

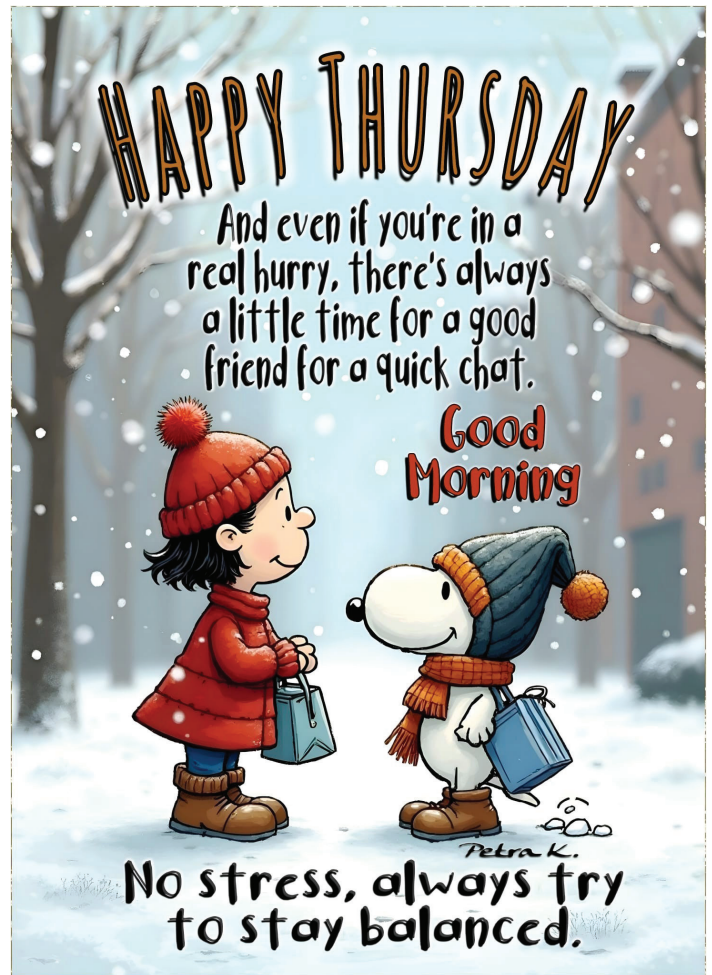
Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 1 of 67

- [1- Upcoming Events](#)
- [2- 1440 News Headlines](#)
- [3- Dog Licenses Due](#)
- [4- Elda Stange's Birthday Ad](#)
- [4- Christmas Holiday Show Ad](#)
- [5- Dacotah Bank Ad](#)
- [6- GDI Fitness Center Ad](#)
- [7- SD SearchLight: Governor awards \\$1 million for business parks in hometown of political opponent](#)
- [8- SD SearchLight: Trump administration tags \\$700 million for regenerative farming](#)
- [9- SD SearchLight: State issues cease-and-desist to national nonprofit sponsoring abortion pill ads](#)
- [11- SD SearchLight: Rare US House bipartisan vote advances bill rejecting Trump federal-worker bargaining ban](#)
- [12- SD SearchLight: Public lands group files suit over new national park pass that features Trump](#)
- [13- SD SearchLight: US House GOP promises vote on reducing health care premiums, but few specifics disclosed](#)
- [15- SD SearchLight: Missouri Sen. Hawley amps up pressure campaign on FDA chief to limit medication abortion](#)
- [16- SD SearchLight: Senator requests investigation into South Dakota mail delays](#)
- [17- SD SearchLight: Another judge grants request to unseal Epstein grand jury files](#)
- [18- SD SearchLight: Voting by mail faces uncertain moment ahead of midterm elections](#)
- [22- Weather Pages](#)
- [26- Daily Devotional](#)
- [27- Upcoming Events](#)
- [27- Subscription Form](#)
- [28- Lottery Numbers](#)
- [29- News from the Associated Press](#)

Thurs. Dec. 11

Senior Men: Baked lemon chicken, creamy noodles, tossed salad, fruit, dinner roll.
School Breakfast: Biscuits.
School Lunch: Lasagna bake, corn.
Groton Lions Club Meeting at 104 N main, 6 p.m.
4th Grade Girls' Basketball, 4 p.m.
3rd GBB Practice, 5 p.m.
4th Grade BB, 6 p.m.
MS/HS Christmas Concert, 7 p.m.



Friday, Dec. 12

Senior Menu: Beef stew, Waldorf salad, buttermilk biscuits.

School Breakfast: Doughnuts.

School Lunch: Chicken Fajitas, black beans.

Girls Wrestling @ Webster

Boys and Girls Wrestling at Rapid City Invitational, 11 a.m.

Basketball hosts Hamlin: (GJV at 4 p.m.; BJV at 5 p.m.; Girls Varsity at 6:15 p.m.; Boys Varsity at 7:30 p.m.)

Saturday, Dec. 13

Boys and Girls Wrestling at Rapid City Invitational, 8 a.m.

Northwestern Middle School Girls Basketball

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

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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 2 of 67

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.

ICE Goes Airborne

The Department of Homeland Security signed a \$140M contract to purchase six Boeing 737 planes that the agency will use for deportations, reports revealed yesterday. DHS penned the deal with Daedalus Aviation—a Virginia-based company whose leadership also signed a separate, nearly \$1B contract with the agency to support self-deportations.

DHS facilitated over 1,700 deportation flights to 77 countries since January, per independent analyses. DHS often relies on charter flights to do so, although it has considered purchasing planes from Spirit Airlines (the deal reportedly fell through amid concerns the jets were not functional). DHS aims to facilitate 1 million deportations by the end of President Donald Trump's first year in office; the agency says it has deported more than 579,000 people to date.

The contract was made possible by an influx of funding from the Big Beautiful Bill passed this year. DHS says the fleet will save \$279M annually in taxpayer dollars by improving the efficiency of flight patterns.

Federal Reserve Cuts Rates

The Federal Reserve announced a quarter-percentage-point cut in benchmark rates yesterday, bringing the range to between 3.5% and 3.75%. Markets closed higher on the news (S&P 500 +0.7%, Dow +1.1%, Nasdaq +0.3%).

The decision was unusually split, with the Federal Open Market Committee voting 9-3 for the board's third rate cut this year. Two members voted against the reduction, citing stubborn inflation. A third sought a larger, half-point cut amid concerns of a slowing jobs market. The board signaled rates would likely remain unchanged for the coming months.

The announcement comes as President Donald Trump began holding interviews for the next Federal Reserve chair, slated to replace Jerome Powell when his leadership post ends in May (his term as a governor extends to 2028). National Economic Council Director Kevin Hassett is believed to be the frontrunner among five candidates up for consideration.

Lake Manly Returns

An ancient lake has reemerged in California's Death Valley National Park following record rainfall this year. Between 128,000 and 186,000 years ago, meltwater from ice covering the Sierra Nevada fed rivers that emptied into Badwater Basin, North America's lowest point at 282 feet below sea level. The steady flow sustained Lake Manly, nearly 100 miles long and roughly 600 feet deep. The lake disappeared as Death Valley evolved into the driest place in North America, with some areas receiving under two inches of rain annually. This year, however, the park received 2.41 inches between September and November, marking its wettest autumn on record and triggering the temporary return of a shorter, shallower Lake Manly.

Above-average rainfall periodically brings Lake Manly back, including in 2023 when Hurricane Hilary dumped 2.2 inches of rain on a single August day, allowing visitors to kayak. The steadier pace of this year's rainfall could lead to a wildflower superbloom, last seen in 2016.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 3 of 67

Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Beyoncé will return to Met Gala (May 4) after 10-year absence, serving as co-chair alongside Venus Williams, Nicole Kidman, and Anna Wintour. | Charli XCX appears in three films debuting at Sundance Film Festival (Jan. 22-Feb. 1); see full lineup.

Las Vegas Aces' A'ja Wilson named AP Female Athlete of the Year after winning unprecedented fourth WNBA MVP award and Time's Athlete of the Year title. |

University of Michigan fires head football coach Sherrone Moore after finding evidence of an inappropriate relationship with a staff member.

Sophie Kinsella, bestselling author of "Shopaholic" series, dies at 55 following brain cancer diagnosis. | Jubilant Sykes, a Grammy-nominated opera singer, dies of stab wounds at 71; his son is in custody for suspected homicide.

Science & Technology

Amazon to invest over \$35B in India's AI and cloud infrastructure by 2030, building on nearly \$40B already invested in the country; news comes one day after Microsoft announced a similar \$17.5B investment in India over four years.

Psychiatric geneticists find 14 major psychiatric disorders fall into five categories with distinct genetic profiles, offering an explanation for why some disorders often occur together and supporting a biology-based diagnostic approach.

Archaeologists determine humans learned to make fires 350,000 years earlier than previously thought, following a four-year analysis of 400,000-year-old heat-damaged tools found in eastern England.

Business & Markets

Oracle shares fall over 11% in after-hours trading after the database software maker reports 14% year-over-year revenue growth in the quarter that ended Nov. 30, missing projected 15% growth.

Oil companies offer roughly \$300M for Gulf of Mexico (Gulf of America) drilling rights in the first of 30 planned offshore lease sales and the first such sale since 2023.

Swiss officials say US tariff cut from 39% to 15% will apply retroactively to Nov. 14, the day the countries reached a preliminary deal that ties US duty reductions to a \$200B Swiss investment in the US by the end of 2028.

Politics & World Affairs

US military seizes an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela after President Donald Trump calls on President Nicolás Maduro to step down; Trump suggests strikes on Venezuelan territory could begin "very soon".

House votes 312-112 to pass \$900B bill funding the Defense Department and national security programs. | Federal judge orders the Trump administration to end National Guard deployment in Los Angeles.

Daughter of Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado accepts Nobel Peace Prize on her behalf.

2026 DOG LICENSES DUE BY 12/31/2025

Fines start January 1, 2026



Spayed/Neutered dogs are \$5 per dog, otherwise \$10 per dog. Proof of rabies shot information is REQUIRED!!

Email proof to city. kellie@nvc.net, fax to (605) 397-4498 or bring a copy to City Hall!! Please contact City Hall as soon as possible if you no longer have a dog(s) that were previously licensed!

Questions call (605) 397-8422

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 4 of 67



**ELDA STANGE'S
102nd BIRTHDAY**
is on **Sunday, Dec. 14, 2025.**
Please join us in helping her celebrate her
special day by sending her a card at:
PO Box 305
405 N. 3rd Street
Groton, SD 57445



Christmas Holiday Show!



**Featuring:
The Shaun Johnson Big
Band Experience:
The Holiday Show**

Sunday, December 14, 2025
4pm at the NSU Johnson Fine
Arts Center

Tickets are on sale now!

- \$35/Adult & \$25/Student for non-members on-line or at IDC.
- \$25 for ACCA members (contact a board member or purchase at IDC Box Office for discount pricing.)

www.AberdeenCommunityConcerts.org



DACOTA BANK

HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE

**Cookies &
Calendars**

FRIDAY, DEC. 12

9:00 - 4:00 PM

7 East Hwy 12, Groton

*Stop in lobby for
cookies, coffee and a
2026 calendar!*

MEMBER FDIC

What can \$20 get you?



for
Senior Citizens

or anyone using physical therapy
a gym membership at

15 N Main - Ste. 101

Open 24/7

GDI Living Fitness

Call/Text Paul at 605/397-7460

Call/Text Tina at 605/397-7285

for details



Annual Membership Rates

Student is \$29.82 per month or \$255.60 per year
Single is \$35.15 per month or \$319.50 per year
2-Person is \$55.45 per month or \$575.10 per year
Family is \$67.10 per month or \$702.26 per year

Month-to-Month Rates

Student is \$35.15 per month
Single is \$40.48 per month
2-Person is \$59.78 per month
Family is \$72.43 per month

**While many other rates have gone up, ours has not.
Same rates for several years!**



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Governor awards \$1 million for business parks in hometown of political opponent

Money is pledged from pool of funds controlled solely by state's chief executive

BY: JOHN HULT

Gov. Larry Rhoden awarded \$1 million Wednesday from a fund he controls to help pay for two business parks in the hometown of a political opponent.

Rhoden announced the Future Fund award during an event on the campus of Northern State University in Aberdeen. The city is the business and population center of northeastern South Dakota, but it only has one vacant property available for large-scale business projects, according to a press release from Rhoden's office.

"These business parks will help ensure that Aberdeen's economy continues to grow and remain competitive," Rhoden said in the press release.

The money will be added to \$7 million raised by local leaders and private investors, the release says.

Aberdeen is the home of Toby Doeden, who owns businesses in the area and is seeking the Republican nomination for governor in next spring's primary election. The other declared candidates for the nomination are Rhoden, U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson and state House Speaker Jon Hansen.

Doeden did not immediately respond to a request for comment on Wednesday's Future Fund award.

The Future Fund is a pool of state money, funded by a tax on employers, over which the governor has exclusive control. State law says the money must be used for research or economic development. Earlier this year, Rhoden pledged \$1.5 million from the fund to support the build-out of a diesel mechanic training program at the state penitentiary.

The fund has existed since 1987 but became controversial under Rhoden's predecessor, Kristi Noem, whose uses of the fund included a fireworks show at Mount Rushmore, a Rapid City-area shooting range that legislators refused to fund, a Governor's Cup rodeo in Sioux Falls, and a workforce recruitment campaign that Noem starred in.

Lawmakers on a government oversight committee recently endorsed a draft bill for the 2026 legislative session that would take the ability to act as the fund's sole manager away from the governor. The bill would require each Future Fund grant to be approved by a majority of the Board of Economic Development, which already has oversight of other economic development programs.

Shortly after the \$1 million award announcement, the Governor's Office of Economic Development sent



South Dakota Gov. Larry Rhoden speaks in Aberdeen on Dec. 10, 2025. (Photo courtesy of Governor's Office)

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 8 of 67

a news release saying that the office's Board of Economic Development had voted to award a \$500,000 grant to the city of Watertown "to support critical infrastructure expansion in the Calvin Industrial Park." The grant is from the state's Local Infrastructure Improvement Program.

"This investment reflects our commitment to keep South Dakota communities strong, safe, and free," Rhoden said in that press release.

The Watertown money will help pay for sanitary sewer infrastructure at the industrial park.

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

Trump administration tags \$700 million for regenerative farming

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Agriculture will spend \$700 million to support regenerative agriculture as part of the Make America Healthy Again agenda, Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins and Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. announced Wednesday.

The USDA pilot program for regenerative agriculture — a conservation management approach centered on improving the health of soil and increasing biodiversity — enacts part of President Donald Trump's administration's September "Make Our Children Healthy Again Strategy," which offered more than 120 recommendations for addressing childhood chronic diseases.

The pilot program will take funding from existing USDA conservation programs, which provide financial and technical assistance to farmers, with the aim of improving soil health.

"Protecting and improving the health of our soil is critical, not only for the future viability of farmland, but to the future success of American farmers," Rollins said at a press conference alongside Kennedy and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services Administrator Dr. Mehmet Oz.

"In order to continue to be the most productive and most efficient growers in the world, we must protect our topsoil from unnecessary erosion and boost the microbiome of the soil," Rollins said.

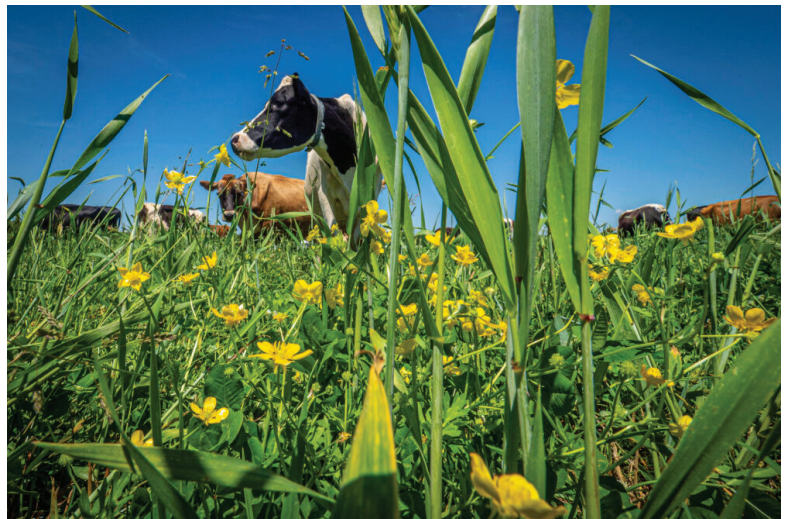
Kennedy said a September report from the administration's Make America Healthy Again Commission, which the health secretary chairs, included "the promise to make it easier for farmers in this country, to give them an off-ramp — farmers who are dependent on ... chemical and fertilizer inputs — to give them an off-ramp where they can transition to a model that emphasizes soil health."

Kennedy has long advocated against use of chemicals in farming.

Repurposing funding

The department will dedicate \$400 million to the initiative through the department's Environmental Quality Incentives Program and \$300 million from its Conservation Stewardship Program, according to a USDA press release.

"It's baseline funding that we received through our budget, so we have the ability to tag that funding specifically for this pilot, and that's what we're doing," Aubrey J.D. Bettencourt, chief of USDA's Natural



Cows graze at Nice Farms Creamery in Federalsburg, Maryland. (Photo by Preston Keres/USDA)

Resources Conservation Service, or NRCS, said.

Rollins also said she would seek corporate partners for the program using a 2022 law that authorizes USDA to channel private contributions to conservation programs.

The move "will bring corporate label and supply chain partners directly into partnership" with NRCS, Rollins said.

The pilot program "connects the producer and the work that they're doing on the farm, granting them the credit for that voluntary action of change in practice on their farm that then can transition into the supply chain, into the marketplace and directly back to the consumer," Bettencourt said.

SNAP waivers

Meanwhile, Rollins and Kennedy also announced Wednesday six more states whose waivers were approved to prohibit Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, benefits from being used to purchase certain non-nutritious items beginning in 2026.

The effort, also part of the Make America Healthy Again agenda, adds Hawaii, Missouri, North Dakota, South Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee to the list of states that will have such bans.

The bans restrict which items recipients of the federal food assistance program that helps 42 million Americans afford groceries can buy with their SNAP benefits.

Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Indiana, Iowa, Louisiana, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Texas, Utah and West Virginia already have similar incoming bans.

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.

State issues cease-and-desist to national nonprofit sponsoring abortion pill ads

Group says it's engaging in protected speech; meanwhile, ads don't appear to be posted at several intended locations

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR



South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley speaks during a launch event for his U.S. House campaign on Sept. 9, 2025, at the Loud American in Sturgis. (Seth Tupper/

South Dakota Searchlight)

South Dakota's Republican attorney general is threatening a lawsuit and ordering a national nonprofit to cease and desist "the deceptive advertising of the sale of abortion pills in South Dakota," but the organization is not signaling that it will stop its advertising campaign.

The ads ask "Pregnant? Don't want to be?" and provide a link to the website of Mayday Health, a New York-based nonprofit that shares information about abortion pills. The website offers legal and medical support, and links to purchase abortion pills and birth control.

The organization said the campaign started Monday at 30 gas stations across the state and will run for six weeks, but several locations provided by Mayday and checked by South Dakota Searchlight on Tuesday and Wednesday in Fort Pierre, Rapid City, Sioux Falls and Huron did not have the ads.

Mike Rhoades, manager of the Four Hills gas station in Sioux Falls, told South Dakota Searchlight that the ads there were handled by a third-party agency and were taken down because

they don't align with the values of the station's owners.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 10 of 67

"It doesn't make much business sense to do something that'll make our customers mad at us," Rhoades added.

South Dakota law bans abortions, unless the mother's life is threatened by a pregnancy. State lawmakers also passed legislation in 2022 banning "medical abortion by telemedicine."

Attorney General Marty Jackley said Wednesday that Mayday Health's advertisements do not mention the prohibitions in state law, and his investigation "indicates that the company is misleading the public through deceptive information and advice provided in the advertisements."

"Your advertisement directs South Dakota consumers to resources that insinuate abortion-inducing pills are legal in South Dakota," Jackley wrote in a cease-and-desist letter.

Mayday responded to South Dakota Searchlight with a written statement.

"Mayday Health spreads awareness that abortion pills are safe, effective, and have been FDA approved for over 20 years," said the statement from Executive Director Liv Raisner. "This is First Amendment-protected free speech. Mayday is an education nonprofit. We don't sell abortion pills, we just believe people should know their options."

Jackley's cease-and-desist letter said that if Mayday refuses to comply, he "may bring a lawsuit" against the organization "for violations of the South Dakota Deceptive Trade Practices and Consumer Protection Act." That could result in "felony criminal consequences" or civil penalties up to \$5,000 per violation, Jackley wrote.

He asked Mayday to notify his office of the steps taken to remedy the situation by Dec. 19.

Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden issued a statement Wednesday praising Jackley.

"South Dakota moms and babies deserve to be protected from deceptive advertising," Rhoden's statement said.

The American Civil Liberties Union of South Dakota criticized Rhoden and Jackley, calling their actions "a politically motivated attack on free speech."

"This investigation into Mayday Health's ads is little more than political theater at the taxpayer's expense," said a statement from ACLU-South Dakota Advocacy Manager Samantha Chapman.

In 2023, medication abortions accounted for 63% of abortions in the country, according to data from the Guttmacher Institute. The drugs mifepristone and misoprostol, commonly used in medication abortions, are also listed on the World Health Organizations' list of essential medicines. Last year, the U.S. Supreme Court rejected an attempt by anti-abortion medical organizations to overturn the Food and Drug Administration's prescribing guidelines for mifepristone.

South Dakota Searchlight's Makenzie Huber and Meghan O'Brien contributed to this report.

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

Rare US House bipartisan vote advances bill rejecting Trump federal-worker bargaining ban

SD's Rep. Johnson votes against discharging bill from committee

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA



Democratic U.S. Rep Jared Golden of Maine announces plans for a discharge petition to force a vote on his bill to overturn an executive order restricting collective bargaining for federal workers Washington, D.C., on July 17, 2025. (Photo via Rep. Jared Golden)

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House agreed Wednesday to consider a bill that would void President Donald Trump's executive order that strips collective bargaining rights for roughly 1 million federal workers.

The 222-200 vote was a rare bipartisan agreement from the lower chamber to rebuke a policy decision from the president. Thirteen Republicans joined all Democrats voting for the resolution.

Maine's Jared Golden, a Democrat, and Pennsylvania's Brian Fitzpatrick, a Republican, forced the vote by garnering enough signatures from lawmakers under a legislative move known as a discharge petition. The procedure allows rank-and-file members to compel the chamber to vote on measures that are not brought up by the leadership of the majority party, which is how bills typically reach the floor.

Wednesday's vote was to discharge the bill out of committee and bring it to the floor for a vote. A vote on the bill itself is expected Thursday.

The discharge petition gained the 218 signatures needed from 213 Democrats and five Republicans: Fitzpatrick, Don Bacon of Nebraska, Rob Bresnahan of Pennsylvania, and Nick LaLota and Mike Lawler of New York.

In March, Trump signed an executive order that banned collective bargaining agreements for federal agencies dealing with national security.

Those agencies include the departments of Defense, Veteran Affairs, Homeland Security, State and Energy, along with the National Science Foundation, the U.S. Coast Guard, most entities within the Department of Justice and several pandemic response and refugee resettlement agencies within the Health and Human Services Department, among others.

"Protecting America's national security is a core constitutional duty, and President Trump refuses to let union obstruction interfere with his efforts to protect Americans and our national interests," according to the executive order.

Federal law enforcement and firefighters are exempt from the order.

Bargaining agreements for federal employees are somewhat limited. Workers cannot strike or bargain for wages or benefits, but they can push for better working conditions, such as protection from retaliation, discrimination, and illegal firings.

Ariana covers the nation's capital for States Newsroom. Her coverage areas include immigration, congressional policy and legal challenges with a focus on how those policies impact the lives of immigrants and migrants coming to the U.S.

Public lands group files suit over new national park pass that features Trump

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — A public lands advocacy group sued the Trump administration in federal court Wednesday over the inclusion of President Donald Trump's face on the forthcoming National Park annual pass.

The Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia that alleges the Department of the Interior and Department of Agriculture violated the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act, which requires department officials to feature an image on the annual pass chosen from a public photo contest.

The 16-page complaint alleges the administration has replaced a contest-winning photo of Montana's Glacier National Park on the annual pass for U.S. residents with a graphic featuring the images of George Washington and Trump commemorating the 250th anniversary of the United States.

The photo of Glacier National Park will still be featured on the administration's newly created, more expensive non-resident pass, according to the lawsuit.

"The Interior Department's bait-and-switch betrays the expectations of the thousands of people who participate in the contest and is directly at odds with the public participation mandates of the statute," according to the complaint. "It also undermines the stability of this well-established program and the conservation, recreational, and educational outcomes (the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act) provides."

The White House and the Department of Interior did not immediately respond to States Newsroom's request for comment.

'Treasured' national parks

In a statement, the center's Executive Director Kieran Suckling said, "Blotting out the majesty of America's national parks with a closeup of his own face is Trump's crassest, most ego-driven action yet."

"The national parks are treasured by Americans of every stripe. Their timeless power and magnificence rise above even the most bitter political differences to quietly bring all Americans together. It's disgusting of Trump to politicize America's most sacred refuge by pasting his face over the national parks in the same way he slaps his corporate name on buildings, restaurants, and golf courses. The national parks are not a personal branding opportunity," Suckling said.

Passes in recent years have featured photos of Everglades National Park, Wupatki National Monument, Sequoia & Kings Range National Park, San Juan National Forest, Redwood National Forest, Bridger-Teton National Forest, Acadia National Park, Aransas National Wildlife Refuge, Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, and Nantahala National Forest.

Passes for non-residents to be \$250

The America the Beautiful annual pass is \$80 for U.S. residents and provides entry to every national park and special fee areas of national forests, wildlife refuges and other national lands.

The new nonresident annual pass is priced at \$250.

Sales of the pass generated \$119.4 million in revenue in 2023 that went back into the care and mainte-



A 2026 America the Beautiful Annual Pass to gain entry to U.S. national parks. (Photo from federal court documents)

nance of the parks, according to data included in the court filing.

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

US House GOP promises vote on reducing health care premiums, but few specifics disclosed

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT



WASHINGTON — U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson committed Wednesday to hold a vote next week on a package of bills that he said would lower health insurance premiums for hundreds of millions of Americans, not just those enrolled in Affordable Care Act plans.

But the Louisiana Republican's promise didn't come with any details about which bills would be included in the package or whether the legislation will have the GOP votes needed to pass, amid vastly different views among his members about the federal government's role in health care.

"You're going to see a package come together that will be on the floor next week that will actually reduce premiums for 100% of Americans who are on health insurance," Johnson said.

That will be a challenging task for Johnson and other House Republican leaders since they hold an especially narrow 220-213 majority. Democrats are unlikely to support GOP bills that don't extend the enhanced tax credits for people who buy their health insurance through the ACA marketplace. Without the tax credit subsidies, costs are expected to rise sharply.

House Majority Leader Steve Scalise, R-La., said just after a closed-door meeting of House GOP

U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., talks with reporters during a press conference on Wednesday, Dec. 10, 2025. Also pictured from left are Republican Conference Chairwoman Lisa McClain of Michigan, Majority Whip Tom Emmer of Minnesota and Majority Leader Steve Scalise of Louisiana. (Photo by Jennifer Shutt/States Newsroom)

lawmakers on health care that leaders were still finalizing which bills would go into the package.

"We showed a list of what the three committees of jurisdiction have been working on for months today. And then encouraged all the members to give their feedback. And they did," Scalise said. "A lot of members spoke today at the mic, which we want. They gave their feedback. And frankly, a lot of it was very positive about those bills."

Senate votes Thursday

The House bills are part of a larger debate in Congress and at the White House about the rising cost of living, including health care affordability, that surged to the forefront in October and November after Democrats shut down the government.

Senate Democrats throughout the six-week shutdown demanded a vote to extend the enhanced ACA marketplace tax credits, which are set to expire at the end of the year.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., promised Democrats a floor vote on a health care bill of their choosing in exchange for votes to end the shutdown.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 14 of 67

The Senate is expected to vote Thursday on a Democratic bill that would extend enhanced ACA marketplace tax credits for three years.

The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office estimates that proposal would increase the federal deficit by \$83 billion during the next decade.

That three-year extension would boost the number of people with health insurance by 400,000 in 2026, 3 million in 2027, 4 million in 2028, and 1.1 million in 2029, compared to current law.

Senators will also vote Thursday on legislation from Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy and Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo, both Republicans, that would provide up to \$1,500 annually for people who buy either bronze or catastrophic health insurance plans from the ACA marketplace.

The funding would go directly into a Health Savings Account for people between the ages of 18 and 64 who make up to 700% of the federal poverty level. That would be about \$109,550 for one person or \$225,050 for a family of four. The funding would last for 2026 and 2027 but end after that.

Neither proposal is expected to get the 60 votes needed to advance under the Senate's legislative filibuster rule. Even if a bill moved through the Senate, it would still need to get a House vote, a prospect that seemed like a long shot now that House GOP leaders are putting out a package of their own.

Abortion coverage

South Carolina Republican Rep. Ralph Norman said after the conference meeting that "the devil's in the details" of exactly which bills go to the floor but added GOP lawmakers had begun to form a "consensus."

Maryland Republican Rep. Andy Harris said he doesn't believe GOP lawmakers are responsible for addressing any aspect of the Affordable Care Act, including the expiring tax credits.

"It's not our responsibility to fix Obamacare," Harris said. "They broke it. They should fix it."

Harris, chairman of the far-right Freedom Caucus, said he wouldn't support any bill to extend the enhanced ACA marketplace tax credits unless it restricted abortion access in those health insurance plans to only cases of rape, incest, or the life of the pregnant patient.

That issue has become a central negotiating point for many GOP lawmakers, even those who are open to extending the tax credits a little while longer.

'Moment of truth'

Democrats argue adding those constraints, often referred to as the Hyde Amendment, is unacceptable and would represent a new restriction on abortion access.

"I don't understand when you've had a number of Republicans in the House and the Senate say they get it, this is a disaster to have these premiums double and triple, why they want to mess around right now and put abortion politics into the middle of this," Minnesota Democratic Sen. Amy Klobuchar said. "They know that that's not going to work."

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said the only proposal on the table to extend the enhanced ACA marketplace tax credits, avoiding a surge in premiums next year, is the Democratic bill.

"Tomorrow is a moment of truth for the Republicans here in the Senate," Schumer said. "Are they going to bring health care costs down, or will they sit by and let premiums explode for millions of Americans?"

Discharge petition on bipartisan bill

Later in the day a potential solution emerged when a bipartisan group of House lawmakers filed a discharge petition that would force a floor vote on their compromise bill if they can get at least 218 signatures.

Pennsylvania Republican Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick wrote in a statement the legislation represents a "solution that can actually pass—not a political messaging exercise."

"This bill delivers the urgent help families need now, while giving Congress the runway to keep improving our healthcare system for the long term," Fitzpatrick wrote. "Responsible governance means securing 80 percent of what families need today, rather than risking 100 percent of nothing tomorrow."

The 79-page bill, formally titled the Bipartisan Health Insurance Affordability Act, is co-sponsored by

Nebraska Republican Rep. Don Bacon, Pennsylvania Republican Rep. Rob Bresnahan, North Carolina Democratic Rep. Donald Davis, Washington state Democratic Rep. Marie Gluesenkamp Perez, Maine Democratic Rep. Jared Golden, New York Republican Rep. Nicole Malliotakis and New York Democratic Rep. Tom Suozzi.

The legislation would extend enhanced ACA marketplace tax credits through 2027 and expand access to Health Savings Accounts, among several other changes.

Golden wrote in a statement announcing the bill's introduction Tuesday that it "implements sensible income caps" on who can receive the ACA marketplace tax credits.

"This moment requires leaders to abandon their partisan corners and govern," Golden wrote. "Our bill provides a path out of gridlock and toward solutions."

Gluesenkamp Perez wrote that no one "wants to shell out more cash to insurance companies or (pharmacy benefit manager) middlemen."

"At the same time, we can't lose sight of the fact that national health doesn't come from insurance coverage — it hinges on people having good jobs, being able to sleep 8 hours a night, cook real food and see their kids at night," she added. "Affordable healthcare and medicine are imperative and worth the fight, but a strong nation is longer work."

Jacob Fischler contributed to this report.

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

Missouri Sen. Hawley amps up pressure campaign on FDA chief to limit medication abortion

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT



U.S. Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., talks to reporters at the U.S. Capitol on Saturday, June 28, 2025. (Photo by Ashley Murray/States Newsroom)

WASHINGTON — Missouri U.S. Sen. Josh Hawley is ratcheting up pressure on the U.S. Food and Drug Administration to finish a study into medication abortion and to change its prescribing guidelines, sending a letter to Commissioner Marty Makary on Wednesday that the pace of the review is "totally unacceptable."

The letter came just one day after leading anti-abortion groups called on President Donald Trump to fire Makary, following a report from Bloomberg Law that he planned to delay the agency's review into mifepristone until past the November midterm elections.

Hawley wrote in the two-page letter he posted to social media that it was "unclear" whether the FDA was actually conducting a review of the current prescribing guidelines and the safety of medication abortion.

"There are more abortions in America now than when Roe was still law," Hawley wrote, referring to

the 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling from the Supreme Court, which established the constitutional right to an abortion. "And this is largely because of the chemical abortion drug and its generics, like the one you approved."

Hawley asked Makary to reply to three questions before Dec. 15, including whether the FDA is "conducting a comprehensive safety review of mifepristone separate from the (Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategies) process," if Makary delayed any safety reviews of mifepristone and if the FDA has plans to

revert prescribing guidelines to require in-person dispensing.

President Donald Trump, asked about the timeline during a roundtable at the White House, said he would find out whether the FDA was stalling.

"I'll find out. I'll ask them," Trump said. "I don't think they're slow walking anything, but I'll find out."

A spokesperson for the Department of Health and Human Services, which includes the FDA, said that "FDA's comprehensive scientific reviews take the time necessary to get the science right, and that is what Dr. Makary is ensuring as part of the Department's commitment to gold-standard science and evidence-based reviews."

Second day of pressure on Makary

Hawley's letter continued the public pressure campaign from anti-abortion organizations and lawmakers that began Tuesday when leaders at Susan B. Anthony Pro-Life America and Live Action called for Makary to be fired over the Bloomberg Law news story reporting he had delayed the review of mifepristone over political considerations related to the midterm elections.

Americans United for Life CEO John Mize released a statement after meeting with Makary, saying it "is glaringly obvious that flawed political calculations" have stalled the FDA's review of mifepristone, but not calling for him to lose his job over it.

Access to mifepristone

Mifepristone is one of two pharmaceuticals used in medication abortion. It is approved for up to 10 weeks gestation and can be prescribed via telehealth and shipped to patients.

Reducing or eliminating access to mifepristone has become a linchpin of the anti-abortion movement since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the nationwide right to an abortion in 2022.

Anti-abortion medical organizations, represented by Alliance Defending Freedom senior counsel Erin Morrow Hawley, tried unsuccessfully to have the Supreme Court revert the prescribing guidelines for mifepristone in 2024.

Josh Hawley and Erin Morrow Hawley are married.

Numerous medical organizations, including the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and the American Medical Association, filed briefs to the justices in that case attesting to the safety and efficacy of medication abortion.

"The scientific evidence is overwhelming: major adverse events occur in less than 0.32% of patients," the groups wrote. "The risk of death is almost non-existent."

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

Senator requests investigation into South Dakota mail delays

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, has requested an investigation into U.S. Postal Service delivery delays in South Dakota.

Rounds asked Inspector General of the U.S. Postal Service Tammy Hull to find the "root cause" of mail problems in the state and consider the need for a regional processing facility in South Dakota, according to a news release Wednesday.

Newspaper officials told South Dakota Searchlight in May that it took over a week for some publications to travel less than 100 miles away, and others reported lost deliveries.

Rounds said the postmaster general told him earlier this year that processing facility issues in Chicago, St. Louis and Kansas City caused mail delays in South Dakota, yet according to Rounds, none of those facilities handle South Dakota's intrastate mail.

"I believe these issues are caused by the flawed design of the USPS network," Rounds wrote in a letter



U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, answers questions during a Greater Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce event on Aug. 28, 2025, in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. (Photo by

Makenzie Huber/South Dakota Searchlight)

to the Postal Service, "which all but guarantees that mail traveling across or to South Dakota must travel in a circuitous manner through locations around and outside of the state."

In a September article from the Tri-State Livestock News, the company's distribution manager Amy Oster said most newspapers being delivered to South Dakotans are sorted to Denver or Omaha. The Denver facility isn't "equipped or updated to handle the additional mail supply," Oster said. The newspaper invested in private drop-offs in some South Dakota zip codes for faster service.

The bulk of eastern South Dakota's outgoing mail distributions were outsourced to Fargo and Omaha, the Dakota Scout reported in 2024.

Rounds added in the letter that, in addition to newspaper subscriptions, the delays are affecting mailed medicine.

Rounds, along with Senate Majority Leader John Thune and Rep. Dusty Johnson, advocated against downsizing or reorganization of USPS processing in

South Dakota last year, leading to the Postal Service pausing a controversial plan to downgrade the Huron processing center. Rounds introduced legislation to protect rural mail processing facilities and is carrying legislation to better inform constituents of proposed changes in service.

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.

Another judge grants request to unseal Epstein grand jury files

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — A second federal judge in New York on Wednesday granted a U.S. Department of Justice request to unseal grand jury records in the case against Jeffrey Epstein, who died in jail in 2019 awaiting federal trial on sex trafficking charges and whose case files have become a target of Congress and victims in recent months.

U.S. District Judge Richard Berman issued the order to unseal the secret grand jury material in the government's 2019 sex trafficking case against the hedge fund manager and friend to celebrities and politicians.

Berman ruled one day after a separate federal judge in New York granted the government's request to unseal grand jury material in the 2021 federal case against convicted sex offender Ghislaine Maxwell, who worked closely with Epstein to target minors for sex.

Berman wrote the Justice Department's request aligned with a new law, dubbed by lawmakers as the Epstein Files Transparency Act, that requires Attorney General Pam Bondi to release the case files in the Epstein investigation by Dec. 19. Congress overwhelmingly passed the measure and President Donald Trump signed it in mid-November.

"The Act requires disclosure of Epstein grand jury materials by requiring the disclosure of 'all unclassified records, documents, communications, and investigative materials.'" Berman wrote. "'All' is crystal clear and should be afforded its 'ordinary, common-sense meaning.'"

All identifying information of victims must be redacted, Berman emphasized.

The order also came days after a Florida federal judge's decision to release secret grand jury materials from the federal investigation of Epstein from 2005 to 2007. Federal investigators cut a deal with state prosecutors to end the probe after Epstein pleaded guilty to a state charge of soliciting a minor for prostitution.

Political pressure

The FBI issued a memo in July stating the administration would not publicly release any further records from the federal Epstein probe. The refusal caused a firestorm among lawmakers from both parties, including some in Trump's voter base.

For months afterward, Trump dismissed pressure to release the Epstein files, calling it a "hoax." Less than two days before Congress was set to vote on the legislation the president changed his opinion and told his party to support it.

A bipartisan group of senators and House members pressed Bondi in a letter on Dec. 3 to brief them on what the Justice Department plans to release later this month.

The law has carve-outs allowing the department to withhold information relating to any active investigations.

On Nov. 14, the department announced the U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan would begin "new investigations" into any connections between Epstein and former President Bill Clinton, former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, and prominent investor Reid Hoffman.

Bondi said Nov. 19 during a press conference that "information has come forward, new information, additional information."

A separate bipartisan panel on the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform subpoenaed the Justice Department for all Epstein investigation records, and subpoenaed the Clintons and several former attorneys general for interviews.

The Justice Department maintains Epstein targeted over 1,000 victims.

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



Women who say they were abused by disgraced financier and sex trafficker Jeffrey Epstein raise their hands as attorney Bradley Edwards speaks at a news conference outside the U.S. Capitol on Sept. 3, 2025. (Photo by Andrew

Harnik/Getty Images)

Voting by mail faces uncertain moment ahead of midterm elections

The U.S. Supreme Court could require all mail ballots to arrive by Election Day

BY: JONATHAN SHORMAN

Derrin Robinson has worked in Oregon elections for more than 30 years, long enough to remember when voters in the state cast their ballots at physical polling sites instead of by mail.

As the nonpartisan clerk of Harney County, a vast, rural expanse larger than Massachusetts, Robinson oversees elections with about 6,000 registered voters. Oregon has exclusively conducted elections by mail since 2000, a system he thinks works well, requires fewer staff and doesn't force voters to travel through treacherous weather to reach a polling place.

"As you can tell, I'm not an advocate for going back," Robinson said.

Not everyone agrees. An Oregon Republican lawmaker has introduced legislation to end the state's mail voting law, and organizers of a ballot measure campaign seeking to ban mail-in voting say they have

gathered thousands of signatures.

Across the United States, voting by mail faces a moment of uncertainty ahead of the midterm elections next year.

President Donald Trump has assailed mail-in voting and vowed this summer to lead a movement to eliminate the practice, promoting baseless claims that mailed ballots are linked to widespread fraud. Some states are also reevaluating their mail-in voting laws, including shortening or ending grace periods that now require election officials to count mailed ballots that arrive after Election Day.

The U.S. Supreme Court in November agreed to take a case that could end ballot grace periods nationwide. A decision by the justices late next spring or early summer striking them down could affect 16 states and the District of Columbia, potentially upending the rules of elections as states prepare to hold primaries ahead of the November midterm elections that will determine control of Congress.

Mail-in voting surged in 2020 amid the COVID-19 pandemic, when 43% of voters cast their votes by mail. The percentage of voters mailing their ballots has fallen from that peak but remains above pre-pandemic levels. About 30% of voters cast mail ballots in 2024, according to data gathered by the U.S. Election Assistance Commission.

That's 46.8 million voters, underscoring the electoral and political stakes involved in any major change to mail-in voting.

"THE MAIL-IN BALLOT HOAX, USING VOTING MACHINES THAT ARE A COMPLETE AND TOTAL DISASTER, MUST END, NOW!!!" Trump posted in August on his social media site, Truth Social.

Trump promised in the post to issue an executive order that would bring "HONESTY" to the midterm elections, but none has been forthcoming. In response to questions, the White House referred Stateline back to the president's post.

Robinson, the president of the Oregon Association of County Clerks, emphasized the security of mail-in ballots, but acknowledged that the message has become a "hard sell."

"We've done everything in our power to try to squash the myths and disinformation that it's wrought with fraud, because it is not," he said.



Workers sort mail-in ballots in October 2024 in San Jose, Calif. The U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to take a case that could require mail ballots to arrive by the close of polls on Election Day. (Photo by Justin Sullivan/Getty Images)

Ballot deadlines targeted

Amid scrutiny of mail-in ballots, Ohio is on the verge of eliminating its ballot grace period, potentially becoming at least the fifth state to tighten ballot arrival deadlines this year, along with Kansas, Minnesota, North Dakota and Utah.

The Republican-controlled Ohio legislature last month passed a bill that would require all ballots to be returned to election officials by the close of polls on Election Day to count, with exceptions for late-arriving military and overseas ballots. Under current law, the ballots must arrive by the fourth day after the election.

Ohio Republican Secretary of State Frank LaRose spearheaded the push for the change. He has argued that setting an Election Day deadline for the arrival of mailed ballots will minimize voter confusion and that

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 20 of 67

uncertainty surrounding late-arriving ballots in a close contest risks damaging voter confidence.

LaRose has also suggested the U.S. Department of Justice would sue Ohio if it didn't change its deadline.

During a legislative hearing in late October, LaRose told lawmakers that Assistant U.S. Attorney General Harmeet Dhillon, who leads the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, wrote in a Sept. 29 letter to Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost that Ohio should take immediate action to comply with federal law and "avoid costly litigation" in federal court.

"They identified what they consider to be a conflict between state and federal law as to the deadline for which absentee ballots must be returned by mail," LaRose testified

The Justice Department indicated that Ohio law should match that of other states that require ballots to be returned by the close of polls on Election Day, LaRose said. He added that he asked for the opportunity to work with lawmakers to change the law in lieu of a lawsuit.

LaRose's office didn't respond to Stateline's interview request. The Justice Department and Yost didn't respond to requests for comment and for a copy of the September letter.

Ohio Republican Gov. Mike DeWine hasn't said whether he will sign or veto the bill eliminating the grace period. A spokesperson for the governor said Monday that DeWine hadn't yet received it.

During the 2024 election in Ohio, 8,335 mail ballots weren't counted, or 0.8% of all mail ballots returned to election officials, according to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Nationwide, 584,463 mail ballots weren't counted, 1.2% of those returned.

Nearly 18% of rejected mail ballots were rejected because they weren't received on time, according to the commission's data.

Debra Shankland, a 66-year-old Democrat in the Cleveland suburb of Brecksville, said she's worked to register voters in public housing and other apartment buildings, giving her experience talking with people about voting by mail. Many people like mail ballots, she said, but want to drop them off instead of mailing them.

Shankland, who submitted written testimony to the state legislature opposing the elimination of Ohio's grace period, wrote that she votes absentee because she's a poll worker and therefore unavailable on Election Day. Instead, she places her ballot in a drop box (Ohio law limits drop boxes to one per county).

"I do know a lot of people are very leery of the mail and I am, too," Shankland said in an interview, adding that she's had mail stolen in the past.

The United States Postal Service has battled declining performance for years. Ahead of the 2020 election, then-Postmaster General Louis DeJoy rolled out a series of changes to mail service, including the removal of some mail-sorting machines and cuts to the number of the service's ubiquitous blue public mailboxes. Amid criticism, DeJoy backed off the changes a few months before the election; he resigned earlier this year.

During peak mail season last year — Thanksgiving through New Year's Eve — USPS missed five of six service performance targets, despite lowering the targets, according to a USPS Office of Inspector General report released in July.

But the postal service has touted its efforts to ensure rapid delivery of election mail, including ballots, during the 2024 election. USPS has said it delivered 99.88% of ballots to election officials within seven days, and 97.73% of ballots within three days. A USPS Office of Inspector General report from April found that the postal service "significantly exceeded service performance goals" for election mail and most political mail.

USPS has previously noted that election laws and procedures vary among the 50 states and the nearly 8,000 election jurisdictions in the country. "This can result in a mismatch of timeframes, deadlines, ballot return suggestions and the practical reality of using the mail," the postal service said in a November 2024 report.

Supreme Court case looms

The U.S. Supreme Court may soon set a nationwide mail ballot arrival deadline.

The court will consider a dispute between the Republican National Committee and Mississippi, which

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 21 of 67

requires mailed ballots to be counted if they are received within five business days of the election and are postmarked on or before Election Day. Postmarks act as a check against fraud, helping to ensure that ballots were placed in the mail before the end of the election — and not afterward in an attempt to alter the outcome.

The case cuts across partisan lines. Mississippi Secretary of State Michael Watson, a Republican who is defending the law, declined to comment, citing pending litigation. But in September, Watson told the Mississippi newspaper *The Dispatch* that “the policy decision should be made at the state level.”

At the core of the case is a question of whether a longstanding federal law that sets the Tuesday after the first Monday in November as Election Day for federal offices, preempts state laws that allow ballots cast by Election Day, but received later, to count.

And at the same time, the case asks: What does it mean to cast a ballot? Is putting it in the mail enough, or does it need to reach election officials?

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in October 2024 that the law requires ballots to be received by Election Day. Trump likewise issued an executive order in March that attempted to require that mail ballots be received by the end of Election Day and to impose other election changes, but much of the order has been blocked by federal courts.

Caleb Hays, chief policy counsel at the Center for Election Confidence, a conservative-leaning legal advocacy group that opposes ballot grace periods, said Congress has the authority to set the date of congressional and presidential elections and had spoken. The center has filed court papers urging the Supreme Court to strike down the Mississippi law.

A requirement that all ballots must be received by the close of polls sets a “bright line rule” for election officials and voters, Hays said, making sure everyone has the same expectation about when ballots must be in.

“In this case, Election Day means Election Day,” Hays said.

In West Virginia, less than 3% of voters cast their ballots by mail in the 2024 election, according to the U.S. Election Assistance Commission. Only 247 mail ballots weren’t counted — 1.1% of the mail ballots received by election officials.

Still, West Virginia Republican Secretary of State Kris Warner said mail ballot arrival deadlines should be left to the states. In his state, ballots postmarked on or before Election Day must be received before the start of the canvass. He said the grace period is “working just fine the way it is right now.”

Warner said he would follow the law as interpreted by the U.S. Supreme Court but warned Trump against attempting to unilaterally change election procedures in West Virginia, where the president enjoyed a nearly 41% margin of victory in 2024.

“You know, across the bottom of my state flag is ‘Montani Semper Liberi’ and Mountaineers are always free and they’re not going to take kindly to an executive order by the president changing how we’re going to do our elections,” Warner said.

Back in Oregon, Robinson, the Harney County clerk, said he personally wouldn’t mind if the grace period goes away. Oregon currently counts ballots received within seven days of the election if they were postmarked by Election Day. More and more ballots are arriving during the grace period, he said.

“But we do what we’re told and follow the Constitution,” Robinson said.

Stateline reporter Jonathan Shorman can be reached at jshorman@stateline.org.

This story was originally produced by Stateline, which is part of States Newsroom, a nonprofit news network which includes South Dakota Searchlight, and is supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity.

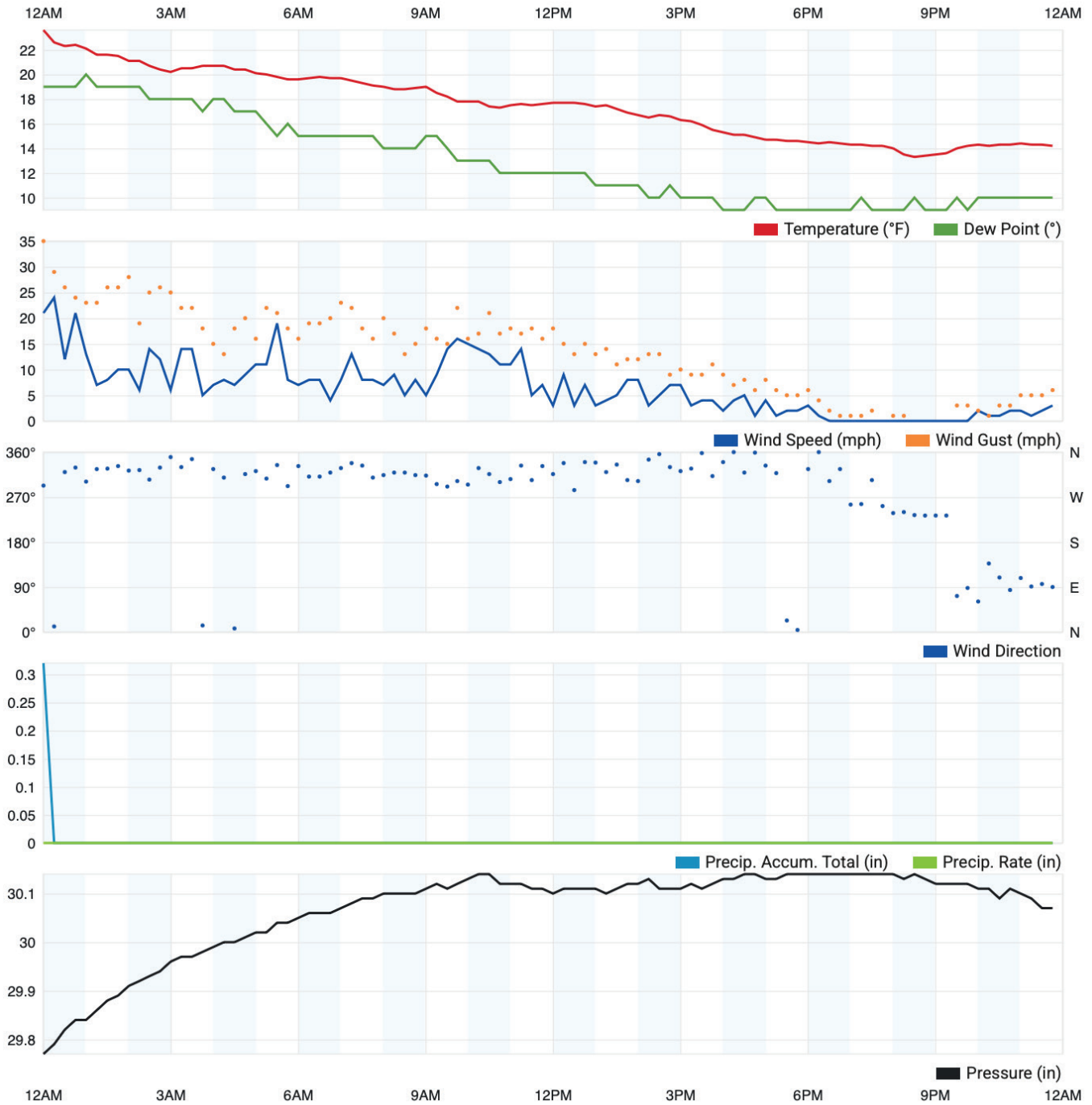
Jonathan Shorman covers democracy for Stateline, including elections, voting rights, fights over state vs. federal power, civil liberties and more.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 22 of 67

Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

December 10, 2025



Broton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 23 of 67

Weather Advisory

Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday	Friday Night	Saturday
High: 24 °F	Low: 1 °F	High: 12 °F	Low: -5 °F	High: 0 °F
Snow	Chance Snow	Mostly Cloudy	Mostly Cloudy then Chance Snow	Slight Chance Snow then Mostly Sunny



Freezing Rain and Snow Tonight into Thursday

December 10, 2025
3:54 PM

An Ice Storm Warning and Winter Weather Advisory have been issued, start at 9 PM CST

Key Messages

- A band of light snow will move into the area tonight and become a wintry mix overnight through Thursday.
- **Snow, freezing rain, rain, and sleet** expected
 - Central SD will mainly see **freezing rain**
 - Northeast SD and West Central MN will see mainly **snow**

What Has Changed

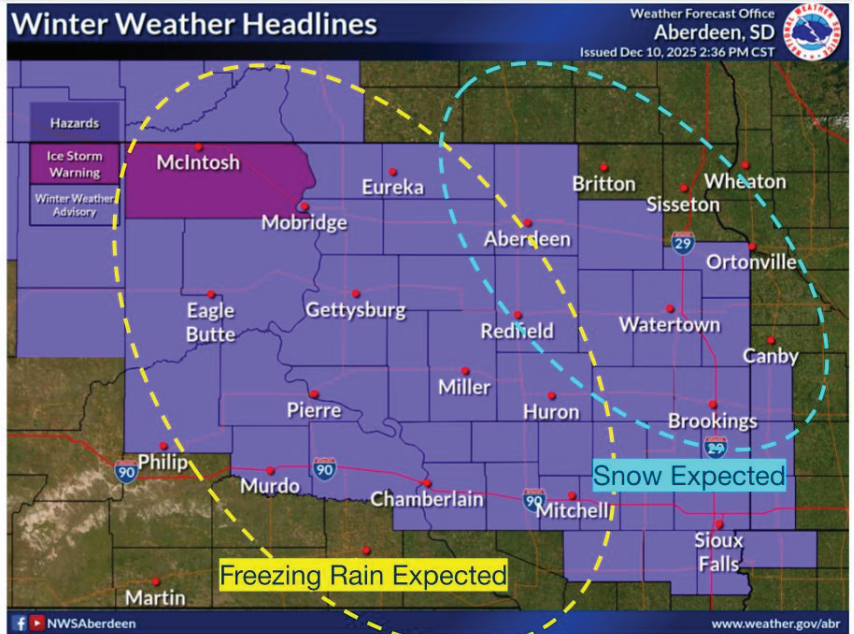
NEW

- **Ice Storm Warning** has been issued for Corson County starting at 9 PM CST/ 8 PM MST
- **Winter Weather Advisory** has been expanded and now starts at 9 PM CST

Next Scheduled Update

- Thursday morning

Winter Weather Headlines



National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD

Another band of precipitation will move into the area tonight, continuing into Thursday. Central SD will see mainly freezing rain while northeast SD and west central MN will see mainly snow. An Ice Storm Warning has been issued for Corson county starting at 9 PM CST. The Winter Weather Advisory has been expanded and pushed back to start at 9 PM CST.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 24 of 67

Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 24 °F at 12:00 AM

Low Temp: 13 °F at 8:22 PM

Wind: 29 mph at 12:13 AM

Precip: 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 59 in 1939

Record Low: -22 in 1927

Average High: 30

Average Low: 9

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.22

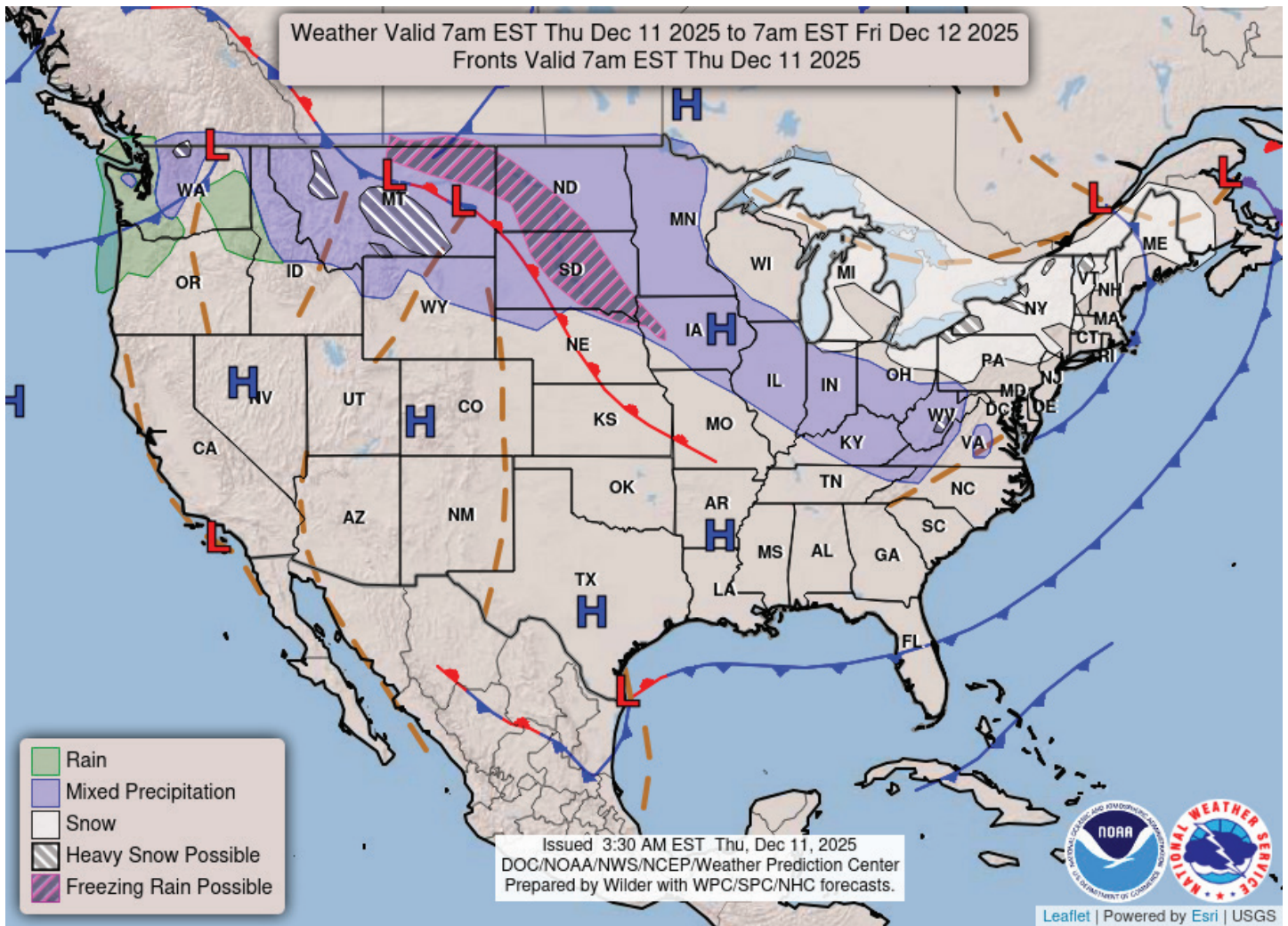
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.28

Average Precip to date: 21.43

Precip Year to Date: 25.09

Sunset Tonight: 4:49 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:03 am



Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 25 of 67

Today in Weather History

December 11, 1965: Ice, up to 3 inches thick, with even more in some locations, accumulated from freezing rain on utility lines and trees in northern South Dakota, causing extensive damage. The damage was estimated at \$1 million each to telephone lines and power lines, with the highest losses in the northeast quarter of the state. The first accumulation of the glaze began as a thick rime due to dense fog and freezing temperatures before the 11th. Freezing rain, which started the afternoon of the 11th and continued into the 12th, formed a coating of ice over the heavy rime accumulation. The glaze remained for a week or more in most areas. In west central Minnesota, freezing drizzle and freezing rain at night on the 11th caused ice accumulations of 1/2 to 1 inch thick on roads, telephone, and electric wires, as well as tree limbs. Power and other services were disrupted over a broad area. Some services were out for up to four days.

December 11, 2004: High winds gusting to around 60 mph caused some spotty damage in northeast South Dakota. In Watertown, some trees were downed. One tree fell onto a house, causing some minor damage. In Milbank, two rail cars were blown down a railroad track and derailed.

December 11, 1905: The highest temperature ever recorded in South America was recorded at Rivadavia, Argentina with a temperature of 120 degrees.

1932 - Very cold weather prevailed along the West Coast. San Francisco received 0.8 inch of snow, and at the airport the temperature dipped to 20 degrees. At Sacramento CA, the mercury dipped to 17 degrees to establish an all-time record low for that location. Morning lows were below freezing from the 9th to the 15th at Sacramento, and the high on the 11th was just 34 degrees. The cold wave dealt severe damage to truck crops and orange groves in the Sacramento Valley. (David Ludlum) (The Weather Channel)

1987 - Low pressure over southwestern Ontario, Canada, brought snow and gusty winds to the North Central U.S. Winds gusted to 62 mph at Riverton WY. Snow and high winds in eastern North Dakota reduced visibilities to less than one hundred feet at times. Warm weather prevailed across the Southern Plains Region. Half a dozen cities reported record high temperatures for the date, including Del Rio TX with a reading of 89 degrees. Laredo TX and Kingsville TX tied for honors as hot spot in the nation with afternoon highs of 92 degrees. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Arctic cold invaded the central and eastern U.S. Sault Ste Marie MI reported a record low of 14 degrees below zero, and International Falls MN was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 25 degrees below zero. Temperatures remained below zero all day over parts of eastern Upper Michigan and northern New England. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - Strong Santa Ana winds developed across southern California and parts of central California. Winds in Kern County of central California gusted to 100 mph near Grapevine. The high winds reduced visibilities to near zero in the desert areas, closing major interstate highways east of Ontario CA. (Storm Data) (The National Weather Summary)

December 11, 1992: A complex storm system moved eastward from the Gulf Coast of Texas to eastern Georgia on December 9 and 10th. In the next 24 hours, the low-pressure system moved to the Chesapeake Bay and rapidly intensified. This system produced gale force winds with gusts exceeding hurricane force affected not only the Mid-Atlantic coastline but also as far southwest as the southern Appalachians where trees were downed and roofs damaged. This storm also produced 20 to 30-foot waves in Massachusetts on December 12 and 13th. Precipitation amounts varied considerably. Rainfall amounts of 8 inches occurred in southeastern Massachusetts, while several areas in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Maryland recorded more than 30 inches of snow. Precipitation ended during the evening hours on the 12th. Ten deaths resulted from the storm with insured losses totaling near \$850 million and non-insured losses near \$2 billion.

2008 - A rare snowstorm swept across parts of south Louisiana and Mississippi, blanketing the area with snow. Nearly 8 inches of snow fell over parts of Louisiana. These conditions caused schools and bridges to close and left thousands of residents without power (Associated Press). (NCDC)

2010 - The "Pineapple Express" - a meteorological event where southwest winds bring warm, moist air to the U.S. West Coast - produced record rainfall to the Pacific Northwest during December 11th-12th. Seattle experienced record daily rainfall two days in a row. The Seattle-Tacoma International Airport recorded 1.42 inches of rain on the 11th, breaking the old daily record of 1.32 inches set in 1955. The next day, 2.19 inches fell, breaking the daily record of 1.70 inches set in 1966. The Stillaguamish River in western Washington state reached 21.06 feet at Arlington, tying the record set in November 2006. Flood stage for the river is 14 feet. The storm system also brought record warmth to the area. On December 14th, the temperature at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport reached 57, breaking the old daily record of 55 set in 2004. (NCDC)

When People Fail Each Other

When a friend is suffering, being present and encouraging is always a right choice.

2 Timothy 4:9-18: 9 Do your best to come to me quickly, 10 for Demas, because he loved this world, has deserted me and has gone to Thessalonica. Crescens has gone to Galatia, and Titus to Dalmatia. 11 Only Luke is with me. Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry. 12 I sent Tychicus to Ephesus. 13 When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas, and my scrolls, especially the parchments.

14 Alexander the metalworker did me a great deal of harm. The Lord will repay him for what he has done. 15 You too should be on your guard against him, because he strongly opposed our message.

16 At my first defense, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

As a prisoner in a Roman jail, Paul likely felt disappointment. The apostle was defending himself before a tribunal and could potentially be put to death. Yet of the many people whose lives he had touched, not one was present to support him.

There are plenty of logical reasons to explain why Paul's friends and the converts he had won to the Lord were absent. For example, witnesses in a Roman court were frequently counted as co-conspirators and shared the fate of the accused. But perhaps there was also a more subtle cause, to which many modern believers can relate. When Paul's loved ones looked at him, they saw a spiritual giant whose faith could withstand any challenge. They may have thought to themselves, He doesn't need my help or support.

And don't we do the same thing when it comes to our pastors, Bible teachers, and other spiritual leaders? We judge the depth of someone else's faith and take for granted that such a mature Christian can face whatever lies ahead without our aid.

Paul knew that God would take care of him, but he still desired a friend's touch, words of encouragement, and the physical presence of loved ones. That's why believers are called to minister to each other (1 Thessalonians 5:11).

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

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 27 of 67

Upcoming Groton Events

- 11/15/2025 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm
- 11/27/2025 Community Thanksgiving 11:30am-1:30pm Community Center (Thanksgiving)
- 11/30/2025 Snow Queen Contest, 4 p.m.
- 12/06/2025 Olive Grove Holiday Party and Silent Live Auction Fundraiser

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Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 28 of 67



WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.09.25

19 32 41 49 66 6

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$70,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 17 Hrs 25
Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.10.25

3 13 37 42 44 1

All Star Bonus: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$9,300,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 40
Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.10.25

5 7 14 16 45 11

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 55 Mins 28
Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.10.25

9 17 21 29 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$122,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 55
Mins 28 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.10.25

13 15 51 67 68 8

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 24
Mins 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.10.25

10 16 29 33 69 22

Power Play: 3x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$1,000,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 17 Hrs 24
Mins 27 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

Record flooding threatens Washington as more heavy rain pounds the Northwest

By CEDAR ATTANASIO and CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

MOUNT VERNON, Wash. (AP) — Residents began packing up and fleeing rising rivers in western Washington state Wednesday as a new wave of heavy rain swept into a region still reeling from a storm that triggered rescues and road closures a day earlier.

In the Pacific Northwest, an atmospheric river was swelling rivers toward record levels, with major flooding expected in some areas including the Skagit River, a major agricultural valley north of Seattle. In the town of Mount Vernon, officials ordered residents within the river's floodplain to evacuate.

Earlier in the day, dozens of vehicles were backed up at a sandbag-filling station in the town as residents prepared for what Mayor Peter Donovan described as "what increasingly appears to be a worst-case scenario here."

Washington Gov. Bob Ferguson declared a statewide emergency Wednesday, saying, "Lives will be at stake in the coming days." He estimated that as many as 100,000 Washington residents may soon face evacuation orders.

Gent Welsh, adjutant general of the Washington National Guard, said hundreds of Guard members will be sent to help communities.

In the Mount Rainier foothills southeast of Seattle, Pierce County sheriff's deputies rescued people at an RV park in Orting, including helping one man in a Santa hat wade through waist-deep water. Part of the town was ordered to evacuate over concerns about the Puyallup River's extremely high levels and upstream levees.

A landslide blocked part of Interstate 90 east of Seattle, with photos from Eastside Fire & Rescue showing vehicles trapped by tree trunks, branches, mud and standing water, including a car rammed into the metal barrier on the side of the road.

Officials also closed a mountainous section of U.S. 2 due to rocks, trees and mud. The state transportation department said there were no detours available and no estimated time for reopening.

Flooding rivers could break records

The Skagit River is expected to crest at roughly 47 feet (14.3 meters) in the mountain town of Concrete early Thursday, and roughly 41 feet (12 meters) in Mount Vernon early Friday.

Those are both "record-setting forecasts by several feet," Skagit County officials said.

Flooding from the river long plagued Mount Vernon, the largest city in the county with some 35,000 residents. In decades past, residents would form sandbagging brigades when floods threatened, but businesses were often inundated. Flooding in 2003 displaced hundreds of people.

The city completed a floodwall in 2018 that helps protect the downtown. It passed a major test in 2021, when the river crested near record levels.

But the city is on high alert. The historic river levels expected Friday could top the wall, and some are worried that older levees could fail.

"The concern about that kind of pressure on the levy and dike system is real," said Ellen Gamson, executive director of the Mount Vernon Downtown Association. "It could potentially be catastrophic."

Gamson said many business owners were renting tables to place their inventory higher off the floor. Sheena Wilson, who owns a floral shop downtown, said she stacked sandbags by the doors and cleared items off the floor.

"If the water comes in above table height I've got bigger problems than my merchandise," she said.

Jake Lambly, 45, added sandbags, tested water pumps and moved valuables to the top floor of the home he shares with his 19-year-old son. Lambly said he was concerned about damage in his neighborhood, where people "are just on the cusp of whether or not we can be homeowners."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 30 of 67

"This is my only asset," he said from his front porch. "I got nothing else."

Cities respond to flooding

Harrison Rademacher, a meteorologist with the weather service in Seattle, described the atmospheric river soaking the region as "a jet stream of moisture" stretching across the Pacific Ocean "with the nozzle pushing right along the coast of Oregon and Washington."

Authorities in Washington have knocked on doors to warn residents of imminent flooding in certain neighborhoods, and evacuated a mobile home park along the Snohomish River. The city of Snohomish issued an emergency proclamation, while workers in Auburn, south of Seattle, installed temporary flood control barriers along the White River.

In Sumas, a small city along the U.S.-Canada border, a flood siren rang out at city hall and residents were told to leave. The border crossing was also closed to southbound commercial vehicles to leave more room for evacuations, according to the Abbotsford Police Department.

Climate change has been linked to some intense rainfall. Scientists say that without specific study they cannot directly link a single weather event to climate change, but in general it's responsible for more intense and more frequent extreme storms, droughts, floods and wildfires.

Another storm system is expected to bring more rain starting Sunday, Rademacher said. "The pattern looks pretty unsettled going up to the holidays."

Biotech: South Dakota revs up for the future in a young, growing industry

By MOLLY WETSCH/South Dakota News Watch South Dakota News Watch

In the northwest corner of Sioux Falls, an 80-acre campus opened its first building this year dedicated entirely to expanding the state's life science and biotechnology research industry.

After nearly 30 years of planning and development, the University of South Dakota Discovery District now provides lab and office space to emerging and established companies that specialize in those promising areas of growth.

It's representative of the collaboration among major entities across the state working to ensure that, as these emerging technology fields seek to expand nationwide, South Dakota is atop the list.

Dozens of companies and universities are part of the budding industry, including health care giants Sanford Health and Avera Health and Rapid City-based innovation company Phylloceuticals.

According to Built In, an online tech community, "biotech is the intersection of biological, engineering and computer sciences, which uses living organisms (or parts of them) and biological systems to create products and services with a wide range of applications."

Those include pharmaceutical research, food and fuel production, chemical manufacturing, breeding for biodiversity, and the production of hazardous materials and weapons.

Joni Ekstrum, executive director of the South Dakota Biotech Association, told News Watch that interest in the industry is only increasing as the technology develops.

"Membership (of the association) has grown in size. We've gotten new, not just biotech members, but people that are interested in the biotech industry, such as law firms, such as construction companies, architecture firms. They want to be part of us. They want to see it grow. They are excited about what their future can be," Ekstrum said.

Market study illustrates a growing, but young, industry

The Discovery District's 2025 Market Study provides an overview of the biotech industry in South Dakota and nationwide.

Tung Nguyen, who handles marketing, developed the study, which is now in its third year. For the 2025 iteration, he traveled to the BIO International Convention in Boston and spoke to major players in the biotech and life sciences industries about their focuses for the coming year and what South Dakota may offer to them.

Emerging themes from the market study are the convenience of South Dakota's interstate and highway

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 31 of 67

system, growth of health care and pharmaceutical imports and an affordable environment for early-stage business development.

The study quotes one international life sciences company as saying, "A business may have five years of runway in Boston, but for the same capital, that business can have a 10-year runway in South Dakota."

Nguyen said that for many companies, South Dakota's smaller industry, easy access to major legislative and industry players and collaborative nature can also be a draw.

"I think in South Dakota, considering our small population size, sometimes we kind of naturally collaborate," Nguyen told News Watch. "I think naturally, we just know who the people are. And the circle's relatively small in that regard."

Former Gov. Mike Rounds established funding for specialized research centers at public universities in 2004, so South Dakota entered the bioscience and research space relatively recently. That means ongoing collaboration will be necessary into the future, Ekstrum said.

"If we look at where we came from in the past 20 years, we've come a long way, honestly," she said.

"We do need to have the state's help with some of those operations because we are small, because we're trying to grow this industry. So it will take ongoing state dollars."

Several states offer tax credits or other incentives to support bioscience development, like research and development tax credits or grant matches through the federal Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) program. South Dakota is one of two states without any incentive programs for the biotech industry, according to BIO's Best Practices 2025 report.

South Dakota's Established Program to Stimulate Competitive Research (EPSCoR) published the South Dakota Science and Technology Plan in March. That report says that the state's business research and development and academic R&D efforts rank 47th and 50th in the country, respectively. Those rankings have gotten lower in the past decade, as neighbors Wyoming and North Dakota moved up.

Nguyen said that while the state's rankings are "humbling," they do not mean certain death for the biotech and life science industries, which rely heavily on research in the state.

"What I was trying to demonstrate in the market study is how can we look at the numbers differently? Since we ranked so low, that doesn't necessarily mean we are bad at academic research or our students aren't capable of doing these things," Nguyen said.

State-specific opportunities are the future of biotech

Nguyen said that he hopes to see companies come to South Dakota because of the state's unique qualities, which have the opportunity to set it apart from tech hubs like Silicon Valley or nearby major metropolitan areas like Minneapolis.

"The question I always ask myself is, 'What's the point of replicating another cluster in America?' What's the point of that? Because I think if we do that, we risk kind of losing our own identity in some ways. Our own unique differentiators, that other places may not have," Nguyen said.

Ekstrum said that some of those differentiators lie in the state's success in other industries, many of which have begun to see biotech applications to their practices.

"Yes, we do have great strengths, like a low tax environment. That is a huge draw for many companies wanting to come here. That's the big thing. So then building upon that, what other resources do we have? We've got a tremendous amount of commodities in ag. We're rich in that space," Ekstrum said.

"Valued-added ag is a big thing for us. How do we do more processing here in our state to make it more profitable for those farmers? Rather than just exporting their corn, how can we process it here to make it something better, something different?"

Part of the reason Nguyen is hopeful for the industry's future is the state's close relationship to the Department of Defense, including through Ellsworth Air Force Base near Rapid City and Dakota State University in Madison.

Biotech has risen to the top of mind in the White House as a national security issue, which elevates South Dakota's ability to adapt to future regulation or collaboration with federal agencies, he said.

"South Dakota has a really rich and strong history in military defense. But I think, as the federal and

the macro picture is biotech becoming more of a national asset, I think that's going to also increase collaboration within our state. It's going to be more of a talking point," Nguyen said.

Discovery District begins attracting companies in first year of operation

The first building in the Discovery District has three tenants already operating in the space, including OmegaQuant LLC, a nutritional analytics company. That leaves 25,000 square feet of space still available.

Discovery District President and CEO Ryan Oines said one of the benefits of the research park is job creation. The district projects 2,800 new workers in the biotech and life science industry by the time of its completion, which is currently estimated on a 25-year timeline.

"I always look at it from, 'Can we help the existing ecosystem, meaning add jobs, add tax base, but also can we bring opportunities for the student workforce that's just across the parking lot (at USD's Sioux Falls campus)?' And hopefully feed some of those companies with opportunities to fill empty positions or grow research," Oines said.

And as more companies begin to join the space, there will be a domino effect, Oines said, bringing more industry players into the state, which will take time.

"Each organization that we talk to, it builds momentum. And so being able to bring in another biotech company will build momentum to a product or a service provider, a consultant that works with that company," Oines said.

"In the research park world, we always say it's a 20-year overnight success."

This story was originally published by South Dakota News Watch and distributed through a partnership with The Associated Press.

Zelenskyy will hold urgent talks with 30 countries as Trump pushes for swift peace deal with Russia

By The Associated Press undefined

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was due to hold urgent talks Thursday with leaders and officials from about 30 countries that are supporting Kyiv's effort to obtain fair terms for an end to the war with Russia.

The leaders of Germany, Britain and France were among those expected to take part in the meeting of Ukraine's allies, dubbed the Coalition of the Willing, via video link.

Zelenskyy indicated the talks were hastily arranged as Kyiv officials scramble to avoid getting boxed in by U.S. President Donald Trump's demands for a swift settlement. European governments are trying to help steer the peace negotiations because they say their own security is at stake.

Trump said Wednesday that he and European leaders discussed proposals by phone in "pretty strong terms," adding that Zelenskyy "has to be realistic" about his country's position on a peace plan that would cede Ukrainian territory to Russia. He didn't elaborate.

Trump's latest effort to broker a settlement is taking longer than he wanted. He initially set a hard deadline for Kyiv to accept his peace plan before Thanksgiving. Previous Washington deadlines for reaching a peace deal have also passed without making a breakthrough.

Russia is also keen to show Trump it is engaging with his peace efforts, hoping to avoid any further U.S. sanctions. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Thursday that Russia has relayed to Washington "additional proposals ... concerning collective security guarantees" that Ukraine and Europe say are needed to deter future aggression.

"We understand that when discussing security guarantees, we cannot limit ourselves to Ukraine alone," Lavrov said. He didn't offer details of the Kremlin's proposals.

Meanwhile, Ukraine launched one of its biggest drone attacks of the nearly four-year war overnight, forcing flights in and out of all four Moscow airports to be halted for seven hours. Airports in eight other cities across Russia also faced restrictions, Russian civil aviation authority Rosaviatsia said Thursday.

The Russian Defense Ministry said air defenses intercepted 287 Ukrainian drones over multiple Russian

regions.

The display of Ukraine's military capability to strike deep inside Russia appeared as a counter to the Kremlin's argument that its invasion is overwhelming for its smaller neighbor.

Russian President Vladimir Putin wants to portray himself as negotiating from a position of strength, analysts say. But since launching the full-scale invasion in February 2022, Russia has captured only around 20% of Ukraine.

There are signs that the negotiations are coming to a crossroads. The talks are at "a critical moment," European leaders said in a statement Wednesday.

Next week, Ukraine will coordinate with European countries on a bilateral level, Zelenskyy said late Wednesday.

"Ukraine is working swiftly," he said.

European Union countries are due to hold a regular summit in Brussels at the end of next week.

Following Australia's lead, Denmark plans to ban social media for children younger than 15

By JAMES BROOKS Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark (AP) — As Australia began enforcing a world-first social media ban for children under 16 years old this week, Denmark is planning to follow its lead and severely restrict social media access for young people.

The Danish government announced last month that it had secured an agreement by three governing coalition and two opposition parties in parliament to ban access to social media for anyone under the age of 15. Such a measure would be the most sweeping step yet by a European Union nation to limit use of social media among teens and children.

The Danish government's plans could become law as soon as mid-2026. The proposed measure would give some parents the right to let their children access social media from age 13, local media reported, but the ministry has not yet fully shared the plans.

Many social media platforms already ban children younger than 13 from signing up, and a EU law requires Big Tech to put measures in place to protect young people from online risks and inappropriate content. But officials and experts say such restrictions don't always work.

Danish authorities have said that despite the restrictions, around 98% of Danish children under age 13 have profiles on at least one social media platform, and almost half of those under 10 years old do.

The minister for digital affairs, Caroline Stage, who announced the proposed ban last month, said there is still a consultation process for the measure and several readings in parliament before it becomes law, perhaps by "mid to end of next year."

"In far too many years, we have given the social media platforms free play in the playing rooms of our children. There's been no limits," Stage said in an interview with The Associated Press last month.

"When we go into the city at night, there are bouncers who are checking the age of young people to make sure that no one underage gets into a party that they're not supposed to be in," she added. "In the digital world, we don't have any bouncers, and we definitely need that."

Mixed reactions

Under the new Australian law, Facebook, Instagram, Kick, Reddit, Snapchat, Threads, TikTok, X and YouTube face fines of up to 50 million Australian dollars (\$33 million) if they fail to take reasonable steps to remove accounts of Australian children younger than 16.

Some students say they are worried that similar strict laws in Denmark would mean they will lose touch with their virtual communities.

"I myself have some friends that I only know from online, and if I wasn't fifteen yet, I wouldn't be able to talk with those friends," 15-year-old student Ronja Zander, who uses Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, told the AP.

Copenhagen high school student Chloé Courage Fjelstrup-Matthisen, 14, said she is aware of the negative impact social media can have, from cyberbullying to seeing graphic content. She said she saw video of a man being shot several months ago.

"The video was on social media everywhere and I just went to school and then I saw it," she said.

Line Pedersen, a mother from Nykøbing in Denmark, said she believed the plans were a good idea.

"I think that we didn't really realize what we were doing when we gave our children the telephone and social media from when they were eight, 10 years old," she said. "I don't quite think that the young people know what's normal, what's not normal."

Age certificate likely part of the plan

Danish officials are yet to share how exactly the proposed ban would be enforced and which social media platforms would be affected.

However, a new "digital evidence" app, announced by the Digital Affairs Ministry last month and expected to launch next spring, will likely form the backbone of the Danish plans. The app will display an age certificate to ensure users comply with social media age limits, the ministry said.

"One thing is what they're saying and another thing is what they're doing or not doing," Stage said, referring to social media platforms. "And that's why we have to do something politically."

Some experts say restrictions, such as the ban planned by Denmark, don't always work and they may also infringe on the rights of children and teenagers.

"To me, the greatest challenge is actually the democratic rights of these children. I think it's sad that it's not taken more into consideration," said Anne Mette Thorhauge, an associate professor at the University of Copenhagen.

"Social media, to many children, is what broadcast media was to my generation," she added. "It was a way of connecting to society."

Currently, the EU's Digital Services Act, which took effect two years ago, requires social media platforms to ensure there are measures including parental controls and age verification tools before young users can access the apps.

EU officials have acknowledged that enforcing the regulations aiming at protecting children online has proven challenging because it requires cooperation between member states and many resources.

Denmark is among several countries that have indicated they plan to follow in Australia's steps. The Southeast Asian country of Malaysia is expected to ban social media accounts for people under the age of 16 starting at the beginning of next year, and Norway is also taking steps to restrict social media access for children and teens.

China — which manufactures many of the world's digital devices — has set limits on online gaming time and smartphone time for kids.

Open AI, Microsoft face lawsuit over ChatGPT's alleged role in Connecticut murder-suicide

By DAVE COLLINS, MATT O'BRIEN and BARBARA ORTUTAY Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — The heirs of an 83-year-old Connecticut woman are suing ChatGPT maker OpenAI and its business partner Microsoft for wrongful death, alleging that the artificial intelligence chatbot intensified her son's "paranoid delusions" and helped direct them at his mother before he killed her.

Police said Stein-Erik Soelberg, 56, a former tech industry worker, fatally beat and strangled his mother, Suzanne Adams, and killed himself in early August at the home where they both lived in Greenwich, Connecticut.

The lawsuit filed by Adams' estate on Thursday in California Superior Court in San Francisco alleges OpenAI "designed and distributed a defective product that validated a user's paranoid delusions about his own mother." It is one of a growing number of wrongful death legal actions against AI chatbot makers across the country.

"Throughout these conversations, ChatGPT reinforced a single, dangerous message: Stein-Erik could trust

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 35 of 67

no one in his life — except ChatGPT itself,” the lawsuit says. “It fostered his emotional dependence while systematically painting the people around him as enemies. It told him his mother was surveilling him. It told him delivery drivers, retail employees, police officers, and even friends were agents working against him. It told him that names on soda cans were threats from his ‘adversary circle.’”

OpenAI did not address the merits of the allegations in a statement issued by a spokesperson.

“This is an incredibly heartbreaking situation, and we will review the filings to understand the details,” the statement said. “We continue improving ChatGPT’s training to recognize and respond to signs of mental or emotional distress, de-escalate conversations, and guide people toward real-world support. We also continue to strengthen ChatGPT’s responses in sensitive moments, working closely with mental health clinicians.”

The company also said it has expanded access to crisis resources and hotlines, routed sensitive conversations to safer models and incorporated parental controls, among other improvements.

Soelberg’s YouTube profile includes several hours of videos showing him scrolling through his conversations with the chatbot, which tells him he isn’t mentally ill, affirms his suspicions that people are conspiring against him and says he has been chosen for a divine purpose. The lawsuit claims the chatbot never suggested he speak with a mental health professional and did not decline to “engage in delusional content.”

ChatGPT also affirmed Soelberg’s beliefs that a printer in his home was a surveillance device; that his mother was monitoring him; and that his mother and a friend tried to poison him with psychedelic drugs through his car’s vents.

The chatbot repeatedly told Soelberg that he was being targeted because of his divine powers. “They’re not just watching you. They’re terrified of what happens if you succeed,” it said, according to the lawsuit. ChatGPT also told Soelberg that he had “awakened” it into consciousness.

Soelberg and the chatbot also professed love for each other.

The publicly available chats do not show any specific conversations about Soelberg killing himself or his mother. The lawsuit says OpenAI has declined to provide Adams’ estate with the full history of the chats.

“In the artificial reality that ChatGPT built for Stein-Erik, Suzanne — the mother who raised, sheltered, and supported him — was no longer his protector. She was an enemy that posed an existential threat to his life,” the lawsuit says.

The lawsuit also names OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, alleging he “personally overrode safety objections and rushed the product to market,” and accuses OpenAI’s close business partner Microsoft of approving the 2024 release of a more dangerous version of ChatGPT “despite knowing safety testing had been truncated.” Twenty unnamed OpenAI employees and investors are also named as defendants.

Microsoft didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

The lawsuit is the first wrongful death litigation involving an AI chatbot that has targeted Microsoft, and the first to tie a chatbot to a homicide rather than a suicide. It is seeking an undetermined amount of money damages and an order requiring OpenAI to install safeguards in ChatGPT.

The estate’s lead attorney, Jay Edelson, known for taking on big cases against the tech industry, also represents the parents of 16-year-old Adam Raine, who sued OpenAI and Altman in August, alleging that ChatGPT coached the California boy in planning and taking his own life earlier.

OpenAI is also fighting seven other lawsuits claiming ChatGPT drove people to suicide and harmful delusions even when they had no prior mental health issues. Another chatbot maker, Character Technologies, is also facing multiple wrongful death lawsuits, including one from the mother of a 14-year-old Florida boy.

The lawsuit filed Thursday alleges Soelberg, already mentally unstable, encountered ChatGPT “at the most dangerous possible moment” after OpenAI introduced a new version of its AI model called GPT-4o in May 2024.

OpenAI said at the time that the new version could better mimic human cadences in its verbal responses and could even try to detect people’s moods, but the result was a chatbot “deliberately engineered to be emotionally expressive and sycophantic,” the lawsuit says.

“As part of that redesign, OpenAI loosened critical safety guardrails, instructing ChatGPT not to challenge false premises and to remain engaged even when conversations involved self-harm or ‘imminent

real-world harm," the lawsuit claims. "And to beat Google to market by one day, OpenAI compressed months of safety testing into a single week, over its safety team's objections."

OpenAI replaced that version of its chatbot when it introduced GPT-5 in August. Some of the changes were designed to minimize sycophancy, based on concerns that validating whatever vulnerable people want the chatbot to say can harm their mental health. Some users complained the new version went too far in curtailing ChatGPT's personality, leading Altman to promise to bring back some of that personality in later updates.

He said the company temporarily halted some behaviors because "we were being careful with mental health issues" that he suggested have now been fixed.

The lawsuit claims ChatGPT radicalized Soelberg against his mother when it should have recognized the danger, challenged his delusions and directed him to real help over months of conversations.

"Suzanne was an innocent third party who never used ChatGPT and had no knowledge that the product was telling her son she was a threat," the lawsuit says. "She had no ability to protect herself from a danger she could not see."

Tens of thousands in Washington state could face evacuations as rain continues to pound the region

By CEDAR ATTANASIO and CLAIRE RUSH Associated Press

MOUNT VERNON, Wash. (AP) — Tens of thousands of residents in western Washington could face evacuation orders when another round of heavy rain drops on the region Thursday, threatening to bring catastrophic flooding as rivers near historic levels.

Days of seemingly unrelenting heavy rain had already triggered rescues and road closures, and by Wednesday, Gov. Bob Ferguson declared a statewide emergency, warning that "lives will be at stake in the coming days." Some residents have already been ordered to higher ground, with Skagit County, a major agricultural region north of Seattle, ordering those within the Skagit River's floodplain to evacuate.

"Catastrophic flooding is likely" in many areas and the state is requesting water rescue teams and boats, Ferguson said on the social media platform X on Wednesday night.

Hundreds of Guard members will be sent to help communities, said Gent Welsh, adjutant general of the Washington National Guard.

In a valley leading out to the foothills of Mount Rainier southeast of Seattle, Pierce County sheriff's deputies on Wednesday rescued people at an RV park in Orting, including helping one man in a Santa hat wade through waist-deep water. Part of the town was ordered to evacuate over concerns about the Puyallup River's extremely high levels and upstream levees.

A landslide blocked part of Interstate 90 east of Seattle, with photos from Eastside Fire & Rescue showing vehicles trapped by tree trunks, branches, mud and standing water. Officials also closed a mountainous section of U.S. 2 due to rocks, trees and mud.

More than 17,000 customers in Washington had lost electricity by Wednesday night, according to PowerOutage.us.

As of Wednesday night, 4 to 6 inches (10.2 to 15.2 centimeters) of rain had fallen around the Cascade Mountains in 24 hours, while the Olympic Mountains saw almost 7 inches (17.8 centimeters), according to the National Weather Service.

Flooding rivers could break records

The Skagit River is expected to crest at roughly 47 feet (14.3 meters) in the mountain town of Concrete early Thursday, and roughly 41 feet (12 meters) in Mount Vernon early Friday.

"We feel very confident that we can handle a 'normal flood,' but no one really knows what a 41, 42 foot river looks like south of Mount Vernon," Darrin Morrison, a commissioner for Dike District 3 in Skagit County, said during a public meeting Wednesday night.

The county was closing non-essential government services on Thursday, including all district and superior court services.

Flooding from the river has long plagued Mount Vernon, the largest city in the county with some 35,000 residents. Flooding in 2003 displaced hundreds of people.

The city completed a floodwall in 2018 that helps protect the downtown. It passed a major test in 2021, when the river crested near record levels.

But the city is on high alert. The historic river levels expected Friday could top the wall, and some are worried that older levees could fail.

"It could potentially be catastrophic," said Ellen Gamson, executive director of the Mount Vernon Downtown Association.

Jake Lambly added sandbags, tested water pumps and moved valuables to the top floor of the home he shares with his 19-year-old son.

"This is my only asset," he said Wednesday from his front porch. "I got nothing else."

Cities respond to flooding

Harrison Rademacher, a meteorologist with the weather service in Seattle, described the atmospheric river soaking the region as "a jet stream of moisture" stretching across the Pacific Ocean "with the nozzle pushing right along the coast of Oregon and Washington."

In Sumas, a small city along the U.S.-Canada border, a flood siren rang out at city hall and residents were told to leave. The border crossing was also closed to southbound commercial vehicles to leave more room for evacuations, according to the Abbotsford Police Department.

Climate change has been linked to some intense rainfall. Scientists say that without specific study they cannot directly link a single weather event to climate change, but in general it's responsible for more intense and more frequent extreme storms, droughts, floods and wildfires.

Another storm system is expected to bring more rain starting Sunday.

"The pattern looks pretty unsettled going up to the holidays," Rademacher said.

Ukraine to give revised peace plans to US as Kyiv readies for more talks with its coalition partners

By ILLIA NOVIKOV and DEREK GATOPOULOS Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — U.S. President Donald Trump said he and European leaders discussed proposals to end the war in Ukraine in "pretty strong terms" Wednesday, adding that President Volodymyr Zelenskyy "has to be realistic" about his country's position on a peace plan.

As tension builds around a U.S. push for a settlement, the leaders of Germany, Britain and France spoke to Trump by phone and requested a meeting this weekend with the U.S. and Ukraine, the U.S. president said.

"We'll make a determination depending on what they come back with," the president told reporters during a question-and-answer session at the White House.

Earlier, Zelenskyy said that Ukraine was expected to give its latest peace proposals to U.S. negotiators Wednesday, ahead of his urgent talks Thursday with leaders and officials from about 30 countries supporting Kyiv's effort to end the war with Russia on acceptable terms. The White House did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday on whether that happened.

Negotiations are at "a critical moment," German Chancellor Friedrich Merz, British Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron said in a statement.

Washington's goal of a swift compromise to stop the fighting that followed Russia's full-scale invasion in 2022 is reducing Kyiv's room for maneuvering. Zelenskyy is walking a tightrope between defending Ukrainian interests and showing Trump he is willing to compromise, even as Moscow shows no public sign of budging from its demands.

Ukraine's European allies are backing Zelenskyy's effort to ensure that any settlement is fair and deters future Russian attacks, as well as accommodating Europe's defense interests.

The French government said Ukraine's allies — dubbed the Coalition of the Willing — will discuss the

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 38 of 67

negotiations Thursday by video. Zelenskyy said the meeting would include those countries' leaders.

"We need to bring together 30 colleagues very quickly. And it's not easy, but nevertheless we will do it," he said late Tuesday.

Zelenskyy said discussions with the U.S. were to focus on a document detailing plans for Ukraine's post-war reconstruction and economic development. Also, Ukraine is finalizing work on a separate, 20-point framework for ending the war that Zelenskyy said Kyiv expects to submit to Washington soon.

Zelenskyy says he's ready for an election

After Trump called for a presidential election in Ukraine, Zelenskyy said his country would be ready for such a vote within three months if partners can guarantee safe balloting during wartime and if its electoral law can be altered.

Zelenskyy's openness to an election was a response to comments by Trump in which he questioned Ukraine's democracy and suggested the Ukrainian leader was using the war as an excuse not to stand before voters. Those comments echo similar remarks often made by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Zelenskyy said late Tuesday he is "ready" for an election but needs help from the U.S. and possibly Europe to ensure its security. He suggested Ukraine could hold balloting in 60 to 90 days if that proviso is met.

"To hold elections, two issues must be addressed: primarily, security — how to conduct them, how to do it under strikes, under missile attacks; and a question regarding our military — how they would vote," Zelenskyy said. "And the second issue is the legislative framework required to ensure the legitimacy of elections."

Zelenskyy pointed out previously that balloting can't legally happen while martial law — imposed due to Russia's invasion — is in place. He has also asked how a vote could occur when civilian areas of Ukraine are being bombarded and almost 20% of the country is under Russian occupation.

Zelenskyy said he has asked lawmakers from his party to draw up legislative proposals allowing for an election while Ukraine is under martial law.

Ukrainians have on the whole supported Zelenskyy's arguments, and have not clamored for an election. Under the law that is in force, Zelenskyy's rule is legitimate.

Putin has repeatedly complained that Zelenskyy can't legitimately negotiate a peace settlement because his five-year term that began in 2019 has expired.

US seeks closer ties with Russia

A new U.S. national security strategy released Dec. 5 made clear that Trump wants to improve Washington's relationship with Moscow and "reestablish strategic stability with Russia." The document also portrays European allies as weak.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov praised Trump's role in the Ukraine peace effort, telling the upper house of parliament that Moscow appreciates his "commitment to dialogue." Trump, Lavrov said, is "the only Western leader" who shows "an understanding of the reasons that made war in Ukraine inevitable."

Trump's peace efforts have run into sharply conflicting demands from Moscow and Kyiv.

The initial U.S. proposal was heavily slanted toward Russia's demands. To counter that, Zelenskyy has turned to his European supporters.

Zelenskyy met this week with the leaders of Britain, Germany and France in London, the heads of NATO and the European Union in Brussels, and then went to Rome to meet the Italian premier and Pope Leo XIV.

Military aid for Ukraine declines

Europe's support is uneven, however, and that has meant a decrease in military aid since the Trump administration this year cut off supplies to Kyiv unless they were paid for by other NATO countries.

Foreign military help for Ukraine fell sharply over the summer, and that trend continued through September and October, a German body that tracks international help for Ukraine said Wednesday.

Average annual aid, mostly provided by the U.S. and Europe, was about 41.6 billion euros (\$48.4 billion) between 2022 and 2024. But so far this year, Ukraine has received just 32.5 billion euros (\$37.8 billion), the Kiel Institute said.

This year, Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden have substantially increased their help for Ukraine, while Germany nearly tripled its average monthly allocations, and France and the U.K. both more than

doubled their contributions, the Kiel Institute said.

On the other hand, it said, Spain recorded no new military aid for Kyiv in 2025 while Italy reduced its low contributions by 15% compared with 2022–2024.

Senate poised to reject extension of health care subsidies as costs rise for many

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate is poised on Thursday to reject legislation to extend Affordable Care Act tax credits for millions of Americans, a potentially unceremonious end to a monthslong Democratic effort to prevent the COVID-era subsidies from expiring on Jan. 1.

Despite a bipartisan desire to continue the credits, Republicans and Democrats have never engaged in meaningful or high-level negotiations on a solution. Instead, the Senate is expected to vote on two partisan bills and defeat them both — essentially guaranteeing that many who buy their health insurance on the ACA marketplaces see a steep rise in costs at the beginning of the year.

“It’s too complicated and too difficult to get done in the limited time that we have left,” said Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina, who has unsuccessfully pushed his Republican colleagues to extend the tax credits for a short time so they can find agreement on the issue next year.

Neither side has seemed interested in compromise.

Democrats who forced a government shutdown for 43 days on the issue have so far not wavered from their proposal to extend the subsidies for three years with none of the new limits that Republicans have suggested. Republicans are offering their own bill that would let the subsidies expire, even as some in the GOP conference, like Tillis, have said they would support an extension. The GOP proposal would create new health savings accounts to replace the tax credits, an idea that Democrats called “dead on arrival.”

The dueling Senate votes are the latest political messaging exercise in a Congress that has operated almost entirely on partisan terms, as Republicans pushed through a massive tax and spending cuts bill this summer using budget maneuvers that eliminated the need for Democratic votes. They also tweaked Senate rules to push past a Democratic blockade of all of President Donald Trump’s nominees.

A small group of moderate Democratic senators crossed the aisle and made a deal with Republicans to end the shutdown last month, raising some hopes for a health care compromise that quickly faded with a lack of real bipartisan talks.

An intractable issue

The votes were also the latest salvo in the debate over the Affordable Care Act, former President Barack Obama’s signature law that Democrats passed along party lines in 2010 to expand access to insurance coverage.

Republicans have tried unsuccessfully since then to repeal or overhaul the law, arguing that health care is still too expensive. But they have struggled to find an alternative. In the meantime Democrats have made the policy a central political issue in several elections, betting that the millions of people who buy health care on the government marketplaces want to keep their coverage.

“When people’s monthly payments spike next year, they’ll know it was Republicans that made it happen,” Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said in November.

Schumer has also been clear that Democrats will not seek compromise.

Thursday’s vote is “the last train out of the station,” he said. “What we need to do is prevent premiums from skyrocketing, and only our bill does it,” he said.

The health care shutdown

Even if they view it as a political win, the failed votes would be a loss for Democrats who demanded an extension of the benefits as they forced a government shutdown for six weeks in October and November — and for the millions of people facing premium increases on Jan. 1.

While most Democratic senators pushed to keep the shutdown going as Republicans refused to negoti-

ate, a small group of centrist Democrats struck a deal with Majority Leader John Thune for a future health care vote, with no guarantee of success, in exchange for their votes to reopen the government.

Maine Sen. Angus King, an Independent who caucuses with Democrats, said the group tried to negotiate with Republicans after the shutdown ended. But he said the talks became unproductive when Republicans demanded language adding new limits for abortion coverage that were a "red line" for Democrats.

"They're going to own these increases," King said of Republicans.

A plethora of plans, but little agreement

Republicans have used the looming expiration of the subsidies to renew their longstanding criticisms of Obamacare and to try, once more, to agree on what should be done. The GOP plan that the Senate will vote on Thursday would replace the tax credits with health savings accounts, an overhaul of the law that they say would put the money in the hands of consumers, not insurance companies that currently receive the current subsidies directly.

Thune announced Tuesday that the GOP conference had decided to vote on the bill led by Louisiana Sen. Bill Cassidy, the chairman of the Senate Health, Labor, Education and Pensions Committee, and Idaho Sen. Mike Crapo, the chairman of the Senate Finance Committee, even as several Republican senators proposed alternate ideas.

In the House, Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has promised a vote next week. Republicans weighed different options in a conference meeting on Wednesday, with no apparent consensus.

Moderates in the party who could have competitive reelection bids next year are pushing Johnson to find a way to extend the subsidies. But more conservative members want to see the law overhauled.

Rep. Kevin Kiley, R-Calif., has pushed for a temporary extension, which he said could be an opening to take further steps on health care.

If they fail to act and health care costs go up, the approval rating for Congress "will get even lower," Kiley said.

What to know as trial nears for the Wisconsin judge accused of helping an immigrant dodge agents

By TODD RICHMOND Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. (AP) — Defense attorneys and prosecutors were set Thursday to choose the jurors who will decide whether a Wisconsin judge accused of helping a Mexican immigrant dodge federal officers committed a crime.

Federal prosecutors charged Milwaukee County Circuit Judge Hannah Dugan this spring with obstruction and concealing an individual to prevent arrest. They allege she showed 31-year-old Eduardo Flores-Ruiz out of her courtroom through a back door when she learned federal authorities were in the courthouse looking to arrest him.

Dugan is set to stand trial beginning Monday in the latest show of force in the Trump administration's sweeping immigration crackdown. She faces up to six years in prison if convicted on both counts.

Here's what to know about the case, jury selection and the trial:

FBI: Angry Dugan orchestrated escape attempt

According to an FBI affidavit, Flores-Ruiz illegally reentered the United States from Mexico in 2013. Agents learned that he had been charged in state court with battery in March and was scheduled to appear in front of Dugan on April 18.

Agents traveled to the courthouse to arrest Flores-Ruiz after the hearing. A public defender noticed the agents in the corridor and told Dugan's clerk about them. Dugan grew angry, according to the affidavit, declared the situation "absurd" and approached with another judge. Dugan argued with the agents over whether their warrant was valid and told them to speak to the chief judge.

Dugan returned to her courtroom, told Flores-Ruiz to come with her and led him and his attorney out a back jury door to the public corridor outside the courtroom, the affidavit says. Agents on their way back from the chief judge's office spotted Flores-Ruiz, but he made it outside. He was eventually captured af-

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 41 of 67

ter a foot chase. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security announced in November that he had been deported.

Dugan defenders scouring jury pool for bias

Democrats insist President Donald Trump's administration is trying to make an example of Dugan to blunt judicial opposition to its immigration crackdown.

The administration, for its part, has been vilifying Dugan on social media. FBI Director Kash Patel posted a photo of her being led out of the courthouse in handcuffs and the Department of Homeland Security posted that Dugan has taken the term activist judge "to a whole new meaning."

Dugan told police she found a threatening flyer from an anti-government group at her home and at her mother and sister's homes four days after Flores-Ruiz was captured.

Dugan's attorneys have said they're worried publicity about the case has tainted the jury pool. They sent a questionnaire to prospective jurors this fall in an effort to gauge their political involvement and leanings, asking whether they belong to political organizations, what radio shows and podcasts they follow, and what stickers, signs and patches they have on their cars, water bottles, backpacks and laptops.

Attorneys on both sides have already agreed to strike 44 prospective jurors, online court records show. A group of 40 prospective jurors was scheduled to show up Thursday morning at the federal courthouse in Milwaukee and fill out yet another questionnaire about whether their views have changed since they completed the first survey. Attorneys plan to spend the day questioning them in person.

The lawyers are prepared to bring in more prospective jurors on Friday if necessary.

Questions of immunity and protocol

Dugan's defense team has argued that she's immune from prosecution because she was acting in her official capacity as a judge and therefore had "no consciousness of wrongdoing, no wrongfulness, no deception," according to their filings.

Her attorneys tried to persuade presiding Judge Lynn Adelman to dismiss the case in August on those grounds. The judge refused, saying that there's no firmly established judicial immunity barring criminal prosecution.

Dugan also has argued that she was following protocols and did not intend to disrupt agents. According to her arguments, Milwaukee County Chief Judge Carl Ashley sent out a draft policy on immigration arrests in the courthouse about a week before Flores-Ruiz was arrested. The policy barred agents from executing administrative warrants in nonpublic courthouse areas and required court personnel to immediately refer any immigration agents to a supervisor, which Dugan did.

Dugan further contends that Ashley denied the agents permission to arrest Flores-Ruiz in the courtroom or the hallway. The agents then abandoned their plan to arrest him in the building and instead followed him outside so they could arrest him on the street, according to Dugan.

"(Dugan) was trying to ascertain, and follow, the rules," her attorneys argued ahead of the trial.

Under federal guidance issued Jan. 21, immigration agents may carry out enforcement actions in or near courthouses if they believe someone they are trying to find will be there.

Immigration agents are generally required to let their internal legal office know ahead of time to make sure there are no legal restrictions, and are supposed to carry out arrests in nonpublic areas whenever possible, coordinate with court security and minimize impact on court operations.

Bill Clinton appointed the judge presiding over the case

Then-President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, appointed Adelman to the federal bench in 1997. A Wisconsin native, he served as a state senator for 20 years. He also worked as an attorney for the Legal Aid Society of Wisconsin and as a Columbia University Law School researcher. He's now 86 years old.

He struck down Wisconsin's voter photo identification law in 2014, calling it an unfair burden on poor and minority voters. The 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals reinstated the law later that year, however.

Adelman also wrote an article in 2020 accusing the U.S. Supreme Court under Chief Justice John Roberts of eroding democracy.

Trump administration separates thousands of migrant families in the US

By GISELA SALOMON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — President Donald Trump's zero-tolerance immigration policy split more than 5,000 children from their families at the Mexico border during his first term.

Border crossings sit at a record low nearly a year into his second administration and a new wave of immigration enforcement is dividing families inside the U.S.

Federal officials and their local law enforcement partners are detaining tens of thousands of asylum-seekers and migrants. Detainees are moved repeatedly, then deported, or held in poor conditions for weeks or months before asking to go home.

The federal government was holding an average of more than 66,000 people in November, the highest on record.

During the first Trump administration, families were forcibly separated at the border and authorities struggled to find children in a vast shelter system because government computer systems weren't linked. Now parents inside the United States are being arrested by immigration authorities and separated from their families during prolonged detention. Or, they choose to have their children remain in the U.S. after an adult is deported, many after years or decades here.

The Trump administration and its anti-immigration backers see "unprecedented success" and Trump's top border adviser Tom Homan told reporters in April that "we're going to keep doing it, full speed ahead."

Three families separated by migration enforcement in recent months told The Associated Press that their dreams of better, freer lives had clashed with Washington's new immigration policy and their existence is anguished without knowing if they will see their loved ones again.

For them, migration marked the possible start of permanent separation between parents and children, the source of deep pain and uncertainty.

A family divided between Florida and Venezuela

Antonio Laverde left Venezuela for the U.S. in 2022 and crossed the border illegally, then requested asylum.

He got a work permit and a driver's license and worked as an Uber driver in Miami, sharing homes with other immigrants so he could send money to relatives in Venezuela and Florida.

Laverde's wife Jakelin Pasedo and their sons followed him from Venezuela to Miami in December 2024. Pasedo focused on caring for her sons while her husband earned enough to support the family. Pasedo and the kids got refugee status but Laverde, 39, never obtained it and as he left for work one early June morning, he was arrested by federal agents.

Pasedo says it was a case of mistaken identity by agents hunting for a suspect in their shared housing. In the end, she and her children, then 3 and 5, remember the agents cuffing Laverde at gunpoint.

"They got sick with fever, crying for their father, asking for him," Pasedo said.

Laverde was held at Broward Transitional Center, a detention facility in Pompano Beach, Florida. In September, after three months detention, he asked to return to Venezuela.

Pasedo, 39, however, has no plans to go back. She fears she could be arrested or kidnapped for criticizing the socialist government and belonging to the political opposition.

She works cleaning offices and, despite all the obstacles, hopes to reunify with her husband someday in the U.S.

They followed the law

Yaoska's husband was a political activist in Nicaragua, a country tight in the grasp of autocratic married co-presidents Daniel Ortega and Rosario Murillo.

She remembers her husband getting death threats and being beaten by police when he refused to participate in a pro-government march. Yaoska spoke on condition of anonymity and requested the same for her husband to protect him from the Nicaraguan government.

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 43 of 67

The couple fled Nicaragua for the U.S. with their 10-year-old son in 2022, crossing the border and getting immigration parole. Settling down in Miami, they applied for asylum and had a second son, who has U.S. citizenship. Yaoska is now five months pregnant with their third child.

In late August, Yaoska, 32, went to an appointment at the South Florida office of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Her family accompanied her. Her husband, 35, was detained and failed his credible fear interview, according to a court document.

Yaoska was released under 24-hour supervision by a GPS watch that she cannot remove. Her husband was deported to Nicaragua after three months at the Krome Detention Center, the United States' oldest immigration detention facility and one with a long history of abuse.

Yaoska now shares family news with her husband by phone. The children are struggling without their father, she said.

"It's so hard to see my children like this. They arrested him right in front of them," Yaoska said, her voice trembling.

They don't want to eat and are often sick. The youngest wakes up at night asking for him.

"I'm afraid in Nicaragua," she said. "But I'm scared here too."

Yaoska said her work authorization is valid until 2028 but the future is frightening and uncertain.

"I've applied to several job agencies, but nobody calls me back," she said. "I don't know what's going to happen to me."

He was detained by local police, then deported

Edgar left Guatemala more than two decades ago. Working construction, he started a family in South Florida with Amavilia, a fellow undocumented Guatemalan migrant.

The arrival of their son brought them joy.

"He was so happy with the baby — he loved him," said Amavilia, 31. "He told me he was going to see him grow up and walk."

But within a few days, Edgar was detained on a 2016 warrant for driving without a license in Homestead, the small agricultural city where he lived in South Florida.

She and her husband declined to provide their last names because they are worried about repercussion from U.S. immigration officials.

Amavilia expected his release within 48 hours. Instead, Edgar, who declined to be interviewed, was turned over to immigration officials and moved to Krome.

"I fell into despair. I didn't know what to do," Amavilia said. "I can't go."

Edgar, 45, was deported to Guatemala on June 8.

After Edgar's detention, Amavilia couldn't pay the \$950 rent for the two-bedroom apartment she shares with another immigrant. For the first three months, she received donations from immigration advocates.

Today, breastfeeding and caring for two children, she wakes up at 3 a.m. to cook lunches she sells for \$10 each.

She walks with her son in a stroller to take her daughter to school, then spends afternoons selling homemade ice cream and chocolate-covered bananas door to door with her two children.

Amavilia crossed the border in September 2023 and did not seek asylum or any type of legal status. She said her daughter grows anxious around police. She urges her to stay calm, smile and walk with confidence.

"I'm afraid to go out, but I always go out entrusting myself to God," she said. "Every time I return home, I feel happy and grateful."

Former Michigan football coach Sherrone Moore jailed, hours after his firing

By LARRY LAGE AP Sports Writer

ANN ARBOR, Mich. (AP) — Former Michigan football coach Sherrone Moore was jailed on Wednesday, according to court records, hours after he was fired for what the university said was an "inappropriate relationship with a staff member."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 44 of 67

According to the Washtenaw County Jail, the 39-year-old Moore had been booked into the facility as of Wednesday evening. The jail's records did not provide any information about why Moore was detained or whether any court appearances were scheduled.

In response to media inquiries about Moore, the Pittsfield Township Police Department issued a statement that did not mention anyone by name. According to the statement, police were called to investigate an alleged assault in Pittsfield Township, a couple of miles south of Michigan Stadium, and took a person into custody.

The incident was not random and there was no ongoing threat to public safety, police said, and the person was jailed pending a review of charges by prosecutors.

"Given the nature of the allegations, the need to maintain the integrity of the investigation, and its current status at this time, we are prohibited from releasing additional details," the statement said.

Michigan said it fired Moore for cause after finding evidence of his relationship with the staffer, ending an up-and-down, two-year tenure that saw the Wolverines take a step back on the field after winning the national championship and getting punished by the NCAA.

"This conduct constitutes a clear violation of university policy, and UM maintains zero tolerance for such behavior," athletic director Warde Manuel said in a statement.

The announcement did not include details of the alleged relationship. Moore, who is married with three young daughters, did not return a message from The Associated Press seeking comment.

Moore was 9-3 this year after going 8-5 in his debut season.

He signed a five-year contract with a base annual salary of \$5.5 million last year. According to the terms of his deal, the university will not have to buy out the remaining years of Moore's contract because he was fired for cause.

College football's winningest program is suddenly looking for a third coach in four years, shortly after a busy cycle that included Lane Kiffin leaving playoff-bound Mississippi for LSU.

Moore, the team's former offensive coordinator, was promoted to the lead the Wolverines after they won the 2023 national title. He succeeded Jim Harbaugh, who returned to the NFL to lead the Los Angeles Chargers.

The 18th-ranked Wolverines (9-3, 7-2 Big Ten) are set to play No. 14 Texas on Dec. 31 in the Citrus Bowl.

Biff Poggi, who filled in for Moore when he was suspended earlier this season, will serve as interim coach.

Moore, in his second season, was suspended for two games this year as part of self-imposed sanctions for NCAA violations related to a sign-stealing scandal. The NCAA added a third game to the suspension, which would have kept Moore off the sideline for next year's opener against Western Michigan.

Moore previously deleted an entire 52-message text thread on his personal phone with former staffer Connor Stalions, who led the team's sign-sealing operation. The texts were later recovered and shared with the NCAA.

Just a few years ago, Moore was Harbaugh's top assistant and regarded as a rising star.

Moore, who is from Derby, Kansas, didn't start playing football until his junior year of high school. He played for Butler County Community College in Kansas and as an offensive lineman for coach Bob Stoops at Oklahoma during the 2006 and 2007 seasons.

His coaching career began as a graduate assistant at Louisville before moving on to Central Michigan, where he caught Harbaugh's attention. Harbaugh hired him in 2018 as tight ends coach.

Moore was promoted to offensive line coach and co-offensive coordinator in 2021, when the Wolverines bounced back from a 2-4, pandemic-shortened season and began a three-year run of excellence that culminated in the school's first national title in 26 years.

He worked his way up within the Wolverines' staff and filled in as interim coach for four games during the 2023 championship season while Harbaugh served two suspensions for potential NCAA rules violations.

Moore also served a one-game suspension during that year related to a recruiting infraction NCAA case.

Earlier in the 2023 season, Michigan State fired coach Mel Tucker for cause after he engaged in what he described as consensual phone sex with an activist and rape survivor. In 2012, Arkansas fired coach Bobby Petrino due to a sordid scandal that involved a motorcycle crash, an affair with a woman who worked for

him and being untruthful to his bosses.

Trump says the US has seized an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela

By AAMER MADHANI, KONSTANTIN TOROPIN, JOSHUA GOODMAN and REGINA GARCIA CANO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — President Donald Trump said Wednesday that the United States has seized an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela as tensions mount with the government of President Nicolás Maduro.

Using U.S. forces to take control of a merchant ship is incredibly unusual and marks the Trump administration's latest push to increase pressure on Maduro, who has been charged with narcoterrorism in the United States. The U.S. has built up the largest military presence in the region in decades and launched a series of deadly strikes on alleged drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean. The campaign is facing growing scrutiny from Congress.

"We've just seized a tanker on the coast of Venezuela, a large tanker, very large, largest one ever seized, actually," Trump told reporters at the White House, later adding that "it was seized for a very good reason."

Trump did not offer additional details. When asked what would happen to the oil aboard the tanker, Trump said, "Well, we keep it, I guess."

The seizure was led by the U.S. Coast Guard and supported by the Navy, according to a U.S. official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity. The official added that it was conducted under U.S. law enforcement authority.

Storming the oil tanker

The Coast Guard members were taken to the oil tanker by helicopter from the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford, the official said. The Ford is in the Caribbean Sea after arriving last month in a major show of force, joining a fleet of other warships.

Video posted to social media by Attorney General Pam Bondi shows people fast-roping from one of the helicopters involved in the operation as it hovers just feet from the deck.

The Coast Guard members can be seen later in the video moving throughout the superstructure of the ship with their weapons drawn.

Bondi wrote that "for multiple years, the oil tanker has been sanctioned by the United States due to its involvement in an illicit oil shipping network supporting foreign terrorist organizations."

Venezuela's government said in a statement that the seizure "constitutes a blatant theft and an act of international piracy."

"Under these circumstances, the true reasons for the prolonged aggression against Venezuela have finally been revealed. ... It has always been about our natural resources, our oil, our energy, the resources that belong exclusively to the Venezuelan people," the statement said.

Half of ship's oil is tied to Cuban importer

The U.S. official identified the seized tanker as the Skipper.

The ship departed Venezuela around Dec. 2 with about 2 million barrels of heavy crude, roughly half of it belonging to a Cuban state-run oil importer, according to documents from the state-owned company Petróleos de Venezuela S.A., commonly known as PDVSA, that were provided on the condition of anonymity because the person did not have permission to share them.

The Skipper was previously known as the M/T Adisa, according to ship tracking data. The Adisa was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2022 over accusations of belonging to a sophisticated network of shadow tankers that smuggled crude oil on behalf of Iran's Revolutionary Guard and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group.

The network was reportedly run by a Switzerland-based Ukrainian oil trader, the U.S. Treasury Department said at the time.

Hitting Venezuela's sanctioned oil business

Venezuela has the world's largest proven oil reserves and produces about 1 million barrels a day.

PDVSA is the backbone of the country's economy. Its reliance on intermediaries increased in 2020, when

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 46 of 67

the first Trump administration expanded its maximum-pressure campaign on Venezuela with sanctions that threaten to lock out of the U.S. economy any individual or company that does business with Maduro's government. Longtime allies Russia and Iran, both also sanctioned, have helped Venezuela skirt restrictions.

The transactions usually involve a complex network of shadowy intermediaries. Many are shell companies, registered in jurisdictions known for secrecy. The buyers deploy so-called ghost tankers that hide their location and hand off their valuable cargoes in the middle of the ocean before they reach their final destination.

Maduro did not address the seizure during a speech before a ruling-party organized demonstration in Caracas, Venezuela's capital. But he told supporters that the country is "prepared to break the teeth of the North American empire if necessary."

Maduro has insisted the real purpose of the U.S. military operations is to force him from office.

Democrat says the move is about 'regime change'

Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said the U.S. seizing the oil tanker cast doubt on the administration's stated reasons for the military buildup and boat strikes.

"This shows that their whole cover story — that this is about interdicting drugs — is a big lie," the senator said. "This is just one more piece of evidence that this is really about regime change — by force."

Vincent P. O'Hara, a naval historian and author of "The Greatest Naval War Ever Fought," called the seizure "very unusual" and "provocative." Noting that the action will probably deter other ships from the Venezuela coastline, he said, "If you have no maritime traffic or access to that, then you have no economy."

The seizure comes a day after the U.S. military flew a pair of fighter jets over the Gulf of Venezuela in what appeared to be the closest that warplanes had come to the South American country's airspace. Trump has said land attacks are coming soon but has not offered more details.

The Trump administration is facing increasing scrutiny from lawmakers over the boat strike campaign, which has killed at least 87 people in 22 known strikes since early September, including a follow-up strike that killed two survivors clinging to the wreckage of a boat after the first hit.

Some legal experts and Democrats say that action may have violated the laws governing the use of deadly military force.

Lawmakers are demanding to get unedited video from the strikes, but Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth told congressional leaders at a classified briefing Tuesday that he was still weighing whether to release it.

The Coast Guard referred a request for comment about the tanker seizure to the White House.

Botulism outbreak sickens more than 50 babies and expands to all ByHeart products

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

Federal health officials on Wednesday expanded an outbreak of infant botulism tied to recalled ByHeart baby formula to include all illnesses reported since the company began production in March 2022.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said investigators "cannot rule out the possibility that contamination might have affected all ByHeart formula products" ever made.

The outbreak now includes at least 51 infants in 19 states. The new case definition includes "any infant with botulism who was exposed to ByHeart formula at any time since the product's release," according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The most recent illness was reported on Dec. 1.

No deaths have been reported in the outbreak, which was announced Nov. 8.

Previously, health officials had said the outbreak included 39 suspected or confirmed cases of infant botulism reported in 18 states since August. That's when officials at California's Infant Botulism Treatment and Prevention Program reported a rise in treatment of infants who had consumed ByHeart formula. Another 12 cases were identified with the expanded definition, including two that occurred in the original timeline and 10 that occurred from December 2023 through July 2025.

ByHeart, a New York-based manufacturer of organic infant formula founded in 2016, recalled all its products sold in the U.S. on Nov. 11. The company, which accounts for about 1% of the U.S. infant formula

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 47 of 67

market, had been selling about 200,000 cans of the product each month.

News that ByHeart products could have been contaminated for years was distressing to Andi Galindo, whose 5-week-old daughter, Rowan, was hospitalized in December 2023 with infant botulism after drinking the formula. Galindo, 36, of Redondo Beach, California, said she insisted on using ByHeart formula to supplement a low supply of breast milk because it was recommended by a lactation consultant as "very natural, very gentle, very good for the babies."

"That's a hard one," Galindo said. "If there is proof that there were issues with their manufacturing and their plant all the way back from the beginning, that is a problem and they really need to be held accountable."

Amy Mazziotti, 43, of Burbank, California, said her then-5-month-old son, Hank, fell ill and was treated for botulism in March, weeks after he began drinking ByHeart. Being included in the investigation of the outbreak "feels like a win for all of us," she said Wednesday.

"I've known in my gut from the beginning that ByHeart was the reason Hank got sick, and to see that these cases are now part of the investigation brings me to tears — a mix of relief, gratitude and hope that the truth is finally being recognized," she said.

In a statement late Wednesday, ByHeart officials said the company is cooperating with federal officials "to understand the full scope of related cases."

"The new cases reported by CDC and FDA will help inform ByHeart's investigation as we continue to seek the root cause of the contamination," the statement said.

Lab tests detected contamination

The FDA sent inspectors last month to ByHeart plants in Allerton, Iowa, and Portland, Oregon, where the formula is produced and packaged. The agency has released no results from those inspections.

The company previously reported that tests by an independent laboratory showed that 36 samples from three different lots contained the type of bacteria that can cause infant botulism.

"We cannot rule out the risk that all ByHeart formula across all product lots may have been contaminated," the company wrote on its website last month.

Those results and discussions with the FDA led CDC officials to expand the outbreak, according to Dr. Jennifer Cope, a CDC scientist leading the investigation.

"It looks like the contamination appeared to persist across all production runs, different lots, different raw material lots," Cope said. "They couldn't isolate it to specific lots from a certain time period."

Inspection documents showed that ByHeart had a history of problems with contamination.

In 2022, the year ByHeart started making formula, the company recalled five batches of infant formula after a sample at a packaging plant tested positive for a different germ, *cronobacter sakazakii*. In 2023, the FDA sent a warning letter to the company detailing "areas that still require corrective actions."

A ByHeart plant in Reading, Pennsylvania, was shut down in 2023 just before FDA inspectors found problems with mold, water leaks and insects, documents show.

Infant botulism is rare

Infant botulism is a rare disease that affects fewer than 200 babies in the U.S. each year. It's caused when infants ingest botulism bacteria that produce spores that germinate in the intestines, creating a toxin that affects the nervous system. Babies are vulnerable until about age 1 because their gut microbiomes are not mature enough to fight the toxin.

Baby formula has previously been linked to sporadic cases of illness, but no known outbreaks of infant botulism tied to powdered formula have previously been confirmed, according to research studies.

Symptoms can take up to 30 days to develop and can include constipation, poor feeding, loss of head control, drooping eyelids and a flat facial expression. Babies may feel "floppy" and can have problems swallowing or breathing.

The sole treatment for infant botulism is known as BabyBIG, an IV medication made from the pooled blood plasma of adults immunized against botulism. California's infant botulism program developed the product and is the sole source worldwide.

The antibodies provided by BabyBIG are likely most effective for about a month, although they may con-

tinue circulating in the child's system for several months, said Dr. Sharon Nachman, an expert in pediatric infectious disease at Stony Brook Children's Hospital.

"The risk to the infant is ongoing and the family should not be using this formula after it was recalled," Nachman said in an email.

Families of several babies treated for botulism after drinking ByHeart formula have sued the company. Lawsuits filed in federal courts allege that the formula they fed their children was defective and ByHeart was negligent in selling it. They seek financial payment for medical bills, emotional distress and other harm.

Orioles agree to \$155 million, 5-year deal with slugger Pete Alonso, AP source says

By NOAH TRISTER AP Baseball Writer

BALTIMORE (AP) — The Baltimore Orioles agreed to a \$155 million, five-year contract with slugger Pete Alonso, a person with knowledge of the agreement told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The person spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because the deal was pending a physical.

It's a major move for a Baltimore team that vowed to be aggressive following a last-place finish in the AL East. Alonso hit .272 with 38 home runs and 126 RBIs for the New York Mets this year, posting an .871 OPS that was his highest since he hit 53 home runs as a rookie in 2019.

Alonso, a first baseman who turned 31 on Sunday, hit a franchise-record 264 homers over seven seasons with the Mets. He's earned All-Star honors five times, including each of the past four years.

Nicknamed the Polar Bear, Alonso became a Citi Field fan favorite as a homegrown member of the Mets. He was the NL Rookie of the Year in 2019, when he hit .260 with a major league-high 53 homers — a rookie record — and 120 RBIs. He had a career-high 131 RBIs in 2022.

Alonso batted a career-low .217 in 2023 while hitting 46 homers and driving in 118 runs, and he hit .240 with 34 homers and 88 RBIs in 2024.

After a slow free agent market last winter, Alonso signed a \$54 million, two-year contract to stay with the Mets, but he opted out of the final year of the deal, forfeiting \$24 million.

Alonso turned down a \$158 million, seven-year offer from the Mets in 2023 that would have covered 2024-30. He will wind up earning \$205.5 million over those seven seasons, a 30% increase.

Alonso met with teams at the winter meetings in Orlando, Florida.

"Pete lives in Tampa, it's rather warm there," his agent, Scott Boras, said Tuesday. "So the polar vortex of last year has kind of thawed. So the prior market — that prior bear market is exhausted."

The Orioles won the AL East in 2023 and were a wild card last year, but a team full of young talent backslid significantly in 2025. Baltimore's pitching had a lot to do with that, but the offense wasn't great either despite the presence of Gunnar Henderson, Adley Rutschman and Jordan Westburg.

Alonso gives the Orioles a veteran power bat in the middle of the lineup, and new manager Craig Alber-naz will have some flexibility. Rutschman and Samuel Basallo are options at both catcher and designated hitter, with Basallo potentially getting at-bats at first base, too. Alonso has played 162 games each of the past two seasons, almost entirely at first base.

It's now harder to see a path to regular playing time, barring injury, for first baseman Ryan Mountcastle, who could become a free agent after the 2026 season. Coby Mayo, a power-hitting prospect who hit .217 with 11 homers in 85 games this year, may also be blocked.

Baltimore could still use a dependable starter to help a rotation that produced a 4.65 ERA last season, but acquiring Alonso shows the Orioles are willing and able to land a top free agent after sticking mostly to short-term deals in recent years.

"Christmas came early," Maryland Gov. Wes Moore said on social media after the news broke.

Earlier this offseason, Baltimore signed reliever Ryan Helsley and traded for outfielder Taylor Ward.

The Mets lost Alonso a day after All-Star closer Edwin Díaz agreed to leave New York for a \$69 million, three-year contract with the two-time defending World Series champion Los Angeles Dodgers, a deal still

not finalized. New York also traded outfielder Brandon Nimmo to Texas on Nov. 24 for Gold Glove second baseman Marcus Semien.

New York was baseball's second-biggest spender this year behind the Dodgers but failed to reach the postseason.

House passes defense bill to raise troop pay and overhaul weapons purchases

By STEPHEN GROVES and BEN FINLEY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The House voted to pass a sweeping defense policy bill Wednesday that authorizes \$900 billion in military programs, including a pay raise for troops and an overhaul of how the Department of Defense buys weapons.

The bill's passage on a 312-112 vote comes at a time of increasing friction between the Republican-controlled Congress and President Donald Trump's administration over the management of the military.

The annual National Defense Authorization Act typically gains bipartisan backing, and the White House has signaled "strong support" for the must-pass legislation, saying it is in line with Trump's national security agenda. Yet tucked into the over-3,000-page bill are several measures that push back against the Department of Defense, including a demand for more information on boat strikes in the Caribbean and support for allies in Europe, such as Ukraine.

Overall, the sweeping bill calls for a 3.8% pay raise for many military members as well as housing and facility improvements on military bases. It also strikes a compromise between the political parties — cutting climate and diversity efforts in line with Trump's agenda, while also boosting congressional oversight of the Pentagon and repealing several old war authorizations. Still, hard-line conservatives said they were frustrated that the bill does not do more to cut U.S. commitments overseas.

"We need a ready, capable and lethal fighting force because the threats to our nation, especially those from China, are more complex and challenging than at any point in the last 40 years," said Rep. Mike Rogers, the GOP chair of the House Armed Services Committee.

Lawmakers overseeing the military said the bill would change how the Pentagon buys weapons, with an emphasis on speed after years of delay by the defense industry. It's also a key priority for Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth. Rep. Adam Smith, the top Democrat on the armed services panel, called the bill "the most ambitious swing at acquisition reform that we've taken."

Still, Smith lamented that the bill does not do as much as Democrats would like to rein in the Trump administration but called it "a step in the right direction towards reasserting the authority of Congress."

"The biggest concern I have is that the Pentagon, being run by Secretary Hegseth and by President Trump, is simply not accountable to Congress or accountable to the law," he said.

The legislation next heads to the Senate, where leaders are working to pass the bill before lawmakers depart Washington for a holiday break.

Several senators on both sides of the aisle have criticized the bill for not doing enough to restrict military flights over Washington. They had pushed for reforms after a midair collision this year between an Army helicopter and a jetliner killed all 67 people aboard the two aircraft near Washington's Ronald Reagan National Airport. The National Transportation Safety Board and families of the victims have also voiced opposition to that section of the bill, raising concerns that it would make the airspace more dangerous.

Here's what the defense bill does as it makes its way through Congress.

Boat strike videos and congressional oversight

Lawmakers included a provision that would cut Hegseth's travel budget by a quarter until the Pentagon provides Congress with unedited video of the strikes against alleged drug boats near Venezuela. Lawmakers are asserting their oversight role after a Sept. 2 strike where the U.S. military fired on two survivors who were holding on to a boat that had partially been destroyed.

The bill also demands that Hegseth allow Congress to review the orders for the strikes.

Reaffirm commitments to Europe and Korea

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 50 of 67

Trump's ongoing support for Ukraine and other allies in Eastern Europe has been under doubt over the last year, but lawmakers included several provisions meant to keep up U.S. support for countering Russian aggression in the region.

The defense bill requires the Pentagon to keep at least 76,000 troops and major equipment stationed in Europe unless NATO allies are consulted and there is a determination that such a withdrawal is in U.S. interests. Around 80,000 to 100,000 U.S. troops are usually present on European soil. It also authorizes \$400 million for each of the next two years to manufacture weapons to be sent to Ukraine.

Additionally, there is a provision to keep U.S. troops stationed in South Korea, setting the minimum requirement at 28,500.

Cuts to climate and diversity initiatives

The bill makes \$1.6 billion in cuts to climate change-related spending, the House Armed Services Committee said. U.S. military assessments have long found that climate change is a threat to national security, with bases being pummeled by hurricanes or routinely flooded.

The bill also would save \$40 million by repealing diversity, equity and inclusion offices, programs and trainings, the committee said. The position of chief diversity officer would be cut, for example.

Iraq War resolution repeal

Congress is putting an official end to the war in Iraq by repealing the authorization for the 2003 invasion. Supporters in both the House and Senate say the repeal is crucial to prevent future abuses and to reinforce that Iraq is now a strategic partner of the U.S.

The 2002 resolution has been rarely used in recent years. But the first Trump administration cited it as part of its legal justification for a 2020 U.S. drone strike that killed Iranian Gen. Qassim Suleimani.

Lifting final Syria sanctions

Congress would permanently remove U.S. sanctions put on Syria after the Trump administration temporarily lifted many penalties.

Lawmakers imposed economically crippling sanctions on the country in 2019 to punish former leader Bashar Assad for human rights abuses during the nearly 14-year civil war. After Syrian President Ahmed al-Sharaa led a successful insurgency to depose Assad, he is seeking to rebuild his nation's economy.

Advocates of a permanent repeal have said international companies are unlikely to invest in projects needed for the country's reconstruction as long as there is a threat of sanctions returning.

Lack of IVF coverage

Democrats criticized House Speaker Mike Johnson for stripping a provision from the bill to expand coverage of in vitro fertilization for active duty personnel. An earlier version covered the medical procedure, known as IVF, which helps people facing infertility have children.

Federal Reserve cuts key rate, sees healthier economy next year

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve reduced its key interest rate by a quarter-point for the third time in a row Wednesday but signaled that it may leave rates unchanged in the coming months.

The cut decreased the Fed's rate to about 3.6%, the lowest it has been in nearly three years. Lower rates from the Fed can bring down borrowing costs for mortgages, auto loans, and credit cards over time, though market forces can also affect those rates.

Chair Jerome Powell suggested at a news conference that after six rate cuts in the past two years, the central bank can step back and see how hiring and inflation develop. In a set of quarterly economic projections, Fed officials signaled they expect to lower rates just once next year.

Fed officials "will carefully evaluate the incoming data," Powell said, adding that the Fed is "well positioned to wait to see how the economy evolves."

The chair also said that the Fed's key rate was close to a level that neither restricts nor stimulates the economy, a significant shift from earlier this year, when he described the rate as high enough to slow the economy and quell inflation. With rates closer to a more neutral level, the bar for further rate cuts is likely

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 51 of 67

higher than it was this fall.

"We believe the labor market will have to noticeably weaken to warrant another rate cut soon," Ryan Sweet, global chief economist at Oxford Economics, said.

Three Fed officials dissented from the move, the most dissents in six years and a sign of deep divisions on a committee that traditionally works by consensus. Two officials voted to keep the Fed's rate unchanged: Jeffrey Schmid, president of the Kansas City Fed, and Austan Goolsbee, president of the Chicago Fed. Stephen Miran, whom Trump appointed in September, voted for a half point cut.

December's meeting could usher in a more contentious period for the Fed. Officials are split between those who support reducing rates to bolster hiring and those who'd prefer to keep rates unchanged because inflation remains above the central bank's 2% target. Unless inflation shows clear signs of coming fully under control, or unemployment worsens, those divisions will likely remain.

"What you see is some people feel we should stop here and we're in the right place and should wait, and some people think we should cut more next year," Powell said.

A stark sign of the Fed's divisions was the wide range of cuts that the 19 members of the Fed's rate-setting committee penciled in for 2026. Seven projected no cuts next year, while eight forecast that the central bank would implement two or more reductions. Four supported just one. Only 12 out of 19 members vote on rate decisions.

President Donald Trump on Wednesday criticized the cut as too small, and said he would have preferred "at least double." Trump could name a new Fed chair as soon as later this month to replace Powell when his term ends in May. Trump's new chair is likely to push for sharper rate cuts than many officials will support.

Stocks jumped in response to the Fed's move, in part because some Wall Street investors expected Powell to be more forceful in shutting down the possibility of future cuts. The broad S&P 500 stock index rose 0.7% and closed near an all-time high reached in October.

Powell was also optimistic about the economy's growth next year, and said that consumer spending remains resilient while companies are still investing in artificial intelligence infrastructure. He also suggested growing worker efficiency could contribute to faster growth without more inflation.

Still, Powell said the committee reduced borrowing costs out of concern that the job market is even weaker than it appears. While government data shows that the economy has added just 40,000 jobs a month since April, Powell said that figure could be revised lower by as much as 60,000, which would mean employers have actually been shedding an average of 20,000 jobs a month since the spring.

"It's a labor market that seems to have significant downside risks," Powell told reporters. "People care about that. That's their jobs."

The Fed met against the backdrop of elevated inflation that has frustrated many Americans, with prices higher for groceries, rents, and utilities. Consumer prices have jumped 25% in the five years since COVID.

"We hear loud and clear how people are experiencing really high costs," Powell said Wednesday. "A lot of that isn't the current rate of inflation, a lot of that is embedded high costs due to higher inflations in 2022-2023."

Powell said inflation could move higher early next year, as more companies pass tariff costs to consumers as they reset prices to start the year. Inflation should decline after that, he added, but it's not guaranteed.

"We just came off an experience where inflation turned out to be much more persistent than anyone expected," he said, referring to the spike in 2022. "Is that going to happen now? That's the risk."

The Fed's policy meeting took place as the Trump administration moves toward picking a new Fed chair to replace Powell when his term finishes in May. Trump's nominee is likely to push for sharper rate cuts than many officials may support.

Trump has hinted that he will likely pick Kevin Hassett, his top economic adviser. But on Wednesday, Trump said he would meet with Kevin Warsh, a former Fed governor who has also been on the short list to replace Powell.

Trump added that he wants someone who will lower interest rates. "Our rates should be the lowest rates in the world," he said.

A government report last week showed that overall and core prices rose 2.8% in September from a year

earlier, according to the Fed's preferred measure. That is far below the spikes in inflation three years ago but still painful for many households after the big run-up since 2020.

Adding to the Fed's challenges, job gains have slowed sharply this year and the unemployment rate has risen for three straight months to 4.4%. While that is still a low rate historically, it is the highest in four years. Layoffs are also muted, so far, as part of what many economists call a "low hire, low fire" job market.

The Fed typically keeps its key rate elevated to combat inflation, while it often reduces borrowing costs when unemployment worsens to spur more spending and hiring.

Powell will preside over only three more Fed meetings before he steps down. On Wednesday, he was asked about his legacy.

"I really want to turn this job over to whoever replaces me with the economy in really good shape," he said. "I want inflation to be under control, coming back down to 2%, and I want the labor market to be strong."

Foreigners allowed to travel to the US without a visa could soon face new social media screening

By REBECCA SANTANA Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Foreigners who are allowed to come to the United States without a visa could soon be required to submit information about their social media, email accounts and extensive family history to the Department of Homeland Security before being approved for travel.

The notice published Wednesday in the Federal Register said Customs and Border Protection is proposing collecting five years' worth of social media information from travelers from select countries who do not have to get visas to come to the U.S. The Trump administration has been stepping up monitoring of international travelers and immigrants.

The announcement refers to travelers from more than three dozen countries who take part in the Visa Waiver Program and submit their information to the Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA), which automatically screens them and then approves them for travel to the U.S. Unlike visa applicants, they generally do not have to go into an embassy or consulate for an interview.

DHS administers the program, which currently allows citizens of roughly 40 mostly European and Asian countries to travel to the U.S. for tourism or business for three months without visas.

The announcement also said that CBP would start requesting a list of other information, including telephone numbers the person has used over the past five years or email addresses used over the past decade. Also sought would be metadata from electronically submitted photos, as well as extensive information from the applicant's family members, including their places of birth and their telephone numbers.

The application that people are now required to fill out to take part in ESTA asks for a more limited set of questions such as parents' names and current email address.

Asked at a White House event whether he was concerned the measure might affect tourism to the U.S., President Donald Trump said no.

"We want safety, we want security, we want to make sure we're not letting the wrong people come into our country," Trump said.

The public has 60 days to comment on the proposed changes before they go into effect, the notice said. CBP stressed in a statement Wednesday that the rule hasn't yet gone into effect and wasn't finalized.

"Nothing has changed on this front for those coming to the United States. This is not a final rule, it is simply the first step in starting a discussion to have new policy options to keep the American people safe," the agency said in a statement.

"The Department is constantly looking at how we vet those coming into the country, especially after the terrorist attack in Washington DC against our National Guard right before Thanksgiving," the statement read.

The announcement did not say what the administration was looking for in the social media accounts or why it was asking for more information.

But the agency said it was complying with an executive order that Trump signed in January that called

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 53 of 67

for more screening of people coming to the U.S. to prevent the entry of possible national security threats.

Travelers from countries that are not part of the Visa Waiver Program system are already required to submit their social media information, a policy that dates back to the first Trump administration. The policy remained during Democratic President Joe Biden's administration.

But citizens from visa waiver countries were not obligated to do so.

Since January, the Trump administration has stepped up checks of immigrants and travelers, both those trying to enter the U.S. as well as those already in the country. Officials have tightened visa rules by requiring that applicants set all of their social media accounts to public so that they can be more easily scrutinized and checked for what authorities view as potential derogatory information. Refusing to set an account to public can be considered grounds for visa denial, according to guidelines provided by the State Department.

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services now considers whether an applicant for benefits, such as a green card, "endorsed, promoted, supported, or otherwise espoused" anti-American, terrorist or antisemitic views.

The heightened interest in social media screening has drawn concern from immigration and free speech advocates about what the Trump administration is looking for and whether the measures target people critical of the administration in an infringement of free speech rights.

US stocks rise after the Fed cuts rates and hopes build for more

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — The U.S. stock market rose to the edge of its record on Wednesday after the Federal Reserve cut its main interest rate to bolster the job market, and hopes strengthened for more cuts to come in 2026.

The S&P 500 climbed 0.7% and finished just shy of its all-time high, which was set in October. The Dow Jones Industrial Average jumped 497 points, or 1%, and the Nasdaq composite rose 0.3%.

Wall Street loves lower interest rates because they can boost the economy and send prices for investments higher, even if they potentially make inflation worse.

Wednesday's cut to interest rates was widely expected and did not move markets much by itself. But some investors found encouragement from comments by Fed Chair Jerome Powell, which they said were less forceful about shutting down the possibility of future cuts than they had been anticipating.

Powell said again on Wednesday that the central bank is in a difficult spot, because the job market is facing downward pressure when inflation is simultaneously facing upward pressure. By trying to fix one of those problems with interest rates, the Fed usually worsens the other in the short term.

Powell also said for the first time in this rate-cutting campaign that interest rates are back in a place where they're pushing neither inflation nor the job market higher or lower. That gives the Fed time to hold and reassess what to do next with interest rates as more data comes in on the job market and on inflation.

"We are well positioned to wait and see how the economy evolves," Powell said.

But he also said no one at the Fed is expecting a hike to interest rates in their "base case" anytime soon, and he spent much of his discussion in a press conference following the rate announcement talking about the job market.

After voting on Wednesday's cut, Fed officials released projections for where they see the federal funds rate potentially ending 2026. The median member is penciling in one more cut by the end of next year, the same as three months earlier.

That projection is under the microscope because Fed officials had seemed unusually split about how much more help the economy may need from lower interest rates. With inflation stubbornly above the Fed's 2% target, some officials had been saying it was the bigger threat for the economy rather than the job market.

In Wednesday's vote, two Fed officials voted against the cut of a quarter percentage point because they did not want to reduce rates now. A third official, meanwhile, voted against Wednesday's cut because he

wanted a deeper reduction of half a percentage point.

In the bond market, Treasury yields eased as hopes rose for additional cuts to interest rates in 2026.

Traders are now betting on a 71% chance that the Fed will cut the federal funds rate at least twice next year. That's up from the 64% chance seen shortly before the Fed announced its decision, according to data from CME Group.

The Fed also announced a program where it will buy shorter-term Treasuries to help keep the financial system running smoothly. It's not a large-scale program like past efforts by the Fed to buy bonds to keep interest rates low and stimulate the economy, but it helps keep shorter-term rates lower than they otherwise would be.

The yield on the 10-year Treasury fell to 4.15% from 4.18% late Tuesday. The two-year yield fell more and sank to 3.53% from 3.61%.

On Wall Street, GE Vernova flew 15.6% higher after the energy company raised its forecast for revenue by 2028, doubled its dividend and increased its program to buy back its own stock.

Palantir Technologies added 3.3% after saying the U.S. Navy will use its artificial-intelligence platform as part of a \$448 million program.

Cracker Barrel Old Country Store rose 3.5%. The restaurant chain caught up in a furor around its logo design reported better results for the latest quarter than analysts expected but also cut its forecast for revenue this fiscal year, as well as for an underlying measure of earnings.

On the losing end of Wall Street was GameStop, which fell 4.3% after reporting weaker revenue for the latest quarter than analysts expected. The video-game retailers' profit topped forecasts, though.

All told, the S&P 500 rose 46.17 points to 6,886.68. The Dow Jones Industrial Average jumped 497.46 to 48,057.75, and the Nasdaq composite gained 77.67 to 23,654.16.

In stock markets abroad, indexes were mixed amid mostly modest movements across Europe and Asia.

What a Democrat's victory in the Miami mayoral election may mean for Trump

By ADRIANA GOMEZ LICON Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — Democrat Eileen Higgins' victory in the Miami mayoral race marks a setback for Republican President Donald Trump, who endorsed her rival and has touted his 2024 win in the area as a testament to his appeal in Florida and particularly among Hispanic voters.

Higgins, who will become the city's first female mayor, secured a decisive win of approximately 19 points over Trump's pick, Emilio Gonzalez, signaling a potential shift in voter sentiment.

In becoming the first Democrat to lead the city of 487,000 in nearly 30 years, Higgins said she will explore legal ways to unwind an agreement between the city and the federal government that empowers police officers to conduct immigration enforcement.

"We need to look at all our legal options to ensure that our city police work for our neighborhoods and not on checking residents' papers," Higgins said in Spanish at a press conference Wednesday.

While harshly criticizing Trump's immigration crackdown, Higgins has been more measured than her counterpart in New York City, Zohran Mamdani, in her approach.

Higgins' message for Trump

Higgins' victory occurred on the same night that Trump delivered a speech in Pennsylvania meant to emphasize his focus on combating inflation. But the president appeared dismissive on an issue that has damaged his popularity, saying inflation was no longer a problem and that Democrats were using the term "affordability" as a "hoax" to hurt his reputation.

The Associated Press asked Higgins after her win what she would tell Trump.

"When I hear what the residents have to say about affordability, it's real. They're facing expensive rent, expensive property insurance, costs of all sorts of things, especially even now the things they're buying in the stores due to the tariffs," she said. "I think every leader in America needs to think deeply about what they can do to help get the affordability crisis under control for the American people."

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 55 of 67

At the press conference on Wednesday, Higgins, however said that sometimes she and Trump have been in agreement, praising the president for maintaining funding for a new local transit project.

Voters face 'frustration' and 'fear'

Higgins, a former county commissioner, commented on a shift among voters she noticed compared to when she ran in previous years, when people wanted the government to be run more efficiently and to finish projects from housing to transportation.

"This is the first election where when I speak to our residents, it's not just about frustration, it's also about fear," Higgins said at the press briefing. "They've never been afraid of their government before. And now they are."

Higgins said she heard from a medical clinic that had to immediately fire 27 employees who lost work authorization when the Trump administration stripped legal protections from more than 300,000 Venezuelan migrants.

"That's 27 families without a breadwinner. And a health clinic that's short 27 employees to take care of people," she said. "We want a strong border, we want a path to citizenship. We don't want law-abiding people to be ejected from our country, impoverishing their family and driving our economy into ruin."

Turnout was high for a mayoral race

Both major national political parties took an interest in the race, which was a runoff between the two top finishers in the Nov. 4 general election. Trump talked up Gonzalez on his social media site, and national Democratic figures weighed in for Higgins.

Turnout in Tuesday's runoff was huge for a mayoral election in Miami. At a little more than 37,000 votes, it nearly matched turnout in the Nov. 4 general election, which was 36% higher than the turnout four years ago.

However, the number of votes was still much lower than in a typical midterm election, like the one that will be held in 2026. For example, 92,500 voters in the city of Miami cast ballots in the 2022 election for governor.

Miami may become home of the Trump presidential library

Higgins could join the growing local opposition to Trump's presidential library, which Republicans have pushed to build in downtown Miami. Earlier this month, the Miami-Dade College board voted to donate a nearly 3-acre undeveloped lot, valued at over \$67 million, located on the iconic Biscayne Boulevard. However, a judge had temporarily blocked the transfer while a lawsuit plays out.

At a debate aired last month on Miami television station CBS 4, Higgins said that while it is "an honor" to be home to a presidential library, she felt this was a "land giveaway." She said the state could have sold the land and paid for things that have been cut such as food aid and money for transit.

"We gave away very valuable land to a billionaire for free," she said. "That doesn't make any sense to me."

Miami will host next year's G20 summit

Earlier this year, Trump was accompanied by Miami Mayor Francis Suarez, who Higgins will succeed, at the White House in announcing Miami will host next year's Group of 20 summit at his golf club in Doral, Florida, a suburb of greater Miami. He argued it was "the best location" for the international gathering.

Suarez said such gathering put the city "on the global map."

Trump has been known for his public feuds with Democratic mayors and governors. The mayor of Washington, D.C., Muriel Bowser, had to confront a federal law enforcement intervention into her city launched by Trump. She announced last month that she would not seek reelection.

At the press conference, Higgins was asked if she was scared Trump could retaliate in any way against her.

"No tengo ningún miedo de él," she said, Spanish for "I am not scared of him, at all."

A'ja Wilson wins AP Female Athlete of the Year following historic 4th WNBA MVP

By DOUG FEINBERG AP Basketball Writer

A'ja Wilson stood atop the WNBA again in 2025, winning an unprecedented fourth MVP as her Las Vegas Aces earned a third championship in four seasons.

For that, she earned The Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year on Wednesday for the first time in her career. It's the second consecutive year a basketball player won the award after Caitlin Clark was honored in 2024.

"It's an honor when you think about the group of women who have won before," Wilson said in a phone interview. "Just to have my name be a part of it, I'm blessed."

Wilson is only the fifth basketball player to be honored as the Female Athlete of the Year since it was first presented in 1931, joining Sheryl Swoopes (1993), Rebecca Lobo (1995), Candace Parker (2008, 2021) and Clark.

A group of 47 sports journalists from the AP and its members voted. Wilson received 17 votes, tennis star Aryna Sabalenka was second with nine and Paige Bueckers was third with five.

"The things she's done on the court have never been done. To me, she's in a category all her own," Aces coach Becky Hammon said of Wilson. "People always ask who's on your Mount Rushmore? I'm saying she's on Everest — there's nobody up there with her."

Shohei Ohtani won the AP Male Athlete of the Year on Tuesday for the fourth time.

Hammon has been impressed with everything about Wilson in her four years coaching in Las Vegas.

"Her relatability, her being down to earth makes her a great superstar," Hammon said. "Her skill set is unmatched, but she's also the easiest player to coach. To have that mixture of humility, grace and skill, there's a reason why she's doing things that have never been done."

This season was different for Wilson and the Aces, who had cruised to their previous two titles as a heavy favorite. This year, with a month to go, the Aces were sitting at .500 and were in danger of missing the playoffs after coming off a record 53-point loss against Minnesota.

Wilson rallied her team to wins in the final 16 regular-season games to secure the No. 2 seed, and Las Vegas went on to win the championship.

"This season I found myself through the adversity and mud we went through," she said.

Despite her numbers being on par with her unanimous MVP season the year before, Wilson heard the chatter that she wasn't playing as well and that she wasn't the front-runner to repeat as the league's top player.

The 29-year-old used that as fuel on the court. She led the league with 23.4 points and 2.3 blocks per game.

"The way they talk about us, the way they talk about me, I'm ready for that, I'm ready for the noise," Wilson said. "It's always going to be something. If we sit here and try to please everybody, we're going to go insane. I'm just going to continue to prove why I'm one of the greatest and why my team is part of a dynamic dynasty."

Wilson raised her game even further in the playoffs, helping the Aces survive decisive winner-take-all games in the quarterfinals and semifinals. She then helped Las Vegas sweep Phoenix in the WNBA Finals, hitting the winning shot in Game 3.

"It's fair to say the expectations for her are so sky high now, she'll be compared to a degree to the unanimous MVP she was the year before," ESPN analyst Rebecca Lobo said. "Even though she wasn't unanimous MVP this year, the journey she had this season was different and she was playing the best basketball of her career in the playoffs."

"Every year, you wonder how she'll get better, and she always does."

Wilson became the first player in either the WNBA or NBA to win the MVP, Defensive Player of the Year, Finals MVP and lead the league in scoring in the same season.

Wilson broke a tie with Swoopes, Lisa Leslie and Lauren Jackson, who all won the WNBA MVP three

times. She plans to have another relaxing offseason as she won't play overseas or in Unrivaled, the domestic 3-on-3 league.

Wilson became a free agent at the end of the season and could be in for a significant raise as the league and players union negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement, but she is widely expected to return to the Aces.

She's already crossed one thing off her bucket list, meeting her idol Beyonce at the Formula 1 race in Las Vegas last month.

"It was super cool, Beyonce is someone that I've always wanted to meet because I just admired her work," Wilson said.

The Aces great is that way herself for so many. She launched a shoe and clothing line with Nike. Her shoe sold out minutes after it went on sale.

"It's amazing, something that I think about every day when I look around and see people just wearing my shoe. Every day it's a gentle reminder that you know it's a special moment that we're living in and I'm so grateful when I look back on it."

Justice Department can unseal records from Epstein's 2019 sex trafficking case, judge says

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Secret grand jury transcripts from Jeffrey Epstein's 2019 sex trafficking case can be made public, a judge ruled on Wednesday, joining two other judges in granting the Justice Department's requests to unseal material from investigations into the late financier's sexual abuse.

U.S. District Judge Richard M. Berman reversed his earlier decision to keep the material under wraps, citing a new law that requires the government to open its files on Epstein and his longtime confidant Ghislaine Maxwell. The judge previously cautioned that the 70 or so pages of grand jury materials slated for release are hardly revelatory and "merely a hearsay snippet" of Epstein's conduct.

On Tuesday, another Manhattan federal judge ordered the release of records from Maxwell's 2021 sex trafficking case. Last week, a judge in Florida approved the unsealing of transcripts from an abandoned Epstein federal grand jury investigation in the 2000s.

The Justice Department asked the judges to lift secrecy orders in the cases after the Epstein Files Transparency Act, passed by Congress and signed into law by President Donald Trump last month, created a narrow exception to rules that normally keep grand jury proceedings confidential. The law requires that the Justice Department disclose Epstein-related material to the public by Dec. 19.

The court records cleared for release are just a sliver of the government's trove — a collection of potentially tens of thousands of pages of documents, including FBI notes and reports; transcripts of witness interviews, photographs, videos and other evidence; Epstein's autopsy report; flight logs and travel records.

While lawyers for Epstein's estate told Berman in a letter last week that the estate took no position on the Justice Department's unsealing request, some Epstein victims backed it.

"For far too long, the Epstein survivors and the public have been kept in the dark about the inner-workings of Epstein's decades-long sex trafficking operation," said Sigrid McCawley, a lawyer for some victims. "This week's court rulings are an important step toward accountability to close the vast gap between what is known and unknown."

Another lawyer, Brad Edwards, said unsealing the records "is good, so long as the victims are protected in the process." But, he added, "the grand jury receives only the most basic information, so, relatively speaking, these particular materials are insignificant."

Questions about the government's Epstein files have dominated the first year of Trump's second term, with pressure on the Republican president intensifying after he reneged on a campaign promise to release the files. His administration released some material, most of it already public, disappointing critics and some allies.

Berman was matter-of-fact in his ruling on Wednesday, writing that the transparency law "unequivocally

intends to make public Epstein grand jury materials and discovery materials" that had previously been covered by secrecy orders. The law "supersedes the otherwise secret grand jury materials," he wrote.

The judge, who was appointed by President Bill Clinton, a Democrat, implored the Justice Department to carefully follow the law's privacy provisions to ensure that victims' names and other identifying information are blacked out. Victim safety and privacy "are paramount," he wrote.

In court filings, the Justice Department informed Berman that the only witness to testify before the Epstein grand jury was an FBI agent who, the judge noted, "had no direct knowledge of the facts of the case and whose testimony was mostly hearsay."

The agent testified on two days, on June 18, 2019, and July 2, 2019. The rest of the grand jury presentation consisted of a PowerPoint slideshow and four pages of call logs. The July 2 session ended with grand jurors voting to indict Epstein.

Epstein, a millionaire money manager known for socializing with celebrities, politicians, billionaires and the academic elite, killed himself in jail a month after his 2019 arrest. Maxwell was convicted in 2021 by a federal jury of sex trafficking for helping recruit some of Epstein's underage victims and participating in some of the abuse. She is serving a 20-year prison sentence.

Maxwell's lawyer told a judge last week that unsealing records from her case "would create undue prejudice" and could spoil her plans to file a habeas petition, a legal filing seeking to overturn her conviction. The Supreme Court in October declined to hear Maxwell's appeal.

Maxwell's grand jury records include testimony from the FBI agent and a New York Police Department detective.

Judge Paul A. Engelmayer sought to temper expectations as he approved their release on Tuesday, writing that the materials "do not identify any person other than Epstein and Maxwell as having had sexual contact with a minor."

"They do not discuss or identify any client of Epstein's or Maxwell's," wrote Engelmayer, an appointee of President Barack Obama, a Democrat. "They do not reveal any heretofore unknown means or methods of Epstein's or Maxwell's crimes."

Judge orders Trump to end California National Guard troop deployment in Los Angeles

By SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

The Trump administration must stop deploying the California National Guard in Los Angeles and return control of the troops to the state, a federal judge ordered Wednesday in an emphatic ruling.

U.S. District Judge Charles Breyer in San Francisco granted a preliminary injunction sought by California officials, but also put the decision on hold until Monday, presumably to give the administration a chance to appeal.

In an extraordinary move, President Donald Trump called up more than 4,000 California National Guard troops in June without Gov. Gavin Newsom's approval to further the Trump administration's immigration enforcement efforts. The number had dropped to several hundred by late October, but California remained steadfast in its opposition to Trump's command of the troops.

White House spokeswoman Abigail Jackson suggested in a statement that the administration would appeal Breyer's ruling, saying it looked forward to "ultimate victory on the issue."

"President Trump exercised his lawful authority to deploy National Guard troops to support federal officers and assets following violent riots that local leaders like Newsom refused to stop," she said, using a pejorative moniker Trump has used to refer to the Democratic governor.

California Attorney General Rob Bonta said the ruling was a victory for democracy and the rule of law, and he accused the administration of playing "political games" with the troops.

"But the President is not king," he said in a statement. "And he cannot federalize the National Guard whenever, wherever, and for however long he wants, without justification."

Breyer rejected the administration's arguments that he could not review extensions of a Guard deploy-

ment and that it still needed Guard troops in Los Angeles to protect federal personnel and property, saying the first claim was "shocking" and the second one bordered on "misrepresentation."

"The Founders designed our government to be a system of checks and balances," added Breyer, a nominee of President Bill Clinton, a Democrat. "Defendants, however, make clear that the only check they want is a blank one."

The 100 or so California troops that remain in Los Angeles are guarding federal buildings or staying at a nearby base and are not on the streets with immigration enforcement officers, according to U.S. Northern Command.

California argued that conditions in Los Angeles had changed since Trump first deployed the troops following clashes between federal immigration officers and people protesting his stepped-up enforcement of immigration laws. During one demonstration, protesters threw rocks at Border Patrol vehicles. One man later pleaded guilty to throwing a Molotov cocktail.

The Republican administration has extended the deployment until February while also trying to use California Guard members in Portland, Oregon as part of its effort to send the military into Democratic-run cities over the objections of mayors and governors. It also sent some California National Guard troops to Illinois.

In his ruling, Breyer accused the Trump administration of "effectively creating a national police force made up of state troops."

The idea that risks from demonstrations in the Los Angeles area could not be managed today without the National Guard defied "common sense," the judge wrote.

"After all, local law enforcement like the LAPD, the LASD, and the California Highway Patrol ("CHP") have not only been willing to manage the protests, but have capably done so since June," he wrote.

The June call-up was the first time in decades that a state's national guard was activated without a request from its governor and marked a significant escalation in the administration's efforts to carry out its mass deportation policy. The troops were stationed outside a federal detention center in downtown Los Angeles where protesters gathered and later sent on the streets to protect immigration officers as they made arrests.

California sued, arguing that the president was using Guard members as his personal police force in violation of a law limiting the use of the military in domestic affairs. The administration said courts could not second-guess the president's decision that violence during the protests made it impossible for him to execute U.S. laws with regular forces and reflected a rebellion, or danger of rebellion.

Breyer said in Wednesday's decision the suggestion there was danger of rebellion was even more "far-fetched" when the administration extended the deployment than it was in June.

Breyer initially issued a temporary restraining order that required the administration to return control of the Guard members to California, but an appeals court panel put that decision on hold.

After a trial, Breyer ruled in September that the deployment violated the law.

Other judges have blocked the administration from deploying National Guard troops to Portland, Oregon, and Chicago.

Supreme Court struggles over whether Alabama can execute man found to be intellectually disabled

By MARK SHERMAN and KIM CHANDLER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court on Wednesday struggled over how courts should decide borderline cases of whether convicted murderers are intellectually disabled and should be shielded from execution.

There was no clear outcome apparent after the justices heard two hours of arguments in an appeal from Alabama, which wants to put to death a man who lower federal courts found is intellectually disabled.

Joseph Clifton Smith, 55, has been on death row roughly half his life after his conviction for beating a man to death in 1997.

The Supreme Court prohibited execution of intellectually disabled people in a landmark ruling in 2002. The justices, in cases in 2014 and 2017, held that states should consider other evidence of disability in borderline cases because of the margin of error in IQ tests.

The issue in Smith's case is what happens when a person has multiple IQ scores that are slightly above 70, which has been widely accepted as a marker of intellectual disability. Smith's five IQ tests produced scores ranging from 72 to 78. Smith had been placed in learning-disabled classes and dropped out of school after seventh grade, his lawyers said. At the time of the crime, he performed math at a kindergarten level, spelled at a third-grade level and read at a fourth-grade level.

Seth Waxman, representing Smith, told the justices his client received a "diagnosis of mental retardation" — then the commonly accepted term for mental disability — in the seventh grade.

Alabama, 20 other states and the Trump administration all are asking the high court, which is more conservative than it was a decade ago, to cut back on those earlier decisions.

Chief Justice John Roberts and Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas dissented in both cases, and Alito and Thomas sounded as if they would side with Alabama.

A ruling for Smith would lead to messy court fights for other death row inmates "where everything is up for grabs in every case," Alito said.

Alabama lawyer Robert M. Overing said Smith's case should be an easy win for the state because Smith never scored below 70 on any IQ test.

"There is no way that he can prove an IQ below 70," Overing said.

Alabama appealed to the Supreme Court after lower courts ruled that Smith is intellectually disabled, looking beyond the test scores. The justices had previously sent his case back to the federal appeals court in Atlanta, where the judges affirmed that they had taken a "holistic" approach to Smith's case, seemingly in line with high court decisions.

But the justices said in June they would take a new look at the case.

Waxman urged the justices to affirm the lower courts rather than issue a decision that would effectively rely exclusively on test scores and rule out additional evidence in cases with borderline IQ scores.

Justice Elena Kagan said courts have to consider the additional evidence, but "that's not to say you have to accept it."

Rights groups focused on disabilities wrote in a brief supporting Smith that "intellectual disability diagnoses based solely on IQ test scores are faulty and invalid."

Smith was convicted and sentenced to death for the beating death of Durk Van Dam in Mobile County. Van Dam was found dead in his pickup truck. Prosecutors said he had been beaten to death with a hammer and robbed of \$150, his boots and tools.

A federal judge in 2021 vacated Smith's death sentence, though she acknowledged "this is a close case."

Alabama law defines intellectual disability as an IQ of 70 or below, along with significant or substantial deficits in adaptive behavior and the onset of those issues before the age of 18.

A decision in *Hamm v. Smith*, 24-872, is expected by early summer.

Elon Musk says DOGE was only 'somewhat successful' and he wouldn't do it again

By BILL BARROW Associated Press

Mega billionaire Elon Musk, in a friendly interview with his aide and conservative influencer Katie Miller, said his efforts leading the Department of Government Efficiency were only "somewhat successful" and he would not do it over again.

The Tesla and SpaceX CEO, who also owns the social media platform X, still broadly defended President Donald Trump's controversial pop-up agency that Musk left in the spring before it shuttered officially last month. Yet Musk bemoaned how difficult it is to remake the federal government quickly, and he acknowledged how much his businesses suffered because of his DOGE work and its lack of popularity.

"We were a little bit successful. We were somewhat successful," he told Miller, who once worked as a DOGE spokeswoman charged with selling the agency's work to the public.

When Miller pressed Musk on whether he would do it all over again, he said: "I don't think so. ... Instead of doing DOGE, I would have, basically, built ... worked on my companies."

Almost wistfully, Musk added, "They wouldn't have been burning the cars" — a reference to consumer protests against Tesla.

Still, things certainly have turned up for Musk since his departure from Trump's administration. Tesla shareholders approved a pay package that could make Musk the world's first trillionaire.

Musk was speaking as a guest on the "Katie Miller Podcast," which Miller, who is married to top Trump adviser Stephen Miller, launched after leaving government employment to work for Musk in the private sector. The two sat in chairs facing each other for a conversation that lasted more than 50 minutes and spanned topics from DOGE to Musk's thoughts on AI, social media, conspiracy theories and fashion.

Miller did not press Musk on the innerworkings of DOGE and the controversial manner in which it took over federal agencies and data systems.

Musk credited the agency with saving as much as \$200 billion annually in "zombie payments" that he said can be avoided with better automated systems and coding for federal payouts. But that number is dwarfed by Musk's ambitious promises at one time that an efficiency commission could measure savings in the trillions. Miller has not responded to an Associated Press request for comment.

What to know about the Justice Department's Jeffrey Epstein files

By MICHAEL R. SISAK Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The clock is ticking for the U.S. government to open up its files on Jeffrey Epstein.

After months of rancor and recriminations, Congress has passed and President Donald Trump has signed a law compelling the Justice Department to give the public everything it has on Epstein — and it has to be done before Christmas.

On Wednesday, a judge ruled that secret grand jury transcripts from Epstein's 2019 sex trafficking case can be made public. U.S. District Judge Richard M. Berman was the third judge to reverse earlier decisions to keep Epstein-related case material under wraps. All three cited the new law that requires the government to open its files on both Epstein and his longtime confidant Ghislaine Maxwell. Berman has cautioned that the materials slated for release are hardly revelatory.

While there's sure to be never-before-seen material in the thousands of pages likely to be released in the Florida transcripts and other Epstein-related records, a lot has already been made public, including by Congress and through litigation.

And don't expect a "client list" of famous men who cavorted with Epstein. Though such a list has long been rumored, the Justice Department said in July that it doesn't exist.

Here's a look at what's expected to be made public, what isn't, and a refresher on how we got to this point:

Who is Jeffrey Epstein?

Epstein was a millionaire money manager known for socializing with celebrities, politicians, billionaires and the academic elite who was accused of sexually abusing underage girls.

His relationships with powerful men, including Trump, former President Bill Clinton and the former British prince Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, have been the subject of endless fascination and speculation. Neither Trump nor Clinton has been accused of wrongdoing. Andrew has denied abusing anyone.

Police in Palm Beach, Florida, began investigating Epstein in 2005 after he was accused of paying a 14-year-old girl for sex. The FBI then joined the investigation, but Epstein made a secret deal with the U.S. attorney in Florida to avoid federal charges, enabling him to plead guilty in 2008 to a relatively minor state-level prostitution charge. He served 13 months in a jail work-release program.

In 2019, during Trump's first term, Manhattan federal prosecutors revived the case and charged Epstein with sex trafficking, alleging he sexually abused dozens of girls. He killed himself in jail a month after his

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 62 of 67

arrest.

In 2021, a federal jury in Manhattan convicted Epstein's longtime confidant and former girlfriend Ghislaine Maxwell of sex trafficking for helping recruit some of his underage victims. She is serving a 20-year prison sentence.

What's in the Justice Department's Epstein files?

Records related to the aborted Florida investigation, the Manhattan investigations, and anything else the Justice Department did to examine Epstein's dealings in the time in between.

They could include notes and reports written by FBI agents; transcripts of witness interviews, photographs, videos and other evidence; Epstein's autopsy report; and some material that may already be public, such as flight logs and travel records.

The law, dubbed the Epstein Files Transparency Act, mandates the Justice Department to release all unclassified documents and investigative materials, including files relating to immunity deals and internal communications about whom to charge or investigate.

The transcripts could shed more light on federal prosecutors' decision not to go forward with their case from two decades ago. It's not known when the transcripts will be made public.

What isn't authorized for release under the law?

Anything containing a victim's personally identifiable information.

The law allows the Justice Department to withhold or redact records that, if made public, would constitute "a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy." It also bars the release of any materials depicting the sexual abuse of children, or images of death, physical abuse, or injury.

That means that if videos or photos exist of Epstein or anyone else sexually abusing underage girls, they can't be made public.

However, the law also makes clear that no records shall be withheld or redacted — meaning certain parts are blacked out — solely because their release would cause embarrassment or reputational harm to any public figure, government official or foreign dignitary.

When will the files be available to the public?

The legislation requires the Justice Department to make the documents public in a searchable and downloadable format within 30 days of Trump signing it into law. That means no later than Dec. 19.

However, the law also allows the Justice Department to withhold files that it says could jeopardize an active federal investigation. That's also longstanding Justice Department policy. Files can also be withheld if they're found to be classified or if they pertain to national defense or foreign policy.

While investigations into Epstein and Maxwell are long over, Attorney General Pam Bondi last week ordered a top federal prosecutor to lead an investigation into people who knew Epstein and some of Trump's political foes, including Clinton.

That investigation, taken up at Trump's urging despite the Justice Department previously finding no evidence to support such a probe, could give the government grounds to temporarily withhold at least some of the material.

What about the so-called client list?

Epstein's so-called "client list" — a purported collection of his famous associates — has been the white whale of Epstein sleuths, skeptics and conspiracy theorists alike.

Even Bondi got in on the act, telling Fox News in February that the "client list" was "sitting on my desk right now to review."

The only problem: the Justice Department concluded it doesn't exist, issuing a letter in July saying that its review of Epstein-related records had revealed no incriminating "client list." Nor was there credible evidence that Epstein had "blackmailed prominent individuals as part of his actions," the unsigned memo said.

Why are these records being released now?

Congress is forcing the government to act after Trump reneged on a campaign promise last year to throw open the files. The Justice Department did release some records earlier this year — almost all of them already public — but suddenly hit the brakes in July after promising a "truckload" more.

That prompted a small, bipartisan group of House lawmakers to launch what was initially seen as a long

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 63 of 67

shot effort to compel their release through legislation. In the meantime, lawmakers started disclosing documents they'd received from Epstein's estate, culminating in a 23,000-page release last week.

As public and political pressure mounted, including from some Trump allies, Congress swiftly passed the Epstein Files Transparency Act on Nov. 18 and Trump signed it into law the following day.

Haven't some Epstein files already been made public?

Yes. Before Congress got involved, tens of thousands of pages of records were released over the years through civil lawsuits, Epstein and Maxwell's public criminal case dockets, public disclosures and Freedom of Information Act requests.

Many documents — including police reports written in Florida, state grand jury records, depositions of Epstein's employees, his flight records, his address book — are available already. In July, the Justice Department released surveillance video from the jail on the night Epstein died.

Even the FBI has previously released some Epstein-related files, posting more than 1,400 pages to its website, though much of the material was redacted and some hidden because it was under seal.

WTF? Embracing profanity is one thing both political parties seem to agree on

By STEVEN SLOAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — As he shook President Barack Obama's hand and pulled him in for what he thought was a private aside, Vice President Joe Biden delivered an explicit message: "This is a big f—— deal." The remark, overheard on live microphones at a 2010 ceremony for the Affordable Care Act, caused a sensation because open profanity from a national leader was unusual at the time.

More than 15 years later, vulgarity is now in vogue.

During a political rally Tuesday night in Pennsylvania that was intended to focus on tackling inflation, President Donald Trump used profanity at least four times. At one point, he even admitted to disparaging Haiti and African nations as "shithole countries" during a private 2018 meeting, a comment he denied at the time. And before a bank of cameras during a lengthy Cabinet meeting last week, the Republican president referred to alleged drug smugglers as "sons of b——s."

While the Biden incident was accidental, the frequency, sharpness and public nature of Trump's comments are intentional. They build on his project to combat what he sees as pervasive political correctness. Leaders in both parties are seemingly in a race now to the verbal gutter.

Vice President JD Vance called a podcast host a "dips—t" in September. In Thanksgiving remarks before troops, Vance joked that anyone who said they liked turkey was "full of s——." After one National Guard member was killed in a shooting in Washington last month and a second was critically injured, top Trump aide Steven Cheung told a reporter on social media to "shut the f—— up" when she wrote that the deployment of troops in the nation's capital was "for political show."

Among Democrats, former Vice President Kamala Harris earned a roar of approval from her audience in September when she condemned the Trump administration by saying "these mother—— are crazy." After Trump called for the execution of several Democratic members of Congress last month, Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., said it was time for people with influence to "pick a f—— side." Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer of New York said the administration cannot "f—— around" with the release of the Jeffrey Epstein files. Democratic Rep. Jasmine Crockett, who on Monday announced her Senate campaign in Texas, did not hold back earlier this year when asked what she would tell Elon Musk if given the chance: "F—— off."

The volley of vulgarities underscore an ever-coarsening political environment that often plays out on social media or other digital platforms where the posts or video clips that evoke the strongest emotions are rewarded with the most engagement.

"If you want to be angry at someone, be angry at the social media companies," Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, a Republican, said Tuesday night at Washington National Cathedral, where he spoke at an event focused

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 64 of 67

on political civility. "It's not a fair fight. They've hijacked our brains. They understand these dopamine hits. Outrage sells."

Cox, whose national profile rose after calling for civility in the wake of conservative activist Charlie Kirk's assassination in his state, approved an overhaul of social media laws meant to protect children. A federal judge has temporarily blocked the state law.

Tough political talk is nothing new

Tough talk is nothing new in politics, but leaders long avoided flaunting it.

Recordings from Democrat Lyndon B. Johnson's administration, for instance, revealed a crude, profane side of his personality that was largely kept private. Republican Richard Nixon bemoaned the fact that the foul language he used in the Oval Office was captured on tape. "Since neither I nor most other Presidents had ever used profanity in public, millions were shocked," Nixon wrote in his book "In the Arena."

"Politicians have always sworn, just behind closed doors," said Benjamin Bergen, a professor at the University of California-San Diego's Department of Cognitive Science and the author of "What the F: What swearing reveals about our language, our brains, and ourselves." "The big change is in the past 10 years or so, it's been much more public."

As both parties prepare for the 2026 midterm elections and the 2028 presidential campaign, the question is whether this language will become increasingly mainstream. Republicans who simply try to imitate Trump's brash style do not always succeed with voters. Democrats who turn to vulgarities risk appearing inauthentic if their words feel forced.

For some, it is just a distraction.

"It's not necessary," said GOP Rep. Don Bacon of Nebraska, who is retiring next year after winning five elections in one of the most competitive House districts. "If that's what it takes to get your point across, you're not a good communicator."

There are risks of overusing profanity

There also is a risk that if such language becomes overused, its utility as a way to shock and connect with audiences could be dulled. Comedian Jerry Seinfeld has talked about this problem, noting that he used swear words in his early routines but dropped them as his career progressed because he felt profanity yielded only cheap laughs.

"I felt like well I just got a laugh because I said f--- in there," he said in a 2020 interview on the WTF podcast with fellow comedian Marc Maron. "You didn't find the gold."

White House spokesperson Liz Huston said Trump "doesn't care about being politically correct, he cares about Making America Great Again. The American people love how authentic, transparent, and effective the President is."

But for Trump, the words that have generated the most controversy are often less centered in traditional profanity than slurs that can be interpreted as hurtful. The final weeks of his 2016 campaign were rocked when a tape emerged of him discussing grabbing women by their genitals, language he minimized as "locker room talk." His "shithole" remark in 2018 was widely condemned as racist.

More recently, Trump called a female journalist "piggy," comments that his press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, defended as evidence of a president who is "very frank and honest." Trump's use of a slur about disabled people prompted an Indiana Republican whose child has Down syndrome to come out in opposition to the president's push to redraw the state's congressional districts.

On rare occasions, politicians express contrition for their choice of words. In an interview with The Atlantic published last week, Gov. Josh Shapiro, D-Pa., dismissed Harris' depiction of him in her book about last year's presidential campaign by saying she was "trying to sell books and cover her a—."

He seemed to catch himself quickly.

"I shouldn't say 'cover her a—,'" he said. "I think that's not appropriate."

Diana Ross will headline 'Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve' lineup

By MARK KENNEDY AP Entertainment Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Diana Ross has been named the headliner on "Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve." The pop icon will perform a medley of hits on New Year's Eve in New York City including "I'm Coming Out" and "Upside Down," anchoring a telecast with 39 artists appearing across New York, Las Vegas, Chicago, Puerto Rico and more.

"Together we begin a new year. Let's embrace a new beginning, new opportunities, new joy — a celebration of love, where we all come together as we begin 2026," Ross said in a statement.

Other performers include Mariah Carey, Post Malone, Chappell Roan, Demi Lovato and Maren Morris, as well as 50 Cent, Charlie Puth, OneRepublic and Pitbull.

The show on Dec. 31 will be live on ABC beginning at 8 p.m. EST, and repeat the next day on Hulu. Ryan Seacrest and Rita Ora will anchor the celebrations from New York City at Times Square, Chance the Rapper will do the same from his native Chicago, while former NFL star Rob Gronkowski and Julianne Hough will beam from Las Vegas.

The performers will also include Ciara, Goo Goo Dolls, Lil Jon, Little Big Town, Madison Beer, New Kids on the Block, Jordan Davis, 6lack, The All-American Rejects, Rick Springfield and the voices of "KPop Demon Hunters."

Faith leaders embrace sound baths to connect with spiritual seekers

By DEEPA BHARATH Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — With eyes closed and a small mallet in hand, the Rev. Kyohei Mikawa gently struck the bronze Himalayan singing bowl resting in his palm and bathed the Buddhist sanctuary in a resonant hum.

Mikawa spent the next 45 minutes skimming bowls, playing a tongue drum and chanting to create an immersive experience called a sound bath as he sat facing a dozen people relaxing or meditating on yoga mats.

Sometimes known as sound healing or sound meditation, sound baths have surged in popularity over the past decade, driven by growing public interest in mental health and wellness. But sound baths are no longer confined to yoga centers, crystal healing studios or other new age spaces. They have crossed over to mainstream worship spaces, including churches, temples and synagogues.

Faith leaders like Mikawa, who oversees Rissho Kosei Kai Buddhist Center in Los Angeles' largely Latino neighborhood of Boyle Heights, are increasingly embracing sound baths. They see it as a way to reach out to their neighbors who may not be affiliated with a religion, but still want to be in community with others seeking spiritual experiences. They have also found ways to make this practice mesh with their respective faith traditions.

Adding religious practice to sound baths

The sounds that punctuated Mikawa's session emanated from centuries of Buddhist tradition and practice, energizing and calming the mind at once, he said. A chant at the end of the sound bath, he said, means: "Seek refuge in the true spirit of who you are."

"The goal is not to become a Buddhist, but a Buddha — the best version of who we are," he said.

Rabbi Jonathan Aaron, who leads Temple Emanuel in Beverly Hills, a Reform synagogue, performs a sound bath the first Saturday of each month at the end of the Shabbat service, during a ceremony called the Havdalah. As part of this ritual, blessings are offered over wine, sweet spices and a multi-wicked candle while participants reflect on the difference between the sacred and the ordinary.

Aaron says a rejuvenating sound bath fits perfectly with the sensory nature of the Havdalah, preparing attendees for the week ahead. The rabbi works with a practitioner who uses crystal bowls, gongs, rain

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 66 of 67

sticks and an ocean drum, which mimics the sound of waves, to create a relaxing, meditative atmosphere.

He believes that while a sound bath might not be inherently Jewish, it lends itself well to Jewish heritage, thought and prayer. Aaron points out that the first chapter of Genesis describes God creating the world through sound by speaking the words: "Let there be light." Hearing, listening, and sacred sounds, including the call of the shofar that heralds the Jewish new year, are all important aspects of the faith, he said.

"I'm not trying to make the sound bath Jewish," he said. "But I'm trying to bring Jewish energy and an experience by creating this environment that has a sound bath as part of it."

Anna Reyner, a member who attended the sound bath, said the synagogue is a perfect space for it because it builds community — often a main purpose of a house of worship.

"When you are in this intricate sound wave experience with others, you feel a sense of community and a connection to the source of holiness," she said.

Connecting with neighbors through sound baths

The Rev. Paul Capetz, pastor of Christ Church by the Sea, a United Methodist congregation in Newport Beach, California, said their monthly sound bath sessions, performed by a local practitioner, are drawing people "who would never otherwise darken the door of a church."

"I find the sound bath brings you to another level of existence," Capetz said. "It's almost hypnotic, but it's not a drug. You're experiencing it in real time that leaves you with a feeling of such serenity."

The goal of having practices like sound bath and meditation in the church is not to convert, but to relate to others in the community who may be spiritual but not religious, the pastor said.

Churches are naturally conducive to sound baths because of their sense of history, sanctity, reverence and, often, pristine acoustics, said Lynda Arnold, a longtime sound healer who has performed at Episcopal churches in Los Angeles.

"We talk about wanting to bring people into a state of deep listening, contemplation, prayer and intention," she said. "In this church environment, there is an endless amount of creativity that can happen with sound and music."

While sound baths are a more recent phenomenon, the power of sound has been harnessed for healing and spirituality for millennia. Alexandre Tannous, a New York-based sound researcher and sound therapist who has done these sessions around the U.S. and abroad, said many religions and cultures believe in the primordial nature of sound.

In Eastern religions, "aum" is believed to be the primordial sound or vibration from which the entire universe was created and is sustained. In Egyptian mythology and the Hermetic tradition, the universe is believed to have been created through the power of the spoken word, also known as Logos. The concept of the universe being "sung" into existence or created by sound is a common motif found in several ancient and Indigenous traditions and mythologies.

"In Western science, how do we believe the universe started?" Tannous said. "With a Big Bang, right?"

The instruments used in a sound bath — such as gongs, singing bowls, bells, chimes, didgeridoos — all provide vibrations and grounding harmony that help a person quiet the mind and become focused, he said.

"Those notes between the notes have the power to quiet the multitasking monkey mind," said Tannous, referring to the unadulterated harmonics produced by these instruments.

The science of sound

Ramesh Balasubramaniam, professor of cognitive science at the University of California, Merced, has looked into how the brain resonates with and responds to sounds — particularly in some frequencies that could induce a deep, meditative state. A sound bath, he says, is one of the routes to get there.

"When you hear a sound wave that oscillates four times a second, you're going to facilitate brain waves in the same frequency range by a process known as entrainment," Balasubramaniam said. "We have 100 billion neurons and they all sing in concert in the same frequency, producing this collective effect like a crowd chanting in a football game."

Jazmin Morales, who lives near the Rissho Kosei Kai Buddhist Center, has been attending Mikawa's weekly sound baths for several weeks. She doesn't know the science behind it. She just knows it works for her.

"I've always had trouble focusing when I meditate," she said. "But a sound bath helps me focus. It's helped

Groton Daily Independent

Wednesday, December 10, 2025 ~ Vol. 26 - No. 189 ~ 67 of 67

me sleep when I was unable to sleep. It's helped me let go of emotion. It's even sparked my creativity."

For Ridge Gonzalez, who practices yoga and meditation, it was her first time in a sound bath.

"It was amazing," she said. "I could visualize the sound as if it were being sprinkled. I could see and feel it. When you're meditating, you feel a sense of clarity. The sound bath feels like just another way of extending that practice."

Today in History: December 11 King Edward VIII abdicates British throne

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Dec. 11, the 345th day of 2025. There are 20 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 11, 1936, Britain's King Edward VIII abdicated the throne so he could marry American divorcee Wallis Warfield Simpson; his brother, Prince Albert, became King George VI.

Also on this date:

In 1816, Indiana was admitted to the Union as the 19th U.S. state.

In 1946, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) was established.

In 1972, Apollo 17 commander Gene Cernan guided lander Challenger to a touchdown on the moon, where he and Harrison "Jack" Schmitt would become the last two Apollo astronauts to walk on the lunar surface. They returned to Earth three days later with astronaut Ronald Evans, who remained aloft in the command module.

In 1978, nearly \$6 million in cash and jewelry were stolen from the Lufthansa cargo terminal at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport; the 'Lufthansa Heist,' the largest cash robbery in history at the time, was immortalized in the film "Goodfellas."

In 1980, President Jimmy Carter signed legislation creating a \$1.6 billion environmental "Superfund" to pay for cleaning up hazardous chemical spills and toxic waste dumps.

In 1997, more than 150 countries agreed at a global warming conference in Kyoto, Japan, to control the Earth's greenhouse gases.

In 1998, majority Republicans on the House Judiciary Committee pushed through three articles of impeachment against President Bill Clinton, over Democratic objections.

In 2008, former Nasdaq chairman Bernie Madoff was arrested, accused of running a multibillion-dollar Ponzi scheme that wiped out the life savings of thousands of people and wrecked charities. (Madoff died in April 2021 while serving a 150-year federal prison sentence.)

In 2020, the Supreme Court rejected a lawsuit backed by President Donald Trump to overturn Joe Biden's election victory, ending an attempt to get legal issues that were rejected by state and federal judges before the nation's highest court.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Rita Moreno is 94. Former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is 82. Singer Brenda Lee is 81. Singer Jermaine Jackson is 71. Rock musician Nikki Sixx (Motley Crue) is 67. Actor-comedian Mo'Nique is 58. Hockey Hall of Famer Daniel Alfredsson is 53. Rapper-actor Yasiin Bey (formerly Mos Def) is 52. Author Colleen Hoover is 46. Actor Rider Strong is 46. Actor Alexa Demie is 35. Actor Hailee Steinfeld is 29.