hezbollah and the Lebanese army haven’t met their obligations, while Lebanon accuses the Israeli army of hindering the Lebanese military from taking over.

## The Super Bowl three-peat eluded Bradshaw, Brady, Montana and Aikman. Now Mahomes takes his shot

By SCHUYLER DIXON AP Pro Football Writer

Terry Bradshaw always wondered what might have been if his Pittsburgh Steelers had reached the Super Bowl either of the times they had a chance to win three in a row.

Ronnie Lott has long lamented just one bounce of the oblong ball that he believes could have helped send the San Francisco 49ers to the big game when they were in just about perfect position for a three-peat.

Kansas City is the first team to reach the Super Bowl after winning the previous two, which means Patrick Mahomes and the Chiefs have done what Tom Brady, Joe Montana, Troy Aikman and Bradshaw couldn't before them.

Now they'll try to finish the job Sunday night against the Philadelphia Eagles in New Orleans.

"You got to have a lot of luck," Lott said. "You got to find moments where you want the ball to bounce your way. And then the other thing is, you've just got to get over the idea that nobody thinks you can do it."

There is one asterisk. Bart Starr led Green Bay to the 1965 NFL championship and the first two Super Bowl titles. Plus, John Elway retired after winning consecutive Super Bowls with the Denver Broncos.

Bradshaw and those Steel Curtain teams lost to the Oakland Raiders, coached by the late Pro Football Hall of Famer John Madden, in the AFC championship game during Pittsburgh's first run as the two-time defending champ.

The Steelers didn't even make the playoffs the second time around, which was four years later.

"Had we gotten to the Super Bowl, then I would say the chances of a three-peat would have been very good because you are a defending champion and you've experienced a Super Bowl and winning a Super Bowl," Bradshaw said. "It's that long, drawn out football season where you're just waiting to get to the playoffs. And it's a difficult task."

Roger Craig's late fumble is what most remember when the 49ers lost at home to the Giants 15-13 on New York's field goal on the final play of the NFC championship game during the 1990 season.

Lott, however, recalls in vivid detail — 34 years later — an earlier play when the Hall of Fame safety says Jeff Hostetler lost control of the ball in the backfield with him blitzing, but the ball bounced the Giants quarterback's way instead of his.

A second consecutive 14-2 season with Montana, Jerry Rice and John Taylor amounted to nothing in the minds of the Niners. Besides the luck of the bounce, Lott was quick to bring up the health of the players — as was Montana.

"The seasons are long. The offseasons are short," Montana said. "Usually you're not at 100% strength, your body doesn't have its usual time to prepare itself during the offseason. When you compound that over the years ... it makes it even worse."

Aikman, running back Emmitt Smith and receiver Michael Irvin also got the Cowboys back to an NFC title game as two-time champs, but the Hall of Fame trio lost at San Francisco during the 1994 season, when Steve Young had taken over for Montana at QB.

Daryl Johnston, the fullback when Dallas became the first to win three Super Bowls in a span of four seasons, believes the Cowboys had an asterisk of their own.

After beating Buffalo for the title in consecutive years, owner Jerry Jones and coach Jimmy Johnson had their infamous and acrimonious split. Barry Switzer coached the team that fell short of a three-peat.

In the 38-28 loss to the Niners, the Cowboys turned over the ball the first three times they had it and trailed 21-0 halfway through the first quarter.

"So, you lose your head coach," Johnston said. "Where would Kansas City be if they lost Andy Reid? And then to play the worst six minutes of football you've ever played as a group to start that game, it was just so unexpected."

Coach Vince Lombardi left the Packers after winning the first two Super Bowls, and Green Bay didn't make the playoffs the year Joe Namath led the New York Jets to their famous upset of Baltimore in Super Bowl 3.

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The first of Miami's consecutive titles is still the only undefeated season of the Super Bowl era, the 17-0 run during the 1972 season. The Dolphins lost their playoff opener when they were two-time champs.

The New England Patriots fell two victories short of a three-peat in 2005, the only chance they had to do that while winning six championships with Brady and coach Bill Belichick.

Mahomes is well aware of the history as the Chiefs try to to shrug off talk of a three-peat. A victory Sunday over Philadelphia would be the 29-year-old's fourth Super Bowl title. Brady was 37 when he won the fourth of his record seven.

"I think you always want to leave a legacy and kind of make your imprint on history, but more than anything, you just want to accomplish a goal that you have with your teammates," Mahomes said. "We know that's a hard process. We know it's hard week-in and week-out. But I'm proud of how our guys have kind of went about that process."

Bradshaw still talks about how hard trying to three-peat was on him. As part of the Fox television crew covering the Super Bowl, the Hall of Famer will share the stage with the winning team, which could mean handing the Lombardi Trophy to Mahomes.

The 76-year-old Bradshaw remembers having a similar chance at history with the Fox crew when Brady's 18-0 Patriots lost to the Giants in the Super Bowl to cap the 2007 season.

"So here I go again. Historical moment," Bradshaw said. "I have no way that I could sit here and say Kansas City is going to lose."

## Musk says he will bring back DOGE staffer who resigned after a report of racist postings

By MICHELLE L. PRICE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Elon Musk said on Friday he is re-hiring a staff member at the Department of Government Efficiency who resigned a day earlier after he was linked to social media posts that espoused racism.

Musk, in a post on his social media network X, said he would bring back Marko Elez after Vice President JD Vance called for him to be rehired. President Donald Trump later endorsed his vice president's view.

Marko Elez resigned Thursday after The Wall Street Journal linked the 25-year-old DOGE staffer to a deleted social media account on X that posted last year, "I was racist before it was cool" and "You could not pay me to marry outside of my ethnicity," among other posts.

The account in September included a post that said, "Normalize Indian hate." The vice president's wife, Usha Vance, is the daughter of Indian immigrants.

Vance, in a post on Musk-owned X, said Elez should be brought back and blamed "journalists who try to destroy people."

"I obviously disagree with some of Elez's posts, but I don't think stupid social media activity should ruin a kid's life," Vance said.

"I'm with the vice president," Trump told a news conference Friday.

A few hours later, Musk posted: "He will be brought back. To err is human, to forgive divine."

The White House did not immediately respond to a message Friday confirming if Elez had been rehired. The administration earlier in the day had confirmed Elez' resignation.

The vice president said Elez should be fired "if he's a bad dude or a terrible member of the team."

Elez did not respond to a message seeking comment Friday.

Elez was among two DOGE employees who were at the center of a controversy this week when they accessed the U.S. Treasury Department's payment system, prompting a court challenge and a judge's decision to restrict their access.

In its report, The Wall Street Journal found a since-deleted account under the handle @nulllptr with a user described as an employee at SpaceX and Starlink, two of Musk's companies. The account previously went by the username @marko\_elez.

Elez, in archives of his personal website, said he worked for SpaceX and on its Starlink satellites, and at X.

## Trump administration orders federal agencies to provide lists of underperforming employees

By BRIAN WITTE Associated Press

President Donald Trump's administration has ordered all federal departments and agencies to provide lists of employees who are underperforming, as it seeks to shrink the workforce and awaits a court ruling related to its deferred resignation offers.

A memo sent by the Office of Personnel Management on Thursday directs the agencies to submit names of every employee who has received less than a "fully successful" performance rating in the past three years and to note whether the workers have been on performance plans.

The memo, which was viewed by The Associated Press, also emphasized that the agencies report any obstacles to making sure they have "the ability to swiftly terminate poor performing employees who cannot or will not improve."

The memo seeks the employee's name, job title, pay plan and other details, as well as whether that employee is "under or successfully completed a performance improvement plan within the last 12 months."

The office also is asking if an agency has proposed or issued a decision in such cases, and whether any action is being appealed or challenged, as well as any outcome.

The data is due by March 7.

Charles Ezell, the acting director of OPM who sent the memo, wrote that the office is developing new performance metrics for evaluating the federal workforce, a standard that "aligns with the priorities and standards in the President's recent Executive Orders." To assist the office, Ezell wrote that all agencies should submit data regarding their performance management plans and policies, including those contained in collective bargaining agreements.

So far, 65,000 federal workers have opted into the deferred resignation program, according to a White House official who wasn't authorized to disclose the latest figures and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The program is being challenged in court, and a federal judge scheduled a hearing for Monday afternoon to consider arguments over whether the plan can proceed.

## A look at the hostages still held by Hamas in Gaza, by the numbers

JERUSALEM (AP) — Israel and Hamas are in the midst of a six-week ceasefire during which Hamas is releasing dozens of the hostages captured in its Oct. 7, 2023, attack in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners.

The sides have carried out four swaps since the ceasefire went into effect last month, freeing 18 hostages and nearly 500 prisoners. A fifth swap, in which three more hostages and dozens more prisoners will be released, is set for Saturday.

Hamas has agreed to release 33 hostages for nearly 2,000 prisoners and detainees during this first phase of the ceasefire. The sides have also begun negotiations on a second phase aimed at returning the remaining hostages, releasing additional prisoners and ending the war.

Here is a breakdown of the hostages taken on Oct. 7, 2023:

Total captured: 251

Hostages freed in exchanges or other deals: 127

Bodies of dead hostages retrieved by Israeli troops: 40

Hostages rescued alive: 8

Hostages still in captivity, alive or dead: 76

Hostages declared dead by Israel: 34

Women and children in captivity: 3 ( A mother and her two young sons.)

Israeli soldiers still captive: 13

Israeli soldiers believed to be alive : 6

Non-Israelis still captive: 5 (3 Thais, 1 Nepalese, 1 Tanzanian)

Non-Israelis believed alive: 2 (1 from Thailand, 1 from Nepal)  
Israelis still in Gaza since before the Oct. 7 attack: 3 (body of one soldier killed in 2014 war, and two civilians who entered Gaza on their own in 2014 and 2015 and are believed alive)

## How the slash-and-burn tactics Musk brought to Washington backfired at Twitter

By MATT O'BRIEN and BERNARD CONDON AP Business Writers

When Elon Musk bought Twitter in 2022, he laid off thousands of employees, stopped paying rent and auctioned off coffee makers and office chairs in hopes of a big turnaround.

Now the world's richest man has brought the same slash-and-burn strategy to the federal government, and some people who experienced Musk's takeover at Twitter have a warning: Expect chaos, cuts driven by ideology as much as by cost concerns, intimidation and plenty of lawsuits.

Since assuming leadership of the Department of Government Efficiency, Musk has consolidated control over large swaths of the government with President Donald Trump's blessing, sidelined career officials, gained access to sensitive databases and invited a constitutional clash over the limits of presidential authority.

Emily Horne, who was head of Twitter's policy communications before joining the Biden administration, describes Musk's modus operandi as: "Take it over, ruthlessly purge anyone who he sees as opposition and crash operations to remake it in his worldview."

It's unclear whether his push for "extremely hardcore" changes at Twitter has paid off. Revenue at the company now called X has plunged, the number of users has dwindled and even Musk himself has expressed frustration at how long it is taking to turn around the company's finances.

"It isn't working," said Ross Gerber, a minority stockholder at X who has written down his stake to zero and expects Musk to fail in Washington, too. "The federal government is going to eat him up and spit him out."

By some measures, X is still a success. The platform continues to attract hundreds of millions of users worldwide and has cemented Musk's political influence. But exactly how it is faring financially is difficult to say because the company is private.

The same week that Musk's teams at DOGE were threatening to lay off tens of thousands of federal workers, bankers who loaned him billions of dollars to buy Twitter were bracing for losses and trying to unload the loans on others. Musk has apparently given up hope of attracting key advertisers back to the platform and has sued some of them.

Examples of budget-minded business leaders who brought their skills to government work abound, but Musk made clear — at both Twitter and DOGE — that his priorities go beyond efficiency into rooting out a "woke" agenda.

Long before fighting diversity, equity and inclusion efforts became a centerpiece of Trump's third presidential campaign, Musk eliminated Twitter's DEI initiatives and the people administering them.

"The culture of Twitter died," said former employee Theodora Skeadas, whose job was cut in the weeks after Musk bought Twitter for \$44 billion in October 2022. "For a lot of these agencies and organizations, that may be in their future."

Another tactic that Musk appears to be bringing to the government: "performances of loyalty."

That is how former Twitter executive Rumman Chowdhury describes Musk's drive to make workers prove the value of their work in a way she says demonstrated fealty. For instance, engineers were told to print out code then line up to have an inexperienced engineer evaluate it.

"It's a fear and intimidation tactic," Chowdhury said. "I don't know if it's the best leadership style long term, as demonstrated by how abysmal Twitter/X is doing."

Musk later sought to rehire some of the engineers he fired. His instinct to threaten also backfired with advertisers.



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Within months of Musk's takeover, advertising revenue plunged by half as brands fled X over fears he was loosening content moderation too much. But instead of courting the companies, Musk took to X threatening to "thermonuclear name & shame" them for leaving his platform. Later at a conference, he used an expletive and urged them, "Don't advertise."

"Talk about shooting yourself in the foot," said ad consultant Tom Hespos of Abydos Media, who told his clients at that point to avoid even posting on X because it could damage their brand. "That is probably the worst comment he could have made."

In August, Musk doubled down by suing Unilever, Mars, CVS Health and several other companies that had dropped Twitter, accusing them of engaging in an "illegal boycott." On Saturday, he added more companies to the lawsuit, including Lego, Shell International, Tyson Foods, Nestle and Colgate-Palmolive.

His drawn-out legal battles with more than 2,000 former Twitter workers are also a sign of the kind of court fights that could await the government. A federal judge on Thursday put on hold a midnight deadline the same day for government workers to accept Musk's "deferred resignation offer" promising pay through September without having to work.

The email announcing the offer was titled "Fork in the Road," echoing a similar email Musk sent to the Twitter workforce in 2022.

More than two years later, Musk's X is still "spending an insane amount of money" defending against allegations by former Twitter employees that they are owed money, said lawyer Shannon Liss-Riordan, who represents hundreds of the workers. She said it would have been cheaper just to pay them what they were owed.

"If that is the way decision making is being made for the federal government, I'm very concerned about the finances of the federal government," she said.

Neither X nor DOGE responded to requests for comment from The Associated Press.

Along with gutting the company's workforce and auctioning off memorabilia and office furniture, Musk's extreme cost-cutting strategy at Twitter included simply not paying its bills. Landlords of the social media company's headquarters in San Francisco as well as its British offices took the company to court for millions of dollars in unpaid rent.

The British case settled for an undisclosed sum. The San Francisco case was dismissed last year; it's not clear if a settlement was paid.

Musk has also brought one of X's real estate executives over to the government.

Even if the X cuts were an unmitigated success, it's unclear whether the same tactics would work for cutting costs and still delivering services at government agencies.

Nicholas Bagley, a law professor at the University of Michigan, said Musk and Trump are arrogating spending power that belongs to Congress, not the executive branch, and he predicts lawsuits over the moves will hamstring their efforts.

"All this is of dubious legality, and that's before you get to the civil service protections," Bagley said, referring to federal workforce rules preventing layoffs for political purposes. "You're going to see a lot of bombast and rhetoric, but I suspect it's going to yield fewer things on the ground."

A few in Musk's orbit have tried to warn him against moving too rashly, including prominent tech investor Paul Graham, who in a recent X exchange asked Musk to "take your time and do it carefully."

The government "isn't just a company. Companies are born and die within the system, and it's OK. But this is the system itself we're talking about here."

Minority X stock owner Gerber, CEO of investment firm Gerber Kawasaki, praises Musk for instilling a sense of belonging to the "special forces of business" at his companies. But he thinks Musk will fail in Washington.

"The idea that you can fire all these people doesn't work," he said. "We're about to see an epic battle."

## Senate GOP unveils \$340B budget plan with Trump's deportation and defense funds, as House stalls

By LISA MASCARO and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As House Republicans missed another deadline Friday to produce a massive budget package of tax cuts and slashed spending, Senate Republicans jumped ahead, unveiling a more tailored \$340 billion blueprint focused on President Donald Trump's deportation agenda and bolstered U.S. defense spending.

Speaker Mike Johnson acknowledged his own chamber's plan for Trump's big budget bill would slip into the weekend as House Republicans work overtime to agree to the details. After a lengthy meeting a day earlier with the Republican president at the White House, they are racing to hammer out a package that includes some \$4 trillion in tax breaks, massive program cuts and a possible extension of the nation's debt limit.

"We have just a few final details to iron out," Johnson said at the Capitol. "It's going well, and I'm very excited about where we are and the fact we're going to be moving this forward."

But the repeated setbacks are frustrating GOP lawmakers as they argue among themselves and they fail to show progress on Trump's signature legislative priority during the first 100 days of the new administration with unified party control of the House, the Senate and the White House.

At stake are countless Trump campaign promises: making tax cuts that expire at the end of this year permanent, cutting spending on federal programs and ensuring the administration has enough money to launch his deportation operation and finish building the U.S.-Mexico border wall. The package is also expected to meet Trump's demands to raise the nation's debt ceiling to allow more borrowing and prevent a federal default.

Trump's message as he popped in and out of the nearly five-hour meeting Thursday at the White House was simple: Get it done.

Instead, Senate Republicans jumped in Friday as they prepared to head to Trump's private Mar-a-Lago club in Palm Beach, Florida, for a Friday night dinner as they push ahead with their own scaled-back proposal.

Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, chairman of the Senate Budget Committee, said "help is on the way."

Graham announced Friday his panel, too, would hold hearings next week to kickstart the process on the Senate GOP's slimmed-back bill.

The dueling approaches between the House and the Senate are becoming something of a race to see which chamber will make the most progress toward the GOP's overall goals.

As the House struggles, Republicans led by Senate Majority Leader John Thune of South Dakota have proposed a two-step approach, starting with a smaller bill that would include money for Trump's border wall and deportation plans, among other priorities. They later would pursue the more robust package of tax break extensions before a year-end deadline.

The Senate Budget Committee said that the proposed new spending would finish the border wall and increase the number of Border Patrol agents and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers.

The increased defense spending would include money for growing the U.S. Navy and build an integrated air and defense missile system to counter threats to the U.S.

The committee said the budget plan would also include proposed cuts elsewhere in federal spending to offset the \$85.5 billion annual cost, which would total \$340 billion over the four years of Trump's second term.

The two chambers are racing to deliver Trump's agenda with small majorities and little room for error. Johnson, R-La., needs almost complete unanimity from his ranks to pass any bill over objections from Democrats. In the Senate, Republicans have a 53-47 majority, with little room for dissent.

It's a heavy lift for Congress, and House and Senate GOP leaders have been desperately looking to Trump for direction on how to proceed, but the president has been noncommittal about the details — only pushing Congress for results.

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It all comes as congressional phone lines are being swamped with callers protesting cost-cutting efforts led by billionaire Elon Musk against federal programs, services and operations.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said Thursday the president and lawmakers discussed "tax priorities of the Trump administration," including Trump's promises to end federal taxation of tips, Social Security benefits and overtime pay. Renewing tax cuts Trump enacted in 2017 also was on the agenda, she said.

House Republicans reconvened late into the evening at the Capitol to make sure all the Republicans would be on board with the emerging plan, particularly the spending cuts that have the potential to cause angst among lawmakers as they slice into government services Americans depend on from coast to coast.

But on Friday they were not quite there yet, lawmakers said, and would stay at it through the weekend.

The House GOP largely wants what Trump has called a "big, beautiful bill" that would extend some \$4 trillion in tax cuts and include funding for the president's mass deportation effort and border wall. It includes massive cuts from a menu of government programs — from health care to food assistance — to help offset the tax cuts.

House GOP leaders are proposing cuts that would bring \$1 trillion in savings over the decade, lawmakers said, but members of the conservative House Freedom Caucus want at least double that amount, some \$2.5 trillion.

The chair of the House Budget Committee, Rep. Jodey Arrington of Texas, said his panel is preparing to hold hearings on the package next week.

Arrington said he can "see the runway" on a budget plan. "We're not far. We're not far."

He said of meeting what he has described as a "stretch goal" of \$2.5 trillion in savings over 10 years: "The opportunity and potential is there, but there's got to be the will of the body."

Trump has repeatedly said he is less wed to the process used in Congress than the outcome of achieving his policy goals.

If the House GOP's initial meeting with Trump at the White House last month was a good first date, this one was "whether we want kids or not," McClain told reporters.

"This was a very different meeting," she said. "It was still positive, optimistic. But it was getting down to business."

## Recent aviation disasters cause fears about the safety of flying

By JOSH FUNK Associated Press

The spate of recent aviation disasters and close calls have people worried about the safety of flying.

The midair collision that killed 67 near Washington, the fiery plane crash in Philadelphia and now a missing plane in Alaska are only the most high-profile disasters. There was also a Japan Airlines plane that clipped a parked Delta plane while it was taxiing at the Seattle airport earlier this week and a United Airlines plane caught fire during takeoff at the Houston airport Sunday after an engine problem sparked a fire on the wing.

That's not even to mention the security concerns that arose after stowaways were found dead inside the wheel wells of two planes and aboard two other flights. And don't forget about the time that a passenger opened an emergency exit door on a plane while it was taxiing for takeoff in Boston.

So of course people are wondering whether their flight is safe?

What happened in the worst incidents?

The Jan. 29 collision between an American Airlines passenger jet and an Army helicopter killed everyone aboard both aircraft. It was the deadliest plane crash in the U.S. since Nov. 12, 2001, when a jet slammed into a New York City neighborhood just after takeoff, killing all 260 people on board and five on the ground. There hadn't even been a deadly crash of any kind involving a U.S. airliner since February 2009.

Crashes are more common involving smaller planes like the single-engine Cessna that went missing in Alaska on Thursday with 10 people aboard. Crews were searching for that plane Friday.

A medical transportation plane crashed in Philadelphia on Jan. 31, killing the six people onboard and

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another person on the ground. That Learjet generated a massive fireball when it smashed into the ground in a neighborhood not long after taking off from a small airport nearby.

How worried should I be?

Fatal crashes attract extraordinary attention partly because they are rare. The track record of U.S. airlines is remarkably safe, as demonstrated by the long stretch between fatal crashes.

But deadly crashes have happened more recently elsewhere around the world, including one in South Korea that killed all 179 people aboard in December. There were also two fatal crashes involving Boeing's troubled 737 Max jetliner in 2018 and 2019. And last January, a door plug blew off a 737 Max while it was in flight, raising more questions about the plane.

And federal officials have been raising concerns about an overtaxed and understaffed air traffic control system for years, especially after a series of close calls between planes at U.S. airports. Among the reasons they have cited for staffing shortages are uncompetitive pay, long shifts, intensive training and mandatory retirements.

President Donald Trump added to those concerns Thursday when he blamed the midair collision on the "obsolete" air traffic control system that airports rely on and promised to replace it.

But even with all that, Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy went on Fox News earlier this week and tried to assure viewers that air travel is "way safer than traveling in a car and train. This is the safest mode of transportation."

And the statistics back that up.

The National Safety Council estimates that Americans have a 1-in-93 chance of dying in a motor vehicle crash, while deaths on airplanes are too rare to calculate the odds. Figures from the U.S. Department of Transportation tell a similar story.

What is being done?

The National Transportation Safety Board and Federal Aviation Administration are investigating these recent crashes and close calls to determine what caused them and look for ways to prevent similar incidents.

There have already been troubling revelations about the midair collision, but it will take more than a year to get the full report on what happened.

The NTSB always recommends steps that could be taken to prevent crashes from happening again, but the agency has a long list of hundreds of previous recommendations that have been ignored by other government agencies and the industries it investigates.

But Duffy said the public is right to say that crashes like the recent ones are unacceptable. That is why he plans to make sure "safety is paramount" as he leads the agency that regulates all modes of transportation.

"I feel really good about where we're at and where we're going and the plans we have in place to make sure we even make the system safer and more efficient than it is today," Duffy said in the Fox interview.

## More GOP-led states seek to follow Trump's lead in defining male and female

By KIM CHANDLER, JOHN HANNA and SAFIYAH RIDDLE Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Katherine Bartle said she spent her years growing up in Alabama trying anything to "fix" herself and exist as a man. Eventually she realized it wasn't possible.

"I am a woman. I assure you that this is not a costume, nor is it by my own choice," Bartle, 24, of Huntsville, Alabama, told Alabama lawmakers this week as they debated legislation that would define her and other transgender women in Alabama as men based on the sex they were assigned at birth.

The Alabama legislation, which passed the Senate Thursday, would create legal definitions of male and female based on the reproductive organs at birth. At least nine other states have already enacted similar laws.

Now Alabama and a small but growing number of other GOP-led states are pushing to enact more laws this year following President Donald Trump's executive order declaring there are two sexes and rejecting the idea that people can transition to another gender.

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"That provides a framework for the states to be able to enact their own without fear of reprisals from the federal government," said Nebraska state Sen. Kathleen Kauth, who is sponsoring a measure there.

Republican Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen issued an executive order to impose definitions for male and female, and he is backing Kauth's bill. The measure also would restrict transgender people's use of bathrooms and locker rooms. A committee hearing was set for Friday.

Several other GOP-led states are considering similar bills this year.

Trump's move affects passports, federal prisons and federal funding. State laws affect state-controlled policies.

For example, after Kansas enacted its law in 2023, the state stopped allowing transgender people to change their birth certificates and driver's licenses so that the listing for "sex" would match their gender identities. Even transgender residents who have had their gender identities reflected on their licenses face having the listing reversed if they have to renew their licenses.

Bills have been proposed in multiple states

Legislation defining male and female passed the Wyoming House last month, and similar proposals have been introduced in Arizona, Indiana, Missouri and South Carolina, according to groups that track measures rolling back transgender rights.

"It's based on fundamental truths that are as old as the Book of Genesis and as reliable as the sun in the sky. Men are born men, women are born women and one can never become the other," said Republican Sen. April Weaver, a sponsor of an Alabama proposal. She said a person "can identify as whoever you want to identify as, but this just puts into law what your sex is."

The Alabama Senate passed the bill with a 26-5 vote, with all five Democrats voting against it. The bill will now move to the Alabama House of Representatives.

Alabama Sen. Linda Coleman-Madison, a Democrat, didn't disagree with the definitions in the bill but questioned its purpose. She said the bill wouldn't "change the perception about how people feel about themselves," but instead intended "to change attitudes as people go in to get services, to have people looked at differently, to target, to isolate."

"I believe people are going to be killed and die behind this," Coleman-Madison said.

Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey promised to sign the bill if it reaches her desk.

The bills began popping up in statehouses several years ago, but they gained traction in the last two years.

Kauth said that even five years ago, the definition of male and female seemed fixed in people's minds. Republicans often describe recognition of transgender people's gender identities as an ideology being pushed by the political left.

"The intensity of this ideology and the push through society has been pretty extreme, so we need to actually push back on it," Kauth said.

The American Medical Association and other mainstream medical groups say that extensive research shows that sex and gender are better understood as a spectrum than as an either/or definition. Strict definitions can also leave out a range of variations that include intersex people, who have physical traits that don't fit typical definitions for male or female categories.

Conservatives pushing the bills often argue that states have an interest in protecting "women-only" spaces such in bathrooms, locker rooms and sport teams and prevent transgender women from accessing them. "It would prevent males who identify as women from claiming that they have an automatic right to access these specific women's spaces. I believe we as women should be standing up to this," Alabama's Weaver said.

Trump boosts the idea that sex is unchangeable

Trump has boosted the idea that there are two unchangeable sexes in a series of executive orders that call for moving transgender women in federal prisons to men's facilities, barring gender-marker changes on passports, ending federal funding for gender-affirming medical care for transgender people under 19, kicking transgender service members out of the military and removing transgender women and girls from women's and girls' sports competitions.

His policies are facing court challenges, with arguments that they are discriminatory and exceed the president's authority. Some of the orders call on Congress to make laws and agencies to implement regulations — actions that can take months or years.

"We deserve to be here," trans people say

Trans people said the bills are an attempt to deny their existence or to capitalize on prejudice for political gain. Several hundred people marched to the Alabama Capitol and Statehouse Wednesday to protest the legislation and other bills that impact LGBTQ people.

"I'm tired of running from the opposition. I'm not going any damn where. You deserve to be here. We deserve to be here," TC Caldwell told the crowd.

Bartle said she believes the bills are about an attempt to "exert control" over people.

"It's not for the protection of women or anything of the sort," she said.

Micah Saunders, a transgender man from Birmingham, Alabama, told lawmakers during a public hearing that they need to think about the implications. He said if the bill were to pass, it would force him as a trans man, who has a "beard and receding hairline," to use the women's facilities, and that any woman "not deemed feminine enough could be a target for harassment."

"This bill will put Alabamians under the threat of violence and harassment. It solves no problems and creates new ones," Saunders said.

## Expect Super Bowl victory celebrations to look different after last year's deadly shooting

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and MARYCLAIRE DALE Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (AP) — Expect more security — and nerves — at this year's Super Bowl victory celebration regardless of who wins Sunday's matchup in New Orleans between the Kansas City Chiefs and Philadelphia Eagles.

A shooting that killed one person and wounded about two dozen others marred last year's Chiefs victory rally, and a Philadelphia Eagles fan died last month after falling from a light pole while celebrating the team's NFC championship victory.

Kansas City plans to boost its police presence if the Chiefs win a third-straight title, and Philadelphia might grease its poles to thwart climbers if the Eagles win. New Orleans, which was the scene of a New Year's Day truck-ramming attack and which is hosting the Super Bowl, plans to block some traffic routes.

"There's a lot of people that'll think twice about attending an event like that," fan Branson Albertson said Thursday as he, his wife and their kids posed for photos inside Kansas City's Chiefs-bedecked Union Station, near where last year's shooting happened.

"But I still think there'll be a big turnout," he added.

Events like victory parades present unique challenges because they are open, unpredictable and draw large crowds, said Alex del Carmen, an associate dean of the school of criminology at Tarleton State University in Texas.

Last year, Chiefs players were jumping off floats to give fans high-fives as buses filled with the team wound through packed downtown Kansas City. Some of that would likely change this year regardless of where the celebration is held, he said.

Other sports celebration in the U.S. also have ended in gun violence, including a shooting that injured several people in 2023 in downtown Denver after the Nuggets' NBA championship, and gunfire in 2023 at a parking lot near the Texas Rangers' World Series parade.

All of these incidents are studied carefully, Del Carmen said.

"What we can do is learn from the past and hopefully last year's lessons were very, very vivid in the minds of those that are going to be planning these next events," said del Carmen, who recruited students to help with security when the Super Bowl was played in Arlington, Texas, in 2011.

There are limits to what safety measures organizers can put in place, particularly in Kansas City, which is in a state with few gun restrictions. Last year's shooting, which appeared to stem from a dispute between

several people, happened with more than 800 officers on hand to police an estimated crowd of 1 million people — which comes out to more than 1,000 parade-goers to every officer.

“When you have that many people compacted into a confined space and everybody is shoulder to shoulder, it’s just hard to see everything, is hard to account for everything,” said Jason Armstrong, a former police chief in Ferguson, Missouri, and Apex, North Carolina, who is now a police consultant.

“You know, we just have to have as many eyes out there as we can.”

If the Chiefs win again, there will be 200 additional officers and the parade will move faster, said Mayor Quinton Lucas.

He said last month that the city would “try our level best to make sure that we think of every contingency,” but he acknowledged that some people might not feel comfortable attending.

“I understand that and I get that,” Lucas said.

Sharon Billington, a 63-year-old Chiefs fan who also visited Union Station, said she plans to watch it on TV. She had family at last year’s festivities and was terrified.

“The world is just not in a position to have that right now,” she said of a large rally.

Philadelphia is known for having one of the league’s most rowdy fan bases. In recent years, zealous Eagles fans have climbed street signs, traffic lights, bus shelters and even theater marquees to lead the crowds below in cheers. In 2023, when the Eagles last won a National Football Conference title, a group of people crashed through the hard plastic roof of a bus shelter where they had been dancing, injuring several of them.

But after a college student was killed by falling off a pole following the Eagles’ conference championship last month, Mayor Chelle Parker is pleading with fans to stay safe.

Officials have sometimes greased the poles ahead of time to thwart such antics — with mixed success — and may do so again this week.

City officials promised they would be ready Sunday, with more police on hand and roads closed near City Hall, the Broad Street corridor, the stadium district and other places fans typically gather.

“The Philadelphia Police Department is on an all-hands-on-deck approach to ensure everyone’s safety,” Police Commissioner Kevin J. Bethel said Friday. “Our officers will be out in full force across the city, ready to keep the festivities running smoothly.”

“You don’t want to be in a celebratory moment, (and) have a tragedy occur,” Parker, sporting a kelly-green suit in a nod to the team, said after the Eagles clinched a Super Bowl spot.

## What is the International Criminal Court and how will Trump’s sanctions impact it?

By MOLLY QUELL Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands (AP) — U.S. President Donald Trump’s executive order imposing sanctions on the International Criminal Court could jeopardize trials and investigations at the world’s only permanent global tribunal for war crimes and genocide.

The order Trump signed Thursday accuses the ICC of “illegitimate and baseless actions targeting America and our close ally Israel.” It cites the arrest warrant the ICC issued last year for Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his former defense minister, Yoav Gallant, over alleged war crimes in Gaza.

The Hague-based court condemned the move. “The Court stands firmly by its personnel and pledges to continue providing justice and hope to millions of innocent victims of atrocities across the world,” the court said in a statement.

What is the International Criminal Court?

The court was created in 2002 to be a last stop for the most serious international crimes: war crimes, crimes against humanity, genocide and aggression.

The United States and Israel are not members, but 125 other countries have signed the court’s foundational treaty, the Rome Statute. The ICC becomes involved when nations are unable or unwilling to prosecute crimes on their territory.

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The court's newest member, Ukraine, formally joined in January.

Judges at the court have convicted 11 people. Congolese warlord Thomas Lubanga was the first, sentenced in 2012 to 14 years in prison for conscripting child soldiers.

A Congolese warlord known as "The Terminator" was convicted in July 2019 for atrocities committed during a brutal ethnic conflict in a mineral-rich region of Congo in 2002-2003. Bosco Ntaganda was given a 30-year prison sentence.

In 2021, the court convicted Dominic Ongwen of dozens of war crimes and crimes against humanity, including multiple killings and forced marriages in Uganda. Ongwen was a one-time child soldier who morphed into a brutal commander of a notorious rebel group known as the Lord's Resistance Army.

What will these sanctions do?

The exact impact is unclear. Trump's executive order invokes emergency powers from several different laws to allow the U.S. Treasury Department and the U.S. State Department to issue specific sanctions.

The court's chief prosecutor, Karim Khan, is a likely target, as is anyone involved in the Netanyahu investigation, including the three judges who issued the arrest warrants. The sanctions could also target the court itself, grinding its operations to a halt.

During his previous term in office, Trump imposed sanctions on former prosecutor Fatou Bensouda and one of her deputies over her investigation of alleged crimes in Afghanistan. The probe covered offenses allegedly committed by the Taliban, American troops and U.S. foreign intelligence operatives dating back to 2002. Trump's sanctions blocked Bensouda from accessing any U.S.-based financial assets of court employees and barred her and her immediate family from entering the United States.

President Joe Biden lifted the sanctions when he took office in 2021.

Why has the court issued an arrest warrant for Netanyahu?

In November, a pretrial panel of judges issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu, Gallant and Hamas' military chief, accusing them of war crimes and crimes against humanity in connection with the war in Gaza.

The warrants said there was reason to believe Netanyahu and Gallant used "starvation as a method of warfare" by restricting humanitarian aid, and intentionally targeted civilians in Israel's campaign against Hamas in Gaza. Israeli officials deny the charges.

The warrant marked the first time that a sitting leader of a major Western power has been accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity by a global court. The decision makes Netanyahu and the others internationally wanted suspects, putting them at risk of arrest when they travel abroad and potentially further isolating them.

Do these sanctions jeopardize current trials?

The court is currently without a single trial ahead for the first time since it arrested its first suspect in 2006.

It has issued 33 unsealed arrest warrants. Those named range from Netanyahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin to Ugandan rebel leader Joseph Kony and Gamlet Guchmazov, a former government member of the breakaway region of South Ossetia in Georgia. Kony is accused of war crimes and crimes against humanity. Guchmazov is accused of torture.

Three verdicts are pending. Former CAR football federation president Patrice-Edouard Ngaïssona and Alfred Yekatom, alleged leaders of a predominantly Christian rebel group in the Central African Republic, are accused of multiple counts of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The trial of Ali Mohammed Ali Abdul Rahman Ali, who is accused of committing atrocities as the leader of the Janjaweed militia in Sudan, wrapped up last year.

For a few hours last month, the court appeared poised to take a Libyan warlord into custody. Instead, member state Italy sent Ossama Anjiem home. Also known as Ossama al-Masri, Anjiem heads the Tripoli branch of the Reform and Rehabilitation Institution, a notorious network of detention centers run by the government-backed Special Defense Force.



## Latino evangelical churches gear up to face possible immigration enforcement in churches

By DEEPA BHARATH Associated Press

Bishop Ebli De La Rosa says his motto right now is "to prepare for the worst and pray for the best."

De La Rosa, who oversees Church of God of Prophecy congregations in nine southeastern states, says he has had to respond quickly to the Trump administration's new orders, which have thrown out policies that restricted immigration enforcement in sensitive locations such as schools and houses of worship.

This move has imperiled 32 of the Latino evangelical denomination's 70 pastors who are here without legal status and serve in some of the region's most vulnerable communities, De La Rosa said. The bishop has instructed each congregation with endangered pastors to prepare three laypeople to take over, should their leader be deported. He has also told them to livestream every service, and to "keep recording even if something happens."

"Some of my pastors are holding services with doors locked because they are scared that immigration agents will burst through the door at any moment," he said. "I feel so bad and so helpless that I can do nothing more for them."

De La Rosa echoes the sentiments of several other faith leaders representing thousands of Latino evangelical Christians in Florida and swaths of the Southeast. They worry about the sanctity of their sacred spaces, and the possibility of immigration raids and arrests.

A statement from the Department of Homeland Security on Jan. 20 said the president's executive order will empower officers with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Customs and Border Protection to enforce immigration laws and that "criminals will no longer be able to hide in America's schools and churches to avoid arrest."

Agustin Quiles, a spokesperson for the Florida Fellowship of Hispanic Councils and Evangelical Institutions, said community members, including many who supported Donald Trump in the last election cycle, now feel devastated and abandoned.

"The messaging appears to be that anyone who is undocumented is a criminal," he said. "Latino evangelicals for the most part voted Republican and hold conservative views on issues like abortion. We want to ask the president to reconsider because these actions are causing pain and trauma to so many families in and beyond our churches. Their suffering is great, and the church is suffering with them."

Quiles said his organization will lobby legislators in Washington and Florida to reinstate laws that protected sensitive spaces like houses of worship.

"Our main focus is the unity of families and the many children who will be impacted or left behind without their parents," he said.

Pastor Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference, who advised President Trump on immigration during his first term, says he has been assured on multiple occasions "by those in the know" that houses of worship have nothing to fear.

"There should be zero angst as it pertains to churches because no one is going to come into a church with or without guns blazing," he said. "That is never going to happen."

However, Rodriguez said agents may surveil a church if they suspect someone engaged in criminal activity is seeking shelter there. And he said those who are here illegally — even if they have lived in the United States for decades — may be deported if they are living with or are around someone who is here illegally and has committed a crime.

The National Association of Evangelicals, which says it represents 40 denominations and serves millions, expressed dismay at the executive order.

"Withdrawal of guidance protecting houses of worship, schools and health facilities from immigration enforcement is troubling," it said on Jan. 22, asserting that the move has deterred some from attending church.

Pastors who are seeing the impact of these orders on the ground agree.

The Rev. Esteban Rodriguez, who leads Centro Cristiano El Pan de Vida, a mid-size Church of God of

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Prophecy congregation in Kissimmee, Florida, said Latino evangelical churches “are like a big family that is composed of families.” In his community, those who are here without legal status have even been afraid to go to work, church and to food pantries to fulfill their basic needs, he said.

Rodriguez said he has been helping some congregants with reference letters for their immigration applications and speaking with lawyers to see how the church can help proactively.

The Rev. Ruben Ortiz, Latino field coordinator for Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, says Latino churches have spent decades creating these sacred spaces at great cost, without relying on government assistance. Ortiz said he was distressed to hear about an incident outside an Atlanta-area church where an individual was arrested while a service was being held inside.

The Bible clearly states that a church is a place of refuge and these laws challenge that sacred belief, Ortiz said.

“We are getting calls from members who say they don’t feel safe in our churches,” he said. “We are going to respond by giving shelter. We are going to embrace all regardless of their immigration status. Everyone can and should find refuge in our churches.”

Thomas A. Saenz, president and general counsel for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, said he does not expect immigration authorities to engage in raids on churches that violate people’s constitutional right to gather and worship.

“What they may do and have done is target a specific individual who might be attending church,” he said. “I would expect more of that.”

The law is murky as to whether churches can legally shelter those who are here illegally as part of their faith, but there are strong arguments to be made, Saenz said.

“People should know they have rights that protect them, and that they have allies inside and outside the church who will express their outrage if their constitutional rights are violated,” he said.

Latino evangelicals are in a unique spot because they are influenced by the theology of right-leaning white evangelical churches, whose pastors and leaders are also the strongest voices against immigration, said Lloyd Barba, assistant professor of religion at Amherst College in Massachusetts who studies Latino immigration and religion.

Barba said the Latino evangelical community includes many independent churches and diverse organizations that lack a unified, central teaching on immigration — unlike mainline denominations such as the United Methodist Church or the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

“Even the Catholic Church has a robust doctrine and social teaching on immigration,” he said. “Without that, we tend to encounter a little more reluctance or uncertainty about whether Latino pastors should be engaging in this kind of sacred resistance.”

Bishop Abner Adorno with Assemblies of God in the Florida Multicultural District, said he leans into the Bible where he says the teaching on immigration is crystal clear. He points to Deuteronomy 10:19, which says: “So you, too, must show love to foreigners for you yourselves were once foreigners in the land of Egypt.”

“This verse describes a Judeo-Christian foundation of concern for immigrants and refugees,” he said. “While the concern of the government must be on enforcement, the role of the church must be compassion.”

## One of the victims of Sweden’s deadliest mass shooting called his fiancée to say he loved her

By ALEKSANDAR FURTULA, SERGEI GRITS and STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press  
OREBRO, Sweden (AP) — Wounded and bleeding, Salim Karim Iskef managed to video-call his fiancée to tell her he loved her one last time before he died this week in what was Sweden’s deadliest mass shooting, The 28-year-old asked Kareen Alia to look after his mother and herself before the call ended.  
There was no answer when she called back, and she later found out he had died of his wounds, one of 10 people killed when a gunman opened fire on Tuesday at the adult education center in the city of Orebro, where Iskef was studying to become a nurse.

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The couple had recently bought a home and planned to get married this summer.

"He had all of these dreams in his heart. Now, unfortunately, all of these dreams are gone. Their light has been put out," Father Jacob Kasselia, priest of their local Orthodox Christian church, told Swedish broadcaster TV4.

Authorities said the shooter, who has not yet been officially identified, was connected to the adult education center where he opened fire with at least one rifle-like weapon and may have attended school there previously.

The shooter was later found dead with three guns, 10 empty magazines and a large amount of unused ammunition next to his body. It was not clear how he died, but officials said police did not return his gunfire.

Officers found at least five people, all over age 18, with serious gunshot wounds. A sixth person was treated for minor injuries.

Investigators have not uncovered a definitive motive behind the bloodshed. Police said there were no warnings beforehand, and they believe the perpetrator acted alone. Authorities said there were no suspected connections to terrorism at this point.

'My whole life was with him'

The school, Campus Risbergska, offers primary and secondary educational classes for adults age 20 and older, Swedish-language classes for immigrants, vocational training, and programs for people with intellectual disabilities. It is on the outskirts of Orebro, about 200 kilometers (125 miles) from Stockholm.

Iskef was studying nursing there after serving as a healthcare worker during the COVID-19 pandemic. His family fled Syria between 2014 and 2015 because of its long-running civil war.

"We've lived together our entire lives," his sister Hanan Eskif told TV4. "We worked together, and we studied together, we went to church together. My whole life was with him, how am I supposed to live without him?"

Their family held a memorial service at their Orthodox Christian church, although they hadn't received Iskef's body by late Thursday.

"We keep looking out the window thinking maybe he'll return and knock on the door, and we'll have to open it. We don't sleep, we don't eat, don't drink. Nothing, we just sit and look out," Eskif told the broadcaster.

Guns in Sweden

The government and Sweden Democrats on Friday planned to move forward with proposals to tighten gun laws, including restricting access to semi-automatic weapons such as the AR-15, Swedish news agency TT reported.

Authorities said the shooter had licenses for four weapons, three of which were found next to his body. Police have seized the fourth. Officials have only said at least one gun was a rifle-like weapon.

Currently, in order to possess a firearm legally in Sweden, applicants must obtain a weapon license and demonstrate that it will be used for an acceptable purpose, such as hunting or target shooting, and not be misused.

Applicants must also submit previously obtained hunting or target shooting certificates. Hunting certificates require people to pass a training course, while target shooters must be certified as active and experienced members of clubs.

In a country of roughly 10.5 million people, there were just over 660,000 registered gun owners at the beginning of 2024, according to the Swedish news agency TT. Those registered owners had some 2 million guns, objects that are considered firearms and weapon parts that require a permit.

TT reported that 1.6 million of those guns are registered for hunting, and another 176,000 for target shooting.

All weapons must be stored in secure cabinets approved by the police. Applications for fully automatic weapons or one-handed weapons are only granted for exceptional reasons, and such permits are generally time-limited.

Permits are revoked if the weapon is modified to be substantially different from its original function.

## Iran supreme leader criticizes proposed nuclear talks with US, upending push to negotiation

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iran's supreme leader said Friday that negotiations with America "are not intelligent, wise or honorable" after President Donald Trump floated nuclear talks with Tehran.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei also suggested that "there should be no negotiations with such a government," but stopped short of issuing a direct order not to engage with Washington.

Khamenei's remarks upend months of signals from Tehran to the United States that it wanted to negotiate over its rapidly advancing nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of crushing economic sanctions worth billions of dollars. Following Khamenei's comments, the Iranian rial sunk to a record low of 872,000 rials to \$1 in aftermarket trading.

What happens next remains unclear, particularly as reformist President Masoud Pezeshkian promised as recently as Thursday to enter into a dialogue with the West.

Khamenei's remarks to air force officers in Tehran appeared to contradict his own earlier remarks in August that opened the door to talks. However, the 85-year-old Khamenei has always been careful with remarks about negotiating with the West. That includes balancing the demands of reformists within the country who want the talks against hard-line elements within Iran's theocracy, including the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard.

Khamenei noted that Trump unilaterally withdrew from the earlier nuclear deal under which Iran drastically limited its enrichment of uranium and overall stockpile of the material, in exchange for crushing sanctions being removed.

"The Americans did not uphold their end of the deal," Khamenei said. "The very person who is in office today tore up the agreement. He said he would, and he did."

He added: "This is an experience we must learn from. We negotiated, we gave concessions, we compromised— but we did not achieve the results we aimed for. And despite all its flaws, the other side ultimately violated and destroyed the agreement."

Mixed messages from both Iran and Trump

It's not clear what sparked Khamenei's remarks. However, they come after Trump suggested he wanted to deal with Tehran, even while signing an executive order to reimpose his "maximum pressure" approach to Iran on Tuesday.

"I'm going to sign it, but hopefully we're not going to have to use it very much," he said from the Oval Office. "We will see whether or not we can arrange or work out a deal with Iran."

"We don't want to be tough on Iran. We don't want to be tough on anybody," Trump added. "But they just can't have a nuclear bomb."

Trump followed with another online message on Wednesday, saying: "Reports that the United States, working in conjunction with Israel, is going to blow Iran into smithereens, ARE GREATLY EXAGGERATED."

"I would much prefer a Verified Nuclear Peace Agreement, which will let Iran peacefully grow and prosper," he wrote on Truth Social. "We should start working on it immediately, and have a big Middle East Celebration when it is signed and completed." He did not elaborate.

Nuclear enrichment sparks concerns

Khamenei, like other Iranian leaders, uses elliptical comments to indirectly govern policy while not boxing himself into any one decision. As supreme leader, he's also created a vast bureaucracy that competes with itself for influence, including with its civilian leadership under Pezeshkian.

As recently as Thursday, Pezeshkian suggested Iran could open itself up to even more inspections from the United Nations' nuclear watchdog, the International Atomic Energy Agency.

"They (can) come and inspect one hundred times more since we are not supposed to go after" a nuclear weapon, Pezeshkian told foreign diplomats.

Iranian diplomats have long pointed to Khamenei's preachings as a binding fatwa, or religious edict, that Iran won't build an atomic bomb.

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Iran has long insisted its nuclear program is for peaceful purposes. However, it now enriches uranium to 60% purity — a short, technical step from weapons-grade levels of 90%. Iranian officials increasingly suggest Tehran could pursue an atomic bomb. U.S. intelligence agencies assess that Iran has yet to begin a weapons program, but has “undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so.”

Iran calls U.S. sanctions on oil trading firms ‘unjustified’

Earlier in the week, Trump also said that displaced Palestinians in Gaza could be permanently resettled outside the war-torn territory and proposed the U.S. take “ownership” in redeveloping the area into “the Riviera of the Middle East.”

Khamenei appeared to reference Trump’s Gaza proposal in his remarks.

“The Americans sit, redrawing the map of the world — but only on paper, as it has no basis in reality,” Khamenei said. “They make statements about us, express opinions and issue threats. If they threaten us, we will threaten them in return. If they act on their threats, we will act on ours. If they violate the security of our nation, we will, without a doubt, respond in kind.”

Meanwhile, Iran’s Foreign Ministry separately criticized the U.S. Treasury’s move to levy sanctions Thursday against firms trading sanctioned Iranian crude oil to China. The Treasury described the firms as forming an “international network for facilitating the shipment of millions of barrels of Iranian crude oil worth hundreds of millions of dollars.”

Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Esmail Baghaei called the Treasury’s decision “completely unjustified and contrary to international rules and regulations.”

## Today in History: February 8, the Orangeburg Massacre

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Feb. 8, the 39th day of 2025. There are 326 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 8, 1968, three Black students were killed and 28 wounded as state troopers opened fire on student demonstrators on the campus of South Carolina State College in Orangeburg in the wake of protests over a whites-only bowling alley. The event would become known as the Orangeburg Massacre.

Also on this date:

In 1587, Mary, Queen of Scots was beheaded at Fotheringhay Castle in England after she was implicated in a plot to murder her cousin, Queen Elizabeth I.

In 1693, a charter was granted for the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg in the Virginia Colony.

In 1904, Japan launched a surprise attack on the Russian Navy at Port Arthur (now Dalian, China), marking the beginning of the Russo-Japanese War.

In 1910, the Boy Scouts of America was incorporated by William D. Boyce.

In 1915, D.W. Griffith’s controversial epic film “The Birth of a Nation” premiered in Los Angeles.

In 1924, the first execution by gas in the United States took place at the Nevada State Prison in Carson City as Gee Jon, a Chinese immigrant convicted of murder, was put to death.

In 1936, the first NFL draft was held at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel in Philadelphia.

In 1960, work began on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, located on Hollywood Boulevard and Vine Street in Los Angeles.

In 1971, NASDAQ, the world’s first electronic stock exchange, held its first trading day.

Today’s birthdays: Composer-conductor John Williams is 93. Broadcast journalist Ted Koppel is 85. Actor Nick Nolte is 84. Comedian Robert Klein is 83. Actor-rock musician Creed Bratton is 82. Actor Mary Steenburgen is 72. Author John Grisham is 70. Hockey Hall of Famer Dino Ciccarelli is 65. Rock singer Vince Neil (Mötley Crüe) is 64. Basketball Hall of Famer Alonzo Mourning is 55. Actor Seth Green is 51. Actor William Jackson Harper is 45. Actor-comedian Cecily Strong is 41. Hip-hop artist Anderson .Paak is 39. Professional surfer Bethany Hamilton is 35.