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Friday, Feb. 21

Senior Menu: Taco salad, Mexican rice with beans, breadstick, fruit.

Basketball Double Header at Britton-Hecla: Boys C at 4 p.m.; Girls JV/Boys JV at 5 p.m., followed by girls varsity and boys varsity.

Saturday, Feb. 22

Boys Region Wrestling at Hamlin, 9:30 a.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. 23

Open Gym, 2 p.m. to 5 p.m.
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, 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.

McConnell to Retire

Sen. Mitch McConnell (R) announced yesterday that he will not seek an eighth term in the Senate next year, almost a year after his decision to relinquish the top role in the upper chamber's GOP. The announcement came on the Kentucky lawmaker's 83rd birthday and prompted several state politicians to express interest in replacing him.

McConnell was first elected to the Senate in 1984, eventually becoming Republican leader in 2007. His 18-year tenure as a Senate party leader is the longest in US history. A thorough knowledge of Senate history and rules helped form McConnell's reputation as a master tactician, using procedural tools and a no-holds-barred approach to cut down Obama-era regulations, pass generational tax code reform, and reshape the federal judiciary via hundreds of confirmations. The end of his decadeslong career was marked by a rise in populism in the GOP under President Donald Trump, as well as a series of medical episodes involving mental lapses and falls.

Elsewhere in the Senate, former terrorism prosecutor Kash Patel was narrowly confirmed as FBI director in a 51 to 49 vote, with two Republicans voting against.

Bon Voyage SS United States

The SS United States, a historic 990-foot ocean liner, has begun its final journey from Philadelphia to become the world's largest artificial reef off Florida's Gulf Coast.

Tugboats are guiding the largest passenger ship built in America, nicknamed "the Big U," to Mobile, Alabama, where the crew will remove hazardous materials, including fuel. The process will take at least a year. The ship—more than 100 feet longer than the Titanic—will then continue its journey before resting roughly 180 feet underwater and 20 miles off the coast of Okaloosa County, Florida. The ship will sit upright on the seafloor, becoming a habitat for marine life. The voyage follows a legal battle and decades of decay while the vessel has been anchored in Philadelphia since 1996.

The SS United States ferried four US presidents and hosted numerous celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, Marlon Brando, and Grace Kelly. It set transatlantic speed records and completed roughly 800 crossings until its retirement in 1969 as air travel took off.

World Cup Kiss Conviction

Former Spanish soccer federation president Luis Rubiales was found guilty of sexual assault yesterday for kissing player Jenni Hermoso without consent after the 2023 Women's World Cup final. Spain's High Court fined Rubiales \$10,434 and ordered him to stay at least 200 meters from Hermoso and not communicate with her for a year. Rubiales and three codefendants were acquitted of a separate coercion charge for allegedly pressuring Hermoso to declare the kiss consensual.

The incident occurred during the medal ceremony following Spain's victory in Sydney. Hermoso, who plays in the Mexican soccer league and for Spain's national team, stated the kiss "tarnished" one of the happiest days of her life, while Rubiales claimed it was consensual. The Spanish penal code classifies a nonconsensual kiss as sexual assault. The scandal led to Rubiales' resignation and a three-year FIFA ban.

The case sparked a widespread debate about sexism in sports. A 2024 study found that 10.9% of US athletes have experienced unwanted sexual contact, with only 10.7% of those affected filing formal reports.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Amazon MGM Studios gains creative control over James Bond film franchise.
Netflix to invest \$1B in Mexico's cinema and television industry over next four years.
San Antonio Spurs star Victor Wembanyama to miss rest of regular season due to blood clot in his shoulder.
MLB to experiment with automated ball-strike challenge system during spring training.
Canada tops Team USA 3-2 in overtime to win 4 Nations Face-Off title.
PGA Tour leaders, including Tiger Woods, meet with White House officials to discuss possible merger with Saudi-backed LIV Golf.

Science & Technology

Rare genetic disorder known as spinal muscular atrophy treated in the womb for the first time; patient, now 2 years old, shows no signs of the progressive neurodegenerative disorder.
Researchers outline method to measure consciousness in animals; approach combines anatomical features with behaviors to compare with what is known about humans.
Inhalable gene therapy to treat cystic fibrosis begins trials in Europe; treatment delivers healthy copies of the gene responsible for mucus buildup in the respiratory and digestive tracts.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close down (S&P 500 -0.4%, Dow -1.0%, Nasdaq -0.5%) as investors question economic outlook amid looming tariffs.
Amazon surpasses Walmart in revenue for the first time, bringing in \$187B in Q4.
Walmart shares close down over 6% after retailer says profits will slow for current fiscal year despite earnings and revenue rising for the quarter.
OpenAI tops 400 million weekly active users, up 33% in less than three months, with paid business users crossing 2 million; user growth comes amid competition from China's DeepSeek model.

Politics & World Affairs

IRS begins laying off roughly 6,700 employees, or over 6% of the agency's workforce; those who have worked for less than one or two years are primarily affected.
Federal judge rules Trump administration can proceed with mass government layoffs.
New York Gov. Kathy Hochul (D) decides against removing New York City Mayor Eric Adams (D) from office amid corruption case fallout, instead seeks increased oversight of City Hall.
 Hamas returns bodies of four people, including two child hostages who were the youngest abducted in the Oct. 7, 2023, attack; Israel says one of the bodies does not belong to a known hostage.

Queen of Hearts








The Queen of Hearts drawing was held Thursday night at the Groton American Legion. The jackpot is \$15,448. Ticket sales for the week was \$1,145 with 10% (\$114) going to the consolation winner. The name of Joel Bierman was drawn. He had card number 46 and the card was the Queen of Diamonds. The Queen of Hearts will now continue into week number 19.

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Groton Area girls back on top in Region 1A

The battle continues to unfold between Groton Area and Aberdeen Roncalli for the number one spot in Region 1A. After the games last night, the Tigers have clawed their way back to the number one spot, just squeaking past Aberdeen Roncalli. Games are still being played tonight.

#	Name	Season			Seed Pts
		W	L	PCT	PTS
1	 Groton Area	13	6	.684	43.526
2	 Aberdeen Roncalli	15	5	.750	43.500
3	 Sisseton	12	7	.632	42.632
4	 Milbank	12	8	.600	41.250
5	 Webster Area	10	10	.500	40.450
6	 Britton-Hecla	5	14	.263	37.789
7	 Redfield	2	17	.105	36.368

Krueger takes first at regions

The Region 1B Wrestling Tournament was held Thursday in Clark. Groton Area's Liza Krueger took first place at 100 pounds. She won two matches by a pin and the third by a technical fall. Krueger will advance to the state tournament Feb. 27-March 1 in Rapid City.

100: Liza Krueger (42-2) placed 1st and scored 25.5 team points.

Quarterfinal - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 42-2 won by fall over Elly Murphy (Dell Rapids) 6-15 (Fall 3:51)

Semifinal - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 42-2 won by tech fall over Vanessa Anderson (Watertown) 29-23 (TF-1.5 4:37 (17-0))

1st Place Match - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 42-2 won by fall over Emery Voelker (Tea Area) 16-11 (Fall 3:44)



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

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South Dakota House advances bill that lawmaker slams as 'locking up librarians'

Legislation would repeal obscenity-related prosecution exemption for libraries, schools, universities and museums

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR - FEBRUARY 20, 2025 5:32 PM

In a move that one lawmaker said would lead to "locking up librarians," South Dakota legislators advanced a bill 38-32 on Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre that would remove legal protections for libraries and other institutions if children view books that meet the legal definition of "harmful to minors."

The bill would repeal an exemption shielding libraries, schools, universities, museums and their employees from prosecution under laws regulating obscenity and dissemination of material harmful to children. Without the exemption, people who work for those entities could be subjected to prosecutions resulting in a year of jail time and a \$2,000 fine.

After passing the House of Representatives, the legislation's next stop is the Senate.

Rep. Bethany Soye, R-Sioux Falls, is the main sponsor. During Thursday's House debate, she referenced an exemption in state law for works with serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value and said that should suffice, without specific protection from prosecution for several entities.

"So essentially this bill is just removing that exemption and saying that we want the same standard for everyone," she said.

Soye cited the book "Tricks" by Ellen Hopkins, marketed as a young adult novel about prostitution, as an example of harmful material currently accessible to students in public school libraries. She and other supporters said the intent of the bill is to pressure schools and libraries to remove those kinds of books.

"I ask all of you to read that and look me in the eyes and tell me that's not pornography," Soye said.

Opponents of the bill said it could lead to librarians facing criminal charges for loaning books. Rep. Drew Peterson, R-Salem, noted that the state's legal definition of harmful material does not require criminal intent to justify a prosecution.

"If a librarian accidentally allowed a student to take an anatomy book home or an encyclopedia with a picture of a naked human being, they could potentially be charged with a year in jail," Peterson said. "That's why I am voting no."

Rep. Will Mortenson, R-Fort Pierre, also opposed the measure.

"We're locking up librarians," Mortenson said. "Folks, we're not growing the state. We're not helping our people. We're locking up librarians in this bill."

Soye countered that several states have already removed similar exemptions and said no librarians have been sent to jail in those states. A report last year by The Washington Post listed eight states that have passed laws stripping librarian exemptions from prosecution under obscenity laws, including one where the law was blocked by the courts and two where the bill was vetoed.

Other opponents said the bill could lead to resignations. Rep. Kevin Van Diepen, R-Huron, a retired law enforcement officer, said he had never been asked to arrest a librarian.

"I've been called by all of the librarians in my district who said they will quit because of this," Van Diepen said. "Is that what we want? Librarians quitting? Doesn't make any sense."

In her closing arguments, Soye rejected claims that the bill criminalizes librarians.

"Just because there's a penalty for something, does that mean you're criminalizing someone?" she asked.

Joshua Haiar is a reporter based in Sioux Falls. Born and raised in Mitchell, he joined the Navy as a public af-

fairs 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.

Push to ban lab-grown meat fails in South Dakota Senate

Governor signed labeling bill and is considering prohibition on state spending in support of the product

BY: SETH TUPPER - FEBRUARY 20, 2025 5:21 PM

A legislative effort to ban lab-grown meat in South Dakota failed Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre, after the success of earlier bills to require labeling and prohibit state spending in support of the product.

The ban's initial failure was Wednesday on a 17-17 vote in the Senate, with one member absent. That was Sen. Kevin Jensen, R-Canton, who had voted for the bill when it advanced out of the Senate Agriculture and Natural Resources Committee.

A supporter of the legislation, Sen. Mykala Voita, R-Bonesteel, made a motion Thursday to reconsider it. "As we had one member of the body absent yesterday, I believe that we should reconsider this vote, and I'd appreciate your support," Voita said.

Two senators who voted for the bill on Wednesday — Ernie Otten, R-Tea, and Amber Hulse, R-Hot Springs — voted against the reconsideration motion, which rendered Jensen's support moot. The 19-16 vote against reconsideration dealt the bill its final defeat.

Hulse told South Dakota Searchlight afterward that she'd heard enough senators planned to change their vote that the bill was doomed, so she didn't think it was worth debating again. In other words, she said, even if the reconsideration motion had been approved, a later vote on the bill itself might have failed.

Coming from a district with many ranchers, Hulse said her initial vote for the legislation was a vote for some of those constituents. But she doubted whether the bill would stand up to constitutional challenges regarding the freedom of interstate commerce.

"I think the constitutionality of the bill, if I'm being quite honest, is questionable," Hulse said.

Otten did not immediately return a message from South Dakota Searchlight.

Barring further procedural maneuvering — such as amending the ban into another piece of legislation — the push to prevent the manufacture, sale and distribution of lab-grown meat in South Dakota is likely over for this legislative session, which ends next month.

Meanwhile, Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden has already signed a bill that will require lab-grown meat products to be labeled. Another bill that would prohibit state government spending in support of research, production, promotion, sale or distribution of lab-grown meat has passed both chambers and is awaiting Rhoden's consideration. That bill includes an exception for public universities, but would prevent scenarios such as the state awarding economic development grants to lab-grown meat companies.

Republican Rep. John Sjaarda, a Valley Springs farmer, proposed the ban and said Thursday that he was disappointed. He said the labeling bill, which applies to carcasses, parts of carcasses and meat food products, may work in stores but will not effectively alert restaurant diners who might not know when their dish is prepared with lab-grown meat.

"It does help," Sjaarda said. "I don't knock it. It's better than nothing."

The proposed ban divided agricultural groups, with some alleging that lab-grown meat has not been proven safe and that a ban would protect consumers and the state's livestock industry.

Others said the product has been cleared by federal safety regulators and should be available in the marketplace. They also said supporting a ban is a hypocritical stance for farmers and ranchers who've opposed restrictions imposed by other states and countries on livestock production practices and genetically modified crops.

Lab-grown meat, also called cell-cultured or cultivated meat, starts from a sample of animal cells that are fed the sugars, water, proteins and vitamins needed to grow into muscle and fat. Although the product

is approved for sale, it's not yet widely available.

Some other states, including Florida and Alabama, have banned lab-grown meat, and the Florida ban has sparked litigation from the industry.

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.

Vaccine 'conscience exemption' bill fails in SD House

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 20, 2025 2:44 PM

The South Dakota House of Representatives voted 36-34 Wednesday at the Capitol in Pierre to defeat a bill that would allow residents to exercise a "conscience exemption" from genetic-based vaccinations during a public health emergency. An attempt to revive the bill on Thursday failed.

The legislation, introduced by Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Bobbi Andera, was amended to prohibit businesses, governments and public accommodations from denying employment, services or entry to a building for an unvaccinated person who asserted a "conscience exemption." The amendment removed individual residents from the list of entities who could not deny a conscience exemption. It also cut a proposed penalty for violations.

"They must make reasonable accommodations as they would with religious or medical exemptions," Andera said.

The exemptions would not have applied to required school immunizations or health care facilities, or to the South Dakota National Guard if the vaccination was required for federal activation.

Supporters of the bill said the legislation supported personal freedom and bodily autonomy. House Majority Leader Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, told lawmakers that the COVID-19 pandemic and the rapid development of a vaccine turned "big business" into a "de facto arm of the government" with businesses requiring workers to be vaccinated during the public health emergency.

Sioux Falls Republican Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt opposed the bill because she struggled with the bill's vague language, such as "adversarial employment action," and questioned the point of a bill without penalty.

"If there is no action or consequence if it isn't followed, then why are we passing it?" Rehfeldt said. "Is this a bill we're passing to make us feel better and to say how much we hate the COVID-19 vaccine?"

Rehfeldt added that the legislation prioritized one person's freedom over another's.

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.

Planning ahead for water projects: SD lawmaker wins endorsement for special fund

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER - FEBRUARY 20, 2025 11:40 AM

At the urging of a Rapid City lawmaker who said big water projects need special attention, a South Dakota legislative committee unanimously supported a bill Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre that would create a water infrastructure development fund.

The fund would hold state and federal grants for rural water projects, accruing interest over time. Lawmakers would appropriate money from the fund for future water projects that have received congressional authorization or are on the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation rural water projects list.

Republican Sen. Helene Duhamel introduced Senate Bill 202. She told lawmakers the fund is a "proactive, fiscally responsible" way to gradually save funds for future water projects.

The Western Dakota Regional Water System, which Duhamel used as an example, aims to deliver Mis-

souri River water to communities, tribes and rural water systems in the western part of the state. The project has received some state and local funding, but has a projected cost in the billions, which would require federal funding. The system has requested a future-use permit for nearly 7 billion gallons of Missouri River water annually, which is pending in the Legislature.

To earn federal funding, state and local governments typically have to provide a match. Other water infrastructure projects in eastern South Dakota could also seek future funding. The state doesn't have a process in place to save for large-scale water projects, Duhamel said, like the Legislature has been doing for prison construction funding.

"We cannot afford to delay investments in water infrastructure," Duhamel said. "The cost of inaction will be far greater than the cost of preparation."

A lobbyist representing WEB Water in north-central South Dakota said the bill requires amendments to ensure support from the water industry across the state. The state Department of Revenue opposed the bill, saying it would circumvent the existing state water planning process. The department awards between \$10 million and \$12 million to projects throughout the state annually, which Duhamel said is insufficient to properly fund infrastructure projects costing billions of dollars.

SB 202 would only create the fund and would not appropriate any money to it.

The bill now heads to the Senate.

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.

Noem revokes protections for hundreds of thousands of Haitian immigrants

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 20, 2025 6:36 PM

WASHINGTON — U.S. Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem Thursday cut protections for hundreds of thousands of Haitian immigrants, leaving them vulnerable to deportations by August.

"We are returning integrity to the TPS system, which has been abused and exploited by illegal aliens for decades," a DHS official said in a statement. "President Trump and Secretary Noem are returning TPS to its original status: temporary."

It's the second time Noem has revoked an extension of Temporary Protected Status renewed under the Biden administration. TPS allows people from countries deemed too dangerous to return to their home due to violence, natural disasters or other unstable circumstances to obtain U.S. work permits and protection from deportation.

More than 300,000 Haitians have TPS, which stems from the 2008 earthquake in Haiti, and their extension was granted until February 2026, but now they will only have protections until August. It's unlikely that Noem will renew the status.

During the presidential campaign, President Donald Trump and Vice President J.D. Vance spread false rumors about Haitians in Springfield, Ohio, eating residents' pets. Trump referred to those Haitians with TPS as being in the country without legal authorization, despite their legal status.

Noem has often criticized the use of TPS and referred to the program as being "abused and manipulated." She recently revoked the Biden administration's TPS extension for roughly 600,000 Venezuelans and declined to renew TPS protections for a portion of that group – about 350,000 Venezuelans – that is set to expire in April.

A lawsuit was filed Thursday by a TPS organization challenging the Trump administration's decision to revoke renewals for Venezuelans on TPS and the decision to not renew TPS for the group of 350,000 Venezuelans that is set to expire this spring.

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There are roughly 1 million people with TPS status.

It's unclear if Noem will revoke the other extensions granted under the Biden administration in January. The Biden administration extended TPS for another 18 months for 103,000 Ukrainians and 1,900 Sudanese until October 2026. The Biden administration also extended TPS for 232,000 Salvadorians until September 2026.

The Department of Homeland Security did not respond to States Newsroom's request for comment.

This is not the first time the Trump administration has tried to end TPS for Haiti. During the first Trump administration, the president tried to end TPS status for Haiti, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Sudan, but in 2018 was ultimately stymied by the courts.

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

Thune and Rounds vote yes as U.S. Senate confirms Kash Patel as FBI director

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY - FEBRUARY 20, 2025 6:30 PM

WASHINGTON — All Senate Republicans, except two, voted on Thursday to confirm Kash Patel to a 10-year term as director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, an agency in the crosshairs of President Donald Trump.

In a 51-49 vote, the Senate GOP approved the 18th of Trump's nominees just one month into the president's second term. All Democrats and independents opposed Patel's nomination.

Republican Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, along with Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, broke with the GOP to vote against Patel, citing a "compelling need for an FBI Director who is decidedly apolitical."

"While Mr. Patel has had 16 years of dedicated public service, his time over the past four years has been characterized by high profile and aggressive political activity. Mr. Patel has made numerous politically charged statements in his book and elsewhere discrediting the work of the FBI, the very institution he has been nominated to lead," Collins said in a statement ahead of the vote.

Murkowski said her "reservations with Mr. Patel stem from his own prior political activities and how they may influence his leadership."

"The FBI must be trusted as the federal agency that roots out crime and corruption, not focused on settling political scores," Murkowski wrote on social media.

Patel, a career Department of Justice prosecutor who also worked for the first Trump administration, will now head up the federal law enforcement agency responsible for stamping out terrorism, white-collar crime, violent crime and public corruption among other criminal activity.

Patel, of Nevada, also has a lengthy resume of media appearances, consulting positions and commercial publications, according to his financial disclosure.

He sits on the board of directors for the Trump Media and Technology Group, which owns Truth Social, but pledged to resign upon confirmation as FBI director.

However, Patel declared on his disclosure that he will not divest from his investments in the Chinese online clothing retailer Shein while he serves as head of the FBI. Patel's investments in the company are valued between \$1 million and \$5 million, and are registered in the Cayman Islands, where Shein's parent company, Elite Depot Ltd., is based.

Patel pulled in between \$230,000 and \$550,000 in recent years from book sales, including his 2023 title "Government Gangsters: The Deep State, the Truth and the Battle for Our Democracy." Patel is also the author of a children's series that depicts a cartoon Donald Trump as a king confronting opposition, including battling a fictional stolen election — even though kings are not elected.

Patel, 44, a frequent guest on right-wing media, told podcast host Shawn Ryan last year that he'd "shut down the FBI Hoover Building on day one and reopen it the next day as a museum of the 'deep state.'"

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Patel was also one of the producers on the recorded version of the "Star-Spangled Banner" sung by defendants jailed in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. Trump played the song on the campaign trail.

However during his confirmation hearing, Patel spoke out against Jan. 6 defendants who committed violence against law enforcement.

When asked about his previous comments about shutting down the FBI headquarters, Patel told senators that accusations that he would "put political bias before the Constitution are grotesquely unfair."

Thune praises Patel

Senate Majority Leader John Thune praised Patel on the Senate floor as the right choice to lead the FBI "at a critical time" and restore trust in an agency suffering from "a perception that politics has infected the FBI's important work."

"The next director of the FBI needs to focus on rooting out politics, so the FBI can enforce the law, uphold the Constitution, and keep Americans safe," Thune said.

"The bureau also needs a renewed focus on empowering the FBI's field offices to be good partners to local law enforcement. I'm encouraged that Mr. Patel has the support of the National Police Association, the National Sheriffs' Association, and multiple state attorneys general — all of whom will be his partners in law enforcement should Mr. Patel be confirmed," the South Dakota Republican continued.

Republican Sen. Eric Schmitt of Missouri posted his support on social media Thursday morning.

"Kash will reform the agency and not a moment too soon," Schmitt wrote.

Sen. Markwayne Mullin wrote on social media early Thursday in all caps that within hours he and his colleagues would "CONFIRM KASH PATEL"

"We're almost there, America," the Oklahoma Republican posted.

Trump was charged with multiple federal crimes in recent years stemming from classified documents held at his Florida estate after his presidency and his attempt to subvert the 2020 presidential election results.

Both cases were dropped after Trump won his second presidency in November, according to a long-standing policy that the department does not prosecute sitting presidents.

Durbin slams Patel support of Jan. 6 defendants

Sen. Dick Durbin, the top Democrat on the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, said Thursday morning that his Republican colleagues are "willfully ignoring myriad red flags about Mr. Patel."

Durbin, of Illinois, led the morning remarks outside the Washington, D.C., FBI headquarters at the J. Edgar Hoover Building.

The committee's ranking member criticized Patel's support for those who broke into the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, many of whom violently attacked law enforcement.

"I was there that day on January 6, as many of my colleagues standing here (were) with me. Those insurrectionists are not political prisoners. They were rioters on a mission from Donald Trump," Durbin said.

Trump granted clemency to all of the nearly 1,600 Jan. 6 defendants on his first night in office, with little pushback from Senate Republicans.

The Trump administration has forced out FBI agents and Department of Justice prosecutors who worked on Jan. 6 cases, according to the Wall Street Journal.

Durbin alleged in a Feb. 11 letter that he obtained "highly credible information from multiple sources that Kash Patel has been personally directing the ongoing purge of career civil servants at the Federal Bureau of Investigation."

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, who spoke alongside Durbin and five other Democratic members of the Senate Judiciary panel, accused Patel of being a "sycophantic suck-up."

"Kash Patel, mark my words, will cause evil in this building behind us, and Republicans who vote for him will rue that day," Whitehouse said.

The White House did not respond to a request for comment on the criticism by Collins, Murkowski and Senate Democrats of Patel.

Patel's background

During Trump's first administration, Patel served as deputy assistant to the president and senior director for counterterrorism at the National Security Council, and as a senior adviser to Trump's director of national intelligence, Rick Grenell. Patel briefly served as the chief of staff to the acting defense secretary from November 2020 to January 2021.

Prior to joining Trump's White House, Patel worked as a national security adviser on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence from March 2018 to January 2019 and as senior counsel for the committee in the months prior.

Patel was a trial attorney with the Department of Justice National Security Division from 2014 to 2017 during former President Barack Obama's second term in office.

Patel began his career as a public defender in Miami, Florida.

He received his law degree from Pace University Law School in 2005. He is from Garden City, New York.

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

D.C. court temporarily halts deportation of asylum-seekers in immigration lawsuit

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA - FEBRUARY 20, 2025 2:58 PM

WASHINGTON — Immigrant advocacy groups on Thursday succeeded in a request to a District of Columbia federal judge to temporarily block the Trump administration from deporting their clients, potentially within hours.

The names of the plaintiffs are being withheld for safety reasons granted by the court, but they include a family of four with two children who fled Afghanistan from the Taliban; two women from Ecuador who were sexually assaulted and fear they will be killed; another woman from Brazil who would face domestic violence or death; and a man who was jailed and tortured in Egypt for his pro-democracy views.

One of the women from Ecuador already has been deported, the Department of Justice confirmed in a Thursday emergency hearing.

According to an emergency motion from the American Civil Liberties Union seeking to keep her in the United States, she "fled Ecuador to escape horrific violence and kidnapping by her former partner — a police officer who called her anti-indigenous slurs while raping her, beating her, and holding his gun to her head — and fears that he will kill her if she is removed."

The clients are part of a lawsuit against President Donald Trump's executive order that effectively bars asylum claims in the United States. U.S. asylum law was established by Congress in 1980 to allow people fleeing to have refuge if they have a credible fear of persecution.

It's the first major legal challenge against the executive order that deems an "invasion" at the southern border as the reason for pausing U.S. asylum law, despite some of the lowest numbers of encounters and unauthorized crossings in years at the U.S.-Mexico border.

The decision by Judge Randolph Moss to grant an administrative stay will freeze the legal proceedings in District of Columbia District Court until Monday afternoon. That will give the Justice Department and the immigrant rights groups time to determine whether the D.C. court has the legal jurisdiction to halt the removals.

The suit was brought as a class action by 13 immigrants without legal status affected by the order and three immigrant rights organizations — the Refugee and Immigrant Center for Education and Legal Services, Las Americas Immigrant Advocacy Center, and Florence Immigrant & Refugee Rights Project.

The ACLU is representing them.

In addition to the executive order, the Trump administration has also shut down the use of the CBP One

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App, one of the few pathways asylum-seekers could use to make appointments to lodge their asylum claims. The ACLU argues that the executive order circumvents asylum law established by Congress.

Birthright citizenship, other suits

Immigration rights groups have levied a slew of lawsuits against the Trump administration since the start of the president's second term.

As part of Trump's campaign promise to enact mass deportations, he directed the Department of Defense to begin transporting migrants detained in the U.S. to the naval base in Guantanamo Bay. That has already resulted in a lawsuit over "the government's attempt to thwart access to counsel for immigrant detainees," according to a complaint brought by immigrant rights advocates.

While Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said that only the "worst of the worst" would be housed on the base, the Department of Justice in a Thursday response to the lawsuit noted that 51 out of the 178 migrants were "low-threat."

Additionally, four nationwide injunctions have been placed against Trump's executive order to end birthright citizenship.

A panel of judges on the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals late Wednesday rejected the Department of Justice's request to lift one of those injunctions placed by a Washington state judge. It could be one of the first birthright citizenship challenges to head to the conservative-dominated U.S. Supreme Court, where Trump has appointed a third of the justices.

And a lawsuit filed by a group of Temporary Protected Status holders Thursday is challenging Noem's decisions regarding TPS for roughly 600,000 Venezuelans, citing a violation of administrative procedures.

The suit contends Noem's decision to end that protected status was "motivated at least in part by racial animus," which violates equal protection under the Fifth Amendment.

Asylum case

Among the 13 plaintiffs in the District of Columbia asylum case, the ACLU argued that eight could be removed as soon as Thursday night.

However, Lee Gelernt, the lead ACLU attorney, said he believed one of the plaintiffs was already on a deportation flight, which is why lawyers filed for the emergency temporary restraining order. ACLU has also filed for a preliminary injunction against the executive order.

"We don't see why the government would not allow these eight plaintiffs to remain" in the United States until the outcome of the case, Gelernt said during Thursday's emergency hearing before Moss, who was appointed by former President Barack Obama in 2014.

A judge can intervene in a deportation based on a removal order, but it's unclear to the ACLU and the Justice Department what the status of removal is for the plaintiffs in the suit.

If they are under expedited removal, a deportation in federal court generally cannot be challenged, because jurisdiction is stripped in the process. But if they are under a removal order, a judge can intervene.

Brian Ward, senior counsel from the Department of Justice, said the Trump administration would need time to figure out the removal orders for the plaintiffs in the case and questioned the legal jurisdiction of the D.C. court in preventing removals.

Gelernt argued that even if the status of removal is expedited, the D.C. court has in the past issued stays in such cases.

"These Individual Plaintiffs are noncitizens who fled persecution and torture in their countries of origin and seek asylum and other protection in the United States," according to the emergency motion from the ACLU. "They are currently detained by Defendants in the United States and could be imminently removed under the unlawful Proclamation challenged in this suit."

Temporary Protected Status

The National TPS Alliance, which is a member-led organization of TPS holders across the country, includ-

ing those from Venezuela, brought the case against Noem in U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California.

TPS is granted to nationals who hail from a country that is deemed too dangerous to return to due to violence, disaster or other unstable circumstances.

The Trump administration on Jan. 19, 2021, issued 18-month deportation protections for Venezuelans — known as Deferred Enforcement Departure, or DED — citing the country's unstable government under President Nicolás Maduro.

"Through force and fraud, the Maduro regime is responsible for the worst humanitarian crisis in the Western Hemisphere in recent memory," according to the Jan. 19, 2021 memo. "A catastrophic economic crisis and shortages of basic goods and medicine have forced about five million Venezuelans to flee the country, often under dangerous conditions."

After the DED designation, the Biden administration issued TPS designation for Venezuelans later in 2021, and again in 2023, creating two groups of TPS holders from the same country.

The suit challenges Noem's decision to revoke an 18-month extension of TPS for 600,000 Venezuelans that was granted under the Biden administration in January and would have lasted until October 2026.

The suit also challenges Noem's decision to end TPS for the 2023 group of Venezuelans — about 350,000 of the 600,000 — leaving them with protections that expire in April and could subject them to deportation.

In her reasoning for ending TPS status, she cited gang activity. Those with TPS need to pass a background check and holders can have their status revoked and deported if they commit a serious crime.

The suit argues that "Secretary Noem, President Trump, and members of the Trump campaign and administration have made to attack and marginalize nonwhite immigrants generally, and the Venezuelan TPS community in particular."

"That is clear from statements the Secretary made when announcing the decisions themselves, labeling Venezuelan TPS holders as 'dirtbags'—an expression of racism made by the official decision maker as part of her explanation for the decision," according to the suit.

The second group of TPS holders from Venezuela, about 250,000, have TPS protections until Sept. 10 and Noem has until July 12 to decide if she will renew those protections.

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

U.S. Senate panel on party-line vote approves McMahon's nomination as Education secretary

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA - FEBRUARY 20, 2025 11:27 AM

WASHINGTON — Linda McMahon got a step closer in her bid to serve as the next U.S. secretary of Education after a Senate panel on Thursday propelled her nomination to the full Senate.

The wealthy donor and former World Wrestling Entertainment executive breezed through a vote in the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions to advance her nomination — 12-11, along party lines.

Though President Donald Trump tapped McMahon to lead the 45-year-old department, he said he wants the nominee "to put herself out of a job" and could soon issue an executive order that diminishes the agency.

At her confirmation hearing before the Senate panel last week, McMahon clarified that, if confirmed, she would work with Congress "to reorient the department toward helping educators, not controlling them."

McMahon is likely to be confirmed in the GOP-controlled Senate.

She served as co-chair of Trump's transition team, led the Small Business Administration during his first White House term and is the chair of the board of the America First Policy Institute — a Trump-loyal think tank.

Meanwhile, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, along with 85 education and civil rights groups, called on members of the panel to reject McMahon's nomination in a Wednesday letter.

"All parents and students in this country — a majority of whom are people of color or are low-income — want the best education, support, and dignity for their own children," the groups wrote.

"We are with them and cannot support a nominee who has demonstrated that she seeks to undermine bedrock American principles of equal opportunity, nondiscrimination, and public education itself."

If confirmed, McMahon would be pivotal to carrying out Trump's sweeping education agenda, which has already kick-started in the month since he took office.

He's signed several education-related executive orders that include: banning transgender athletes from competing in women's school sports teams consistent with their gender identity; prioritizing school choice funding; ending what the administration sees as "radical indoctrination in K-12 schooling"; and taking "additional measures to combat anti-semitism."

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

GOP-led lawsuit that could dismantle disability protections draws public backlash

Advocates say the suit over transgender protections imperils federal safeguards for people with disabilities

BY: ANNA CLAIRE VOLLERS, STATELINE - FEBRUARY 20, 2025 8:48 AM

A push by Republican attorneys general in 17 states — including South Dakota — to strike down part of a federal law that protects disabled people from discrimination has prompted an outcry from advocates, parents and some local officials.

The GOP-led lawsuit targets certain protections for transgender people. But some experts warn it has the potential to weaken federal protections for all people with disabilities.

Texas GOP Attorney General Ken Paxton sued the federal government in September over the Biden administration's addition of a gender identity-related disorder to the disabilities protected under a section of a 1973 federal law.

Republican attorneys general from 16 other states joined the lawsuit: Alaska, Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, South Carolina, South Dakota, Utah and West Virginia.

But the AGs face a growing public backlash that stems from conflicting messages about what the lawsuit would actually do.

"The disability community is outraged and scared," said Charlotte Cravins, a Baton Rouge, Louisiana, attorney whose 1-year-old son has Down syndrome and is blind in one eye.

Cravins and other parents and advocates point to parts of the lawsuit in which the plaintiffs ask the court to find an entire section of the law unconstitutional. If the court agrees, they think it would allow schools, workplaces, hospitals and other entities to refuse to provide accommodations they've been required to provide for the past 50 years.

"It would affect so many people that every person in our state — really, in our country — should be concerned," Cravins said. "If they can erase protections for disabled children, then who's next?"

The provision in question, Section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, prohibits entities that receive federal funding from discriminating based on disability. For example, the law prohibits hospitals from denying organ transplants to people because they have a disability. It requires schools to allow deaf students to use speech-to-text technology. The law covers a wide range of disabilities, including vision and hearing impairments, autism, diabetes, Down syndrome, dyslexia and ADHD.

Last May, the Biden administration issued a rule that added to the covered disabilities "gender dysphoria,"

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the psychological distress that people may experience when their gender identity doesn't match their sex assigned at birth. Gender dysphoria is defined in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders.

In recent days, national disability rights groups — including the American Council of the Blind, the National Down Syndrome Society, the National Association of the Deaf and the Disability Rights Education and Defense Fund — have encouraged the public to speak out, sparking a surge of activity on social media and calls to state lawmakers.

Jackley and other AGs respond

Despite the public backlash, some state AGs are digging in their heels.

South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley issued a news release Feb. 14 defending the lawsuit, and then another news release five days later reiterating his defense.

"It is unfortunate that the Biden Administration tried to force boys into girls' bathrooms and locker rooms through Section 504 and disability funding," Jackley said. "Both the Attorneys General, through this lawsuit, and President Trump, through his executive order, are putting a stop to this. This lawsuit is not stopping needed funding for disabled children and their parents, and Texas has made that clear."

Georgia Republican Attorney General Chris Carr also insists the lawsuit wouldn't affect existing disability protections. Instead, he said, it merely aims to reverse the Biden administration's addition of gender dysphoria to the law's protected disabilities.

"The constitutionality of 504 was never in question," Carr said in a statement to Stateline. "We are fighting one woke policy added by Biden for virtue signaling."

He said most Georgians don't believe gender dysphoria should be treated as an eligible disability "as if it's the same as Down syndrome or dyslexia or autism."

Arkansas Republican Attorney General Tim Griffin issued a statement last week claiming that if the states win the lawsuit, "regulations would go back to what they were" before gender dysphoria was added to the law. He said that a ruling declaring Section 504 unconstitutional would only mean the federal government couldn't revoke funding over a failure to comply with the part of the law protecting gender dysphoria.

But Erwin Chemerinsky, a constitutional law expert and the dean of the UC Berkeley School of Law, wrote in an email that the lawsuit clearly asks the court to declare the entirety of Section 504 unconstitutional. He called the request "truly stunning."

The lawsuit is currently on hold. Shortly after President Donald Trump took office on Jan. 20, the parties in the case agreed to pause litigation while the new administration reevaluates the federal government's position. Status reports are due to a judge later this month. Some of the AGs involved in the lawsuit, including Georgia's Carr and West Virginia Republican Attorney General J.B. McCuskey, have said they expect the Trump administration to reverse the Biden rule. That could cause the AGs' lawsuit to be dropped.

Meanwhile, as public pressure escalates, some AGs are distancing themselves from the suit.

South Carolina Republican Attorney General Alan Wilson said in a statement last week that Trump's Jan. 20 executive order stating that "it is the policy of the United States to recognize two sexes, male and female" resolved his concerns. "Our mission is complete," Wilson said. Some advocates understood his statement to mean he might withdraw South Carolina from the lawsuit.

However, a spokesperson for his office told Stateline that South Carolina would not be withdrawing from the lawsuit, but would be filing a notice with the court this week to clarify that the state is not asking for Section 504 to be declared unconstitutional.

Utah Republican Attorney General Derek Brown said in a statement that Utah joined the lawsuit before he took office and that he doesn't think Section 504 will be invalidated because "the Trump administration will soon withdraw the regulation" that added gender dysphoria to the list of disabilities.

The AGs argue that established federal law does not consider gender identity disorders to be disabilities. They say allowing the Biden rule to remain in place would let the government withhold federal funding from schools unless they allow transgender students to compete in sports or use locker rooms that match

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their gender identity.

Grassroots efforts

Cravins, the Louisiana attorney and mother, sent a letter this week to Louisiana Republican Attorney General Liz Murrill, asking her to drop Louisiana from the lawsuit.

Murrill issued a statement Wednesday expressing support for people with disabilities and saying her office is "actively seeking a resolution with the Trump administration" to withdraw the Biden rule while keeping the law's previous protections intact.

Cravins said her son depends on Section 504 protections to access specialized therapies, and will rely on those protections even more as he approaches school age. Section 504 will help ensure he receives access to vision-related support, therapy and other accommodations in school.

Cravins believes the AGs that signed onto the lawsuit aren't being honest about its potential impact to protections for all people with disabilities.

"For them to say one thing and the lawsuit to say another, I can't imagine it's anything other than them being disingenuous with their constituents," she said.

Ryan Renaud, a school board representative for one of the largest public school districts in Alabama, said a concerned parent who also is an attorney contacted him last week, after reading a story about Alabama Republican Attorney General Steve Marshall joining the lawsuit. More calls soon followed.

"We've been hearing from dozens of parents in the last couple of days," Renaud told Stateline. Without Section 504 protections, he said, students could lose access to a wide range of accommodations, from classroom aides to extra time to take tests.

The impacts could extend beyond what most people think of when they think of special education, he said.

"This includes students with ADHD, heart disease, depression, visual impairment, diabetes," Renaud said. "Accommodations that come with those health concerns also fall under 504 plan protection.

"When a student doesn't have those accommodations, they become less secure in class and teachers are less able to manage their classrooms."

He's also worried that the funding from the U.S. Department of Education that helps pay for those accommodations could vanish if federal law no longer requires them. Trump has vowed to dismantle the agency.

"We spend on average \$30 million a year or more on special education, and more than a quarter of that is provided by the federal government," he said. "If [accommodations] aren't federally protected and the Department of Education doesn't have the authority to disburse the funds, we have to assume we'd have to pick up that slack through local or state funding.

"And it's hard to believe Alabama would cough up tens or hundreds of millions of dollars to supplement these costs."

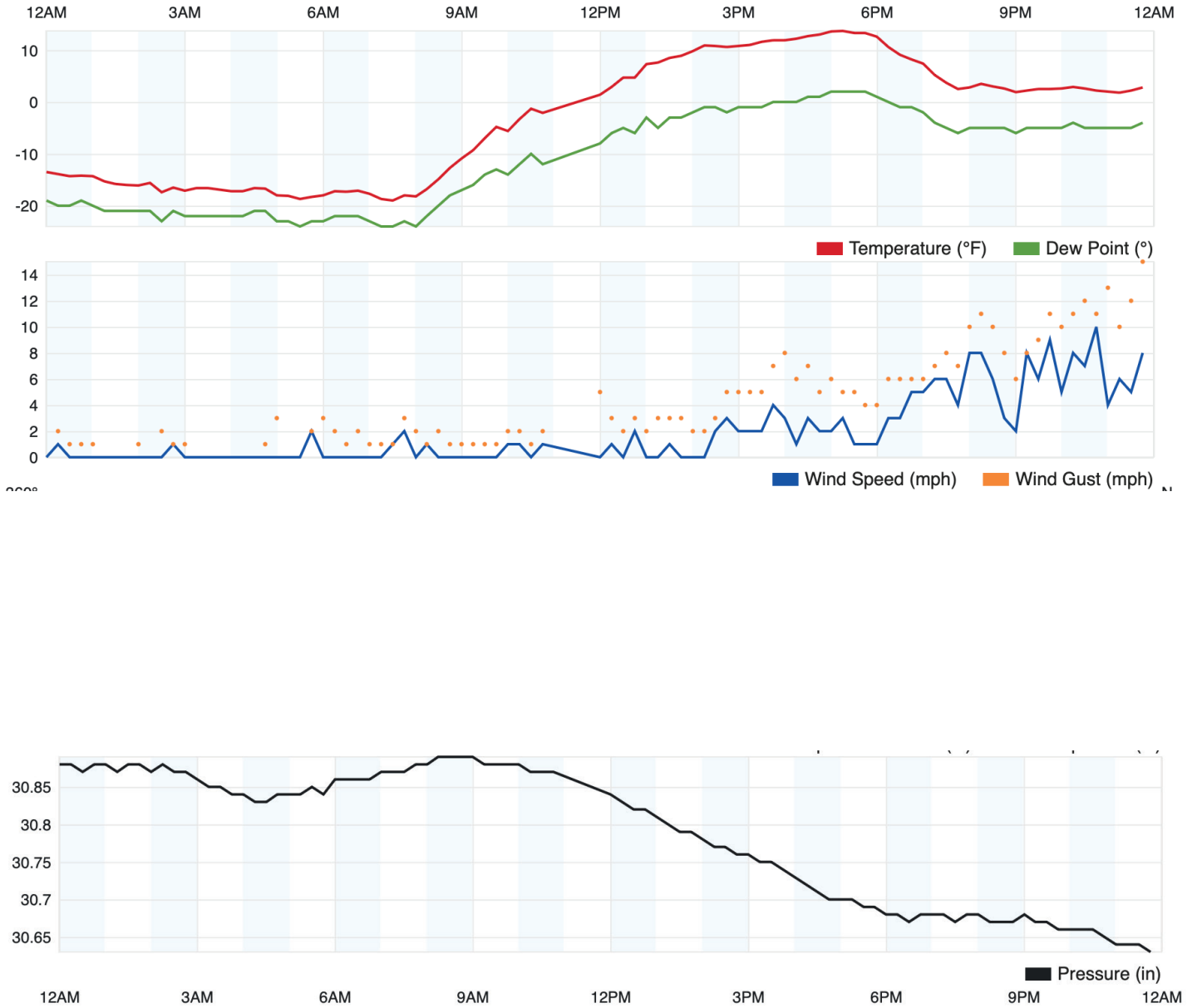
Last year, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 1.6 million students with disabilities were served under Section 504 nationwide during the 2020-2021 school year.

Anna Claire Vollers covers health care for Stateline. She is based in Huntsville, Alabama.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



High: 28 °F

Sunny

Tonight



Low: 7 °F

Partly Cloudy

Saturday



High: 41 °F

Mostly Sunny

Saturday Night



Low: 20 °F

Partly Cloudy

Sunday






High: 52 °F

Partly Sunny

 February 21, 2025
2:13 AM

Weather Whiplash - Mild Temperatures Next Several Days

Today	Saturday	Sunday
		
Highs: 22 to 36°F	Highs: 35 to 49°F Lows: 8 to 16°F	Highs: 42 to 60°F Lows: 17 to 28°F
Southwest Winds 25-35 mph Sisseton Hills	Light West Wind 10-20 mph	West Wind 20-35 mph
Warmest Temps Across Central SD	Warmest Temps Across Central SD	Warmest Temps Across Central SD

With the Arctic air relenting, and milder air incoming, we'll be looking at some weather whiplash with over a 50 degree temperature swing when we compare the last several days. Dry conditions will also dominate through the weekend.

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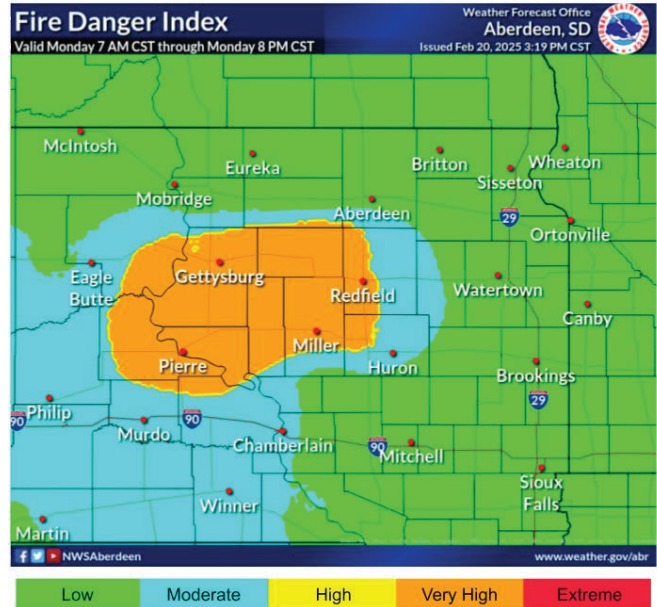


Possible Fire Weather Concerns Monday

February 20, 2025
3:44 PM

Key Messages

- Very High Fire Danger Monday afternoon west of the James River.
- The combination of wind gusts above 25 mph and daytime humidity of 35% or lower may cause fires to spread rapidly.



National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
U.S. Department of Commerce

National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

From our Fire Danger Index, there is currently a Very High Fire Danger for areas west of the James River Monday afternoon. The combination of wind gusts above 25mph and daytime humidity of 35% or lower may cause fires to spread rapidly.

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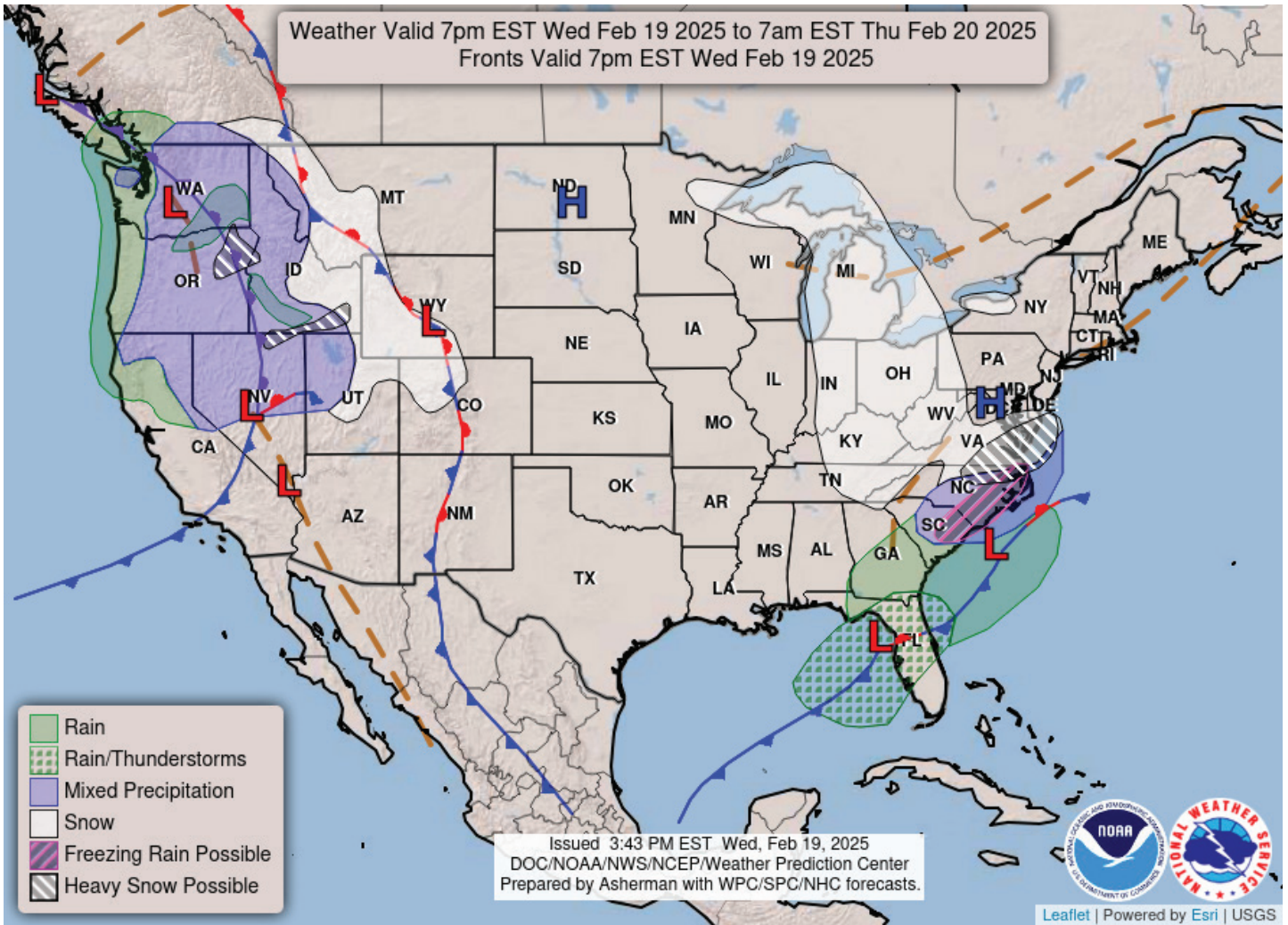
Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 14 °F at 5:07 PM
Low Temp: -19 °F at 7:30 AM
Wind: 13 mph at 10:52 PM
Precip: : 0.00

Day length: 10 hours, 45 minutes

Today's Info

Record High: 61 in 1930
Record Low: --30 in 1918
Average High: 30
Average Low: 8
Average Precip in Feb.: 0.42
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.20
Average Precip to date: 0.97
Precip Year to Date: 0.20
Sunset Tonight: 6:08:35 pm
Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:21:48 am



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Today in Weather History

February 21, 1918: Due to Chinook winds, a warm-up of 83 degrees in just 12 hours occurred in Granville, North Dakota. The temperature soared from an early morning low of 33 degrees below zero to an afternoon temperature of 50.

The image below is the Cooperative Observers' Meteorological Record for Granville, North Dakota, during February 1918. The highest temperature for the month was 50 degrees, and the lowest was 33 below zero. Both occurred on the same day!

February 21, 1969: Heavy snow and winds of 15 to 25 mph caused blowing and drifting snow, which closed many roads. Snowfall amounts of 5 to 12 inches were typical across eastern South Dakota from the 20th to the 22nd. Some snowfall amounts included 5 inches at Clear Lake and Brookings, 6 inches at Wilmot, 7 inches at Milbank, Redfield, and Mitchell, 8 inches at Conde, and 9 inches at Webster, Sioux Falls, and Huron.

1935: Frequent dust storms occurred in eastern Colorado during the month, forcing schools to close and people to stay indoors. A fatality happened on this date when two section cars collided on the railroad near Arriba Colorado due to poor visibility.

1971: A tornado outbreak struck portions of the Lower Mississippi River Valley and the Southeastern United States on February 21–22nd. The two-day tornado outbreak produced at least 19 tornadoes, probably several more, primarily brief events in rural areas, and killed 123 people across three states. The tornadoes "virtually leveled" entire communities in the state of Mississippi.

In Mississippi, the storms killed 107 people, injured 1,060, and hospitalized 454 others. On March 23, 1971, the Mississippi Civil Defense Council estimated 17 million dollars in property damages. In addition, 131,308 individuals received disaster service from the Salvation Army in nine areas. As of 1971, in terms of fatalities, the outbreak produced the fourth-highest number of deaths in Mississippi from tornadoes on one day. The top five tornado events include 317 deaths on May 7, 1840, in Natchez, 216 deaths on April 5, 1936, in Tupelo, 160 deaths on April 20, 1920, in the northeast and east-central Mississippi, 107 deaths from the Mississippi Delta outbreak on February 21, 1971, and 100 deaths on April 24, 1908, in Lamar to Wayne Counties.

Aerial surveys showed that most storm reports from various sources fit into three main tracks. The surveys also found three principal tornadoes contributed to over 300 miles of tornado track, varying in width from 1/4 miles to more than 1/2 mile. One track extended 159 miles as a continuous storm, beginning southwest of Cary, passing west of Belzoni, Greenwood, and Oxford, with the tornado lifting near Abbeville. After passing over Abbeville, the tornado redeveloped to the southwest of Bethlehem in Marshall County and continued northeast to Selmer, Tennessee. Another tornado first developed near Delhi, Louisiana, and continued 102 miles to near Schlater, Mississippi. The tornado struck the towns of Delta City, Inverness, and Moorhead. A third major storm began south-southwest of Bovina, passed through Little Yazoo, and ended near Lexington for a path length of 69 miles. Although much shorter, about eight miles, a fourth track extended from north of Drew to near Rome.

The three significant tornadoes traveled at speeds of 50 to 60 mph. The speed was determined from a selected set of more reliable checks at various locations. All the death occurred along these three tornado tracks. Between 11:56 am and 9:00 pm, the Jackson, Mississippi River radar showed hook echoes in 28 observations. Some of the hooks were as far away as 90 miles. At one time, as many as four hook echoes were observed on the radar.

The Mississippi State Department of Education indicates more than \$1.2 million in damages to schools and their contents. At nine canteen sites established by the Salvation Army, there were 94,337 food servings through March 8, 1971. The Mississippi Power and Light Company reported its most significant wind damage in company history. A total of 68 115,000 volt transmission line structures were downed at 14 different locations, with damage that exceeded \$290,000, with about 50 percent in Humphrey County and 40 percent in Sharkey County. The South Central Bell Telephone Company's losses exceeded \$300,000. They lost 4,600 telephones, 3,250 long-distance circuits were affected, and 205 telephone poles were

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destroyed. Ten exchanges were on emergency power. The American Telephone and Telegraph Long Lines department lost its microwave tower adjacent to Benton, and 1,800 circuits were affected.

At Inverness, at about 4:40 pm, a powerful tornado destroyed 90 percent of the small business district, and 75 percent of the homes were damaged. The storm caused 21 fatalities. Officials noted 153 homes destroyed, 52 had major damage, and 90 received minor damage. The businesses destroyed or damaged in Inverness totaled 61, and farm buildings destroyed was 30. In and near Inverness reports that some people sought shelter from the oncoming tornado by getting in bathtubs, curling up in mattresses, and crawling into haystacks. The tornado was reported to have struck for about 2 minutes, and all electrical powerlines, telephone, and water lines were destroyed. A man who resides on the north edge of Inverness told the newspaper, "At first, just before the storm, it was very quiet and calm...Then I heard (the tornado) for about 3 minutes before I saw it. It was a big funnel cloud..." The Indianola newspaper noted that along the path of the tornado, there was "lots of debris, that is visible on cropland, especially warped tin and larger pieces of lumber."

A tornado struck south-southwest of Bovina at about 5:06 pm and, during a 3-mile track, killed a man and his wife. A man to the south of Bovina "went out on the porch and looked down the road and saw the storm coming.: It was a "half mile down the road." There was "an unnatural calm" just ahead of the storm. "We could hear it coming through and could see lumber and debris flying in the air. It was yellow in the center."

A tornado struck Holmes County at about 6:10 pm. The Lexington newspaper noted, "A tornado touch down in the southwest corner of Holmes County in the Bronzville community. The damage in the Brozville area was not extremely heavy but caused extensive damage to barns, chicken houses, sheds, and a few homes." The tornado apparently lifted afterward and rose above Lexington as the storm continued to the northeast.

Another tornado crossed Yalobusha County from 5:53 pm to 6:23 pm. The cooperative weather observer at Water Valley wrote, "The damaged area, Cascilla (Tallahatchie County) to Tillatoba (Yalobusha County) was about 200 yards wide, but as it moved across Yalobusha County, it began to narrow and tip along, just bumping here and there." As the tornado crossed Highway 315, four miles northeast at the north end of the Yacona River bridge, it was no more than 150 feet wide. The timbered Yacona River bottom areas had roofing material, wallpaper, and insulation from least as far away as Tillatoba. The winds carried many items for some distances. A report was received that checks and/or portions of checks from the Bank of Anguilla, Sharkey County, were found in Panola County, around 140 miles away.

2013: An astonishing 515 cm (202.8" or almost 17') level of snow depth was measured at Sukayu Onsen, Aomori on Honshu Island in Japan, on February 21, 2013, the deepest snow measured at an official weather site in Japan records. (Last Updated in 2020).



SHOULD IT BE FAITH OR FEELINGS?

Two best friends were walking home from church. It was a time for laughing and shoulder-nudging. Tim's Mom looked on approvingly as they enjoyed each other's company.

Suddenly, Tim caught Alex off-guard – looking in the wrong direction. To his left was a huge mud-puddle. Into the mud went Alex after a two-handed push from Tim.

"Why in the world did you do that, Tim?" asked his mother.

"Well," came his reply after a moment's thought, "the devil tricked me!"

"How?" she wondered. After all, they were walking home from church.

"Well," Tim said after thinking for a moment, "when the devil told me to do it, it felt so good I thought it was the Lord talking to me."

Scripture, Paul reminds us, is not only inspired by God, but was given to us to teach us "what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. It straightens us out and teaches us to do what is right!"

Feelings come and go but they are not facts that we can safely build our lives upon. There are times when our feelings encourage us to do what is right and avoid doing what is wrong. But there are many times when our feelings and emotions are distorted by temptations and could lead us in the wrong direction. That's why God gave us clearly defined directions to follow.

Prayer: Give us a faith, Lord, that is strong enough to take You at Your Word and follow You every day of our lives. May we accept and follow Your guidance. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realize what is wrong in our lives. 2 Timothy 3:16

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: 02.18.25

1 20 25 58 61 22

MegaPlier: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$165,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 6 Mins 5 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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3 22 23 35 41 2

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$24,470,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 21 Mins 5 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.20.25

15 39 40 42 47 7

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 36 Mins 5 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

6 9 16 27 30

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$41,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 36 Mins 5 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

15 21 34 43 60 23

TOP PRIZE:

\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 5 Mins 5 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS: 02.19.25

6 21 28 49 60 20

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

\$215,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 5 Mins 5 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

Thursday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Andes Central/Dakota Christian 58, Kimball-White Lake 40
Canistota 45, Irene-Wakonda 39
Centerville 63, Chester 51
Custer 74, Lead-Deadwood 51
Deubrook 57, Elkton-Lake Benton 42
Deuel 57, Aberdeen Roncalli 53
Edgemont 67, Takini 46
Florence-Henry 61, Sisseton 47
Freeman 62, Gayville-Volin High School 29
Freeman Academy-Marion 56, Scotland/Menno 55
Hamlin 69, Clark-Willow Lake 47
Hanson 78, Canton 69
Harding County 82, Hulett, Wyo. 52
Harrisburg 52, Brandon Valley 39
Ipswich 71, Potter County 45
Lemmon High School 61, Bison 45
Lennox 64, Tri-Valley 57
Lower Brule 74, Dupree 62
Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud 50, Hot Springs 48
Marty 67, White River 58
Parkston 93, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 52
Pine Ridge 84, Todd County 68
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 65, Iroquois-Lake Preston 48
Sioux Falls Christian 82, Sioux Center, Iowa 41
Sioux Valley 69, Garretson 44
Spearfish 50, Douglas 48
Sturgis Brown High School 85, Rapid City Central 81, OT
Sully Buttes 57, Faulkton 55
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 60, Ethan 58
Viborg-Hurley 56, Howard 40
Wall 93, Philip 62
Waubay/Summit 57, Great Plains Lutheran 47
Waverly-South Shore 48, Britton-Hecla 34
Wilmot 73, Flandreau Indian 43
Wolsey-Wessington 72, Hitchcock-Tulare 41

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 58, Deuel 24
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 45, Kimball-White Lake 38
Bennett County 69, Kadoka 59
Bridgewater-Emery 77, Flandreau Indian 34
Britton-Hecla 40, Waverly-South Shore 34
Burke 62, Gregory 31

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Canton 51, Hanson 43
Castlewood 62, Estelline-Hendricks 37
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 71, Timber Lake 63
Custer 80, Lead-Deadwood 30
Deubrook 48, Elkton-Lake Benton 27
Edgemont 60, Takini 24
Ethan 68, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 16
Faith 44, New Underwood 26
Faulkton 57, Sully Buttes 29
Freeman 53, Gayville-Volin High School 51
Great Plains Lutheran 55, Waubay/Summit 18
Hamlin 79, Clark-Willow Lake 59
Harding County 71, Philip 39
Hitchcock-Tulare 44, Wolsley-Wessington 36
Irene-Wakonda 37, Canistota 32
Lakota Tech 82, Crow Creek Tribal School 22
Lemmon High School 77, McIntosh High School 37
Lyman 38, Jones County 34
Mahpiya Luta Red Cloud 94, Hot Springs 10
Marshall, Minn. 78, Sioux Falls Jefferson 43
Marty 69, St. Francis Indian 62
McCook Central-Montrose 66, Madison 21
McLaughlin 52, Tiospaye Topa 45
Milbank 64, Webster 34
Miller 68, Highmore-Harrold 48
Mobridge-Pollock 67, Stanley County 25
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 58, Parkston 48
North Central 33, Leola-Frederick High School 29
Northwestern 47, Herreid-Selby 41
Potter County 42, Ipswich 38
Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 54, Iroquois-Lake Preston 24
Scotland/Menno 39, Freeman Academy-Marion 28
Sioux Falls Christian 74, Yankton 25
Sioux Valley 64, Garretson 18
Sisseton 63, Florence-Henry 37
Spearfish 59, Douglas 26
Sturgis Brown High School 50, Rapid City Central 41
Sunshine Bible Academy 34, Colome 16
Tri-Valley 41, Lennox 36
Viborg-Hurley 56, Howard 45
West Central 58, Flandreau 48
POSTPONEMENTS AND CANCELLATIONS=
Little Wound vs. Crazy Horse, ccd.

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

Pope marks a week in hospital with pneumonia as the obvious question is asked: Might he resign?

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis marked the one-week point Friday in his hospital stay, getting up and out of bed to eat breakfast as the 88-year-old pontiff continued fighting pneumonia and a complex respiratory infection, the Vatican said.

The Vatican late Thursday reported a "slight improvement" in his overall clinical condition, with his heart working well. But it will still take some time to understand if the various drug therapies are working, and outside doctors have said that regardless, recovery from pneumonia in such a fragile patient could take up to two weeks.

According to the one-line morning bulletin Friday, "The night went well, this morning Pope Francis got up and had breakfast."

Francis was admitted to Rome's Gemelli hospital on Feb. 14 after a case of bronchitis worsened; doctors later diagnosed a complex respiratory infection, involving bacteria, virus and other organisms and the onset of pneumonia in both lungs on top of asthmatic bronchitis. They prescribed "absolute rest."

As his hospital stay drags on, some of Francis' cardinals have begun responding to the obvious question circulating: whether Francis might resign if he becomes irreversibly sick and unable to carry on. Francis has said he would consider it, after Pope Benedict XVI "opened the door" to popes retiring, but has shown no signs of stepping down and in fact has asserted recently that the job of pope is for life.

But the question is now in the air, ever since Benedict became the first pope in 600 years to retire when he concluded in 2013 that he didn't have the physical strength to carry on the rigors of the globe-trotting papacy.

"Everything is possible," said Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline, the archbishop of Marseille, France, when asked Thursday.

Another cardinal, Gianfranco Ravasi, suggested it was more than just a possibility.

"There is no question that if he (Francis) was in a situation where his ability to have direct contact (with people) as he likes to do ... was compromised, then I think he might decide to resign," Ravasi was quoted as telling RTL 102.5 radio.

Francis confirmed in 2022 that, shortly after being elected pontiff, he wrote a resignation letter in case medical problems impeded him from carrying out his duties. There is no provision in canon law for what to do if a pope becomes incapacitated.

But there is no indication Francis is in any way incapacitated or is even considering stepping aside. During his hospital stay, he has continued to work, including making bishop appointments. After a hospital stay in 2021, he bristled when he learned that some clergy were allegedly already preparing for a conclave to elect his successor.

Francis had an acute case of pneumonia in 2023 and is prone to respiratory infections in winter.

Doctors say pneumonia in such a fragile, elderly patient makes him particularly prone to complications given the difficulty in being able to effectively expel fluid from his lungs. While his heart is strong, Francis isn't a particularly healthy 88-year-old. He is overweight, isn't physically active, uses a wheelchair because of bad knees, had part of one lung removed as a young man, and has admitted to being a not-terribly-cooperative patient in the past.

Francis has had two longer hospital stays during his nearly 12-year pontificate. He spent 10 days at Gemelli in 2021 when he had 33 centimeters (13 inches) of his colon removed. In 2023, he was admitted for nine days for surgery to remove intestinal scar tissue and repair an abdominal hernia.

As he recovers this time around, the Catholic faithful have been participating in special moments of prayer.

In the Philippines, Asia's largest Catholic nation, Filipino worshippers held an hourlong prayer at the Manila Cathedral on Friday for the pope's rapid recovery. Other Catholics were urged to pray in their homes and communities for the pontiff, who drew a record crowd of 6 million people when he celebrated Mass in a Manila park in 2015, according to official estimates at the time.

"The Philippines has a place very close to his heart," said the Vatican's ambassador to Manila, Archbishop Charles John Brown.

Middle East latest: Netanyahu says body Hamas released was that of a woman from Gaza, not a hostage

By The Associated Press undefined

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says a body that Hamas militants released during the handover of remains of Israeli hostages is that of a woman from Gaza instead of that of Shiri Bibas, the mother of two young boys whose bodies were returned on Thursday.

In a statement released Friday, Netanyahu criticized the handover of the wrong remains as a "cruel and malicious violation" of the ceasefire agreement, which has halted fighting in the Gaza Strip, and said Hamas would "pay the full price" for the action.

Hamas militants turned over four bodies on Thursday under the tenuous ceasefire, which has paused over 15 months of war. Israeli confirmed one body was that of Oded Lifshitz, who was 83 when he was abducted during the Hamas attack on Israel that started the war on Oct. 7, 2023.

The remains of Shiri Bibas' two young sons, Ariel and Kfir Bibas, were positively identified, the Israeli Defense Forces said, but added the fourth body was not that of their mother, nor of any other hostage.

"We will work with determination to bring Shiri home together with all our hostages — both living and dead — and ensure that Hamas pays the full price for this cruel and malicious violation of the agreement," Netanyahu said.

"The sacred memory of Oded Lifshitz and Ariel and Kfir Bibas will be forever enshrined in the heart of the nation. May God avenge their blood. And so we will avenge," he added.

Here's the latest:

Hamas says it has no interest in withholding any bodies

CAIRO — Hamas says it will "conduct a thorough review" of Israeli claims that a body it handed over Thursday as part of a ceasefire deal was not that of Israeli hostage Shiri Bibas.

The group insisted it has adhered to all terms of the deal and "has no interest in withholding any bodies in its possession."

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed revenge for what he described as a "cruel and malicious violation" of the ceasefire agreement after forensic tests showed one of four bodies handed over as part of the ceasefire was of an unidentified Palestinian woman instead of Bibas. The other three remains were identified as those of Bibas' two young sons, and of Oded Lifshitz, who was 83 when he was abducted.

"We have demonstrated full compliance with the agreement in recent days and remain committed to all its terms," Hamas said.

Hamas suggested that a possible mix-up of remains may have occurred due to Israeli bombardment of the location where Bibas and her sons Kfir and Ariel were being held and where Palestinians were present. The militants have long maintained the mother and her children were killed in Israeli bombing.

"We reject Netanyahu's threats, which serve only to manipulate Israeli public opinion," Hamas said, calling on mediators to ensure the continued implementation of the ceasefire. The group also called for the return of the unidentified remains, which Israel has said is that of a Palestinian woman.

Connor McDavid scores in OT to give Canada 3-2 win over United States in 4 Nations Face-Off final

By JIMMY GOLEN AP Sports Writer

BOSTON (AP) — When they played "O Canada" for the second time, there were no American fans left in the arena to boo.

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Instead, the Canadian team stood at the blue line, arm in arm, player and coach, wearing their championship hats while the maple leaf flag was lowered behind the 4 Nations Face-Off trophy and the national anthem reverberated across the Americans' home ice. The fans who remained, many of them in their red Team Canada jerseys, sang along.

Connor McDavid scored at 8:18 of overtime to give Canada a 3-2 victory over the United States on Thursday night as the North American rivals turned what had been a tune-up for the 2026 Olympics into a geopolitical brawl over anthems and annexation as much as international hockey supremacy.

Or, to put it another way: It was the 51st U.S. state 3, Canada's 11th province 2.

"You can't take our country — and you can't take our game," Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau posted on X in a cross-border callback to President Donald Trump's chatter about turning one of the United States' closest allies into the 51st state.

"A lot of stuff going on with Canada and the USA right now, and us playing against each other was kind of a perfect storm for our sport," said Nathan MacKinnon, who was selected the MVP of the new tournament with four goals in four games. "It was much more popular than even we would have imagined. It was getting so much attention from our whole continent."

Jordan Binnington stopped 31 shots — including the last 20 in a row — on the same ice where he helped the St. Louis Blues win the Stanley Cup as a rookie five years ago. MacKinnon and Sam Bennett also scored for Canada, which made it 2-2 in the second period and then played a scoreless third.

After a flurry of saves by Binnington early in the overtime, Canada gained a faceoff in the U.S. zone and Mitch Marner got the puck along the boards before popping it into the center to McDavid for the winner. The Canadians poured over the boards to celebrate, shook hands with the vanquished Americans, and then took turns skating with the never-before-awarded trophy.

"Just to see the reaction. Just to know what it means to us. I know it's just a quick tournament, and it's not an Olympic gold medal or anything like that, but it means the world to our group, as you can see," McDavid said.

"I hope (the new fans) love it," he said. "It's a great game, it's a great sport and I hope we put on a good show these last couple days and gained some fans, ultimately. You can't ask for a better show than that."

Brady Tkachuk and Jake Sanderson scored for the Americans, and Connor Hellebuyck stopped 22 shots in regulation and three more in OT. The U.S. has lost all but one game against Canada in best-on-best international play dating to the preliminaries of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics; the lone victory was in the 4 Nations round-robin, a game so good it turned Thursday's sequel into one of the most anticipated international hockey events in decades.

"I think guys that are at home watching this, I'm hoping they're wanting a piece of it," U.S. forward Dylan Larkin said. "This grew the game really well, but I hope it pushes guys to want a piece of this and then the next generation that got to watch this, they're going to watch the Olympics next year and hopefully there's a different outcome."

The already ripe rivalry between the two North American hockey powers took on an added intensity during the tournament following Trump's tariff threats and talk of making Canada the 51st U.S. state. Trump called the American team Thursday morning to wish it well, then turned to Truth Social to take a poke at "Governor Trudeau."

The political backdrop combined with the quality of the round-robin game, which the United States won 3-1 on Saturday, to bring the atmosphere of a Stanley Cup Final or Olympic gold medal game to the TD Garden.

Fans in their team jerseys waved flags, shouted for their countrymen and continued the ritual booing of the opposing national anthem that has become a nightly undercard for a tournament that returned the NHL's stars to the international scene after missing the last two Winter Games.

The pregame hype video was a callback to the 1980 Olympics, when the undermanned U.S. team upset the powerful Soviet machine in the midst of the Cold War. "Miracle on Ice" Olympic hero and honorary U.S. captain Mike Eruzione wore a Johnny Gaudreau jersey to honor the memory of former Boston Col-

lege and Calgary Flames star who was killed by a drunk driver while bicycling in New Jersey at his sister's wedding last summer.

The American fans chanted "Johnny Hockey!" to spur their team on, and broke into frequent cheers of "U-S-A! U-S-A!" — just like in Lake Placid.

But this time it was the team in red that came away with the win.

"We wanted this one," Canada forward Mark Stone said. "You've got 40 million Canadians, sitting at home, and you feel the energy. Anytime you have the chance to play for our country, or the flag on our chest, it's a special, special feeling. ... It brings us together. And just glad we got to get this one."

Senate Republicans approve budget framework, pushing past Democratic objections after all-night vote

By LISA MASCARO, KEVIN FREKING and MATT BROWN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican senators pushed a \$340 billion budget framework to passage early Friday, chugging through an all-night session and Democratic opposition in a step toward unleashing money the Trump administration says it needs for mass deportations and border security that top their agenda.

The hours-long "vote-a-rama" rambled along in a dreaded but crucial part of the budget process, as senators considered one amendment after another, largely from Democrats trying to halt it. But Republicans used their majority power to muscle the package to approval on a largely party-line vote, 52-48, with all Democrats and one GOP senator opposing it.

"What we're doing today is jumpstarting a process that will allow the Republican Party to meet President Trump's immigration agenda," Senate Budget Committee chair Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., said while opening the debate.

Graham said President Donald Trump's top immigration czar, Tom Homan, told senators that the administration's deportation operations are "out of money" and need more funding from Congress to detain and deport immigrants.

With little power in the minority to stop the onslaught, Democrats instead used the all-night debate to force GOP senators into potentially embarrassing votes — including the first one, on blocking tax breaks to billionaires. It was turned back on procedural grounds. So were many others.

"This is going to be a long, drawn-out fight," Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer of New York warned. Hours later, Schumer said it "was only the beginning" of what could become a months-long debate.

The package is what Republicans view as a down payment on Trump's agenda, part of a broader effort that will eventually include legislation to extend some \$4.5 trillion in tax breaks and other priorities. That's being assembled by House Speaker Mike Johnson in a separate budget package that also seeks up to \$2 trillion in reductions to health care and other programs.

Trump has preferred what he calls one "big, beautiful bill," but the White House is open to the Senate's strategy of working on the border package first, then turning to tax cuts later this year.

As voting began, the president signaled his go-ahead, posting a thank you to Senate Majority Leader John Thune "and the Republican Senate, for working so hard on funding the Trump Border Agenda."

Republican Sen. Rand Paul of Kentucky cast the lone GOP vote against the framework.

What's in the Senate GOP package

The Republican Senate package would allow up to \$175 billion to be spent on border security, including money for mass deportation operations and building the U.S.-Mexico border wall, in addition to a \$150 billion boost to the Pentagon and about \$20 billion for the Coast Guard.

But there won't be any money flowing just yet, as the process has several steps ahead. The budget resolution is simply a framework that sends instructions to the various Senate committees — Homeland Security, Armed Services, Judiciary — to hammer out the details. Everything will eventually be assembled in another package, with another vote-a-rama down the road.

Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., the No. 2-ranking Senate Republican, said GOP lawmakers are acting quickly to get the administration the resources they have requested and need to curb illegal border crossings.

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"The budget will allow us to finish the wall. It also takes the steps we need toward more border agents," Barrasso said. "It means more detention beds. ... It means more deportation flights."

Republicans insist the whole thing will be paid for, rather than piled onto debt, with potential spending cuts and new revenues.

The committees are expected to consider rolling back the Biden administration's methane emissions fee, which was approved by Democrats as part of climate change strategies in the Inflation Reduction Act, and hoping to draw new revenue from energy leases as they aim to spur domestic energy production.

One amendment that was accepted after several hours of debate was actually a Republican effort to fend off criticism that the package would be paid for by cutting safety net programs. The amendment from Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, said Medicaid and Medicare would be strengthened during the budget process.

Democrats brought a slew of amendments

First up from Democrats was a vote to prevent tax breaks for billionaires — an amendment that was repeated in various forms throughout the night.

Democrats argue that the GOP tax cuts approved in 2017 flowed to the wealthiest Americans, and extending them as Trump wants Congress to do later this year would prolong the giveaway. Even though the billionaire amendments failed, they picked up some Republican support. Sen. Susan Collins of Maine voted for several of them, and Sen. Josh Hawley of Missouri voted for another.

Schumer launched a strategy earlier this week to use the budget debate to focus on both the implications of the tax policy and the Trump administration's Department of Government Efficiency, which is slashing across the federal government.

It's a better approach for Democrats than arguing against tougher border security and deportations, which divides the party.

All told, senators processed almost three dozen amendments on reversing DOGE cuts, protecting federal workers from being fired, ensuring U.S. support for Ukraine as it battles Russia and others.

Sen. Patty Murray of Washington, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee, said the single biggest driver of the national debt since 2001 has been a series of Republican-led tax cuts.

"And you'll never guess what our Republican colleagues on the other side of the aisle are focused on right now, nothing to lower the cost of eggs, it's actually more Republican tax cuts," Murray said.

She called the budget plan a "roadmap for painful cuts to programs families count on each and every day, all so they can give billionaires more tax cuts."

Congress is racing itself

The budget resolution is setting up what's called the reconciliation process, which used to be rare, but is now the tool often used to pass big bills on party-line votes when one party has control of the White House and Congress, as Republicans do now.

But Republicans are arguing with themselves over how to proceed. The House is marching ahead on its "big, beautiful bill," believing they have one chance to get it right. The Senate views its two-bill strategy as more practical, delivering on border security first, then turning to taxes later.

Budget rules allow for passage by a simple majority vote, which is key in the Senate, where it typically takes 60 votes to break a filibuster on big items. During Trump's first term, Republicans used the reconciliation process to pass GOP tax cuts in 2017. Democrats used reconciliation during Joe Biden's presidency to approve COVID-19 relief and the Inflation Reduction Act.

Trump appears to be stirring the fight, pitting Republicans in the House and Senate against each other to see which one delivers fastest.

French street artist Shuck One pays tribute to Black history at Pompidou Center in Paris

By SYLVIE CORBET and NICOLAS GARRIGA Associated Press

PARIS (AP) — French street artist Shuck One is honoring Black figures who shaped France's recent history on the mainland and overseas, in an art installation being produced for an exhibition starting next

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month at the Pompidou Center in Paris.

Shuck One is a Black graffiti and visual artist native of the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe, which is a French overseas department. He is participating in the "Black Paris" exhibition, which retraces the presence and influence of Black artists in France from the 1950s to 2000.

The Pompidou Center, one of the world's top modern art museums, said that it will celebrate 150 artists of African descent, from Africa to the Americas, whose works have often never been displayed in France before.

Shuck One is one of five artists chosen to provide contemporary insights.

"I wanted to invoke the memory of the Black figures who created the 'Black Paris' and who, in a way, were pioneers before us in artistic, intellectual and other fields," Shuck One told The Associated Press. "It's a way for me to honor them."

Activist and artist

Describing himself as "an activist who became an artist," Shuck One grew up in the 1970s in Guadeloupe. After he arrived in Paris in the 1980s, he was considered one of the pioneers of French street art and graffiti — inspired by figures of the Négritude movement that denounced colonialism, racism and Eurocentrism.

His installation, titled "Regeneration," is four meters (13 feet) high and 10 meters (33 feet) long. It shows major moments of Black history through paintings and collages of maps of Paris, archives and photos.

The starting point of the installation is the "Tirailleurs Sénégalais," a corps of colonial infantry in the French army that fought in both World Wars.

One highlight is the May 1967 riots in Guadeloupe that led to the massacre of possibly dozens of people — figures are still being questioned by historians. Another feature is the BUMIDOM, a French state agency that between 1963 and 1981 organized the migration of 170,000 people from French overseas departments to the mainland for economic purposes, now considered by historians a symbol of post-colonial domination and discrimination.

Portraits of Black figures

It also shows portraits of Black figures, including politicians, writers, civil rights activists and other pioneers.

They include U.S.-born entertainer and civil rights activist Joséphine Baker; Aimé Césaire, poet and founder of the Négritude movement; and American political activist Angela Davis.

But there are also less known names like writer and activist Paulette Nardal; Eugénie Eboué, the first Black woman elected to France's National Assembly and Gerty Archimède, the second to be elected shortly after; and Maryse Condé, a novelist from Guadeloupe.

"The overall message of the exhibition is ... to revive these forgotten figures, but also a next-generation aspect, a way to pass their history on," Shuck One said as he carefully studied the elaborate collage of photos and archive documents on a big wall of the exhibition.

"It's also a way of making people understand what's activism is about — (it's) very well to talk about the community, but it's also important to know its history," he said.

The exhibition, which runs from March 19-June 30, is one of the last at the Pompidou Center before it shuts down later this year for renovations, which are due to last five years.

How Trump's mass layoffs raise the risk of wildfires in the US West, according to fired workers

By MARTHA BELLISLE and CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

SEATTLE (AP) — The termination letters that ended the careers of thousands of U.S. Forest Service employees mean fewer people and less resources will be available to help prevent and fight wildfires, raising the specter of even more destructive blazes across the American West, fired workers and officials said.

The Forest Service firings — on the heels of deadly blazes that ripped through Los Angeles last month — are part of a wave of federal worker layoffs, as President Donald Trump's cost-cutting measures reverberate nationwide.

Workers who maintained trails, removed combustible debris from forests, supported firefighters and

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secured funds for wildfire mitigation say staffing cuts threaten public safety, especially in the West, where drier and hotter conditions linked to climate change have increased the intensity of wildfires.

"I'm terrified of that," said Tanya Torst, who was fired from her position as a U.S. Forest Service partnership coordinator in Chico, California, on Feb. 14. Torst, whose probationary period was set to end in March, worked with groups to bring in nearly \$12 million for removing dead trees and other fuels in the Mendocino National Forest.

"This is 100% a safety thing," she said of her concerns, recalling the deadly Paradise blaze that killed 85 people east of Chico in 2018. "That's why I'm speaking out."

The U.S. Department of Agriculture, which oversees the Forest Service, said in a statement that Secretary Brooke Rollins supports Trump's directive to fire about 2,000 "probationary, non-firefighting employees," which he said was for efficiency's sake. Rollins is committed to "preserving essential safety positions and will ensure that critical services remain uninterrupted," the statement said.

The statement didn't address the fired workers who were responsible for removing combustible fuels and other projects aiming to lower a wildfire's intensity.

The Trump administration has frozen funds for wildfire prevention programs supported by legislation championed by former President Joe Biden, The Associated Press reported. Programs not funded by that legislation can continue, an Interior Department statement said.

U.S. Rep. Kim Schrier, a Washington state Democrat, said on the social platform X that the Forest Service layoffs are already hurting the state, "and it is only going to get worse. Fire season is coming."

The Washington state Department of Natural Resources said the firings forced them to develop contingency plans to deal with a "degraded federal force this coming fire season."

Melanie Mattox Green, who was fired from her land management and environmental planning job at the Helena-Lewis and Clark National Forest in Montana, said their fire-prevention efforts prioritized areas where towns border forest lands. Staffing cuts put those towns at risk, she said.

"If a fire breaks out now without these projects occurring, that fire is going to be far more dangerous to our local communities," she said.

The cuts also mean fewer people will keep trails free of fallen trees and other debris, she said. Maintaining trails is critical in remote areas that firefighters access by foot.

"Without those trails being cleared, it means that now firefighters cannot easily and more effectively get to these fires to fight them," she said.

Many Forest Service workers who don't occupy official firefighter positions still have firefighting certifications, known as a "red card," that must be renewed annually. Josh Vega, who maintained 1,100 miles (1,770 kilometers) of trails as a forestry technician in the Bob Marshall Wilderness in Montana before being fired, said his crew was the first to arrive at a wildfire that broke out in 2023.

For about two days, Vega's crew monitored the blaze before firefighters arrived. "We spent the next few days keeping an eye on the fire, making sure that the trailheads were all closed and that the public knew what was happening so that they wouldn't find themselves in a predicament."

Many Forest Service operations involve supporting firefighters beyond fire season, including surveying areas for prescribed burns or ensuring trail access, said Luke Tobin, who was fired from his forestry technician role in Idaho's Nez Perce National Forest.

"Everybody helps with fire in some aspect, some way, shape or form," he said.

Gregg Bafundo, who was fired last week from his post as a wilderness ranger and wildland firefighter at the Okanogan Wenatchee National Forest, said the staffing cuts came at a critical time.

"This is the time of year when they hire everybody," he said during a press conference organized by Washington Sen. Patty Murray. "It's the time of year when firefighters renew their red cards and practice redeploying their fire shelters. This is when they train to be ready to fight next summer's fires.

"We can't train while the fire is burning over the hill." ____

Rush reported from Portland, Oregon.

How LA wildfires are making an already tough rental market even worse

By JANIE HAR and DAMIAN DOVARGANES Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The one-bedroom cottage with a woodsy vibe reminded Heather McAlpine of the home she lost to the brutal Los Angeles-area wildfires. But only two hours after seeing the listing, the rental was snapped up.

She is one of tens of thousands of people displaced by the fires who is now competing for housing in a region that is among the most expensive and competitive in the country, partly due to lack of supply.

McAlpine, had lived in her Altadena house for four years and is now staying with her boyfriend. She isn't surprised by spiking rents.

"I know they're expensive, and it sucks," she said.

Tenants who were just getting by before the fires now face a daunting housing search after the January fires leveled entire neighborhoods. The LA fires destroyed more than 16,000 homes, businesses and other structures in upscale Pacific Palisades and working-class Altadena, where the U.S. Census reports 22% of homes were occupied by renters.

It's hard to quantify exactly how the wildfires are affecting the rental market, but LA rents rose faster than prices nationwide in January compared to the previous month, according to housing platform Zillow.

The added competition from residents displaced by the fires is likely to worsen housing affordability, increase overcrowding and contribute to homelessness, says Sarah Karlinsky, research director at the Turner Center for Housing Innovation at the University of California, Berkeley. Already, more than half of all renter households — or a little over 1 million households — in LA County spend 30% or more of their income on rent.

Shane Phillips, housing initiative project manager at the UCLA Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, expects prices to increase significantly for months, if not a few years.

"There's only so many people moving at any given time, and suddenly adding another 20,000 households to that amount is just an extraordinary pressure," he said.

Rental pageviews in LA County on the real estate platform Redfin are up 50% from a year ago, said Daryl Fairweather, the company's chief economist.

She said people will feel the impact of "shorter supply, more fierce competition for rentals."

Egregious rents cropped up soon after the fires broke out, prompting an ad-hoc group of tenant organizers, web programmers and others to crowdsource examples. The Rent Brigade found more than 1,300 examples of illegal rent increases advertised between Jan. 7 and Jan. 18. Many have since been removed or relisted at lower prices.

California Attorney General Rob Bonta has warned repeatedly of the state's anti-gouging laws, which limits price increases to no more than 10% from whatever the price was before the emergency. His office has so far filed three misdemeanor criminal price-gouging charges.

A 10% cap is still too high for Wendy Dlakic. She was paying about \$3,000 a month for a now uninhabitable two-bedroom condo in Altadena, a community she loved. She's searched rental websites, but for now is staying with friends, family and at Airbnbs.

"It was already expensive," said Dlakic, an educator who moved to Southern California two years ago. "It's tough to be in LA on one income. You're right on the edge, you know?"

The "typical rent" in the U.S. was \$1,968 as of Jan. 31 — up 0.2% from the previous month, according to Zillow. But in the LA metro area, the typical rent was up 0.8% to \$2,954. Zillow calculates the typical rent figure by averaging the middle 30% of rents.

Daniel Yukelson, executive director of the Apartment Association of Greater Los Angeles, says fears of rent-gouging have been overblown by tenant advocates and he's angry that Bonta has filed criminal charges.

"Some mistakes were unknowingly made," he said. "If these infractions were pointed out to these few owners, corrections would have surely been made immediately,"

McAlpine, the displaced tenant, realized the Eaton Fire was coming for her in-law unit while she was

helping to evacuate neighbors as a Altadena Mountain Rescue Team volunteer. She scooped up her cat, ski gear and camera equipment and fled the 300-square-foot (28-square-meter) cottage.

She's grateful for donations through GoFundMe, which will help with essentials, but is worried about finding a standalone unit close to nature and within her monthly budget of \$1,800 for rent and utilities.

The cottage that McAlpine, a photographer, and her boyfriend wanted was listed for \$2,750 a month. Even though they have a bigger budget together, the hunt has been dispiriting.

"I'm quickly looking for the photos. 'Oh, does this look sketchy or not?' Or, 'you know, is this the right price?'" she said. "It's just very different from how I would normally look for a place to live."

Israel identifies remains of child hostages but says another body from Hamas was not their mother

By MELANIE LIDMAN, JOSEF FEDERMAN AND WAFAA SHURAFU Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel (AP) — The Israeli military said Friday it had positively identified the remains of two young hostages but another body released by Hamas under a ceasefire deal was not the boys' mother as the militant group had promised.

The revelation was a shocking twist in the saga surrounding the Bibas family, who have become global symbols of the plight of Israeli hostages held by Hamas, and threw the future of the fragile ceasefire into question.

"This is a violation of utmost severity by the Hamas terrorist organization," the army said in a statement.

During the monthlong ceasefire, Hamas has been releasing living hostages in exchange hundreds of Palestinian prisoners. Thursday's release marked the first time the group has returned the remains of dead hostages.

Early in the day, Hamas had turned over four bodies to the Red Cross. Israel quickly confirmed one body was that of Oded Lifshitz, who was 83 when he was abducted during the Hamas attack that started the war on Oct. 7, 2023.

Hamas had said the other remains belonged to Shiri Bibas, and her two young boys, Ariel and Kfir. In an overnight announcement, the army said Israel's National Institute of Forensic Medicine had identified the boys, but the final set of remains did not belong to their mother. It said the remains did not match any other hostage either.

"This is an anonymous, unidentified body," it said. "We demand that Hamas return Shiri home along with all our hostages."

It said the army had notified their family, including Yarden Bibas, Shiri's husband and father of the two boys, who was released early this month as part of the ceasefire deal.

Hamas has claimed all four of the hostages returned Thursday were killed in Israeli airstrikes. But Israel said the testing had found the two boys and Lifshitz were killed by their captors.

Hamas did not immediately respond to Israel's announcement that the body was not of the boys' mother.

A top U.S. official issued a stark warning for Hamas after the Israeli military said the militant group released an "anonymous" body and not that of a slain Israeli hostage.

Speaking to CNN, U.S. envoy Adam Bohler called the Hamas decision to reportedly release the wrong body "horrific" and a "clear violation" of the ceasefire halting fighting in the Gaza Strip

"If I were them, I'd release everybody or they are going to face total annihilation," said Bohler, who serves as the U.S. envoy for hostages.

It is now unclear whether the next scheduled swap, set for Saturday, will take place. It also is not clear whether the truce, which halted 15 months of fighting, will be extended when the current phase expires in early March.

In another potential blow to the deal, a series of explosions Thursday on three parked buses rattled central Israel.

There were no injuries and no claim of responsibility. But the Israeli military said in response it was beef-

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ing up its forces in the West Bank, raising the likelihood of further escalation in the area. Israel has been carrying out a broad military offensive in the occupied territory since the ceasefire took effect.

Outpouring of grief

The return of the remains Thursday had set off a nationwide outpouring of grief as flag-waving crowds lined highways on a rainy day to pay their respects to a convoy carrying the coffins and thousands packed a Tel Aviv square in an emotional nighttime vigil.

Many people wiped away tears and softly sang the national anthem as the caravan wound through southern Israel — a stark contrast to the celebratory return of 24 living hostages in recent weeks under the tenuous ceasefire.

The handover was a grim reminder of those who died in captivity.

Militants who handed over the bodies displayed four black coffins on a stage in the Gaza Strip surrounded by banners, including one depicting Netanyahu as a vampire. On each coffin, a photo of one of the hostages was stapled to the side.

Large numbers of masked and armed militants looked on as the coffins were loaded onto Red Cross vehicles before being driven to Israeli forces. The military later held a small funeral ceremony, at the request of the families, before transferring the bodies to the forensics lab for DNA testing.

In Tel Aviv where the bodies were transported, a double rainbow unfolded across the sky just before sunset. Thousands of people gathered at the city's Hostage Square and recited traditional mourning prayers. Some held orange balloons, in honor of the red-headed Bibas boys, and the crowd swelled after sundown as musicians performed subdued ballads, matching the nation's grief.

"Our hearts — the hearts of an entire nation — lie in tatters," Israeli President Isaac Herzog said. "On behalf of the State of Israel, I bow my head and ask for forgiveness. Forgiveness for not protecting you on that terrible day. Forgiveness for not bringing you home safely."

Lifshitz's son, Yizhar, said the identification of his father had brought some closure to the family and would allow them to bury him on his kibbutz.

Infant was the youngest taken hostage

Kfir Bibas, who was 9 months old at the time, was a red-headed infant with a toothless smile when militants stormed the family's home on Oct. 7, 2023. His brother, Ariel, was 4. Video from that day showed a terrified Shiri swaddling the boys as militants led them into Gaza.

Her husband, Yarden Bibas, was held separately before his release.

Relatives in Israel had clung to hope, marking the boys' birthdays. The Bibas family said it was waiting for official identification before acknowledging that their loved ones were dead.

A cousin of Shiri Bibas who lives in Buenos Aires, told the local Radio Con Vos station she has been reliving the trauma of the abduction. Romina Miasnik said she hoped her loved ones "can become a symbol of something new, of coexistence, of hatred no longer having a place."

Like the Bibas family, Oded Lifshitz was abducted from Kibbutz Nir Oz, along with his wife, Yocheved, who was freed early in the war as an apparent humanitarian gesture.

Hamas-led militants abducted 251 hostages, including about 30 children, in the Oct. 7 attack, in which they also killed around 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

Most of the hostages have been released or rescued, or their remains have been recovered. But Israel estimates 66 remain in captivity, roughly half of whom are still believed to be alive.

It's not clear if the ceasefire will last

Hamas is set to free six living hostages on Saturday in exchange for hundreds of Palestinian prisoners, and says it will release four more bodies next week, completing the first phase. That will leave the militants with about 60 hostages, all men and about half believed to be dead.

Hamas has said it won't release the remaining captives without a lasting ceasefire and a full Israeli withdrawal. Netanyahu, with the full backing of the Trump administration, says he's committed to destroying Hamas' military and governing capacities and returning all the hostages, goals widely seen as mutually exclusive.

Trump's proposal to remove about 2 million Palestinians from Gaza so the U.S. can own and rebuild it,

which has been welcomed by Netanyahu but universally rejected by Palestinians and Arab countries, has thrown the ceasefire into further doubt.

Hamas could be reluctant to free more hostages if it believes that the war will resume.

Israel's military offensive killed more than 48,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which doesn't distinguish between civilians and combatants. Israel says it has killed more than 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

The offensive destroyed vast areas of Gaza, reducing entire neighborhoods to rubble. At its height, the war displaced 90% of Gaza's population. Many have returned to their homes to find nothing left and no way of rebuilding.

No injuries from Israeli bus explosions in suspected militant attack, police say

By JOSEF FEDERMAN and OHAD ZWIGENBERG Associated Press

BAT YAM, Israel (AP) — A series of explosions Thursday on three parked buses has rattled central Israel in what authorities suspected was a militant attack. No injuries were reported.

The explosions happened on a day when Israel was already grieving after Hamas returned the bodies of four hostages from Gaza as part of a ceasefire deal. The bus explosions were reminiscent of bombings during the Palestinian uprising of the 2000s, but such attacks are now rare.

Explosives were found on two other buses but did not detonate, police spokesman Asi Aharoni told Channel 13 TV. Israeli police said the five bombs were identical and equipped with timers, and said bomb squads were defusing the unexploded bombs.

Investigators in white coveralls searched for evidence inside the burned-out metal shells of the buses, which blew up in a parking lot in Bat Yam, a city outside Tel Aviv.

The city's mayor, Tzvika Brot, said it was a miracle no one was hurt. The buses had been parked after finishing their routes, he said.

The head of the bus company said they immediately ordered all bus drivers to stop and conduct a "thorough inspection." They resumed their routes once they were found to be safe, Ofir Karni said.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's office said he was receiving updates from his military secretary and following the events. The Shin Bet internal security agency was taking over the investigation, police said.

"We need to determine if a single suspect placed explosives on a number of buses, or if there were multiple suspects," police spokesman Haim Sargrof told Israeli TV.

Sargrof said the explosives used Thursday matched explosives used in the West Bank, but he declined to elaborate.

Israel's military has repeatedly carried out raids on suspected Palestinian militants in the West Bank since Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack sparked the devastating war in Gaza. As part of that crackdown, Israel has greatly restricted entry into Israel for Palestinians from the occupied territory.

A group identifying itself as a branch of Hamas' military wing, the Qassam Brigades, from the northern West Bank city of Tulkarem, posted on the messaging app Telegram: "We will never forget to take vengeance for our martyrs as long as the occupation is on our lands." The group did not appear to claim responsibility for the attack.

Tulkarem and two refugee camps in the city have been a focus of Israel's broad military offensive in the West Bank since the ceasefire in Gaza took effect on Jan. 19.

The Israeli military said early Friday it had imposed restrictions on Palestinian movement and sealed off parts of in the West Bank amid its ongoing security operations there.

Brot, the mayor of Bat Yam, urged residents to stick with their routines but also stay vigilant, telling Channel 13 TV that schools will be open Friday and public transport will be operating.

A news conference between Zelenskyy and Trump's Ukraine envoy is canceled as tension rise

By JUSTIN SPIKE Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — A news conference that was planned to follow talks between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Donald Trump's Ukraine envoy was canceled Thursday as political tensions deepened between the two countries over how to end the almost three-year war with Russia.

The event was originally supposed to include comments to the media by Zelenskyy and retired U.S. Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, but it was changed at the last minute to a simple photo opportunity where the two posed for journalists. They did not deliver statements or field questions as expected. The change was requested by the U.S. side, Ukrainian presidential spokesman Serhii Nikiforov said.

Kellogg's trip to Kyiv coincided with recent feuding between Trump and Zelenskyy that has bruised their personal relations and cast further doubt on the future of U.S. support for Ukraine's war effort.

Dozens of journalists gathered at Ukraine's presidential office in Kyiv after being invited to take photos and observe a news conference with Zelenskyy and Kellogg. As the meeting began, photographers and video journalists were allowed into a room where the two men shook hands before sitting across from each other at a table.

Journalists were then informed that there would be no news conference with remarks by the leaders or questions from reporters. Nikiforov gave no reason for the sudden change except to say that it was in accordance with U.S. wishes.

The U.S. delegation made no comment. The White House did not respond to questions about why the news conference was called off.

Two leaders were to speak about ending the war

The two men were due to speak about Trump's efforts to end the war. Zelenskyy had previously said he looked forward to explaining what was happening in Ukraine and showing it to Kellogg.

Kellogg, one of the architects of a staunchly conservative policy book laying out an "America First" national security agenda, has long been Trump's top adviser on defense issues.

Writing on his Telegram channel, Zelenskyy said the meeting with Kellogg was a "good conversation, lots of details." He said they discussed security guarantees for Ukraine and the return of Ukrainian prisoners from Russian custody.

"We can and must make peace reliable and lasting so that Russia can never return with war again," he wrote. "Ukraine is ready for a strong, truly beneficial agreement with the President of the United States on investments and security."

Zelenskyy and Trump have traded rebukes in recent days.

The spat erupted after Russia and the U.S. agreed Tuesday to start working toward ending the war in Ukraine and improving their diplomatic and economic ties. With that, Trump abruptly reversed the three-year U.S. policy of isolating Russia.

Zelenskyy was unhappy that a U.S. team opened the talks without inviting him or European governments that have backed Kyiv.

When Trump claimed Zelenskyy was deeply unpopular in Ukraine, the Ukrainian president said Trump was living in a Russian-made "disinformation space," suggesting he had been duped by Putin.

Trump also accused Zelenskyy of being "a dictator without elections" and suggested that Ukraine was to blame for the war. Due to the fighting, Ukraine has delayed elections that were scheduled for April 2024.

Zelenskyy "retains a fairly high level of public trust" in Ukraine — about 57 percent — according to a report released Wednesday by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology.

White House sees obstacles to peace

White House national security adviser Mike Waltz said Trump's increasingly tough criticism of Zelenskyy reflected frustration with what the administration sees as roadblocks erected by the Ukrainian leader to finding an endgame to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

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"There needs to be a deep appreciation for what the American people and the American taxpayer, what President Trump did in his first term and what we've done since," Waltz said. "There's some of the rhetoric coming out of Kyiv, frankly, and insults to President Trump (that) were unacceptable."

Waltz also noted that Trump is frustrated that Zelenskyy rejected an offer presented last week by Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent that would have given the U.S. access to Ukrainian minerals as repayment for U.S. support during the war and future aid for Ukraine.

Russia's army crossed the border on Feb. 24, 2022, in an all-out invasion that Putin sought to justify by falsely saying it was needed to protect Russian-speaking civilians in eastern Ukraine and prevent the country from joining NATO.

On Wednesday, Trump warned Zelenskyy that he "better move fast" to negotiate an end to Russia's invasion or risk not having a nation to lead.

European leaders quickly threw support behind Zelenskyy

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, whose country has been Kyiv's second-biggest weapons supplier after the U.S., said it was "wrong and dangerous" to deny Zelenskyy's democratic legitimacy.

Ukraine has been defending itself for nearly three years against a merciless war of aggression — day after day," Scholz told news outlet Der Spiegel.

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer spoke to Zelenskyy on Wednesday and expressed support for him "as Ukraine's democratically elected leader," Starmer's office said, adding that it was "perfectly reasonable" to postpone elections during wartime.

Russian officials, meanwhile, are basking in Washington's attention and offering words of support for Trump's stance.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said "the rhetoric of Zelenskyy and many representatives of the Kyiv regime in general leaves much to be desired" — a veiled reference to Ukrainian criticism of Putin.

"Representatives of the Ukrainian regime, especially in recent months, often allow themselves to make statements about the heads of other states that are completely unacceptable," Peskov said in a conference call with reporters.

China hailed the developments in talks between the United States and Russia at a G20 foreign ministers meeting in Johannesburg.

During a Thursday speech, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said a "window for peace is opening" in Ukraine. "China supports all efforts committed to peace, including the recent consensus reached by the United States and Russia" Wang said, calling for dialogue towards "sustainable and lasting solutions that take into account each other's concerns."

Strikes on civilians

Amid the diplomatic clamor, Ukrainian civilians continue to endure Russian strikes. Russia fired 161 Shaded and decoy drones and up to 14 missiles of various types at Ukraine overnight from Wednesday to Thursday, according to military authorities.

A Russian glide bomb struck an apartment block in the southern city of Kherson on Wednesday night, killing one person and wounding six, including 14-year-old twins, authorities said.

The southern port city of Odesa also came under a Russian drone attack for the second consecutive night, leaving almost 50,000 homes without electricity in freezing winter temperatures, officials said.

Victor Wembanyama's season is over.

What's next for the Spurs star?

By TIM REYNOLDS AP Basketball Writer

Victor Wembanyama is one of the faces of the NBA, the star of the San Antonio Spurs and already one of the biggest names in basketball.

And his season is over, after the Spurs announced Thursday that he has been diagnosed with deep vein thrombosis in his right shoulder.

The 7-foot-3 center from France was averaging 24.3 points, 11 rebounds, 3.8 blocks and 3.7 assists this

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season. Since blocked shots became an official statistic, only Kareem Abdul-Jabbar — nearly a half-century ago — finished a season with those numbers or better.

Some questions and answers about Wembanyama's situation:

What is deep vein thrombosis?

By the Mayo Clinic's definition, deep vein thrombosis — or DVT — "occurs when a blood clot forms in one or more of the deep veins in the body, usually in the legs." The Spurs say Wembanyama was diagnosed with DVT in his right shoulder, and doctors will now work to determine how and why that happened before coming up with a plan for treatment.

Among the major risks of DVT: Clots breaking loose, traveling through the bloodstream and reaching the lungs. That does not appear to have happened to Wembanyama, at least based on the diagnosis the team provided Thursday.

How will Wembanyama be treated?

Doctors who spoke Thursday to The Associated Press — none of them involved in Wembanyama's treatment — said it's a virtual certainty that the French star will be prescribed blood-thinning medication to address the clot.

The longstanding thinking was that athletes who participate in contact sports like basketball should not play while on blood thinners, or anticoagulants, because of the risk of bleeding. However, an article published Thursday by the American College of Cardiology — hours before the news about Wembanyama broke — said playing "competitive sports may be reasonable for athletes receiving full anticoagulation or partial anticoagulation."

What does this mean for the Spurs?

In short, it's not good. The Spurs are not currently in the playoff picture and faced an uphill fight just to get into the play-in tournament — and now will have to finish the season without their best player.

San Antonio still has talent: Chris Paul, Harrison Barnes and newly acquired De'Aaron Fox are a formidable veteran trio. But everything is built around Wembanyama.

And the Spurs will be without their biggest star while also missing the franchise's leader. Coach Gregg Popovich had a stroke in November and has been away from the team for nearly the entire season.

What does this mean for the NBA?

The league's MVP for each of the last six years has been a player born somewhere other than the U.S. and that streak is likely to extend to seven this season — with Canada's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, the stellar Oklahoma City guard, and Serbia's Nikola Jokic, the three-time MVP from Denver, expected to be the favorites.

But it robs the league of one of its brightest stars for the stretch run.

Everything Wembanyama does is huge news in France and in San Antonio, and he's already one of the league's most popular players. If he and the Spurs had made a playoff run, his star would have only shined brighter.

Why can't he win an NBA award now?

The league is in its second year of what's commonly called the 65-game rule, which basically means a player has to appear in at least 65 games to be eligible for most end-of-season awards like MVP.

It also applies to defensive player of the year, which Wembanyama was favored to win. He has played in only 46 games, meaning he will not be on the NBA's ballot for that trophy when the voting is conducted in April.

Wembanyama won rookie of the year last season. If this situation happened then, he still could have won the rookie honor — that one doesn't fall under the 65-game-minimum policy.

The Latest: Judge declines to halt Trump administration's federal workers layoffs

By The Associated Press undefined

A federal judge on Thursday refused to temporarily block the Trump administration's mass layoff of federal workers while a lawsuit brought by five unions moves forward.

U.S. District Judge Christopher Cooper found the unions must bring their claims under federal employment law rather than in district court.

Earlier Thursday, the Senate voted to confirm Kash Patel as FBI director, a decision that places him atop the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency, despite concerns from Democrats over his qualifications and the prospect that he would do President Donald Trump's bidding.

Here's the latest:

Trump has ended his speech

Trump has returned to the White House after wrapping up his speech to the Republican Governors Association.

Trump jokes that Canada can keep 'O Canada' anthem as 51st US state

Trump mused once again about absorbing Canada as a 51st U.S. state, continuing the ribbing of the nation's northern neighbor that has infuriated many Canadians.

He noted that Canadians booed the U.S. national anthem ahead of an international hockey game in Montreal.

"I think ultimately they'll be praising the national anthem. We'll have to work out some deal ... because I do like the 'O Canada' all right," Trump said, referring to the Canadian national anthem. "It's a beautiful thing. I think we're going to have to keep it for the 51st state."

He went on to use the pejorative nickname he's adopted for Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

"I call him Governor Trudeau," Trump said. "I said, 'Governor Trudeau's doing a wonderful job.'"

Musk shows openness to auditing Federal Reserve

Musk suggested he was open to auditing the Federal Reserve and accused Democrats of "treason" as he drew cheers from activists gathered at the Conservative Political Action Conference outside Washington.

Musk spoke about his crusade to cut government spending and downsize the federal workforce with the administration's Department of Government Efficiency.

Musk slammed the Biden administration for its immigration policies, specifically naming an app that was used by nearly 1 million people to be allowed into the U.S. on two-year permits with eligibility to work. He accused Biden and Democrats of doing that as an "investment" to get more support in swing states.

"A lot of people don't quite appreciate that this was an actual real scam at scale to tilt the scales of democracy in America," Musk said before Newsmax host Rob Schmitt asked him, "Treason?"

Musk responded, "Treason."

When Schmitt asked him if he would consider auditing the Federal Reserve, Musk responded, "Yeah, sure, while we're at it."

"Waste is pretty much everywhere," Musk said.

Trump praises Republican Governors Association chairman

Trump went on to praise Georgia Gov. Brian Kemp, the RGA chairman who has had a complicated relationship with Trump.

The president was fiercely critical of Kemp for certifying his narrow loss in the 2020 election, which Trump falsely claimed was rigged.

The two reconciled before the 2024 election, and Kemp endorsed Trump.

"He was fantastic," Trump said of Kemp. "We won Georgia by a lot."

Trump begins speech to Republican governors

Trump is speaking to a meeting of the Republican Governors Association in Washington.

He took the stage to Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA," continuing his tradition from his campaign.

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"I want to get you home to the hockey game," Trump said to begin. The U.S. and Canadian national teams are playing Thursday evening.

The RGA is charged with recruiting candidates, raising money and coordinating strategy to help Republicans win gubernatorial races.

Trump meets with drug company executives as RFK Jr. settles in at HHS

Drug company executives and the head of PhRMA, their influential lobbying group, have met with Trump at the White House.

"We expressed our commitment to strengthening American leadership in biopharmaceutical innovation, revitalizing domestic manufacturing, and lowering costs for patients," Alex Schriver, PhRMA's vice president of public affairs, said in a statement.

Trump met with the group's president & CEO, Steve Uhl, and group board members.

The meeting comes as Trump's pick to lead the Department of Health and Human Services, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., takes control of the agency overseeing food and drug safety, Medicare and Medicaid, medical research, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Kennedy disputes the consensus among doctors and scientists that vaccines are safe and effective with a rare risk of complications that is outweighed by the benefits. He's been highly critical of the medical establishment and drug companies in particular.

What's in the Senate GOP budget package?

The Republican package would allow up to \$175 billion to be spent on border security, including money for mass deportations and building the U.S.-Mexico border wall. It includes a \$150 billion boost to the Pentagon and about \$20 billion for the Coast Guard.

But even if it's approved, there won't be any money flowing just yet.

The budget resolution is simply a framework that sends instructions to the various Senate committees — Homeland Security, Armed Services, Judiciary — to hammer out the details. Everything will eventually be assembled in another package with another vote-a-rama down the road.

Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, the No. 2-ranking Senate Republican, says GOP lawmakers are acting quickly to get the administration the resources it's requested and stressed the need to curb illegal border crossings.

The committees may decide to roll back the Biden administration's methane emissions fee, which was approved by Democrats as part of climate change strategies in the Inflation Reduction Act.

Senators ready to stay up all night for GOP budget

Senators are ready to stay up all night, launching a budget "vote-a-rama" — a crucial, if dreaded, step toward unleashing a \$340 billion package Trump's team says it needs for mass deportations and security measures atop the Republican agenda.

It's a start to a lengthy process between the Senate and the House, which is working on its own package, Trump's "big, beautiful bill" with some \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts and up to \$2 trillion reductions in health care and other programs.

Democrats, in the minority, don't have the power to stop anything but plan to force all-night amendment votes, starting with one prohibiting tax cuts for billionaires.

Trump administration is flouting an order to temporarily lift a foreign aid freeze, judge says

A federal judge says the Trump administration has kept withholding foreign aid despite a court order and must at least temporarily restore the funding to programs worldwide.

But Judge Amir H. Ali declined a request by nonprofit groups doing business with the U.S. Agency for International Development to find Trump administration officials in contempt of his order.

The Washington, D.C., district court judge says administration officials used his Feb. 13 order to temporarily lift the freeze on foreign aid to instead "come up with a new, post-hoc rationalization for the en masse suspension" of funding.

Ali says that USAID Deputy Secretary Pete Marocco, a Trump appointee, and other top officials have

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“continued their blanket suspension of funds.”

Kids’ disability rights cases stalled at Education Department

As Trump reshaped the Education Department, parents say action on kids’ disability rights cases ground to a halt.

Standing up for children with disabilities has been a primary role of the department, which enforces the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The freeze on pending cases and Trump’s calls to dismantle the department altogether left many parents worrying about the federal government’s commitment to disabled students.

After The Associated Press asked the Education Department for comment on this reporting, a spokesperson said the department ended the pause on reviews of disability complaints Thursday.

Trump administration throws out deportation protections for roughly half a million Haitians

The Trump administration is throwing out protections that shielded roughly half a million Haitians from deportation, meaning they would lose their work permits and could be eligible to be removed from the country by August.

The decision, announced Thursday, is part of a sweeping effort to carry out mass deportations and specifically to scale back the use of the Temporary Protected Status designation, which was widely expanded under the Biden administration to cover about 1 million immigrants.

The Department of Homeland Security says it is vacating a Biden administration decision to renew Temporary Protected Status — which gives people legal authority to be in the country but doesn’t provide a long-term path to citizenship — for Haitians.

Elon Musk brandishes chainsaw on stage at CPAC

Wearing his trademark black “Make America Great Again” hat, Musk began his appearance at the Conservative Political Action Conference by brandishing a chainsaw that was given to him by Argentine President Javier Milei.

The chainsaw was used by Milei during his 2023 presidential campaign to symbolize his proposals to shred the bloated Argentine state. Milei came on stage Thursday and passed the power tool to Musk.

The red chainsaw swung by Musk was engraved with Milei’s slogan, “Viva la libertad, carajo,” which is Spanish for “Long live liberty, damn it.”

Musk is spearheading Trump’s massive effort to cut spending and downsize the federal government.

Judge won’t immediately block Trump administration’s abrupt halt to Catholic refugee funding

A federal judge has refused to block the Trump administration’s abrupt halt to funding of the nation’s largest private refugee resettlement program in a setback to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Judge Trevor McFadden denied the bishops’ request for a temporary restraining order that would have restored the funding but called his ruling “very tentative.”

McFadden, who was appointed by President Donald Trump in 2017, also ordered the two sides to have mediation session with a federal magistrate judge next week.

“A temporary restraining order is an extraordinary remedy that should be granted sparingly,” he said.

The bishops are asking him to prohibit the U.S. State Department from enforcing a Jan. 24 suspension of millions of dollars in aid, saying it has affected nearly 7,000 newly arrived refugees.

With insults and bravado, Trump takes campaign messaging into White House

Trump won reelection months ago and is barred from seeking another term. You might not know it from official White House communications.

Trump and his team have continued the aggressive media strategy they honed during his campaign, using crass language, gleefully lashing out at critics and trolling mainstream news organizations.

The approach was on full display this week as White House communications director Steven Cheung used social media to mock an upcoming gathering of anti-Trump Republicans by calling it “the Cuck Convention” on his government account. The word, which describes a man who likes to watch his wife have sex with other men, was frequently used during the campaign to insult and emasculate rivals.

On Tuesday, the official White House account posted a video of shackled migrants being loaded onto planes, with the sounds of clanking chains and whirring jet engines in the background. The caption said

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"ASMR: Illegal Alien Deportation Flight."

ASMR stands for "autonomous sensory meridian response," a relaxing and pleasurable feeling some people experience from certain sights or sounds.

Trump "isn't afraid to defend his positions, and that's our goal with our messaging every day," said White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt.

Trump to make woman he pardoned for nonviolent drug offense his 'pardon czar'

Alice Marie Johnson was among the guests at a Black History Month reception at the White House.

Trump called out her name in his remarks and said he's going to bring her into the administration.

"She's going to be my pardon czar," he said.

What the role would entail is unclear. Trump has issued numerous pardons since taking office, including for those convicted of committing offenses during the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the Capitol, and most recently to former Illinois Gov. Rod Blagojevich.

Johnson had spent more than two decades serving life without parole for a nonviolent drug offense before Trump pardoned her in 2020.

Judge won't halt federal worker layoffs

A federal judge is refusing to temporarily block the Trump administration's mass layoff of federal workers while a lawsuit brought by five unions moves forward.

U.S. District Judge Christopher Cooper found the unions must bring their claims under federal employment law rather than in district court.

The union groups representing hundreds of thousands of federal workers argue Trump's efforts to slash the workforce conflicts with Congress' power to shape the size and direction of agencies through funding decisions, as well as laws detailing exactly how such layoffs must be carried out.

Attorneys for the Trump administration say the unions failed to show that they were facing the kind of irreparable, immediate harm that would justify an emergency order stopping layoffs.

CDC vaccination committee meeting postponed days after RFK Jr. took over at HHS

A panel of experts that advises the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on vaccine policy will not meet as previously scheduled next week.

The Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices was to meet in Atlanta Feb. 26-28 — its first gathering since Robert F. Kennedy Jr. was sworn in as Health and Human Services secretary.

Kennedy was critical of the panel during his confirmation process, and it's on a list of federal advisory committees that are being reviewed, according to an executive order issued by Trump on Wednesday.

Kennedy also vowed to investigate the childhood vaccine schedule that prevents measles, polio and other dangerous diseases when he spoke to HHS employees this week.

Chinese official says there's no winning with tariffs

A senior Chinese economic official says there is no winner in trade wars and tariffs and that Beijing will work with the international community to safeguard global trade.

Zhao Zhao, counselor of economy and commerce at the Chinese Embassy in Washington, said the move by the Trump administration to impose 10% tariffs on Chinese goods was "without authorization."

"It represents a typical form of unilateralism and trade protectionism," he told reporters.

Trump said he has imposed the tariff due to China's role in making the opioid fentanyl.

Beijing has taken the case to the World Trade Organization. Zhao said much is at stake for the world's two largest economies to handle their trade relations appropriately.

Groups sue Trump administration over end to protections for Venezuelans

Two nonprofit groups have filed a lawsuit challenging the Trump administration's decision to end temporary legal status that has shielded more than 600,000 Venezuelans living in the U.S. from deportation.

Casa and Make the Road New York contend that an order to end Temporal Protected Status for Venezuelans is unconstitutional.

The lawsuit was filed in Maryland. It's the second to challenge the Department of Homeland Security's decision to revoke an 18-month extension of TPS that was granted by the Biden administration in January.

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That order affects more than 348,000 Venezuelans living in the U.S. whose temporary protection expires in April. TPS protections for other Venezuelans are set to expire at the end of September.

EPA union challenges return-to-office order

The largest union at the Environmental Protection Agency is seeking to block a Trump administration mandate that workers return to the office full-time.

The American Federation of Government Employees Council 238, which represents more than 8,000 EPA employees, filed grievances against the agency over a memo requiring in-person work "to the maximum extent possible" starting next week.

"Our hallways have been too vacant, desks are empty, and cubicles are filled with unoccupied chairs," EPA Administrator Lee Zeldin said in a video message to employees.

The union said the order violates a collective bargaining agreement that allows flexible schedules for about half the agency's staff.

FBI directors are given 10-year terms

FBI directors are given 10-year terms as a way to insulate them from political influence and keep them from becoming beholden to a particular president or administration.

Patel was selected to replace Christopher Wray, who was picked by Trump in 2017 and served for more than seven years but who was seen by him as insufficiently loyal. He resigned before Trump took office.

Since Wray's resignation, the FBI has been led by interim leaders, who have clashed with the Justice Department over its demands for details about the agents who investigated the Capitol riot. Trump has said that he expects some of those agents will be fired.

Patel denied having any knowledge of discussions about potential firings.

Bomb threat forces evacuation of Kennedy Center

The Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts was evacuated Thursday in response to a bomb threat.

A statement from the Kennedy Center said that the center's multiple buildings were "evacuated due to a bomb threat targeting Shen Yun performances. Security acted swiftly, following existing protocols."

Police and bomb-disposal units arrived as visitors were ushered outside. Images posted on social media showed video monitors throughout the complex displaying a red screen with the message: "Emergency Alert, Evacuate"

The Shen Yun artistic troupe is an offshoot of the Falun Gong movement, an anti-Beijing spiritual group. The troupe has performed regularly at the Kennedy Center for years and was set to begin a 10-day run with a performance Thursday evening.

As of 2 p.m. EST, a spokesman for the U.S. Park Police, which has jurisdiction over the Kennedy Center, said the Park Police were "no longer on the scene"

A Kennedy Center spokesman confirmed that the evacuation order had been lifted.

Only two Republicans vote against confirming Patel

Sens. Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska were the lone Republican holdouts. The vote was 51-49.

National security adviser says Trump is 'frustrated' with Zelenskyy

Trump's national security adviser, Mike Waltz, said the U.S. president is "obviously very frustrated" with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

Waltz's remark during a White House briefing continues days of barbs the leaders have traded as Trump has refocused U.S. foreign policy toward pressuring Ukraine to make concessions to Russia that would end the war.

"Some of the rhetoric coming out of Kyiv, frankly, and insults to President Trump were unacceptable," Waltz said. He criticized Zelenskyy for rejecting a Trump proposal to "co-invest" in mining Ukrainian natural resources as a way to refund the U.S. for billions of dollars in weapons and economic assistance.

Waltz did not respond when asked whether Trump sees Russian President Vladimir Putin as a dictator, a day after Trump called Zelenskyy, who was elected in 2019, a "dictator without elections." He also didn't directly answer a question about whether Trump thinks Zelenskyy or Putin was more responsible for the war.

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Patel inherits an agency gripped by turmoil

Patel inherits an FBI gripped by turmoil as the Justice Department has forced out a group of senior bureau officials in the past month. It's also made a highly unusual demand for the names of thousands of agents who participated in investigations related to the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol.

Patel has spoken of his desire to implement major changes at the FBI, including a renewed emphasis on its traditional crime-fighting duties rather than the intelligence-gathering and national security work that has come to define its mandate over the past two decades.

He has also echoed Trump's desire for retribution. Patel raised alarm among Democrats for saying before he was nominated that he would "come after" anti-Trump "conspirators" in the federal government and the media.

Republicans rally around Patel as right person for FBI job

Republicans angry over what they see as law enforcement bias against conservatives during the Biden administration and criminal investigations into Trump rallied behind Patel as the right person for the FBI director's job.

"Mr. Patel wants to make the FBI accountable once again — get back the reputation that the FBI has had historically for law enforcement," Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said before Patel was confirmed.

Democrats complained about Patel's lack of management experience compared with previous FBI directors.

"I am absolutely sure of this one thing: this vote will haunt anyone who votes for him. They will rue the day they did it," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat.

About a half-dozen Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee gathered outside FBI headquarters before the vote in a last-ditch plea to derail his confirmation.

Senate narrowly confirms Patel as FBI director despite Democratic concerns

The Senate has narrowly voted to confirm Kash Patel as director of the FBI, moving to place him atop the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency despite doubts from Democrats about his qualifications and concerns he will do Trump's bidding and go after the president's adversaries.

"I cannot imagine a worse choice," Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., told colleagues before the 51-49 vote by the GOP-controlled Senate. Sens. Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska were the lone Republican holdouts.

A Trump loyalist who has fiercely criticized the agency, Patel will inherit an FBI gripped by turmoil as the Justice Department over the past month has forced out a group of senior bureau officials and made a highly unusual demand for the names of thousands of agents who participated in investigations related to the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol.

Trump calls US hockey team before 4 Nations Face-Off final against Canada

Trump is also looking forward to watching the game Thursday night between the U.S. and Canada, the White House press secretary said.

"And we look forward to the United States beating our soon-to-be 51st state, Canada," she said.

Trump has been pressing the idea of Canada becoming the 51st state as part of his trade dispute with America's neighbor to the north. Canada's prime minister, Justin Trudeau, has said that will never happen.

Leavitt gives journalist for X the first question, talks up Musk's platform

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt says Trump has signed 73 executive orders in his first month as president.

Leavitt and other White House officials used the press briefing Thursday to highlight Trump's actions over the past 30 days.

Among the executive orders Trump has signed are efforts to eliminate birthright citizenship, gain more presidential control over the federal bureaucracy and workforce, and eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion measures.

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Trump signed 73 executive orders in his first 30 days

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt says Trump has signed 73 executive orders in his first month as president.

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Leaders of France and Britain to meet with Trump next week

Trump will host French President Emmanuel Macron at the White House next Monday, followed by British Prime Minister Keir Starmer on Thursday.

Trump will also hold the first Cabinet meeting of his second term next Wednesday, said White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt.

Murkowski urges Congress to 'stand up' against efforts by Trump to exceed his authority

Alaska U.S. Sen. Lisa Murkowski said Congress needs to "stand up" against efforts by Trump that exceed his authority, including any attempts to withhold federal funds that Congress has already appropriated.

If Congress permits that, it effectively cedes some of its authority, the centrist Republican and frequent critic of Trump told a tele-town hall attended by more than 1,000 people late Wednesday.

"We have to stand up. Now, the 'we' has to be more than just me. And this is where it becomes more of a challenge, but it requires speaking out. It requires saying, 'That violates the law, that violates the authorities of the executive.'"

It also requires using relationships that have been built within the administration "to go back to the executive and say, 'There is a way to accomplish what you are seeking, but you have to do it within the confines of the law.'" she said.

Murkowski said some Alaskans will want her to "raise hell" and fight the administration while others want her to back the president.

Layoffs hit agency devoted to preventing overdose deaths and suicides

Roughly 100 people have lost their jobs at the U.S. government agency devoted to preventing overdose deaths and suicides, according to a Health and Human Services official who wasn't authorized to disclose the figure and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

The dismissals last weekend – part of the White House's efforts to shrink the government workforce – amounted to about 10% of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration staff, the official said.

SAMHSA provides expertise and grant money to communities to prevent overdoses and suicides, operates treatment locators where people can find addiction treatment providers, and supports efforts to enhance mental health. The agency operates and promotes awareness of the 988 suicide and crisis hotline.

President Donald Trump made the opioid crisis a priority during his first term. In 2017, Trump became the first president to declare the opioid crisis a national health emergency. In 2018, he signed a bill increasing federal opioid funding to record levels.

Senators applauds McConnell

About 20 senators from both sides of the political aisle gathered in the Senate chamber as McConnell paid tribute to his family, his home state and to the Senate itself, having announced he will not seek reelection.

"The Senate is still equipped for work of great consequence," he told them. "And, to the disappointment of my critics, I'm still here on the job."

As he concluded, Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C. motioned that the audience of senators, staff and Capitol visitors be allowed to applaud for up to 30 seconds.

Then, the Republican senators in attendance lined up to greet McConnell and gathered around him.

He took out a tissue and made a joke, prompting the group to laugh. Senate Majority Leader John Thune then gave him a warm handshake and a dozen other senators soon did so as well.

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Venezuelans sue Trump administration over ends of temporary protection

A group of Venezuelans is suing the Trump administration over its decision to end temporary protections that shield hundreds of thousands of immigrants from the South American country from deportation.

The lawsuit by the National TPS Alliance and eight Venezuelans alleges that Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem illegally revoked an 18-month extension of Temporary Protection Status, or TPS, for Venezuelans that was granted by the Biden administration in January.

Noem's order affects 348,202 Venezuelans living in the U.S. with TPS slated to expire in April. That's about half of the approximately 600,000 who have the protection. The remaining protections are set to expire at the end of September.

"Venezuelan TPS holders, like all TPS holders, are lawfully present here pursuant to protection granted because it is not safe for them to return to their country," said Jose Palma, coordinator of the National TPS Alliance.

The lawsuit was filed in San Francisco, at Federal Court in the Northern District of California.

Musk and Argentina's Milei to meet at CPAC

Billionaire Elon Musk, who has become Trump's close adviser spearheading a massive effort to cut spending and downsize the federal government, is set to meet with Argentine President Javier Milei, who is in Washington to attend the Conservative Political Action Conference.

Musk was announced as a speaker for the conference earlier on Thursday by Mercedes Schlapp, a CPAC organizer. The scheduled meeting between Musk and Milei was confirmed by a person who insisted on anonymity to discuss an event that hadn't yet been announced publicly and said the meeting was private and had been planned for weeks.

Milei was the first foreign leader to meet with Trump after he won the election, but before he took office. He was also invited to the inauguration. A self-described "anarcho-capitalist," Milei has received praise frequently from Musk for implementing a series of austerity measures, laying off tens of thousands of government workers, freezing public infrastructure projects to fix Argentina's long mismanaged economy.

-By Adriana Gomez Licon

Vance says American culture has sought to turn everyone into 'androgynous idiots'

Vance told conservatives that American culture is sending a message that is diminishing masculinity.

"I think that it wants to turn everybody into, whether male or female, into androgynous idiots who think the same, talk the same, and act the same. We actually think God made male and female for a purpose," Vance said.

He told the CPAC audience that when it comes to the Trump administration, "We want you guys to thrive as young men and as young women and we're going to help with our public policy to make it possible to do that."

He said Trump appeals in particular to young men because "He doesn't allow the media to tell him he can't make a joke or he can't have an original thought."

Sen. Mitch McConnell won't seek reelection in Kentucky in 2026

Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell is announcing on Thursday that he won't seek reelection next year, ending a decades-long tenure as a power broker who championed conservative causes but ultimately ceded ground to the fierce GOP populism of President Donald Trump.

McConnell, the longest-serving Senate party leader in U.S. history, chose his 83rd birthday to share his decision not to run for another term in Kentucky and to retire when his current term ends. He informed The Associated Press of his decision before he was set to address colleagues in a speech on the Senate floor.

His announcement begins the epilogue of a storied career as a master strategist, one in which he helped forge a conservative Supreme Court and steered the Senate through tax cuts, presidential impeachment trials and fierce political fights.

Administration officials to address reporters

National Security Advisor Mike Waltz, Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller and National Economic Council Director Kevin Hassett will address reporters at the White House on Thursday as part of the press briefing,

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Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt announced.

Leavitt said in a post on X that the officials will be there "to discuss the President's accomplishments so far."

Vance to speak at annual Conservative Political Action conference

People are gathering in a Washington suburb for the annual Conservative Political Action Conference, where Vice President JD Vance will open as the first speaker.

President Donald Trump is scheduled to appear on Saturday, the organization announced.

Attorney General Pam Bondi and House Speaker Mike Johnson will be speaking later Thursday as well as Steve Bannon, a popular Trump ally. Other international figures such as former UK Prime Minister Liz Truss and Argentine President Javier Milei are also appearing at the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center in Oxon Hill, Maryland. Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni is scheduled to address attendees at the conference, but her office said it will be a video appearance.

A news conference between Zelenskyy and Trump's Ukraine envoy is cancelled at US request

A Kyiv official says a news conference after talks between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and President Donald Trump's Ukraine envoy was cancelled Thursday at the request of the U.S.

The scheduled comments to the media by Zelenskyy and retired U.S. Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, Trump's special envoy to Ukraine and Russia, were called off after their meeting, the Ukrainian president's spokesman Serhii Nikiforov said.

Kellogg's trip to Kyiv coincided with recent feuding between Trump and Zelenskyy that has bruised their personal relations and cast further doubt on the future of U.S. support for Ukraine's war effort.

Thursday marks a month since Trump took office

He's expected to host a reception for Black History Month in the afternoon, and then go to the National Building Museum to give a speech to a meeting of the Republican Governors Association.

Also on tap is a press briefing with the White House press secretary and other administration officials.

Trump will be signing executive orders at a different desk in the White House

The Resolute Desk, an Oval Office mainstay, "is being lightly refinished," Trump posted on social media. The desk was built from oak used in the British Arctic exploration ship HMS Resolute, and Queen Victoria gave it as a gift to President Rutherford B. Hayes in 1880.

In the meantime, Trump said he would sit at the "C&O" desk previously used by President George H.W. Bush. It was originally built around 1920 for the owners of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railway, hence the name.

"This is a beautiful, but temporary replacement!" Trump said.

President Trump is targeting more organizations as he tries to downsize the federal bureaucracy

He listed four targets in his executive order on Wednesday, including the United States Institute of Peace, which promotes conflict resolution around the world, and the Presidio Trust, which manages a park in San Francisco.

Both organizations were created by Congress. The executive order said they "shall reduce the performance of their statutory functions and associated personnel to the minimum presence and function required by law."

Trump also directed the elimination of various advisory panels, including the Health Equity Advisory Committee, the Advisory Committee on Long COVID and the Community Bank Advisory Council.

Trump says federal government should 'take over' DC, backing congressional GOP push

Trump on Wednesday threw his support behind congressional efforts for a federal takeover of the nation's capital, saying he approves putting the District of Columbia back under direct federal control.

Speaking to reporters aboard Air Force One, Trump complained about crime and homelessness in the district, saying, "I think we should take over Washington, D.C. — make it safe." He added, "I think that we should govern District of Columbia."

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Under terms of the city's Home Rule authority, Congress already vets all D.C. laws and can outright overturn them. Some congressional Republicans have sought to go further, eroding decades of the city's limited autonomy and putting it back under direct federal control, as it was at its founding.

Senate pushes toward confirmation of Kash Patel as FBI director

The Senate was set to vote Thursday on whether to confirm Kash Patel as FBI director, a decision that could place him atop the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency despite concerns from Democrats over his qualifications and the prospect that he would do President Donald Trump's bidding.

Patel cleared the Senate Judiciary Committee last week by a 12-10, party-line vote.

He is expected to be confirmed unless more than three Republican senators defy Trump's will and vote against him, which is seen as unlikely.

Patel, a Trump loyalist who has fiercely criticized the agency that he is poised to lead, would inherit an FBI gripped by turmoil. The Justice Department in the last month has forced out a group of senior FBI officials and made a highly unusual demand for the names of thousands of agents who participated in investigations related to Jan. 6.

Trump has said that he expects some of those agents will be fired.

Trump and Musk say they like working together and will keep at it. Will it last?

It's been a burning political question for weeks: How long will Trump — who doesn't like sharing the spotlight — be able to do just that with Musk, a billionaire also overly fond of attention?

In a joint Fox News Channel interview that aired Tuesday, both insisted they like each other a lot and would stick with their arrangement despite what Trump said were attempts by the media to "drive us apart."

At times, Trump sat back as Fox News Channel's Sean Hannity heaped praise on Musk in an attempt to counteract a Democratic narrative that he's a callous and unelected force out to destroy the government and upend civil society.

There were also moments when Trump and Musk were all but finishing each other's sentences, as if they were part of a buddy comedy and not the president and his most powerful aide.

Trump backs idea to send some DOGE savings to American citizens

Trump said at an investment conference in Miami on Wednesday that he likes the idea of giving some of the savings from Musk's Department of Government Efficiency back to U.S. citizens as a kind of dividend, and that the administration is considering a concept in which 20% of the savings produced by DOGE's cost-cutting efforts goes to American citizens and another 20% goes to paying down the national debt.

Trump also said the potential for dividend payments would incentivize people to report wasteful spending.

Some New York prison guards charged in beating death of handcuffed inmate appear in court

By MICHAEL HILL undefined

UTICA, N.Y. (AP) — Six New York prison guards have been indicted for second-degree murder in the beating death of a handcuffed inmate, a brutal incident captured on body-worn cameras that triggered widespread outrage and calls for justice.

Four other corrections workers were charged with lesser crimes in the December death of Robert Brooks at Marcy Correctional Facility in an indictment unsealed Thursday.

The special prosecutor, Onondaga County District Attorney William Fitzpatrick, said especially disturbing to him was the "sense of normalcy" of the employees on the video, which was caught unintentionally on the body-worn cameras.

"I think any sentient human being looking at the tapes naturally comes to the conclusion that he must have said something. He must have spit at the officers. He must have resisted in some way. And the fact of the matter is, he did absolutely nothing," Fitzpatrick said during a news conference after the court proceeding.

Handcuffed corrections employees appeared one after another in a packed Utica court to enter not guilty pleas. Fitzpatrick said at least six made bond in court. Bail for the murder charges was set at a \$250,000

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bail bond or a \$1 million partially secured surety bond.

After some of the corrections officers were released, one man said, "This is not justice, judge — These people killed a Black man," as he left the courtroom. One woman was removed after shouting "murderer, murderer."

Protesters were upset that officers were offered bail. Fitzpatrick said the judge followed the law and the men were not flight risks.

Prison guards Nicholas Anzalone, David Kingsley, Anthony Farina, Christopher Walrath and Mathew Galliher were among the people charged with second-degree murder, according to court documents. The name of the sixth person was redacted because they'll appear in court next week.

All six were also charged with first-degree manslaughter, meaning prosecutors believe they are criminally liable for the conduct of others.

Brooks had been serving a 12-year prison sentence for first-degree assault since 2017. He arrived at the prison 200 miles (320 kilometers) northwest of New York City only shortly before the videotaped beating after being transferred from another nearby facility.

Fitzpatrick said Brooks was beaten three separate times as soon as he arrived at the prison, the last being the fatal beating in the infirmary caught on body-camera footage.

The video shows officers pummeling Brooks, whose hands are cuffed behind his back. Officers strike him in the chest with a shoe and lift him by the neck and drop him. The video recorded on the night of Dec. 9 has no sound, but the guards meting out the punishment and watching it appear unconcerned. Brooks, 43, died the next day.

Brooks died of a "massive beating" that broke a bone in his neck, ripped his thyroid cartilage and bruised several internal organs. He also died as a result of repeated restrictions to his airways, which caused brain damage, and choking on his own blood, Fitzpatrick said.

Fitzpatrick said Thursday that he'll prove in court that the guards thought the body-worn cameras were off, raising concerns about a culture among guards in which a group beating of an inmate could be carried out with an apparent "sense of normalcy."

Robert Brooks Jr., the victim's son, said after witnessing court proceedings that the indictments were a step toward accountability.

"These men killed my father, it was on video. The whole world got to see it. Waiting a month for these charges has been incredibly hard. But these men must be prosecuted and convicted of the crimes they made," the younger Brooks said.

Robert Brooks Jr. claimed in a federal lawsuit filed in January that his father's attackers "systematically and casually beat him to death" and that the prison system tolerates violence.

Fitzpatrick said the charges reflected responsibility: Those who beat Brooks, those who watched, and those who knew about it or should have, but did absolutely nothing to stop it.

Galliher, one of the corrections officers, was further charged with gang assault. Three other prison guards were charged with lesser manslaughter offenses, meaning that prosecutors believe they did not commit murder, but were criminally responsible for the actions of others to some degree. They are Michael Mashaw, Michael Fisher and David Walters.

One worker, whose title was unclear, was charged with tampering with evidence.

Nicolas Gentile allegedly "cleaned the area of Robert Brooks' blood stains in an effort to conceal" the assault, according to court documents.

Three other prison employees have reached plea agreements, Fitzpatrick said.

"Today will, hopefully, be a chapter in restoring the faith of people that when people cross the line, people engage in such horrific acts, that there are severe consequences," Gov. Kathy Hochul told reporters in New York City.

Hochul had ordered state officials to initiate proceedings to fire more than a dozen employees implicated in the attack on Brooks.

The announcement of the murder charges came on the fourth day of a wildcat strike, in which at least

some corrections officers are refusing to enter their shifts at 36 correctional facilities across the state, according to prison officials.

Even before Brooks' death, employees at the medium-security prison had been accused of abusing incarcerated people.

Fitzpatrick took over the case as a special prosecutor after state Attorney General Letitia James recused herself, citing her office's representation of several implicated officers in separate civil lawsuits. Those employees had previously been accused of either taking part in previous beatings of inmates or letting them continue.

"It's fortunate that video evidence of a callous murder made it possible for charges to be brought against these officers. For far too long, that evidence has not existed, making transparency and accountability out of reach," said Jennifer Scaife, executive director of the Correctional Association of New York.

That watchdog group reported "rampant abuse by staff" at Marcy after interviewing people incarcerated there in October 2022, who told them of physical assaults in locations without cameras, such as between the gates, in vans and in showers. A guard told one new arrival that this was a "hands-on facility," we're going to put hands on you if we don't like what you're doing," according to the report.

Sen. Mitch McConnell won't seek reelection in 2026, ending long tenure as Republican power broker

By BRUCE SCHREINER and KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Republican Sen. Mitch McConnell announced Thursday that he won't seek reelection next year, ending a decadeslong tenure as a power broker who championed conservative causes but ultimately ceded ground to the fierce GOP populism of President Donald Trump.

McConnell, the longest-serving Senate party leader in U.S. history, chose his 83rd birthday to share his decision not to run for another term in Kentucky and to retire when his current term ends. He informed The Associated Press of his decision before he addressed colleagues in a speech on the Senate floor.

"Seven times, my fellow Kentuckians have sent me to the Senate," McConnell said, as aides lined the back chamber and senators listened from seats. "Every day in between I've been humbled by the trust they've placed in me to do their business right here. Representing our commonwealth has been the honor of a lifetime. I will not seek this honor an eighth time. My current term in the Senate will be my last."

The scramble for McConnell's seat intensified soon after McConnell spoke.

Former state Attorney General Daniel Cameron, a Republican, said he's in the race to succeed his one-time mentor, having formerly worked as McConnell's legal counsel. Cameron lost the 2023 governor's race to Democratic incumbent Andy Beshear but has been planning a political comeback. Cameron said Thursday that his values align with Kentucky voters and touted his support for Trump.

"I'm going to be an 'America First' senator and it's time for a new generation of leadership," Cameron told the AP in a phone interview Thursday evening.

McConnell's retirement announcement began the epilogue of a storied career as a master strategist, one in which he helped forge a conservative Supreme Court and steered the Senate through tax cuts, presidential impeachment trials and fierce political fights. Yet with his powerful perch atop committees, and nearly two years remaining in his term, McConnell vowed to complete his work on several remaining fronts.

"I have some unfinished business to attend to," he said.

McConnell walked gingerly to the podium, sporting a walking boot. Senators from both sides of the political aisle seemed to listen most intently as he told them that while there are any number of reasons for pessimism, the strength of the Senate is not one of them.

"The Senate is still equipped for work of great consequence," he told them.

As he concluded, Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C., motioned for the audience of senators, staff and Capitol visitors be allowed to applaud, which is usually not allowed under Senate rules.

Republican senators then lined up to greet McConnell, beginning with Sen. Susan Collins of Maine, who hugged him, and Sen. Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, who patted him on the back. He took out a tissue and

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made a joke, prompting the group to laugh. Senate Majority Leader John Thune of South Dakota gave him a warm handshake, and a dozen others senators soon did so as well.

Sen. Lindsey Graham said McConnell reshaped the American judiciary, particularly the Supreme Court. "He has a lot to be proud of, and I am sure he will work hard to the very end of his term," Graham said.

Changing dynamics in the GOP

McConnell, first elected in 1984, intends to serve until his term ends in January 2027. The Kentuckian has dealt with a series of medical episodes in recent years, including injuries sustained from falls and times when his face briefly froze while he was speaking.

The famously taciturn McConnell revered the Senate as a young intern long before joining its back benches as a freshman lawmaker in the mid-1980s. His dramatic announcement comes almost a year after his decision to relinquish his leadership post after the November 2024 election.

McConnell's looming departure reflects the changing dynamics of the Trump-led GOP. He's seen his power diminish on a parallel track with both his health and his relationship with Trump, who once praised him as an ally but has taken to criticizing him in caustic terms.

In Kentucky, McConnell's departure will mark the loss of a powerful advocate and will set off a competitive GOP primary next year for what will now be an open Senate seat. Beshear, seen as a rising star in his party for winning statewide office in Republican territory, has said he has no interest in the Senate. Beshear's chief political strategist, Eric Hyers, reiterated that stance Thursday, posting on X, "He is not running for the Senate."

Another prominent Kentucky Republican considering the race quickly weighed in. U.S. Rep. Andy Barr said he would decide soon about his future. Also looming as a GOP candidate is businessman Nate Morris.

One common denominator among them — their professed loyalty to Trump.

McConnell, a diehard adherent to Ronald Reagan's brand of traditional conservatism and muscular foreign policy, increasingly found himself out of step with a GOP shifting toward the fiery, often isolationist populism espoused by Trump.

McConnell still champions providing Ukraine with weapons and other aid to fend off Russia's invasion, even as Trump ratchets up criticism of the country and its leader, Volodymyr Zelenskyy. The senator made it clear Thursday that national defense remains a priority for him.

He and Trump were partners during Trump's first term, but the relationship was severed after McConnell blamed Trump for "disgraceful" acts in the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol attack by his supporters. A momentary thaw in 2024 when McConnell endorsed Trump didn't last.

Last week, Trump referred to McConnell as a "very bitter guy" after McConnell, who battled polio as a child, opposed vaccine skeptic Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s confirmation as the nation's top health official. McConnell referred to Trump as a "despicable human being" and a "narcissist" in a biography of the senator by The AP's deputy Washington bureau chief, Michael Tackett.

Shifting the Supreme Court

Before their falling out, Trump and McConnell pushed through a tax overhaul largely focused on reductions for businesses and higher-earning taxpayers. They joined forces to reshape the Supreme Court when Trump nominated three justices and McConnell guided them to Senate confirmation, tilting the high court to the right.

McConnell set a precedent for hardball partisan tactics in 2016 by refusing to even give a hearing to Democratic President Barack Obama's pick of Merrick Garland to replace the late Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia. Putting the brakes on the Senate's "advise and consent" role for judicial nominees, McConnell said the vacancy should be filled by the next president so voters could have their say. Trump filled the vacancy once he took office, and McConnell later called the stonewalling of Garland's nomination his "most consequential" achievement.

Later, when liberal Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg died weeks before the 2020 presidential election won by Democrat Joe Biden, McConnell rushed Amy Coney Barrett's confirmation through the Senate, waving off allegations of hypocrisy.

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McConnell also guided the Senate — and Trump — through two impeachment trials that ended in acquittals.

In the second impeachment, weeks after the deadly Capitol attack by a mob hoping to overturn Trump's 2020 reelection defeat, McConnell joined all but seven Republicans in voting to acquit. McConnell said he believed Trump couldn't be convicted because he'd already left office, but the senator also condemned Trump as "practically and morally responsible" for the insurrection.

McConnell over the years swung back and forth from majority to minority leader, depending on which party held power. He defended President George W. Bush's handling of the Iraq war and failed to block Obama's health care overhaul.

McConnell, the longest-serving senator ever from Kentucky, ensured that the Bluegrass State received plenty of federal funding. Back home he was a key architect in his party's rise to power in a state long dominated by Democrats.

He is married to Elaine Chao, and they have long been a power couple in Washington. The senator referred to her as his "ultimate teammate and confidante." Chao was labor secretary for Bush and transportation secretary during Trump's first term, though she resigned after the Capitol insurrection, saying it had "deeply troubled" her.

IRS layoffs could hurt revenue collection and foil efforts to go after rich tax dodgers, experts say

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The layoffs of roughly 7,000 IRS probationary workers beginning this week likely mean the end of the agency's plan to go after high-wealth tax dodgers and could spell disaster for revenue collections, experts say.

The majority of employees shown the door at the federal tax collector are newly hired workers focused on compliance, which includes ensuring that taxpayers are abiding by the tax code and paying delinquent debts, among other duties.

The IRS layoffs, one of the largest purges of probationary workers this year across the government, could also hurt customer service and tax return processing during tax season this year, the union representing Treasury Department employees warned Thursday.

The upheaval comes less than two months before the tax filing deadline and as the Department of Government Efficiency under Trump adviser Elon Musk seeks to shrink the size of the federal workforce in an effort to radically cut spending and restructure the government's priorities.

Vanessa Williamson, a senior fellow at the Urban-Brookings Tax Policy Center, said on a Thursday call with reporters that the layoffs at the IRS will disproportionately harm enforcement efforts.

"When you underpay and understaff the IRS, the agency doesn't have the power or the resources it needs to go after wealthy tax evaders with their high priced lawyers," she said, adding, "The result is, of course, a disaster for revenue."

The Inflation Reduction Act, signed into law by President Joe Biden in 2022, gave the IRS \$80 billion and the ability to hire tens of thousands of new employees to help with customer service and enforcement as well as new technology to update the tax collection agency, though congressional Republicans later clawed back some of the money.

Former IRS Commissioner Daniel Werfel, appointed by Biden, placed a particular focus on aggressively auditing high-income tax cheats as well as executives who use business aircraft for their personal use while still writing it off as a tax expense and wealthy people who sought to get favorable tax treatment through Puerto Rico without meeting certain tax requirements.

A Congressional Budget Office report issued last year describes how rescissions in funding for the IRS affect baseline projections of future revenues, offering a variety of scenarios depending on the severity of the cuts.

A \$5 billion rescission would reduce revenues by \$5.2 billion from 2024 to 2034 and increase the deficit

by \$0.2 billion. A \$20 billion rescission would reduce revenues by \$44 billion and increase the deficit by \$24 billion for the same period. A \$35 billion rescission would reduce revenues by \$89 billion and increase the cumulative deficit by \$54 billion.

"If you starve the IRS, you'll be providing a feast for the tax evaders," Williamson said.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said during his confirmation hearing last month that "we do not have a revenue problem in the United States of America, we have a spending problem."

However, both revenues and spending will be an ongoing point of contention for congressional Republicans, who are trying to come up with how to pay for extending provisions of President Donald Trump's Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. The Penn Wharton Budget model estimates that permanently extending Trump's tax cuts would increase deficits by \$4 trillion over the next decade.

Chye-Ching Huang, executive director of NYU's Tax Law Center, called the layoffs "misguided" and said they "will hurt everyday Americans who pay their taxes and count on the IRS to pay refunds on time while encouraging wealthy people and large businesses to cheat on their taxes."

Doreen Greenwald, president of the National Treasury Employees Union, said: "In the middle of a tax filing season, when taxpayers expect prompt customer service and smooth processing of their tax returns, the administration has chosen to decimate the whole operation by sending dedicated civil servants to the unemployment lines."

The union representing IRS workers has already filed multiple legal challenges over the administration's mass layoffs.

Mark Mazur, a former assistant secretary for tax policy at Treasury, said that since most of the laid-off workers were in the IRS' small business and self-employment division, employees who had handled bigger corporate enforcement cases will be forced to stop their work and handle easier small-business cases.

"For sure this mean less enforcement activity," and the deterrence effect of audits will be diminished, he said.

Representatives from Treasury, the IRS and the White House did not respond to Associated Press requests for comment on Thursday.

Kids' disability rights cases stalled as Trump began to overhaul Education Department

By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH, COLLIN BINKLEY and ANNIE MA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — It was obvious to Christine Smith Olsey that her son was not doing well at school, despite educators telling her to leave it to the experts. The second-grade student stumbled over words, and other kids teased him so much he started to call himself "an idiot."

Though her son had been receiving speech and occupational therapy, Smith Olsey said his Denver charter school resisted her requests for additional academic support. She filed a complaint with the state and then, in September, the Education Department's Office for Civil Rights.

In January, her son's case came to a halt.

"I have to postpone meetings with you to discuss the case," a department mediator wrote to her on Jan. 23, three days after President Donald Trump's inauguration. "I am sorry for the inconvenience. I will be in touch as I am able."

As Trump began to reshape the Education Department, investigations and mediations around disability rights issues came to a standstill.

Standing up for children with disabilities has been a primary role of the department's civil rights office, which enforces protections guaranteed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Historically, most complaints to the department have involved disability discrimination — parents saying their disabled child is not receiving accommodations they need to learn, which schools must provide under federal law.

It's not unusual for new presidential administrations to freeze cases while they adjust priorities, but exceptions typically are made for urgent situations, such as a child's immediate learning situation. The freeze on pending cases and Trump's calls to dismantle the department altogether left many parents worrying

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about the federal government's commitment to disabled students' rights.

In the first weeks of the Trump administration, the Education Department has launched investigations of complaints involving antisemitism and transgender athletes allowed to compete in women's sports, delivering on Trump's vow to use federal funding as leverage to assail perceived "wokeness" in schools.

It's worrisome the administration has said so little about responding to complaints from families of students with disabilities, said Catherine Lhamon, who led the Office for Civil Rights under former presidents Joe Biden and Barack Obama.

"If it is not aggressively engaged in protecting those rights, the office is not doing its job," Lhamon said in an interview.

An Education Department spokesperson said the Office for Civil Rights ended the pause on its review of disability complaints Thursday, after The Associated Press asked for comment on the findings of reporting for this story. The Trump administration lifted its pause on disability cases sooner than the Biden administration did in its first months in office, spokesperson Julie Hartman said.

Progress stalled for families relying on federal intervention

The freeze had upended progress for families like Smith Olsey's, whose children's special education services may hinge on the outcomes of the department's dispute resolution process.

"It's a scary time right now to be a parent of special needs kiddos," Smith Olsey said.

Her son has been diagnosed with attention-deficit / hyperactivity disorder, autism, dyslexia, and dyscalculia, a learning disorder caused by differences in parts of the brain involved with numbers and calculations. Since preschool, he has had an individualized education program for a developmental delay.

This month, the school agreed her son needs extra academic help, but she is seeking compensatory services to make up for time he went without adequate support. She also is seeking reimbursement for money she spent out of pocket on therapy, tutoring and testing.

When families believe their child is not receiving adequate services for their disability, filing a complaint with the Education Department is one way of prompting districts to provide additional help. Parents may also file a complaint with state agencies or pursue litigation.

Education Department serves as referee of disability rights cases

Between 2021 and 2024, the department's Office for Civil Rights received 27,620 complaints related to disability rights. The office is required to process all complaints it fields, but politics can play a role in setting priorities and choosing which cases to pursue.

Typically, more than half of the complaints to the department have involved disability discrimination, but last year accusations of sex discrimination surged to account for a majority of them, according to an annual report. Disability discrimination accounted for 37%, while discrimination over race or national origin accounted for 19%.

In recent years, the office has seen a significant decline in its staffing, even as the number of cases it must look into has increased.

Parents and advocates say they are concerned about the future of the department's oversight role as Trump and his nominee for education secretary, Linda McMahon, outline a vision for a dramatically reduced footprint for the agency.

At her confirmation hearing, Democrats pressed McMahon on whether she would support the department's enforcement role in disability rights. She suggested the Department of Health and Human Services could take over that work.

"There is a reason the Department of Education exists, and it is because educating kids with disabilities can be really hard," Sen. Maggie Hassan, D-N.H., said during the hearing. "It takes national commitment to get it done."

The freeze leaves families feeling outraged and adrift

In the fall, DarNisha Hardaway was relieved when an Education Department mediator found her son's school needed to reevaluate him and provide tutoring. She had filed a complaint with the department after a series of suspensions that she said stemmed from her son being overwhelmed and not getting enough

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academic help. The 12-year-old has an intellectual disability, autism and epilepsy.

The Education Department, Hardaway said, "made the school system do what they're supposed to do."

If the school district broke the mediation agreement, she was told to contact the Office for Civil Rights again. This month, after her son had an outburst in class, his suburban Detroit school told her he would need to learn online for the rest of the year — a ruling Hardaway saw as a violation of his disability accommodations. On Tuesday, an Office for Civil Rights representative told her they could not respond with any substantive information.

Every day she waits, her son learns in front of a computer. "He can't learn online, and DarNisha is not a teacher," said Marcie Lipsitt, who is working with the family. "The OCR is just closed for business, and I'm outraged."

Complaints about racial discrimination in schools are also pending.

Tylisa Guyton of Taylor, Michigan, filed a complaint with the Office for Civil Rights on Jan. 20 over her 16-year-old son's repeated suspensions from a suburban Detroit school district, alleging a white administrator has been targeting him and a group of other Black children.

The teen has been out of school since Dec. 4 with the latest suspension, and she has heard nothing about when he might be allowed to return or be placed in an alternative school. Since missing so much school, she doubts he will be able to graduate on time.

"I just feel lost," she said.

Could Trump really return DOGE savings to taxpayers?

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER and PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — An idea first proposed on social media has bubbled up to the White House and received President Donald Trump's enthusiastic endorsement: Take some of the savings from billionaire Elon Musk's drive to cut government spending and return it to taxpayers.

"I love it," Trump said late Wednesday on Air Force One, when asked about the proposal.

If Musk's target of \$2 trillion in spending cuts is achieved by next year, supporters of the idea say that about one-fifth of those funds could be distributed to taxpaying households in checks of about \$5,000.

But before you start planning for a windfall, budget experts say such huge savings — nearly one-third of the federal government's annual spending — are highly unlikely. And sending out a round of checks — similar to the stimulus payments distributed by Trump and then President Joe Biden during the pandemic — could fuel inflation, economists warn, though White House officials dismiss that concern.

With the annual budget deficit at \$1.8 trillion last year and Trump proposing extensive tax cuts, there will also be significant pressure to use all the savings to reduce that deficit, rather than pass on part of it.

Here's what to know about the proposal:

Where is this coming from?

James Fishback, founder of investment firm Azoria Partners which he launched at Trump's Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida, promoted the idea Tuesday on X, formerly known as Twitter, prompting Musk to respond that he would "check with the president." Fishback said there have also been "behind the scenes" conversations about the issue with White House officials.

Musk has estimated that his Department of Government Efficiency has cut \$55 billion so far — a tiny fraction of the \$6.8 trillion federal budget. But DOGE's public statements so far haven't verified the presumed savings, and its claims that tens of millions of dead people are fraudulently receiving Social Security have been disproven.

Fishback supports having the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office determine how much DOGE saved. If DOGE cuts \$500 billion by July 2026, he said, then the checks would be \$1,250, rather than \$5,000.

"We uncovered enormous waste, fraud and abuse," Fishback said in an interview with The Associated Press. "And we are going to make good and pay restitution and then rewrite the social contract between the taxpayer and the federal government."

Fishback supports sending out checks, rather than using all the money to reduce the deficit, because it

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would encourage Americans to seek out wasteful government spending “in their communities, and report it to DOGE.”

When am I going to get my check?

OK, let’s slow down. According to the proposal, DOGE must first complete its work, slated to be done by July 2026. Once that happens, one-fifth of any savings could be distributed later that year to the roughly 79 million households that pay income taxes. About 40% of Americans don’t pay such taxes, so they wouldn’t get a check.

How much can DOGE really save?

Color most economists and budget experts skeptical that its focus on “waste, fraud, and abuse” can actually reduce government spending by much. Budget-cutters from both parties have sought to eliminate “waste” — which doesn’t have much of a political constituency — for decades, with little success in reducing the deficit.

One of the biggest moves by the Trump administration so far has been to fire tens of thousands of government workers, but such changes aren’t likely to produce big savings.

“Only a small share of total spending goes to federal employees,” said Douglas Elmendorf, former director of the Congressional Budget Office. “The big money is in federal benefits and in federal taxes and those are not in DOGE’s purview.”

In November, John DiIulio Jr., a political scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, wrote in an essay for the Brookings Institution that “eliminating the entire federal civilian workforce would leave in place about 95% of all federal spending and the \$34 trillion national debt.” DiIulio noted that government contractors and nonprofits that receive government funds now employ three times as many people as the federal government’s 2.2 million employees.

It’s also not clear how much in savings can be achieved without Congress codifying it in law.

“Firing someone doesn’t save money until Congress comes back and reduces the appropriation for that employee’s agency,” Emendorf said. “If you fire somebody but leave the appropriation where it is, then ... that money can be spent on something else. So DOGE can’t really achieve savings until there’s legislative change as well.”

Wouldn’t another round of government checks contribute to higher inflation?

Trump and his economists blame Biden’s \$1,200 stimulus checks, distributed in the spring of 2021, for fueling the worst spike in inflation in four decades. Yet they maintain that sending checks stemming from reduced government spending wouldn’t boost inflation.

Kevin Hassett, director of the White House’s National Economic Council, said Thursday that since the money would have been spent by the government anyway, having it spent by consumers would be a wash. Biden and Trump’s stimulus checks during the pandemic were deficit-financed, which can be more inflationary.

But Ernie Tedeschi, director of economics at the Yale Budget Lab, and an economist in the Biden White House, said that more government checks are “the last thing we need economically right now.”

The U.S. unemployment rate is now much lower than in 2021, Tedeschi said, which means that businesses could struggle to hire enough workers to meet the additional demand created by a round of checks. Worker shortages can push up prices.

Yet some Democrats agree with Hassett, but for different reasons.

“I can’t imagine they’d be inflationary because I can’t imagine they’d be big enough,” said Elaine Kamarck, senior fellow in governance studies at the Brookings Institution.

Kamarck, who worked with Vice President Al Gore to cut government waste in the Clinton administration, dismissed the DOGE dividend as “ridiculous.”

“There’s no money there, and certainly not enough money to make a big contribution to taxpayers,” she said. “The guy just says things,” she added, referring to Musk.

Dr. Mehmet Oz holds millions from companies that he'd wield power over if confirmed, report shows

By AMANDA SEITZ and BRIAN SLODYSKO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The wealth of Dr. Mehmet Oz, the celebrity heart surgeon nominated by President Donald Trump to lead the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, has swelled in part from for-profit health care companies over which he'd wield significant power if confirmed, according to a newly filed government ethics report.

In the filing, the 64-year-old former talk show host pledged to divest from those companies within three months of confirmation and said that until then, he wouldn't participate in any matter that could affect his investments.

Oz's net worth is between \$98 million and \$332 million, according to an analysis of the disclosure, which lists asset values in ranges but does not give precise dollar figures. Oz shot to fame and made millions off his daytime talk show. His most recent disclosure shows he also holds millions of dollars worth of shares in health insurance, fertility, pharmaceutical and vitamin companies.

Oz said in the filing that he will sell off parts of his significant and diverse investment portfolio, which ranges from retail giants such as Walmart to tech companies such as Apple.

His roster of investments includes up to \$5 million in Inception Fertility, a company with a network of fertility clinics; a maximum of \$100,000 with pharmaceutical giant AbbVie; and as much as \$600,000 with the nation's largest health insurer, UnitedHealth Group. He also holds up to \$5 million with Nvidia, an artificial intelligence company that outfits hospitals.

And his work as an adviser for iHerb, a website that sells health and beauty supplements, has earned Oz as much as \$25 million in company stock, which he pledged to forfeit "as soon as practicable but not later than 90 days after confirmation." He indicated he would also resign from his position with the company if confirmed.

His investments touch nearly every aspect of the health care system, said Lawrence Gostin, a public health professor at Georgetown University.

"He has his fingerprints and his financing all over the health care system, from services to artificial intelligence to medical products," Gostin said. "It seems to me that those conflicts are so intertwined in his and his families finances, I don't know how he disentangles himself from it all."

A spokesman for Oz did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

If confirmed by the Senate, Oz would be responsible for the programs that more than half the country relies on for health insurance: Medicaid, Medicare and the Affordable Care Act.

Medicaid provides nearly-free health care coverage to millions of the poorest children and adults in the U.S. while Medicare gives older Americans and the disabled access to health insurance. The Affordable Care Act is the Obama-era program that offers health insurance plans to millions of Americans who do not qualify for government-assisted health insurance, but do not get insurance through their employer.

As the administrator for CMS, Oz would make decisions on how the government covers procedures, hospital stays and medications in these programs and the reimbursement rates doctors and other providers get for their services.

Oz ran a failed 2022 bid to represent Pennsylvania in the U.S. Senate as a Republican. During the campaign, he called to expand Medicare Advantage, the increasingly popular version of Medicare that's run by private insurers who have been accused of defrauding the government by billions of dollars through the program.

Before his turn to politics, Oz was a renowned heart surgeon at Columbia University. He rose to fame on "The Oprah Winfrey Show" with appearances where he discussed weight-loss diets, Botox and anti-aging techniques. Eventually, he landed his own show, which was popular but attracted deep criticism from the scientific community. Some colleagues at Columbia University called for his removal over claims he made about products on TV. Senators, too, scolded him during a 2014 hearing over the weight-loss drugs he promoted

He has formed a kinship, though, with Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who was sworn in as the nation's top health official last week. Kennedy and Oz have shared concerns over pesticides and unhealthy foods. Oz's confirmation hearing to become CMS administrator has not been scheduled.

Trump loyalist Kash Patel is confirmed as FBI director by the Senate despite deep Democratic doubts

By ERIC TUCKER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate on Thursday narrowly voted to confirm Kash Patel as director of the FBI, moving to place him atop the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency despite doubts from Democrats about his qualifications and concerns he will do Donald Trump's bidding and go after the Republican president's adversaries.

"I cannot imagine a worse choice," Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., told colleagues before the 51-49 vote by the GOP-controlled Senate. Sens. Susan Collins of Maine and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska were the lone Republican holdouts.

A Trump loyalist who has fiercely criticized the agency he will now lead, Patel will inherit an FBI gripped by turmoil as the Justice Department over the past month has forced out a group of senior bureau officials and made a highly unusual demand for the names of thousands of agents who participated in investigations related to the Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol.

Patel has spoken of his desire to implement major changes at the FBI, including a reduced footprint in Washington and a renewed emphasis on the bureau's traditional crime-fighting duties rather than the intelligence-gathering work that has come to define its mandate over the past two decades as national security threats have proliferated.

But he's also echoed Trump's stated desire for reprisal, raising alarm among Democrats for saying before he was nominated that he would "come after" anti-Trump "conspirators" in the federal government and the media.

In a statement posted after the vote on the social media platform X, Patel wrote that he was honored to be confirmed as the ninth director of the FBI, an institution he said had a "storied legacy."

"The American people deserve an FBI that is transparent, accountable, and committed to justice. The politicalization of our justice system has eroded public trust — but that ends today," he wrote. He said his mission as director was to "let good cops be cops — and rebuild trust in the FBI."

Republicans angry over what they see as law enforcement bias against conservatives during the Democratic Biden administration, as well as criminal investigations into Trump, have rallied behind Patel as the right person for the job.

"Mr. Patel wants to make the FBI accountable once again — get back the reputation that the FBI has had historically for law enforcement," Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said this week before Patel was confirmed. "He wants to hold the FBI accountable to Congress, to the president and, most importantly, to the people they serve — the American taxpayer."

Democrats complained about Patel's lack of management experience compared with previous FBI directors and they highlighted incendiary past statements that they said called his judgment into question.

"I am absolutely sure of this one thing: this vote will haunt anyone who votes for him. They will rue the day they did it," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat.

He added: "To my Republican colleagues, think about what you will tell your constituents" and family "about why you voted for this person who will so completely and utterly disgrace this office and do such grave damage to our nation's justice system."

About a half-dozen Democrats on the Senate Judiciary Committee gathered outside FBI headquarters earlier Thursday in a last-ditch plea to derail his confirmation.

"This is someone we cannot trust," said Sen. Adam Schiff of California. "This is someone who lacks the character to do this job, someone who lacks the integrity to do this job. We know that, our Republican colleagues know that."

Patel's eyebrow-raising remarks on hundreds of podcasts and in other interviews over the past four years include referring to law enforcement officials who investigated Trump as "criminal gangsters," saying some Jan. 6 rioters were "political prisoners" and opining that FBI headquarters should be shut down and turned into a museum for the so-called deep state.

At his Senate hearing in January, Patel said Democrats were taking some of his comments out of context or misunderstanding the broader point he was trying to make. He also denied the idea that a list in a book he authored of government officials who he said were part of a "deep state" amounted to an "enemies list," calling that a "total mischaracterization."

"I have no interest, no desire and will not, if confirmed, go backwards," Patel said as he vowed that there would be "no politicization at the FBI" and "no retributive actions taken."

He said at the hearing that "the only thing that will matter if I'm confirmed" is a "de-weaponized, de-politicized system of law enforcement completely devoted to rigorous obedience to the Constitution and a singular standard of justice."

Patel was selected in November to replace Christopher Wray, who was picked by Trump in 2017 and who resigned at the conclusion of the Biden administration to make way for his chosen successor. Wray infuriated Trump throughout his tenure, including after FBI agents searched his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida in August 2022 for classified documents in one of two federal investigations that resulted in indictments against Trump that were dismissed after his election win.

FBI directors are given 10-year terms as a way to insulate them from political influence and keep them from becoming beholden to a particular president or administration. But Trump fired the FBI director he inherited, James Comey, after Comey had spent over three years on the job and replaced Wray after more than seven years in the position.

Since Wray's resignation, the FBI has been led by interim leaders, who have clashed with the Justice Department over its demands for details about the agents who investigated the Capitol riot — a move seen as a possible prelude to broader firings. Patel denied having any knowledge of discussions about potential firings, but a letter from Durbin last week that cited information that he said had come from insiders suggested that Patel may have been covertly involved in that process.

Trump has said that he expects some of those agents will be fired.

Patel is a former federal defender and Justice Department counterterrorism prosecutor. He attracted Trump's attention during the president's first term when, as a staffer on the Republican-led House Intelligence Committee, Patel helped produce a memo that showcased surveillance-related errors during the FBI's investigation into ties between Russia and Trump's 2016 campaign.

Patel later joined Trump's administration, both as a counterterrorism official at the National Security Council and as chief of staff to the defense secretary.

Once off the table, bills to charge women who get abortions with murder get votes before failing

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Abortion rights advocates feared the 2022 U.S. Supreme Court ruling that opened the door to state abortion bans would also lead to tracking women and charging women who get abortions with murder.

No states have allowed either, but the ideas, once off the table, have gotten attention in legislatures this month.

Oklahoma lawmakers killed a bill that would have allowed murder charges after a public hearing, and North Dakota did so after a floor debate. Similar bills have been introduced before, but they haven't been granted hearings, in part because most major anti-abortion groups oppose them.

A Missouri committee heard testimony on a bill to create a database of pregnant women deemed "at risk" of getting an abortion and connecting them with prospective adoptive parents.

Here's a look at the proposals:

Missouri proposal would make a database of certain pregnant women

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Under the Missouri legislation, the state Department of Social Services would be directed to create a new division tasked with maintaining a "central registry of each expectant mother who is at risk for seeking an abortion."

The division would also keep a list of prospective adoptive parents and coordinate adoption proceedings.

House Speaker Jonathan Patterson, a Republican, said Thursday that he wants to aid adoption but that the bill doesn't have broad support among House Republicans. Two similar bills were rescinded this week.

"There is some question about the central registry and databases," Patterson said. "That has to be really tightened up to make sure that people's privacy is protected."

Republicans are also wary of expanding government and concerned about the measure's estimated \$30 million-a-year cost.

Still, it has won some support.

"Bills like this continue to disprove the false narrative advanced by pro-abortion advocates that the pro-life movement does not care about women, or care about children after they are born," Susan Klein, executive director of Missouri Right to Life, wrote in a statement supporting the bill.

Tracking pregnancies is not a new worry for advocates

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America says the Missouri legislation is the first of its kind, though fears over the potential tracking of pregnant women are nothing new.

Abortion rights advocates have long argued that if individuals' reproductive health information is not kept private, then it could be used not only in targeted ads but also in law enforcement investigations. Some Democratic-led states have taken steps to protect such health data in recent years.

On a call with reporters Wednesday, Katie Knutter, executive director of Wellspring Health Access, which provides abortion in Wyoming, said that she hears from out-of-state patients that they might be tracked by their home states when they seek abortion — even though laws to do so are not on the books.

"The broader discussion in the media has made patients very aware and very concerned about these things," Knutter said.

Lawmakers consider but reject allowing charges against women who obtain abortion

Oklahoma's Senate Judiciary Committee on Wednesday voted 6-2 against advancing a proposal to allow murder charges against women who obtain abortions, with possible punishments including the death penalty and life in prison.

A week earlier, North Dakota's House rejected a measure with similar features 77-16.

Groups including the National Right to Life Committee and Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America have for years been urging lawmakers not to consider those measures, arguing that women are often coerced into abortion and should not be punished.

Some conservative lawmakers see it differently.

"While the abortion clinics no longer offer or perform abortion, there is a massive loophole in Oklahomans' laws," Sen. Dusty Deever, who sponsored the Oklahoma measure, told the judiciary committee during a hearing Wednesday. "Namely, they don't apply to the mothers themselves."

For the sponsor, the influx of abortion pills is the growing concern

Deever said his approach is the only way to stop the flow of abortion pills prescribed by doctors in other states via telehealth and shipped in. A survey conducted for the Society of Family Planning, which advocates abortion access, found that there were nearly 1,000 abortions via telemedicine in Oklahoma in the second half of 2023. The Guttmacher Institute, another research organization that supports abortion rights, has found that by 2023, more than 6 in 10 abortions in the formal healthcare system nationally involved pills.

Democrats and some Republicans on the committee had concerns, including that the law could lead to criminal investigations of women who have miscarriages, that such an extreme approach could rally support for a state constitutional amendment to allow abortion, or that enforcement would be hard.

Similar measures in Idaho and Indiana appear unlikely to advance. Bills have also been introduced in South Carolina and Texas.

A flight to a Toronto paramedics conference becomes a real emergency for a former EMT

By JOHN WAWROW Associated Press

TORONTO (AP) — Former paramedic Peter Carlson is still having difficulty putting into perspective the shuddering jolt he and 79 others aboard Delta Air Lines flight 4819 experienced earlier this week.

One moment, the 40-year-old was looking forward to arriving in Toronto where he was speaking at an Ontario paramedic chiefs convention. The next, he was hanging — strapped only by his seatbelt — looking down at the airplane's ceiling, attempting to assess the chaos around him.

As blood flowed from a gash on the back of Carlson's head, he noticed other injured passengers, including one pinned beneath a seat behind him. There was an overwhelming smell of jet fuel as it streamed down the window next to his seat by the plane's right wing which was sheared off during Monday's crash landing at Toronto's Pearson International Airport.

"It was a forceful impact, a sideways movement and suddenly just inverted," Carlson told The Associated Press on Wednesday. "And the only mission was to get out."

Carlson's friend and convention chairman Michael Nolan, 53, was waiting to pick him up when he spotted a plume of black smoke in the distance.

"Are you OK? Something's going on on the runway," Nolan texted Carlson, not realizing it was his plane. Carlson responded that he was on the tarmac.

At first, Nolan thought it meant Carlson's plane had landed. Then his friend sent a follow-up text with a picture of his fellow passengers evacuating the upside-down plane.

"My heart just sank ... knowing that was his reality was absolutely shocking to me and really brought it home," said Nolan, a paramedic chief in a county north of Ottawa.

Instead of just attending a convention about the role paramedics play in the world, the two men found themselves in the middle of a real-life emergency.

Nolan rushed to a triage area to assist in treating injured passengers, greeting his friend of over a decade with a big hug.

Carlson's paramedic instincts also kicked in, even though he's held a so-called desk job for the past decade.

"I was comfortable with how my body and mind empowered me to do what I needed to do at that point," he said. "I was able to see the objective nature of the challenge in front of us, which was to get away from the threat."

Though credited for helping in the evacuation, Carlson deferred praise to the four crew members who shepherded the passengers to safety. That everyone survived astounds him, especially after seeing videos posted online of the Mitsubishi CRJ-900 jet touching down heavily and skidding down the runway before flipping over.

"Even without seeing that, it's remarkable," Carlson said, noting he bruised his ribs and has several cuts and bruises on his legs.

"I don't know if I'm deserving of going into miracle territory, but it sure feels ..." he added, before pausing to find the appropriate word. "It's amazing. It's amazing."

The last of the 21 injured passengers was released from the hospital on Thursday.

The cuts and bruises will heal, but the mental trauma left Carlson wondering whether he could muster enough resolve on Wednesday to still deliver his address.

"It took me a lot of personal motivation to leave my room," he said. "This morning, I just couldn't. I was quite emotional about this whole thing and just really want to be home."

And yet, deliver Carlson did — giving a 20-minute speech in which he outlined his background and influences in paramedicine, the significance of the job and the difference paramedics can make.

Whatever anxieties he felt didn't show.

Though Carlson longed to be back home in Minneapolis, Minnesota, with his wife and three children, his nerves were eased being among his working family of paramedics and Nolan.

National Chief of the Assembly of First Nations Cindy Woodhouse welcomed Carlson on Tuesday into

a drumming circle of healing.

A day later, Ontario paramedic chiefs association president Greg Sage honored Carlson's efforts on the airplane with a certificate.

"I think every single one of us in this room would hope that if we personally were faced with what Pete was, that we would respond in a similar manner," Sage said. "I think he's inspired all of us."

Carlson's trip to Toronto began with a hug with Nolan during a very trying time. Two days later, the two shared a more joyous hug onstage after Carlson accepted his award to a standing ovation.

"I was not as present the last couple of days as I had hoped to be," Carlson apologized to the crowd.

"Given the events as they've played out, I can't think of a better group of people in terms of taking care of one another in their community and myself," Carlson said. "So just a very big thank you."

Scottish Highland bull on the loose in Connecticut's rural hill country

KENT, Conn. (AP) — A Scottish Highland bull is the talk of the town in the rural hills of western Connecticut, where it has been roaming for over a month in the frigid winter weather after escaping from its confines.

Local residents have reported sporadic sightings, including a few over the past week, said Lee Sohl, the animal control officer in Kent. It was recently seen just over the town line in New Milford.

"People keep spotting it and they don't know that people are looking for it," Sohl said in a phone interview Thursday. "If somebody calls me about a sighting, then I tell the owner and they've been doing their best. They run right out and try to get to it. But it's hard. It's hard in this weather, and it's very scared."

The owner, Jo Ann Joray, said there have been people out looking for the bull, but they haven't been able to catch it.

Photos posted on social media by people who have spotted the bull have drawn a range of comments, from ones expressing sympathy for its plight, to others saying the bull is adorable to one saying it would produce good steaks.

Stray farm animals are nothing new in the area. Cows, horses and goats get loose on occasion, Sohl said. "That's just where we live," she said.

The bull's story evoked memories of Buddy the beefalo, a bison hybrid who roamed the woods in central Connecticut for months in 2020 and 2021 after escaping on the way to the slaughterhouse. Buddy was eventually caught and moved to a Florida animal sanctuary.

Scottish Highland cattle are known as a hardy breed that can live outside all year, according to the Highland Cattle Society in Scotland. That's good for the Connecticut bull because temperatures have been below freezing for several days.

Vatican says Pope Francis is 'improving slightly' as cardinals acknowledge resignation is possible

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis' overall clinical condition is "improving slightly" and his heart is working well as he battles pneumonia, the Vatican said Thursday, as some of his cardinals cheered him on and insisted that the Catholic Church was very much alive and well even in his absence.

In a late update, Vatican spokesman Matteo Bruni said Francis has no fever and that his key heart parameters "continue to be stable."

The 88-year-old pope was admitted to the hospital on Feb. 14 after a case of bronchitis worsened; doctors later diagnosed the onset of pneumonia in both lungs on top of asthmatic bronchitis and prescribed "absolute rest."

"If you really want him to rest, you have to hospitalize him," quipped Cardinal Jean-Marc Aveline, the archbishop of Marseille, France, referring to Francis' work ethic.

Aveline was speaking at a Vatican news conference about a Mediterranean youth peace initiative alongside

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his counterpart from Barcelona, Cardinal Juan José Omella. But given the limited amount of information about Francis' condition, they were peppered with questions about the pope's health and whether he might decide to resign if he doesn't recover fully.

"Everything is possible," Aveline said.

Regardless, Omella insisted that the life of the church continued even with Francis in the hospital.

"Popes change, we bishops change, priests in parishes change, communities change. But the train continues being on the move," Omella said.

Another cardinal, Gianfranco Ravasi, had commented earlier in the day on the possibility of resignation when asked if Francis might decide to follow in the footsteps of Pope Benedict XVI and step down if he becomes too ill. Benedict became the first pope in 600 years to retire when he concluded in 2013 that he didn't have the physical strength to carry on the rigors of the globe-trotting papacy.

"There is no question that if he (Francis) was in a situation where his ability to have direct contact (with people) as he likes to do ... was compromised, then I think he might decide to resign," Ravasi was quoted as telling RTL 102.5 radio.

Francis has already confirmed that shortly after being elected pontiff he wrote a resignation letter in case medical problems impeded him from carrying out his duties. There is no provision in canon law for what to do if a pope becomes incapacitated.

There is no indication Francis is in anyway incapacitated. Bruni said he woke up Thursday, got out of bed and had breakfast in an armchair, and worked from his hospital room with his aides. Blood tests have showed a "slight improvement" in some inflammation indices but it will still be some time before doctors will know if the various therapies are working.

The pope had an acute case of pneumonia in 2023 and is prone to respiratory infections in winter.

Doctors say pneumonia in such a fragile, elderly patient makes him particularly prone to complications given the difficulty in being able to effectively expel fluid from his lungs. While his heart is strong, Francis isn't a particularly healthy 88-year-old. He is overweight, isn't physically active, uses a wheelchair because of bad knees, had part of one lung removed as a young man, and has admitted to being a not-terribly-cooperative patient in the past.

Archbishop Giuseppe Satriano of Bari said he was sad that Francis was sick and that rumors about his condition were circulating, but confident he would recover. He recalled that Francis proved the naysayers wrong when he completed a gruelling four-nation trip to Asia in September.

"Even during the long trip in Asia, the Swiss Guards and gendarmes came back more tired than he, and we all feared he'd come back destroyed," Satriano said. "But he's a fighter, so I think he'll win this battle."

In the Trump administration, nearly every major department is an immigration agency

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Drug Enforcement Administration agents touting immigration arrests, IRS agents poring over documents, the military escorting deportation flights. As the Trump administration works on the president's pledge to crack down on illegal immigration and carry out mass deportations, the flurry of activity has stretched across the federal government — well beyond the Department of Homeland Security, the traditional home to most immigration and border security functions.

President Donald Trump's sweeping promises have translated into a whole-of-government approach for immigration enforcement. In other words, nearly every major Cabinet agency is an immigration agency in Trump's government.

The departments of State, Defense and Justice have made immigration a clear priority in their work and public messaging. Parts of the departments of Treasury and Health and Human Services have been involved. And the reach and focus on immigration are only expected to grow, with the Republican president late Wednesday signing an executive order aimed at ending federal benefits for people in the U.S. illegally.

"The breadth of what is happening in these first couple of weeks is much wider than we saw during the

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first Trump administration," said Colleen Putzel-Kavanaugh, associate policy analyst with the Migration Policy Institute.

Here's a look at how immigration enforcement is playing out across the federal government.

Immigration as a State Department priority

Trump has promised "mass deportations," which means not only arresting as many people in the U.S. illegally as possible but also figuring out how to remove them from the country.

That's where the State Department comes in.

Marco Rubio's first international trip as secretary of state was to Central America, and he came away with deals for Guatemala, Panama and El Salvador to accept deportees from other nations. That helps officials address a key barrier: Many countries don't take back their citizens when deported.

Other issues were part of Rubio's trip — Chinese influence on the Panama Canal, for example — but migration was at the top of his agenda.

Tom Warrick, a former top DHS counterterrorism official who's now at the Atlantic Council, a nonpartisan think tank, said that wasn't always the case.

"For DHS, for ICE in particular, it's, 'What do you need foreign countries to do? OK. State Department, it's now your requirement to go out and make that your top priority,'" he said.

Trump's pick for Rubio's deputy, Christopher Landau, was ambassador to Mexico from 2019 to 2021 and played a key role in implementing the Remain in Mexico policy, and, like Rubio, speaks fluent Spanish.

That's another sign of immigration's importance, said Mark Krikorian, executive director of the Center for Immigration Studies, which advocates for less immigration.

"Just the fact that the two of them are the No. 1 and 2 people in the State Department suggests the administration's refocus on our own backyard," Krikorian said. "And immigration control is a big part of that."

And from the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service, 600 agents were deputized Tuesday by Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem to assist in "arresting and deporting" people in the country illegally.

A ramped-up military role

The Defense Department has played a border security role since the administration of George W. Bush, with active-duty and National Guard troops sent to the U.S.-Mexico border to back up Border Patrol agents.

But this administration has taken early high-profile steps that go further.

The Pentagon has beefed up the number of troops at the border and promised more. Instead of relying solely on Immigration and Customs Enforcement charter flights, Air Force planes have been used to carry out 26 deportation flights — a rare step.

In his first trip as secretary of defense, Pete Hegseth visited troops on the border and said all department assets were on the table to assist. That includes Guantanamo Bay, where officials have sent 13 deportation flights of migrants they call "the worst of the worst" — though they've given little information about their identities or any crimes.

The administration's Jan. 20 executive orders outline other possible changes for the Defense Department.

Trump's declaration of a national emergency at the southern border indicates he may redirect money for border wall construction, something he did during his first term. And he gave Hegseth and Noem 90 days for recommendations on what's needed to take complete control of the southern border, including whether to invoke the Insurrection Act. That would allow officials to circumvent rules limiting military involvement in civilian law-enforcement duties.

Warrick said the general public has largely been OK with the Pentagon taking part "behind the scenes," but that might change if the role becomes more visible.

"There's a very clear line that exists in the mind of the American people who do not want to see uniformed military people arresting migrants, especially in their homes and schools and houses of worship," Warrick said.

Justice Department and 'sanctuary cities'

A few days after being sworn into office, Attorney General Pam Bondi took aim at what the administration considers a key impediment: cities and states that don't work with immigration enforcement to identify and deport people in the country illegally. These are often called sanctuary cities.

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Bondi announced a lawsuit targeting New York's attorney general and governor over a state law allowing people who might not be in the U.S. legally to get driver's licenses. Days earlier, another Justice Department lawsuit targeted Chicago and Illinois, alleging that their "sanctuary" laws "thwart federal efforts.

"This is a new DOJ," said Bondi, appearing with Tammy Nobles, whose 20-year-old daughter Kayla was killed in 2022 by a man who entered the U.S. illegally from El Salvador.

Agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation; Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives; and Drug Enforcement Administration have taken part in high-profile ICE operations to find and arrest migrants in the country illegally.

Putzel-Kavanaugh said those agencies used to play roles in line with their priorities, such as pursuing a drug charge. Now, it's a "much more highly publicized and much more singularly focused agenda for the DOJ," she said.

The administration also has tapped the Department of Justice's Bureau of Prisons to hold detained migrants, beefing up Immigration and Customs Enforcement's detention capacity.

Other departments are involved, too

Even the Internal Revenue Service has been brought in as part of immigration enforcement — Noem asked the arm of the Treasury Department to help target employers engaged in unlawful hiring practices and to monitor immigrants in the country illegally.

And the administration this week suspended a program run out of the Department of Health and Human Services that provides legal services to migrant children traveling alone.

What might be next?

Krikorian said he's looking for the Department of Labor to take on a greater role, especially as worksite enforcement becomes a bigger administration strategy.

And for the Education Department, with Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency accessing federal student loan data that includes their parents' citizenship status, student advocates worry the administration will use that information to identify people in the country illegally.

In the executive order signed Wednesday, Trump seeks to end "all taxpayer-funded benefits for illegal aliens," but it wasn't clear which benefits would be targeted. People in the country illegally generally do not qualify except for emergency medical care. Children are entitled to a free K-12 public education regardless of immigration status under a 1982 Supreme Court ruling.

The order directs all departments and agencies to identify federal benefit spending that is inconsistent with a 1996 welfare law that denies most public benefits to people in the country illegally.

Robot umpires are getting their first MLB test during spring training

By RONALD BLUM AP Baseball Writer

TAMPA, Fla. (AP) — A computerized system that calls balls and strikes is being tested during Major League Baseball spring training exhibition games starting Thursday after four years of experiments in the minor leagues.

Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred is an advocate of the Automated Ball-Strike System, which potentially as early as 2026 could be used to aid MLB home plate umpires, but not replace them.

Starting in 2024, MLB focused testing on a challenge system in which the human umpire makes each original call. Data from the spring training test could cause MLB to make alterations to the system for Triple-A games this season.

How does the Automated Ball-Strike System work?

Stadiums are outfitted with cameras that track each pitch and judge whether it crossed home plate within the strike zone. In early testing, umpires wore ear buds and would hear "ball" or "strike," then relay that to players and fans with traditional hand signals.

The challenge system adds a wrinkle. During spring training, human umps will call every pitch, but each team will have the ability to challenge two calls per game, with no additions for extra innings. A team

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retains its challenge if successful, similar to the regulations for big league teams with video reviews, which were first used for home run calls in August 2008 and widely expanded to many calls for the 2014 season.

Only a batter, pitcher or catcher may challenge a call, signaling with the tap of a helmet or cap; and assistance from the dugout is not allowed. A challenge must be made within 2 seconds, and the graphic of the pitch and strike zone will be shown on the scoreboard and broadcast feed. The umpire then announces the updated count.

MLB estimates the process averages 17 seconds.

Where will ABS be tested?

MLB has installed the system in 13 spring training ballparks that are home to 19 teams. The Florida stadiums, all in the Florida State League, are the stadiums of Detroit, Minnesota, the New York Mets, New York Yankees, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Toronto, plus the ballpark shared by Miami and St. Louis.

Five test sites in Arizona all are shared: the Diamondbacks/Colorado, Chicago White Sox/Los Angeles Dodgers, Cleveland/Cincinnati, Kansas City/Texas and Seattle/San Diego.

About 60% of spring training games are slated for trial, although teams could play vastly different numbers of games with ABS testing. The Diamondbacks are slated for 29 ABS games, while the Cubs have just seven.

What is the technology?

A Hawk-Eye pose-tracking system of cameras was installed and used to track pitches and whether they are within a strike zone based on the height of each batter, who is measured without shoes before a team's first test game. MLB estimated the calibration process at less than one minute for each player.

There are eight cameras at most of the spring training ballparks in the test and 12 at the Diamondbacks/Rockies stadium.

While the strike zone actually called by big league umpires tends to be oval in shape, the ABS strike zone is a rectangle, as in the rule book.

Developing a consensus on what a computer strike zone should be has been an issue.

When did MLB first start using ABS?

MLB started experimenting with ball/strike technology at the independent Atlantic League in 2019.

A challenge system was tried in 2021 at eight of nine ballparks that make up the Florida State League. ABS was promoted to five Triple-A parks in 2022 and expanded to all Triple-A stadiums in 2023, the robot alone for the first three games of each series and a human with a challenge system in the final three. That system was in place at the start of 2024, but MLB switched to an all-challenge system last June 25.

How successful were teams with challenges last year?

Overall return rate over the full Triple-A season was 51%, with challenges by the defense winning 54% and by the offense winning 48%. Challenges with the two-challenge limit in place averaged 3.9 per game, including 2.2 by the offense.

The success percentage has been slightly better for video reviews in the major leagues. Teams increased their success rate on video reviews to 53.7% last season, led by the Boston Red Sox at 67.9%.

Just 1.6% of first pitches were challenges, but the figure increased to 3.9% for two-strike pitches, 5.2% for three-ball pitches and 8.2% for full counts.

Challenge percentages were more likely later in the game. While 1.9% of pitches were challenged in the first three innings, 2.5% were challenged from the fourth through the sixth, 2.8% in the seventh and eighth and 3.6% in the ninth.

How has the computer strike zone changed over time?

MLB has changed the shape of the ABS strike zone several times.

It started with a 19-inch width in 2022, then dropped it to 17 inches — matching the width of home plate. Narrowing the strike zone led to an increase in walks and only small changes in strikeout rates.

The top of the strike zone was 51% of a batter's height in 2022 and 2023, then raised to 53.5% in 2024 after pitchers' complaints the top had been too low. The bottom of the strike zone has been 27% since 2022 after initially being set at 28%.

A batter's stance is not taken into account.

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ABS makes the ball/strike decision at the midpoint of the plate, 8 1/2 inches from the front and 8 1/2 inches from the back. The contrasts with the rule book zone called by umpires, which says the zone is a cube, and a strike is a pitch that crosses any part.

Strikeout rates increased 0.5% and walk rates rose 1% in full ABS games and 0.8% in challenge games. How will ABS impact broadcasts?

Concerned the strike zone box on broadcasts could tip whether to challenge and cause fans to yell at players to challenge, MLB plans to experiment with several broadcast alternatives, among them: show the box but not the ball; show the ball but not the box; and to show only corners of the box.

How can players give feedback?

Dugout iPads available to all teams will have an application called ProTABS that allows players to check pitches against their individual strike zone. Information will update after every plate appearance and players can give MLB comment on single pitches and the overall system.

EU official meets with Trump counterparts to resolve tariff threats

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Hoping to head off a potential trade conflict, a top European Union official stressed the importance of active engagement and fairness in trade during a four-hour meeting with Trump administration officials.

“The top objective as it was presented to us yesterday by our American partners is reciprocity,” Maroš Šefčovič, the European commissioner for trade and economic security, told reporters at a Thursday briefing.

Šefčovič met on Wednesday with Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick, White House National Economic Council Director Kevin Hassett and Jamieson Greer, President Donald Trump’s nominee to be the U.S. trade representative.

Trump has thrown the decades long partnership between the U.S. and Europe into turmoil by pledging to charge higher taxes on imports from Europe that he says would match the tariffs faced by American products.

But Trump’s plan for fair tariffs would also include the value added tax — which is akin to a sales tax — charged in Europe that could drastically push up import taxes and potentially trigger a broader trade conflict if the EU imposed retaliatory measures. A broader trade war risks both an economic slowdown and higher inflation that could create financial challenges for millions of families and potentially hurt political support for Trump, as voters in 2024’s election specifically wanted him to lower price pressures.

Trump has also proposed separate sectoral tariffs on autos, pharmaceutical drugs and computer chips, in addition to having already imposed 25% steel and aluminum tariffs with no avenues to provide exceptions or exemptions.

The U.S. president also has tariffs ready on Mexico and Canada over his claims that more should be done on illegal immigration and drug smuggling, though he suspended those tariffs for 30 days for ongoing talks. The import taxes that could potentially harm the U.S. auto sector and other industries could potentially begin in March.

At Thursday’s White House news briefing, Hassett said that a Mexican delegation had talks with Lutnick and him about resolving the issues.

“We want trade to be fair,” Hassett said.

The EU official tried in his conversation with White House officials to equate the value added tax as similar to a sales tax as its paid by the final consumer, but he said that the issue had not been resolved.

Šefčovič also said they discussed the industrial overcapacity of China, particularly in steel, and that the U.S. and EU should work together to tackle that problem, instead of targeting each other.

He stressed that the meeting ended with a focus on looking for ways to “generate positive momentum,” adding that the EU would like to “see where we can, like, move first and fast, because I really would like to avoid the pain of measures and countermeasures.”

The EU official said it was critical to establish a personal relationship with his U.S. counterparts.

"I'm glad that it happened and that we could have such an intense meeting," he said. "Now, I think we will both be thinking how to keep the momentum going on and how to hopefully avoid I would say, the pain."

Snowy roads lead to hundreds of Virginia and North Carolina crashes as Arctic air brings record cold

By BEN FINLEY, MAKIYA SEMINERA and SARAH BRUMFIELD Associated Press
NORFOLK, Va. (AP) — Roads in Virginia and North Carolina remained treacherous Thursday as unusually heavy snow led to hundreds of accidents, including crashes on an interstate that involved more than 50 vehicles. Meanwhile, a polar vortex sent temperatures plunging from the Northern Great Plains all the way to Louisiana.

Two separate collisions stopped traffic on Interstate 40 in Orange County, North Carolina, on Wednesday afternoon and the stopped vehicles were struck from behind, including a tractor trailer that hit a passenger vehicle, causing a fatality, according to the North Carolina State Highway Patrol. A total of 53 vehicles were involved in 12 crashes in the area, the highway patrol said. The driver of the tractor trailer was charged with misdemeanor death by motor vehicle and exceeding a safe speed for conditions.

The highway patrol responded to nearly 1,200 collisions statewide on Wednesday, according to Sgt. Christopher Knox. Crashes on Wednesday also closed portions of Interstate 95 and I-85 near Raleigh, North Carolina.

Virginia State Police reported early Thursday that there had been well over 800 crashes statewide since heavy snow pounded parts of the mid-Atlantic on Wednesday. At least 45 crashes involved injuries but no fatalities.

Emergency workers in Suffolk, Virginia, rescued two people from an SUV that crashed into water on Wednesday afternoon, according to the city's Department of Fire & Rescue. Photos the department posted on social media showed rescuers stretching a ladder to the vehicle's roof and helping one person clinging to the roof rails crawl across the ladder to land.

Wednesday's snowfall in Norfolk, Virginia, ranked as the eighth-highest, one-day snowfall total the coastal city has ever recorded, Weather Prediction Center meteorologist Scott Kleebauer said. Norfolk officially recorded about 10.2 inches (about 26 centimeters) of snow, he said.

High snowfall isn't unprecedented, he said, but it's "certainly rare."

"This is probably one of those one-in-10-years type storm," Kleebauer said.

Children in the city of 230,000 on the Chesapeake Bay used boogie boards to sled down a small hill, while some adults cleared off cars with leaf blowers. Many roadways were still covered in slush, if not snow, while authorities urged everyone to stay off the roads to give plows time to come through.

Mary Stokes, whose family owns a small environmental consulting firm, said employees weren't able to go out into the field to conduct mold testing and other types of work to help homeowners and businesses stay compliant with environmental laws.

"We're obviously not going to make them take a vacation day when they physically can't come to work," Stokes said while clearing off her SUV. "But we're not making any money. It can definitely be a financial hit."

Jared Brooks, a surgeon at a local hospital, predicted that schools wouldn't reopen in Norfolk until at least Monday. The temperature wasn't expected to rise above freezing on Thursday.

"People aren't used to driving in these kinds of conditions," Brooks said while shoveling the sidewalk outside of his house. "And they just don't slow down appropriately. And they get kind of crazy. People just need to stay home and not even try to drive unless they have to."

Schools were closed or relying on remote learning throughout large parts of Virginia and North Carolina, while several thousand electric customers were without power Thursday morning. About 1,800 flights were canceled or delayed on Thursday across the U.S., including about 250 flights in and out of Charlotte Douglas International Airport in North Carolina, according to the flight-tracking site FlightAware.com.

Meanwhile, an arctic air mass was bringing widespread, record-breaking cold to the central United

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States, and forecasters expected some locations in the Plains and Lower Mississippi Valley to experience their coldest temperatures on record this late in the season, according to the Weather Prediction Center. In Detroit, crews are fixing a large water main break that left dozens of people without power and heat amid temperatures well below freezing.

Frigid temperatures broke daily cold records Thursday across 45 weather stations ranging from North Dakota to Louisiana, Kleebauer said. Parts of Texas also broke daily cold records set in 2021 when a deadly winter storm caused the state's power grid to mostly collapse.

In Nebraska, Grand Island set a new record for Feb. 20 of minus 24 Fahrenheit (minus 31 Celsius), breaking the old record of minus 11 F (minus 24 C) set in 1938, while Hastings set a new record of minus 20 F (minus 29 C), eclipsing the record of minus 12 F (minus 24 C) in 1918. In Missouri, new record lows were set in several cities, including Springfield at minus 12 F, breaking the record of 7 F (minus 14 C) in 1918, and Joplin at minus 9 F (minus 23 C), breaking the record low of 16 F in 1963, 1978 and 2021.

The National Weather Service in Dodge City, Kansas, was forecasting one more day of dangerous cold for western Kansas, with wind chills dropping below minus 20 F in some locations Thursday morning. Wichita schools have been closed due to the cold since Tuesday, while many other Kansas schools opened late on Thursday.

But a "big change" is on the horizon, Kleebauer said. Thursday is expected to be the "last truly cold day" across the country as temperatures rise next week, he said.

New York sues vape distributors over Elf Bar and other fruit and candy e-cigarettes

By MATTHEW PERRONE AP Health Writer

New York on Thursday sued some of the country's biggest distributors of electronic cigarettes, accusing the companies of violating state laws that prohibit the sale of vaping flavors and designs that appeal to children.

Attorney General Letitia James announced the lawsuit targeting middlemen that distribute fruit- and candy-flavored e-cigarettes like Puff Bar and Elf Bar to hundreds of convenience stores and gas stations across the state. The approach differs from past litigation by New York and other states, which targeted vaping manufacturers, such as Juul Labs.

Widely blamed for sparking the teen vaping trend, Juul has paid more than \$1 billion to settle dozens of state and local lawsuits and investigations into its early marketing practices, which included launch parties and product giveaways. The company stopped selling flavors like mango and mint in 2019 and is no longer popular with teens.

Instead, Chinese-made disposable e-cigarettes like Elf Bar have become the top choice among high school and middle school students. None of the products are approved by federal health regulators but they continue shipping into the U.S., often mislabeled as batteries, cell phones or other products.

The state's nearly 200-page legal complaint points to "widespread evidence of illegal conduct, including documents showing illegal shipments of flavored vapes to New York." The filing also includes photos of brightly colored e-cigarettes that resemble soft drinks and candy and come in flavors like "fruity bears freeze," "cotton candy," and "strawberry cereal donut milk."

New York banned all vaping flavors other than tobacco in 2020.

"For too long, these companies have disregarded our laws in order to profit off of our young people, but we will not risk the health and safety of our kids," James said in a statement.

The lawsuit seeks hundreds of millions of dollars in damages from the companies, as well as a permanent ban on their sales of flavored vapes in New York.

Companies named in the lawsuit include Demand Vape of New York, Evo Brands of California, Safa Goods of Florida and Midwest Goods of Illinois.

Calls and messages to the companies were not immediately returned Thursday morning.

According to the lawsuit "Demand Vape maintains close ties with international manufacturers, such that its co-founder routinely travels to China where Demand Vape's products originate to direct flavor development and marketing."

In 2022 litigation, the co-founder of Buffalo-based Demand Vape told a federal judge that his company had sold more than \$132 million worth of Elf Bar e-cigarettes in the past year. The company that makes Elf Bar is based in Shenzhen, China, and sells flavors including "strawberry mango" and "lemon mint."

Despite the continued availability of disposable e-cigarettes, the vaping rate among U.S. teens has fallen to a 10-year low of under 6%, according to federal figures released last year. Government health officials attribute the drop to more aggressive U.S. enforcement, including hundreds of warning letters sent to retail stores selling unauthorized vaping products.

Yoon appears in 2 different South Korean courts while defending his martial law decree

By KIM TONG-HYUNG Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea (AP) — Shuttled around Seoul in a prison transport vehicle, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol appeared in two different courts on Thursday, contesting his arrest on rebellion charges in one and fighting an effort to remove him from office in the other.

Both cases — one on criminal charges, one an impeachment — are related to his brief imposition of martial law in December.

Security was heightened at the Seoul Central District Court as the motorcade transporting Yoon arrived for a preliminary hearing that involved discussions of witnesses, proposed evidence and other preparations for his criminal trial.

The court, which scheduled another preliminary hearing in March, was also reviewing a request by Yoon's lawyers to revoke his arrest order and release him from custody. Such challenges are rarely successful.

The court did not specify when it would make a decision on the request but asked both Yoon's defense team and the prosecutors to submit further written submissions within 10 days.

Yoon next traveled across the capital to the Constitutional Court, which is nearing a decision on whether to formally remove him from office after was impeached by the National Assembly. During the hearing on Thursday, the court said it will hold final arguments on the case on Feb. 25, which possibly sets up a decision sometime in March.

Yoon temporarily left the courtroom when Prime Minister Han Duck-soo appeared as a witness. Yoon's lawyer explained to the justices that his client believed it would damage the country's image if both were seen in court together.

Han supported Yoon's claim that the liberal opposition, with its legislative majority, had disrupted state affairs through pushing for impeachments of senior officials and undermining the government budget.

However, Han repeated his previous statements to lawmakers and investigators that Yoon had possibly violated constitutional requirements by failing to deliberate in a formal Cabinet meeting before declaring martial law on Dec. 3. Han said he didn't know of any Cabinet member who expressed support of Yoon's step.

Yoon returned to the courtroom as the justices called another witness, Hong Jang-won, former first deputy director of South Korea's spy agency.

During the hearing, Hong maintained his earlier testimony that Yoon ordered him to help a defense counterintelligence unit detain key politicians, including National Assembly Speaker Woo Won Shik and opposition leader Lee Jae-myung. Visibly irritated, Yoon denied ordering anyone's arrest and accused Hong of lying and fabricating evidence.

After the hearing, Yoon's motorcade took him back to a detention center near Seoul.

Yoon was indicted Jan. 26 on rebellion charges, which carry a potential punishment of death or life in prison. In South Korea, presidents have immunity from most criminal prosecutions, but not on charges

of rebellion or treason.

The indictment alleges his imposition of martial law was an illegal attempt to shut down the National Assembly and arrest politicians and election authorities. The conservative Yoon has said his martial law declaration was intended as a temporary warning to the liberal opposition and that he had always planned to respect lawmakers' will if they voted to lift the measure.

Yoon's presidential powers were suspended when he was impeached Dec. 14, leaving him to fight for his political life at the Constitutional Court.

Martial law was lifted about six hours after Yoon declared it but has caused political turmoil, disrupted high-level diplomacy and tested the resiliency of the country's democracy. Yoon's conservative supporters rioted at the Seoul Western District Court after it authorized his arrest last month, while his lawyers and ruling party have openly questioned the credibility of courts and law enforcement institutions handling the case.

Yoon has continued to express contempt for his liberal rivals for obstructing his agenda and endorsed baseless conspiracy theories about election fraud to justify his ill-fated authoritarian push.

Yoon's defense minister, police chief and several military commanders have also been arrested and indicted on rebellion, abuse of power and other charges related to the martial law decree, which involved hundreds of heavily armed troops deployed to the National Assembly and National Election Commission offices.

Ancient deity, pet and endangered species. Why is axolotl Mexico's most beloved amphibian?

By MARÍA TERESA HERNÁNDEZ Associated Press

MEXICO CITY (AP) — Legend has it the axolotl was not always an amphibian. Long before it became Mexico's most beloved salamander and efforts to prevent its extinction flourished, it was a sneaky god.

"It's an interesting little animal," said Yanet Cruz, head of the Chinampaxóchitl Museum in Mexico City.

Its exhibitions focus on axolotl and chinampas, the pre-Hispanic agricultural systems resembling floating gardens that still function in Xochimilco, a neighborhood on Mexico City's outskirts famed for its canals.

"Despite there being many varieties, the axolotl from the area is a symbol of identity for the native people," said Cruz, who participated in activities hosted at the museum to celebrate "Axolotl Day" in early February.

While there are no official estimates of the current axolotl population, the species *Ambystoma mexicanum* — endemic of central Mexico — has been catalogued as "critically endangered" by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species since 2019. And though biologists, historians and officials have led efforts to save the species and its habitat from extinction, a parallel, unexpected preservation phenomenon has emerged.

Axolotl attracted international attention after Minecraft added them to its game in 2021 and Mexicans went crazy about them that same year, following the Central Bank's initiative to print it on the 50-peso bill. "That's when the 'axolotlmania' thrived," Cruz said.

All over Mexico, the peculiar, dragon-like amphibian can be spotted in murals, crafts and socks. Selected bakeries have caused a sensation with its axolotl-like bites. Even a local brewery — "Ajolote" in Spanish — took its name from the salamander to honor Mexican traditions.

Before the Spaniards conquered Mexico-Tenochtitlan in the 16th century, axolotl may not have had archeological representations as did Tláloc — god of rain in the Aztec worldview — or Coyolxauhqui — its lunar goddess — but it did appear in ancient Mesoamerican documents.

In the Nahuatl myth of the Fifth Sun, pre-Hispanic god Nanahuatzin threw himself into a fire, reemerged as the sun and commanded fellow gods to replicate his sacrifice to bring movement to the world. All complied but Xólotl, a deity associated with the evening star, who fled.

"He was hunted down and killed," said Arturo Montero, archeologist of the National Commission of Protected Natural Areas. "And from his death came a creature: axolotl."

According to Montero, the myth implies that, after a god's passing, its essence gets imprisoned in a mundane creature, subject to the cycles of life and death. Axolotl then carries within itself the Xolotl deity,

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and when the animal dies and its divine substance transits to the underworld, it later resurfaces to the earth and a new axolotl is born.

"Axolotl is the twin of maize, agave and water," Montero said.

Current fascination toward axolotl and its rise to sacred status in pre-Hispanic times is hardly a coincidence. It was most likely sparked by its exceptional biological features, Montero said.

Through the glass of a fish tank, where academic institutions preserve them and hatcheries put them up for sale, axolotl are hard to spot. Their skin is usually dark to mimic stones — though an albino, pinkish variety can be bred — and they can stay still for hours, buried in the muddy ground of their natural habitats or barely moving at the bottom of their tanks in captivity.

Aside from their lungs, they breathe through their gills and skin, which allows them to adapt to its aquatic environment. And they can regenerate parts of its heart, spinal cord and brain.

"This species is quite peculiar," said biologist Arturo Vergara, who supervises axolotl preservation efforts in various institutions and cares after specimens for sale at a hatchery in Mexico City.

Depending on the species, color and size, Axolotl's prices at Ambystomania — where Vergara works — start at 200 pesos (\$10 US). Specimens are available for sale when they reach four inches in length and are easy pets to look after, Vergara said.

"While they regularly have a 15-years life span (in captivity), we've had animals that have lived up to 20," he added. "They are very long-lived, though in their natural habitat they probably wouldn't last more than three or four years."

The species on display at the museum — one of 17 known varieties in Mexico — is endemic to lakes and canals that are currently polluted. A healthy population of axolotl would likely struggle to feed or reproduce.

"Just imagine the bottom of a canal in areas like Xochimilco, Tlahuac, Chalco, where there's an enormous quantity of microbes," Vergara said.

Under ideal conditions, an axolotl could heal itself from snake or heron biting and survive the dry season buried in the mud. But a proper aquatic environment is needed for that to happen.

"Efforts to preserve axolotl go hand in hand with preserving the chinampas," Cruz said at the museum, next to a display featuring salamander-shaped dolls. "We work closely with the community to convince them that this is an important space."

Chinampas are not only where axolotl lay its eggs, but areas where pre-Hispanic communities grew maize, chili, beans and zucchini, and some of Xochimilco's current population grow vegetables despite environmental threats.

"Many chinampas are dry and don't produce food anymore," Cruz said. "And where some chinampas used to be, one can now see soccer camps."

For her, like for Vergara, preserving axolotl is not an end, but a means for saving the place where the amphibian came to be.

"This great system (chinampas) is all that's left from the lake city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, so I always tell our visitors that Xochimilco is a living archeological zone," Cruz said. "If we, as citizens, don't take care of what's ours, it will be lost."

Trump backs idea to send some DOGE savings to American citizens

By CHRIS MEGERIAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said that he likes the idea of giving some of the savings from Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency back to U.S. citizens as a kind of dividend.

He said at an investment conference in Miami on Wednesday that the administration is considering a concept in which 20% of the savings produced by DOGE's cost-cutting efforts goes to American citizens and another 20% goes to paying down the national debt.

Trump also said the potential for dividend payments would incentivize people to report wasteful spending.

"They'll be reporting it themselves," Trump said. "They participate in the process of saving us money."

Later, as he flew back to Washington aboard Air Force One, he was asked by a reporter about the plan

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floated by Musk.

"I love it," the Republican president told reporters on the plane.

A day earlier, Musk wrote on his social media platform that he "will check with the President" in response to a suggestion that Trump and Musk should announce a "DOGE Dividend" that would send a refund to taxpayers from part of the savings created by DOGE. Its efforts have already led to thousands of federal government employees being fired or laid off.

Today in History: February 21 Malcolm X was shot and killed at age 39

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Feb. 21, the 52nd day of 2025. There are 313 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 21, 1965, civil rights activist Malcolm X, 39, was shot to death inside Harlem's Audubon Ballroom in New York. Three men identified as members of the Nation of Islam were convicted of murder and imprisoned; all were eventually paroled. (The convictions of two of the men were dismissed in November 2021, when prosecutors said new evidence had undermined the case against them.)

Also on this date:

In 1885, President Chester Arthur dedicated the Washington Monument.

In 1911, composer Gustav Mahler, despite a fever, conducted the New York Philharmonic at Carnegie Hall in what turned out to be his final concert. (He died the following May.)

In 1916, the Battle of Verdun, the longest battle of World War I, began in northeastern France.

In 1972, President Richard M. Nixon began a historic visit to China, where he met with Chinese leader Mao Zedong.

In 1973, Israeli fighter planes shot down Libyan Arab Airlines Flight 114 over the Sinai Desert, killing all but five of the 113 people on board.

In 1975, former Attorney General John N. Mitchell, former White House Chief of Staff H.R. Haldeman, and former White House Domestic Affairs Adviser John D. Ehrlichman were sentenced to 2 1/2 to 8 years in prison for their roles in the Watergate cover-up. (Each ended up serving less than two years.)

In 1992, Kristi Yamaguchi of the United States won the gold medal in women's figure skating at the Albertville Winter Olympics; Midori Ito of Japan won the silver, Nancy Kerrigan of the U.S. the bronze.

In 1995, Chicago adventurer Steve Fossett became the first person to fly solo across the Pacific Ocean by balloon, landing in Leader, Saskatchewan, Canada. after a 5,400 mile, four-day flight from South Korea.

Today's birthdays: Film and music executive David Geffen is 82. Actor Tyne Daly is 79. Actor Anthony Daniels is 79. Actor William Petersen is 72. Actor Kelsey Grammer is 70. Country musician Mary Chapin Carpenter is 67. Baseball Hall of Famer Alan Trammell is 67. Actor William Baldwin is 62. Democratic Sen. Mark Kelly of Arizona is 61. Actor Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor is 56. Musician Rhiannon Giddens is 48. Actor Tituss Burgess is 46. Actor Jennifer Love Hewitt is 46. Filmmaker-comedian Jordan Peele is 46. Singer Charlotte Church is 39. Actor Elliot Page is 38. Actor Joe Alwyn is 34. Actor Sophie Turner is 29.