

Groton Daily Independent

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Saturday, Dec. 20

G Wrestling @ Border Brawl (Ashley, ND), 9 a.m.
MVP Titan Invite Boys Wrestling at Plankington, 9 a.m.
Boys Wrestling @ Sioux Valley Cossack, 10 a.m.
Santa Day at 111 N Main, 9 a.m. to 11 a.m.

Sunday, Dec. 21

Emmanuel Lutheran: Worship, 9 a.m.; Sunday School, 10:15 a.m.; Choir, 6 p.m.
St. John's Lutheran: Worship with communion at St. John's, 9 a.m.; at Zion, 11 a.m.; Sunday School, 9:45 a.m.



United Methodist: Worship with communion at Conde, 8:15 a.m.; at Groton Sunday School Christmas Program, 9:30 a.m.; at Britton, 11:15 a.m.; Coffee Hour, 10:30 a.m.

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

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

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

7th Grade Soccer, 1 p.m.

4th Grade BB Practice, 2 p.m.

Dance Team Practice, 5 p.m.

6th Grade Boys Basketball, 6 p.m.

7th Grade Boys BB, 6 p.m.

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1440

Why 1440? The printing press was invented around the year 1440, spreading knowledge to the masses and changing the course of history. More facts: In every day, there are 1,440 minutes. We're here to make each one count.

Epstein Deadline Drops

The Justice Department yesterday released four batches of files relating to Jeffrey Epstein, including photos of public figures such as former President Bill Clinton, President Donald Trump, Diana Ross, and Mick Jagger. The photos do not implicate anyone.

The release came on the day of a congressionally mandated deadline to unseal all unclassified documents connected to the late financier and convicted sex offender, which has not yet been fully met. The DOJ said officials needed about two more weeks to redact identifying information about victims in several hundred thousand documents. The delay has drawn criticism from lawmakers across the aisle. Democrats on the House Oversight and Judiciary committees are considering legal action over the DOJ's noncompliance with the deadline.

Congress, court records, and the DOJ have released several documents related to Epstein over the past few years.

US strikes Islamic State infrastructure and weapons sites in Syria.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said the US launched the large-scale strike yesterday in response to an attack last week in Syria that killed two US Army soldiers and a civilian US interpreter. US officials said the operation hit roughly 70 targets across central Syria where the Islamic State is situated and that more strikes should be expected. Information about casualties was not immediately available.

Trump suspends visa program used by Brown University, MIT shooting suspect.

Trump paused the diversity visa program shortly after the suspected gunman was identified as a Portuguese national who used it to enter the US in 2017. Accounting for up to 50,000 green cards available annually, the program is a random lottery that prioritizes citizens of countries with low immigration to the US. It's unclear whether Trump has the power to suspend the lottery, since it was created by Congress.

European Union commits to lending roughly \$105B to Ukraine's war effort.

The International Monetary Fund estimates the interest-free loan will cover two-thirds of Ukraine's military and economic needs through 2027. After much debate about how to finance the loan, EU leaders decided to borrow money on capital markets. Some leaders had pushed to use frozen Russian assets, an unprecedented scheme that others deemed legally risky.

Famine averted in Gaza but crisis-level hunger persists, per expert panel.

A United Nations- and World Health Organization-backed report says the Gaza Strip is no longer facing famine. The expert panel, which had declared famine in the Gaza City region in August, credited the improvement to expanded food access following the Oct. 10 ceasefire. However, the report says over three-quarters of the population—or 1.6 million people—are still facing acute hunger and malnutrition.

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Living mates may influence each other's gut microbiome.

A new study on rats reveals that their gut microbiomes are shaped by the genes of the other rats they live with. While genes don't transfer between hosts, gut bacteria shaped by one rat's genetics can spread to other rats through close social contact. Researchers suspect the same is true for humans, which could deepen our understanding of microbiome-linked diseases such as obesity and Alzheimer's.

Sony buys majority stake in "Peanuts" comics.

The Japanese conglomerate will pay \$457M to roughly double its stake in Peanuts Holdings to 80%. The family of "Peanuts" creator Charles M. Schulz will hold the remaining 20%. Sony first became involved with Peanuts in 2010, over six decades after Charlie Brown, Snoopy, and their friends first appeared in American newspaper comic strips in 1947 as "Li'l Folks." The "Peanuts" name was introduced in 1950.

Wiz Khalifa handed 9 month Romanian jail sentence on drug possession charge.

The American rapper allegedly had over 18 grams of cannabis at a Romanian music festival he headlined in 2024, some of which he smoked on stage. A lower court issued an \$830 fine in April, but prosecutors appealed, seeking a harsher penalty. As of this writing, it is unclear whether Romanian authorities will try to extradite Wiz Khalifa from the US. Romania has some of the strictest drug laws in Europe.

Humankind(ness)

Today, we're sharing a story from reader Theresa M. in Salem, Massachusetts.

"I was in Trader Joe's with my 2-month-old and 8-year-old while my oldest was next door at her piano lesson. It was incredibly busy and I couldn't find my carrier before leaving the house so I had to use the stroller. I had a basket and overfilled it, and the baby was screaming and I had to pick her up. A kind lady next to us gave us her spot in line and helped us lug the overflowing groceries to the register. A couple joined in to help too. It wasn't my finest moment as a mom of four, but the genuine kindness almost brought me to tears."

Turnovers derail Groton Area in loss at West Central

The Groton Area girls basketball team traveled to West Central on Friday night and dropped a 49-28 decision to the Trojans in the varsity contest.

Groton Area showed early energy, as the game was tied three times in the opening quarter with two lead changes. The Tigers held an 11-9 advantage at the end of the first quarter before West Central used a seven-point run in the second to grab an 18-11 lead. Groton settled in late in the half, but the Trojans maintained a slim 21-18 edge at the break.

Turnovers proved costly for the Tigers, particularly against a West Central team that capitalized on extra possessions.

"The main thing in the game was giving away possessions," Groton Area head coach Matt Locke said. "I know at halftime we had 16 turnovers, and when you give away that many possessions, we're just not good enough to overcome that right now — especially against a team like that."

West Central seized control after halftime, opening the third quarter with a 14-point run to extend its lead to 35-21 by the end of the period. The Trojans continued to pull away in the fourth quarter to secure the 49-28 victory.

Locke noted that while West Central has improved significantly from a season ago, Groton executed part of its defensive game plan, particularly in limiting West Central scorer Kacey Jatón.

"We came into it not wanting No. 10 to beat us, and she didn't," Locke said. "Jerrica did a really good job on her, holding her to six points, but then we didn't do a very good job on another one."

Offensively, Groton Area continues to search for rhythm and confidence.

"They need to see the ball go in the hoop — that's the biggest thing," Locke said. "Once somebody sees it go through a couple times, we'll be off."

Groton Area was led by Jaedyn Penning with six points and two rebounds. Rylee Dunker added six points, eight rebounds, three assists, and a steal, while Taryn Traphagen finished with six points, five rebounds, and three steals. Jerica Locke contributed three points, three rebounds, one assist, and three steals. McKenna Tietz recorded four points, two rebounds, one assist, and two steals. McKenna Krause scored two points, both from three-point range. Sydney Locke added one point and one rebound. Kella Tracy had one rebound and one assist, Ashlyn Warrington grabbed one rebound, and Mia Crank finished with one rebound and one steal.

As a team, Groton Area shot 5-of-24 on two-point attempts (21 percent), 3-of-15 from beyond the arc (20 percent), and 9-of-14 from the free-throw line (64 percent). The Tigers totaled 24 rebounds, six assists, 10 steals, 26 turnovers, and 12 team fouls.

West Central was paced by Ellie Knight with 14 points, while Mackenzie Skonhovd and Ella Harden each added 11. Casey Jatón finished with six points, Abby Thornton scored four, and Ayla Kramer added three. The Trojans went 5-of-11 from the free-throw line and committed 12 team fouls.

Despite the result, Locke emphasized the team's effort and leadership, noting progress that does not always show on the scoreboard.

"Every year you've got to figure out new roles and new leaders," he said. "I thought we had some really good leadership tonight in the huddle and in the locker room. Some of that stuff you can control, and the girls know it. They'll get back after it."

In subvarsity action, West Central defeated Groton Area 37-28 in the junior varsity game and 38-26 in the girls seed game.

Groton Area's junior varsity scoring was led by Sydney Locke with 10 points, while Kella Tracy added eight. Ashlyn Warrington finished with four points, McKenna Krause scored three, Tevan Hanson added two, and all Tiger starters scored.

The varsity game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Avantara - Groton, Agtegra, Bierman Farm Service, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Heartland Energy, The MeatHouse in Andover. Rich Bosma and Mike Imrie did the play-by-play. Jeslyn Kosel did the camera and technical.

Trojans Pull Away Early, Hand Tigers 69-42 Road Loss

The Groton Area boys basketball team ran into a hot-shooting and aggressive West Central squad Friday night, falling 69-42 to the Trojans on the road.

West Central took control early, jumping out to a 25-10 lead after the first quarter and extending the margin to 48-21 by halftime. The Trojans continued to pull away in the second half, leading 61-32 after three quarters, fueled by several eight-point runs and 10 made three-pointers on the night.

"They just—excuse my French—kicked our ass," said Groton Area head coach Greg Kjellsen. "I can't find one thing that we did well. We turned the ball over way too much, they shot the lights out, and we didn't match their intensity."

Groton struggled to respond after getting punched early, committing uncharacteristic turnovers in the opening quarter that allowed West Central to build momentum. Kjellsen said many of the mistakes were self-inflicted.

"I don't know how many turnovers we had in the first quarter, but they were careless—balls off our feet, off our hands," he said. "We dug ourselves in a hole and just couldn't dig out."

The Tigers finished shooting 37 percent from the field, going 7-of-19 on two-point attempts and 8-of-22 from beyond the arc. Groton was perfect from the free-throw line, converting all four attempts, but finished with 15 turnovers, 18 rebounds, and 10 assists.

Keegen Tracey led Groton with 14 points, three rebounds, and two assists. Becker Bosma added 10 points, three rebounds, and two steals, while Karson Zak chipped in nine points and two assists. Ryder Johnson scored four points, Easton Weber added three, and Gage Sippel finished with two points, two assists, and two steals.

West Central was led by Will Kuhl with 15 points, followed by Connor Mebius with 14. Boshe Knight scored 10 points, Hayden Heier added nine, and Carter Gross contributed seven as the Trojans showcased their balance and depth.

"They've got size, quickness, and shooters," Kjellsen said. "If they shoot like that, they're going to win 99.9 percent of their games."

Despite the lopsided score, Kjellsen emphasized the importance of learning from the loss with a quick turnaround ahead.

"We told the kids this one's over, and I hope it hurts—because if it does, it means something to you," he said. "We didn't execute defensively or offensively, but we'll get better. We have to."

In the junior varsity game, West Central rallied for a 45-39 win after Groton held a 20-17 halftime lead. The Trojans outscored the Tigers in the third quarter to take control. RAnthony Tracy and Asher Johnson each led the Tigers with nine points followed by Ethan Kroll with seven, Ryder Schelle six and Jordan Schwan three.

The Groton C-team earned the lone win of the night, defeating West Central 65-21 in overtime. Trey Tietz led Groton Area with 27 points followed by Trayce Schelle with 16, Major Dolan 11, Ryder Schwan seven and Briggs Conn four.

Groton Area returns to action Monday, traveling to Redfield for a doubleheader.

The varsity game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Avantara - Groton, Agtegra, Bierman Farm Service, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Heartland Energy, The MeatHouse in Andover. Rich Bosma and Mike Imrie did the play-by-play. Jeslyn Kosel did the camera and technical. The junior varsity game was also livestreamed sponsored by Jerry and Becca Johnson.

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Groton Legion

Wings

Nite



Groton American Legion

Soon to be a Classic monthly "Legion Wings Nite"

Friday and Saturday

Dec. 19 & 20

6-10pm

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!**

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The Junior Kindergarten and Kindergarten students opened the Elementary Christmas Program with, "Up On The Housetop," and "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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The fifth graders sang, "Born on Christmas Day," and "Sleigh Ride." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The fourth graders sang, "Silent Night" and "Jingle Bell Rock." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The third graders sang, "Away in a Manger" and "Holly Jolly Christmas." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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A special song, "When Christmas Comes to Town" was sung by the third through fifth graders. (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The second graders sang, "Little Drummer Boy" and "O Come All Ye Faithful." (Photo by Paul Kosel)



The first graders sang, "Let it Snow" and "All I Want for Christmas is My Two Front Teeth." (Photo by Paul Kosel)

South Dakota Transportation Commission Awards Economic Development Grants

PIERRE, S.D. – At the South Dakota Transportation Commission meeting held on Thursday, Dec. 18, 2025, commissioners awarded \$4 million in economic development grants for infrastructure improvements to counties and smaller communities across South Dakota. The economic development grant funds are designated to improve roads leading to schools, main business areas, hospitals, grain elevators, and other economic-based areas within a community. The grants provide funding for 80 percent of the construction costs to a maximum of \$600,000.

“These economic development grants have proven to be a vital part of improving and strengthening our state's infrastructure,” said Transportation Secretary Joel Jundt. “Without the grant funds, many rural communities would not have the financial ability to foster economic development. Thankfully, these dollars will help position our local communities for long-term success.”

Following is the list of grants awarded by the Transportation Commission at the December meeting:

Community Access Grants:

City of Crooks received \$600,000 for 3rd and 4th Streets, 1st Avenue, and Park Drive which serve the truck route and business area;

City of Deadwood received \$600,000 for Crescent Street which serves the rodeo grounds;

City of Hartford received \$600,000 for Western Avenue which serves a business area;

City of Hecla received \$547,000 for Pine Street and Depot Street which serve the elevator; and

City of Sinai received \$193,800 for Park Avenue which serves a business area.

Agri-Business Grants:

Yankton County received \$518,500 for 439th Avenue which serves Yaggie's, Inc.;

Fort Pierre received \$463,000 for Buffalo Road which serves Sioux Nation; and

Blom Township received \$518,500 for 473rd Avenue which serves Plainview Dairy.

Economic development grant program information and the application process are available on the SD-DOT website located [here](#) or by contacting Paula Huizenga, Grants Program Engineer, at 605-773-6253.

Meade County Fatal Crash

What: Single vehicle fatal crash

Where: North Haines Avenue and Peterson Road, Rapid City, SD

When: 9:20 p.m., Thursday, December 18, 2025

Driver 1: 16-year-old female from Rapid City, SD, fatal injuries

Vehicle 1: 2015 Lexus ES

Seat belt Used: No

Passenger 1a: 15-year-old male from Rapid City, SD, fatal injuries

Seat belt Used: Under investigation

Meade County, S.D.- Two teenagers died in a single vehicle crash Thursday night, just north of Rapid City, SD.

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

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2015 Lexus ES was traveling northbound on North Haines Avenue near the intersection of Peterson Road. The vehicle went off the road to the left, entering the ditch where it overturned and rolled.

Both the driver and a passenger were ejected from the vehicle and sustained fatal injuries.

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

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

Meade County Crash/Loose Cattle on I-90

What: Two vehicle injury crash with livestock

Where: Interstate 90, mile marker 29, one mile west of Sturgis, SD

When: 3:05 p.m., Friday, December 19, 2025

Driver 1: 76-year-old female from Newell, SD, no injuries

Vehicle 1: 2011 Ford Escape

Seat belt Used: Yes

Driver 2: 53-year-old male from Kent, MN, serious, non-life-threatening injuries

Vehicle 2: 2020 Western Star Semi

Seat belt Used: Yes

Meade County, S.D.- One person was injured in a two vehicle crash that resulted in loose cattle on Interstate I-90 and temporary lane closures, one mile west of Sturgis, SD.

The names of the persons involved have not been released.

Preliminary crash information indicates the driver of a 2020 Western Star semi hauling 37 head of cattle was traveling eastbound on Interstate 90 near mile marker 29. At the same time, the driver of a 2011 Ford Escape entered the eastbound lanes from a dirt median in the highway, and began driving slowly in the right hand lane. The semi braked and swerved to avoid colliding with the Ford, tripped and rolled onto its side into the median. The trailer had opened and the cattle began to run out onto the interstate.

No secondary crashes occurred, and all cattle were driven to the north side of the interstate. I-90 was reduced to one lane of eastbound traffic until 5:20 p.m. and has since reopened. All of the cattle were loaded into other trailers.

The driver of the semi was transported to a Sturgis hospital with serious, non-life-threatening injuries. The driver of the Ford was not injured.

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

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



SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

<https://southdakotasearchlight.com>

Company that hired state's former head of economic development benefits from \$69 million in aid

CJ Schwan's also has a corporate board member who chairs South Dakota's Board of Economic Development

BY JOSHUA HAIAR

Steve Westra was South Dakota's commissioner of economic development four years ago when the office first agreed to provide financial assistance for a CJ Schwan's company project.

After leaving state government, he's now a vice president for the company, which has benefited from state grant and loan approvals totaling \$69 million.

All the while, the chairman of the state board that approved some of the aid, Jeff Erickson, has also been a member of the CJ Schwan's board of directors.

The state funding is helping CJ Schwan's with the construction of a \$550 million food production plant in Sioux Falls that will have an estimated 600 employees — a project that the Governor's Office of Economic Development has described as the largest single private investment in South Dakota history. The company, which is part of a South Korean global conglomerate known as CJ Group, has also opened an office with 50 additional employees in downtown Sioux Falls.

State Board of Economic Development minutes say Erickson abstained from discussion and votes on financial assistance for the company. Westra's LinkedIn page indicates he waited a year after leaving state government to begin working for CJ Schwan's, which is the state's legally required waiting period for former state employees to benefit from a contract they were involved with, or to enter into a new contract with the state.

Yet lawmakers and others from both sides of the political aisle are questioning the ethics of the situation.

Former state Sen. Reynold Nesiba, D-Sioux Falls, served on the state Board of Economic Development until last year. He said Erickson's dual roles on the CJ Schwan's corporate board and a state board that's approved tens of millions of dollars in aid for the company are "deeply problematic." To avoid the appearance of impropriety, Nesiba said, Erickson should give up one position or the other.

"Serving both simultaneously tarnishes the reputation of both institutions," Nesiba said.

Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, is the former CEO of the Brookings Economic Development Corp. He said the jobs and tax revenue generated by the CJ Schwan's project will be a win for South Dakota and Sioux Falls, but "the optics" of Westra's transition "are absolutely terrible."

"I think there are some concerns with this," Reed said. "The safeguards are supposed to be there with the one-year statute, but is that enough? I think we may need to revisit that."

Rep. Erik Muckey, D-Sioux Falls, said lawmakers should investigate Westra's conduct.

"This is a serious issue and a potential conflict of interest that deserves the full weight of the Legislature looking into it," Muckey said.

Nesiba, Reed and Muckey had not been aware that CJ Schwan's hired Westra until South Dakota Searchlight informed them.

Responses to concerns

Westra did not respond to multiple South Dakota Searchlight messages. CJ Schwan's said in an email that Westra "is currently employed by CJ Schwan's to advise on business development and government relations matters. He was hired after he left state government. At no time did anyone from the company

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discuss potential employment with Mr. Westra while he was involved with state government.”

Reed and Muckey are two of the four non-voting legislative members of the state Board of Economic Development, serving alongside 13 citizen appointees, including Erickson. Reed said Erickson “recuses himself and does not participate in the discussion” when matters involving CJ Schwan’s arise.

Erickson was required to file a financial interest statement with the state to serve on the Board of Economic Development. He disclosed in his 2017 statement — the most recent one available from the South Dakota Secretary of State’s Office — that Schwan’s was one of numerous businesses supplying him, his spouse or his children with more than 10% control or more than \$2,000 of annual family income.

When Searchlight asked Erickson for further information about those disclosures, he mentioned his abstention from matters pertaining to CJ Schwan’s and said he disclosed his conflict to the rest of the state Board of Economic Development. Although he serves on the CJ Schwan’s board of directors, Erickson told Searchlight in a written statement, “I have no ownership interest in this company and have not financially benefited in any way from this project.” In response to Nesiba’s assertion that Erickson should give up his state board or corporate board position, Erickson said he disagrees and stands by his statement.

CJ Schwan’s said Erickson “was asked by one of our shareholders to represent their interests on our board, and his service began years before any discussions or plans related to our South Dakota project even began.” Erickson began serving on the company’s board in 2016. He had already been a longtime member of the state Board of Economic Development by then, with minutes showing him in the chairman’s role as early as 2012.

State aid approvals benefiting CJ Schwan’s

\$6.7 million grant from the Future Fund — a pool of economic development money controlled by the governor — to the Sioux Falls Development Foundation for land in an industrial park that the foundation developed and transferred to CJ Schwan’s for its construction of a food production plant.

Up to \$15 million in rebates of state sales taxes paid on project construction and equipment, via the Reinvestment Payment Program.

\$15 million low-interest loan from the Revolving Economic Development and Initiative Fund to support construction of the plant.

\$30 million more from the Future Fund, paid in two \$15 million installments to the Sioux Falls Development Foundation, to reimburse CJ Schwan’s for construction costs including an on-site wastewater treatment facility.

\$448,000 grant from the Local Infrastructure Improvement Program to the Sioux Falls Development Foundation for gas-line infrastructure that will benefit CJ Schwan’s and the broader industrial park around it.

Another \$1.55 million grant from the Future Fund to the Sioux Falls Development Foundation for gas-line infrastructure that will benefit CJ Schwan’s and the broader industrial park around it.

Total: \$69 million.

The state first pledged assistance for a CJ Schwan’s project in 2021. Then-Gov. Kristi Noem’s administration committed to providing \$6.7 million in grants through the Governor’s Office of Economic Development, which Westra led at the time. He left his state government job in May 2023.

Since May 2024 — the month Westra began working for CJ Foods, according to his LinkedIn profile — the company’s project has been approved for another \$32 million in state grants, a \$15 million low-interest state loan, and up to \$15 million in state sales tax rebates.

From ice cream trucks to food production

Schwan’s was founded as a family company during the 1950s in Minnesota. It was known for its yellow trucks and delivery drivers who went door-to-door selling ice cream and frozen food.

Over time, the company grew to include the production of frozen foods for grocery stores and the food-service industry. The transformation culminated in that part of the business being acquired in 2019 by CJ CheilJedang, a subsidiary of South Korea-based CJ Group, for a price reported at the time as \$1.84 billion. CJ Group, which is publicly traded in Korea, disclosed revenues of about \$30 billion last year. The Schwan’s home delivery service, which was not part of the acquisition, has since been shut down.

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The company first contacted the state in the fall of 2019 — the year Noem became governor and hired Westra to lead the economic development office. The company said it was planning a major project in one of several states. South Dakota officials met with the company over the course of a year to discuss the project and potential state incentives.

“GOED has actively recruited Minnesota businesses, particularly those with strong ties to South Dakota, for years — CJ Schwan’s is one such business,” said a statement from the state economic development office to South Dakota Searchlight. “Their Sioux Falls project emerged in 2020 through GOED’s ‘South Dakota Means Business’ campaign and the subsequent hard work of many in Sioux Falls and at GOED.”

Westra explained the campaign’s philosophy in 2020.

“We hear over and over from business owners in Minnesota and other states that increased government regulations are making it difficult to earn a profit and plan for growth,” Westra said at the time. “We want to get the word out that it doesn’t have to be this way.”

Near the end of 2020, the company had narrowed potential sites to two states. In January 2021, CJ Schwan’s announced its selection of a site in northern Sioux Falls.

“The combination of the state’s highway infrastructure, geographic proximity to serve our customers, and South Dakota’s pro-business environment were all factors in our decision,” the company said in a statement to South Dakota Searchlight, explaining its choice of the site.

The company hopes to open its Sioux Falls plant next year with 600 full-time jobs paying an average of \$19 per hour. The facility will include production lines for the bibigo brand of steamed dumplings and egg rolls marketed to the food-service industry, the company said last year, plus a warehouse, distribution center and office space.

“Projects of this scale and complexity are only possible through strong business/government partnership,” the company said, “and the state of South Dakota has provided outstanding support to us.”

Incentives begin

Westra signed the agreement promising the state’s first assistance to CJ Schwan’s, which is dated Sept. 30, 2021. It was a commitment to provide \$6.7 million in grants from the state’s Future Fund to the Sioux Falls Development Foundation. The state paid the money to the development foundation in 2024, when the foundation transferred land in its Foundation Park to CJ Schwan’s for the project.

“It covered what it cost us to develop the land,” said Bob Mundt, president and CEO of the foundation, adding that the land transfer to CJ Schwan’s was “part of our contribution to help bring them here.”

Mundt declined to comment on the ethical concerns expressed by lawmakers but offered comments on the worthiness of the CJ Schwan’s project.

“This is a great project for the city and state of South Dakota,” Mundt said. “We feel that it has tremendous potential for growth and expansion in the future.”

Mundt said another state competing for the project had a site ready to go, making the land important in the competition to recruit the company to Sioux Falls.

The source of the initial state aid for the project, the Future Fund, is a pool of money that was created in 1987 at the request of then-Gov. George Mickelson. It was placed under the exclusive control of the governor, with the intent of enabling the state’s chief executive to respond quickly when economic opportunities arise.

State law mandates only that the fund be used “for purposes related to research and economic development for the state.” The money comes from South Dakota employers, who pay a fee to the Future Fund when they submit payroll taxes to the unemployment benefits program.

Noem sparked controversy and bipartisan lawmaker criticism with several uses of the Future Fund, including a fireworks show at Mount Rushmore, a Rapid City-area shooting range that legislators refused to pay for, 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 that would take some control of the fund 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

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development programs.

Sen. Taffy Howard, R-Rapid City, plans to introduce the bill during the legislative session that begins in January. She said the Future Fund is one of a range of government financial incentives for businesses that "need more transparency, objectivity and unbiased oversight than we have now."

State aid continues

Noem's office announced in April 2023 that Westra would step down as economic development commissioner on May 22 of that year. Further aid would not begin flowing toward the CJ Schwan's project until 2024, by which time Westra was a company employee. On his LinkedIn profile, Westra lists his title as senior vice president of business development and his start date as May 2024.

In August 2024, the state Board of Economic Development — chaired by Erickson, but with him abstaining as he did on each discussion and vote related to CJ Schwan's — approved up to \$31.5 million for the company from the state's Reinvestment Payment Program. It provides rebates of state sales taxes paid on qualifying construction and equipment expenses. That approval and some of the other aid benefiting CJ Schwan's went to SFC Global Supply Chain, which has been described as a subsidiary of CJ Schwan's in company documents.

The sales tax rebate has since been reduced to a maximum of \$15 million.

The state board additionally approved two loans to the company in September 2024 through the state's Revolving Economic Development and Initiative Fund. It provides low-interest loans to help finance land, buildings and equipment for business expansions and relocations. The CJ Schwan's project was initially awarded two REDI loans totaling \$25 million, but those commitments expired before the loans were taken out, and the loans were not made. Instead, the state board approved a \$15 million REDI loan in October of this year.

CJ Schwan's conducted a ceremonial groundbreaking for its Sioux Falls project in November 2024.

The next month, the Noem administration pledged another \$30 million from the Future Fund. The grant was split into two \$15 million awards to the Sioux Falls Development Foundation so it could reimburse some of CJ Schwan's construction costs, including building an on-site wastewater treatment facility. The first \$15 million was paid out that month, and the second \$15 million was provided in June this year.

The Governor's Office of Economic Development said both of the \$15 million grants were approved by the Noem administration before Noem resigned in January to accept the top job at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Her departure elevated her lieutenant governor, Larry Rhoden, to governor.

"The current administration's role has been to review progress and release funds only after the required milestones were met," the state economic development office said in a statement to Searchlight.

The office also said that when CJ Schwan's selected South Dakota, Sioux Falls required the company to build a wastewater treatment facility that the company would not have been required to build in other states.

"To present a competitive bid for the project to move forward, the state agreed to a Future Fund grant to offset those additional costs," the office said. "But for this grant, CJ Schwan's would have chosen a state without this requirement."

In March of this year, the state Board of Economic Development approved a \$448,000 grant to the Sioux Falls Development Foundation from the state's Local Infrastructure Improvement Program for natural gas infrastructure supporting the CJ Schwan's project site.

Construction work at the site began in May this year, and in June, Rhoden awarded another \$1.55 million grant from the Future Fund to the Sioux Falls Development Foundation to further assist with the natural gas infrastructure at the site. The work funded by the infrastructure grant and the latest Future Fund grant will also benefit the broader industrial park around CJ Schwan's as it continues to develop.

The latest Future Fund award brought the total amount of Future Fund assistance for the project to about \$38 million.

The total of all state grants and loans initially approved to benefit the CJ Schwan's project added up to \$95 million, but after the reductions to the REDI loans and sales tax rebates, the amount is now \$69 million.

Meanwhile, CJ Schwan's said it has pledged \$250,000 to Forward Sioux Falls, a joint economic develop-

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ment venture of the Greater Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce and Sioux Falls Development Foundation. The company said it has also sponsored the Sanford International golf tournament in Sioux Falls for the past three years. More than half of the construction contracts associated with the Sioux Falls project so far have been awarded to local contractors, the company said, totaling more than \$75 million.

"We look forward to continuing to support the community and the vitality of the region as a corporate citizen," the company said.

Rhoden said he is proud that South Dakota "is a destination for world-class companies like CJ Schwan's."

"This project will be a huge benefit to our economic growth — it's a major feather in the cap of former Governor Noem, and the state's investments brought South Dakota a \$550 million plant that will support 600 good-paying jobs in Sioux Falls," Rhoden said.

Political fallout

The state's approach to economic development is one of the central issues in the campaign for next year's Republican gubernatorial nomination, which has four candidates so far: Rhoden, who is serving the remainder of Noem's second term, U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, Aberdeen businessman Toby Doeden, and state Speaker of the House Jon Hansen.

Hansen, of Dell Rapids, has made criticism of the Governor's Office of Economic Development one of his main campaign themes, calling aid from the office "corporate welfare." He said Westra's transition from state economic development commissioner to an executive for a company receiving millions from that office "may be the most blatant example of crony capitalism I've seen yet."

"I'm committed to ending this abuse — whether through legislation this session or as the next governor — and stopping the unaccountable slush-fund spending in our government," Hansen said.

South Dakota Democratic Party Executive Director Dan Ahlers, a former legislator, said he's bothered by Westra's transition — which Ahlers called a "golden parachute" — and by CJ Schwan's being part of a global conglomerate "that doesn't need this kind of assistance." He said some of the state aid given to the company would have been better used "to cultivate entrepreneurship at the local level in this state for small business owners to help get their ideas off the ground."

Sen. Michael Rohl, R-Aberdeen, said Westra's actions in helping to arrange state aid for a company that he ended up working for "certainly appear unethical and premeditated." Rohl voted against the state Senate's confirmation of Westra's reappointment to a new term as economic development commissioner in 2023 because, according to Rohl, Westra "lacked the integrity my neighbors expect." Rohl was one of six people in the 35-member Senate to vote against Westra's confirmation.

The CJ Schwan's situation is not the first time Westra has faced ethical questions.

While he was serving as state economic development commissioner during the COVID-19 pandemic, companies connected to Westra and his business associates received state coronavirus relief grants, according to a 2021 South Dakota Public Broadcasting review of state records.

Hegg Companies, where Westra had long held leadership roles, was awarded \$574,425 from a state small-business grant program funded with federal pandemic relief dollars. Additional corporations registered to Hegg Companies President and CEO Paul Hegg and his father, Board Chairman Peter Hegg, received roughly \$3 million combined.

Westra listed income from Hegg Companies on a required financial disclosure when he joined Noem's cabinet in 2019. Noem's spokesman, Ian Fury, said at the time that Westra was on a leave of absence from Hegg Companies. But when Hegg Companies filed its 2020 annual report with the South Dakota secretary of state, the corporation still listed Westra as vice president and secretary.

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.

Attorney general charges inmate, former penitentiary employee in one of eight fatal prison overdoses

Jackley says deaths are predominantly from synthetic drug K2

BY: JOHN HULT

The November overdose death of a state prison inmate in Sioux Falls has drawn charges for a former Department of Corrections medical staffer and a man who's already serving a 65-year sentence in the South Dakota State Penitentiary.

In indictments filed this week in Minnehaha County, 25-year-old medical aid Natalie Krause is accused of conspiring with 26-year-old inmate Cole Waters to distribute the synthetic drug that killed Travis Long Fox.

Long Fox overdosed on Nov. 4, Attorney General Marty Jackley said at a Friday news conference in Sioux Falls, and died Nov. 7. His is one of eight inmate overdose deaths that have occurred in 2025 — a figure higher than any year in recent memory for the Department of Corrections.

The synthetic drug involved is commonly referred to as K2, which can be soaked into pieces of paper that are then dried out for smoking.

That's the form it took in the Long Fox overdose case, Jackley said.

"K2 wouldn't necessarily be the drug of choice" on the streets in South Dakota, he said, but the ability to conceal it on sheets of paper has made it a popular option inside prisons and "it's creating a public health and safety issue" in those institutions.

Seven of the eight prison overdose deaths are suspected or confirmed to be tied to K2.

"It can be difficult for corrections officials to prevent inmates from having a piece of paper," Jackley said.

Krause and Waters face a host of felony charges relating to the alleged possession and delivery of unauthorized articles in a correctional setting and allegedly distributing a substance resulting in death. If convicted on all charges, Krause could get up to 95 years in prison. Waters, because of his previous felony conviction, could be sentenced to an additional 170 years.

Waters pleaded guilty to manslaughter for shooting and killing a 17-year-old boy in 2019 during a botched attempt to steal the victim's marijuana.

Krause, the former medical aid, allegedly delivered the K2-laced paper to Waters, with whom she had "a personal relationship," Jackley said.

Krause is currently in custody at the Minnehaha County Jail on a \$100,000 cash-only bond. She's scheduled to appear in court on Monday. Waters was given a personal recognizance bond and released back to the custody of the Department of Corrections. His next court date is set for Jan. 6.

Jackley said his office has 112 pending criminal cases tied to the Department of Corrections at the moment, ranging from drug possession and distribution to inmate assaults on other inmates or staff members. The new case is the third tied to the death of a specific inmate. Charges were filed in July and September, respectively, in earlier overdose deaths. Krause is the second former prison staff member charged.

Jackley said he has "authorized" charging decisions in one other overdose case, and said he expects to announce indictments in that case within about a month.

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.

US Army Corps says oil should keep flowing through Dakota Access Pipeline in long-awaited study

Environmental review recommends additional conditions on pipeline to protect water, respond to tribal concerns

BY: MARY STEURER AND AMY DALRYMPLE

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on Friday issued a long-awaited Dakota Access Pipeline environmental impact statement, recommending that the pipeline keep operating but with some new conditions for its Missouri River crossing in North Dakota.

The pipeline has been operating since June 2017, carrying crude oil from North Dakota's Bakken oil field to Illinois. The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe has opposed the project and challenged it in court, citing concerns about impacts to the tribe's Missouri River water supply.

A judge ordered the Army Corps to conduct the study in 2020 after he found the federal government unlawfully had granted an easement allowing the pipeline to pass underneath the Lake Oahe reservoir on the Missouri without taking a full account of the potential environmental impacts. The pipeline has been operating without the easement for the past five years.

The 464-page environmental impact statement evaluated five paths forward for the project. One option would allow the pipeline to continue operating with no changes, while another would add new conditions. Two options involve shutting down the pipeline, either leaving the pipe in the ground or removing it. A fifth option would reroute the pipeline north of Bismarck, requiring more permitting and new construction.

The Corps said its preferred alternative is to grant the easement, allowing the pipeline to keep operating, but with some additional conditions to make the pipeline safer. The Corps said that option protects environmental resources and responds to comments raised by Tribal Nations.

The recommendation is not official until after a 30-day waiting period required under the National Environmental Policy Act. After that period concludes on Jan. 20, the Corps may issue a record of decision.

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe said in a statement Friday the environmental impact statement "does not remedy" any of its concerns related to the pipeline safety or tribal sovereignty.

"At every turn, our rights and the health and safety of our people and the environment are ignored," Standing Rock Sioux Tribe Chairman Steve Sitting Bear said in the statement. "We will continue to fight for our homelands and the promises the United States made to our Tribe in Treaty."

Pipeline developer Energy Transfer has said the pipeline has always complied with regulations. The pipeline crosses at minimum 95 feet below the riverbed of Lake Oahe.

"The Dakota Access Pipeline is built to be one of the safest, most technologically advanced pipelines in the world," a website affiliated with Energy Transfer, the pipeline's developer, states.

North Dakota officials have supported the continuing operation of the pipeline. The project transports just under half of the state's oil production.

"After eight years of operating safely, the Dakota Access Pipeline has become an essential part of our nation's energy infrastructure," Gov. Kelly Armstrong said in a Friday statement. "Its continued operation will ensure energy security and affordability for the country while providing positive economic impact that touches every North Dakotan."

Added safeguards

The conditions added to the easement would mostly be the responsibility of pipeline company Dakota Access to implement. The requirements are meant to prevent an oil spill and minimize the impacts of a spill, such as implementing new leak detection technology as it becomes available and conducting groundwater monitoring and surface water sampling. The conditions would require installing groundwater monitoring wells but no other construction.

Another safeguard is requiring Dakota Access to provide an alternate water supply in the event of an oil spill that affects Lake Oahe.

According to the Army Corps' review, there have been no oil spills from the pipeline underneath Lake Oahe or anywhere else along the main pipeline route. The report states there have been 12 spills at above-ground facilities, but that all were minor and have been addressed.

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The study says the Dakota Access Pipeline is less at risk for spills than the average pipeline.

The environmental impact statement included a section on environmental justice, which considered the potential effects of the pipeline on tribal sovereignty and culture, particularly for the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe and Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe in South Dakota.

The pipeline crosses underneath Lake Oahe less than a mile north of the Standing Rock Reservation. It passes through unceded land that was recognized as belonging to the Sioux Nation in 19th century treaties with the U.S. government.

Pipeline opponents demonstrated for months in 2016 and 2017 near the pipeline water crossing.

The Army Corps acknowledges that tribal citizens may be disproportionately affected by any negative environmental impacts of the Dakota Access Pipeline. The tribes rely on the health of Lake Oahe and surrounding natural resources for cultural and spiritual reasons, as well as for their water and food supply. Many tribal community members are more than 20 miles away from a grocery store, according to the study.

Under the Corps' recommended alternative, Dakota Access would need to develop a food distribution plan for communities that rely on Lake Oahe for hunting and fishing, in the event those resources would be affected by an oil spill.

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe initially collaborated with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers on the environmental impact statement as a "cooperating agency," which allowed it to have greater involvement in certain parts of the study. However, the tribe stopped participating in 2022, voicing concerns about the transparency of the pipeline company's emergency response plans, The Bismarck Tribune reported. Tribal citizens still submitted comments to the Corps.

Standing Rock in its Friday statement again criticized what it called a lack of adequate consultation by the Army Corps, and said the agency continues to withhold important information from the tribe.

The Army Corps held two meetings in Bismarck in November 2023 to collect public comment on the environmental impact statement. At the time, Corps officials said the final statement was expected in 2024.

The Standing Rock Sioux Tribe launched a new legal challenge to the pipeline in a lawsuit against the Army Corps in 2024. The suit was dismissed by a federal district court judge, who said the tribe could not bring the case until the environmental impact statement was finalized. The tribe has appealed that decision.

The tribe in the lawsuit pointed to evidence of potential lost drilling fluid during the construction of the pipeline. The environmental impact states that no drilling fluid was released at the Lake Oahe crossing during construction.

The study states that shutting down the pipeline would have "permanent, moderate to major adverse impacts on the local economy," including by reducing tax revenue.

The Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation in North Dakota in comments submitted to the federal agency said that shuttering the Dakota Access Pipeline would cost it millions of dollars in revenue. The tribe said it relies on this funding to support public health care, child and senior programs, and public safety, among other services.

"A large amount of oil produced on the Fort Berthold reservation moves on the Dakota Access pipeline," MHA Chairman Mark Fox said in a statement Friday. "We are pleased that the preferred alternative is to keep the pipeline operating with additional conditions to assure safety and address concerns."

Dakota Access developer Energy Transfer did not respond Friday to a request seeking comment.

The study notes that President Donald Trump's administration rescinded climate change and environmental justice-related federal guidance when the Corps was working on finalizing its environmental impact study. The Corps says its analyses of climate change and environmental justice impacts were left in the study "to avoid delay in decision making and the significant time and resources required for document revisions."

North Dakota Monitor staff Jeff Beach, Jacob Orledge and Michael Achterling contributed to this report.

Mary Steurer is a reporter based in Bismarck for the North Dakota Monitor. A native of St. Louis, Steurer previously worked as the local government reporter for the Casper Star-Tribune newspaper in Wyoming.

Amy Dalrymple is editor-in-chief of North Dakota's States Newsroom outlet. She previously was editor of The Bismarck Tribune and a newspaper journalist in Williston and Fargo. You can reach her at adalrymple@northdakotamonitor.com.

Department of Justice releases new documents, photos as part of Epstein files

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY, JACOB FISCHLER, ARIANA FIGUEROA AND SHAUNEEN MIRANDA

WASHINGTON — The Department of Justice began releasing thousands of records Friday related to the late sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, but questions remained over whether officials will meet the requirements of a law overwhelmingly backed by both Republicans and Democrats and signed by President Donald Trump.

The department posted four data sets of images and documents just after 4 p.m. Eastern.

The trove reviewed by States Newsroom reporters contains numerous images of Epstein with celebrities, including the late pop star Michael Jackson, rock legend Mick Jagger, illusionist David Copperfield and former President Bill Clinton. Many other faces in photos are redacted. The photos were released without dates or context.

A reproduction of Epstein's contact list included entries for Trump, his late former wife, Ivana Trump, and his daughter, Ivanka Trump.

An array of photos of Trump with several women appeared amongst the files, according to a preliminary scan by the New York Times. But the Times also said most of the images already had been made public.

Trump, who is prolific on social media, had not yet commented in the hours after the files were released. During an earlier press conference on prescription drugs Friday, the president declined to take any questions.

Trump had a well documented friendship with Epstein, a hedge fund manager who enjoyed a circle of wealthy and influential friends — though Trump maintains he had a falling out with Epstein and was never involved in any alleged crimes.

Since July, when Justice officials announced no further files would be released, Trump had resisted loud protests, even from his base, that all investigative material in the government's possession should be made public. Trump repeatedly called the files a "Democrat hoax," despite the investigation occurring during his first administration.

Files in the first dataset include images of lavishly furnished rooms, including one that appears to have a taxidermied tiger, as well as bathrooms with framed photographs of women whose faces have been redacted.

Photos in the second data set reveal Epstein seated at a table with Jagger, and another of Clinton lying in a hot tub or spa with the top of his chest visible. Another photo was of Clinton with the late pop star Michael Jackson.

Clinton was also photographed with a woman, whose face is redacted, seated on his lap and with his arm around her. In another, Clinton and Epstein stand side by side, smiling at something off camera and dressed in shiny party shirts.

A spokesperson for Clinton posted on social media that the former president was unaware of Epstein's illegal activities and cut the financier off socially before allegations were public. The spokesperson, Angel Ureña, also redirected attention back to Trump.

"This is about shielding themselves from what comes next, or from what they'll try and hide forever," he wrote about the Trump White House. "So they can release as many grainy 20-plus-year-old photos as they want, but this isn't about Bill Clinton. Never has, never will be."

In a Dec. 10 letter from Clinton's lawyer obtained by the New York Times, the former president denies being connected to any alleged crimes Epstein committed.

Photos in the third dataset document Epstein's travels to Europe, desert locations and island locales. Most photos of people other than Epstein, his accomplice Ghislaine Maxwell and Clinton are redacted.

The last dataset also included a completely redacted 119-page grand jury file from New York federal court. Both Epstein and Maxwell were prosecuted in New York, and the Justice Department requested the sealed records be made public.

Maxwell was convicted and sentenced for her role in the scheme to traffic teenage girls for sex.

The fourth trove of files appeared to relate to law enforcement and attorneys' investigation into potential

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sex abusers, such as coordinating interviews and crafting timelines. A portion of the documents related to a 2019 grand jury were completely blacked out.

Following the Justice Department's release Friday afternoon, both Rep. Tom Massie, R-Ky., and Rep. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., who co-sponsored the Epstein Files Transparency Act, released scathing statements.

"Unfortunately, today's document release by @AGPamBondi and@DAGToddBlanche grossly fails to comply with both the spirit and the letter of the law that @realDonaldTrump signed just 30 days ago," Massie posted on X.

Document release to continue

Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche told Fox News Friday morning the department will "release several hundred thousand documents today, and those documents will come in all different forms, photographs and other materials associated with, with all of the investigations into, into Mr. Epstein."

But Blanche also said the release will carry over into "the next couple of weeks," which would be past the Friday deadline set in the law.

The law, unanimously supported by the Senate and approved by the House 427-1, requires the Justice Department to publicly disclose "all unclassified records, documents, communications, and investigative materials in its possession that relate to Epstein or Maxwell."

'ALL the Epstein files'

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer issued a statement Friday slamming the department's admission that it will not meet the law's deadline. Trump signed the bill into law on Nov. 19.

"The law Congress passed and President Trump signed was clear as can be — the Trump administration had 30 days to release ALL the Epstein files, not just some. Failing to do so is breaking the law. This just shows the Department of Justice, Donald Trump, and Pam Bondi are hellbent on hiding the truth," Schumer said, alleging a "cover up."

"Senate Democrats are working closely with attorneys for the victims of Jeffrey Epstein and with outside legal experts to assess what documents are being withheld and what is being covered up by Pam Bondi. We will not stop until the whole truth comes out," the New York Democrat continued.

Schumer later criticized in a separate statement the late afternoon release as "just a fraction of the whole body of evidence."

House Democrats Robert Garcia, D-Calif., and Jamie Raskin, D-Md., released a joint statement Friday stating they "are now examining all legal options in the face of this violation of federal law." Garcia and Raskin are, respectively, the ranking members of the House Oversight and Government Reform and Judiciary committees.

Massie, who pushed to bypass Republican leadership to pass the legislation, published a 14-minute video on social media Thursday night regarding how the public should interpret whether the Justice Department follows the statute.

"How will you know if they've released all the materials?" Massie said. "Well, one of the ways we'll know is there are people who covered this case for years, and I've talked to them in private, then they know what some of the material is that's back there."

The Kentucky Republican said he's been in contact with victims' lawyers who claim federal investigators are in possession of names that should be contained in the files.

"If we get a large production on December 19, and it does not contain a single name of any male who's accused of a sex crime or sex trafficking or rape, or any of these things, then we know they haven't produced all the documents. It's that simple," Massie said.

In a press conference Tuesday led by several Senate Democrats, Schumer said the lawmakers have been "preparing for any scenario" and warned "there will be serious legal and political consequences" if the Trump administration withholds documents required by law to be released.

'New information' on Epstein cited

The brief text of the law does not outline penalties if the deadline is not met.

Types of documents cited in the law include flight logs, plea agreements and immunity deals, and any

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internal DOJ communications about Epstein, who died in jail in 2019 awaiting trial on federal sex trafficking charges.

The law states documents cannot be delayed, redacted or withheld "on the basis of embarrassment, reputational harm, or political sensitivity, including to any government official, public figure, or foreign dignitary."

Victims' identities must be redacted, and written justification is required for any information withheld, according to the law.

Carve-outs also exist for any material relating to ongoing investigations.

The department announced new investigations on Nov. 14 into Epstein's ties to Clinton, former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers, and prominent investor Reid Hoffman.

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

House Democrats release more photos

Democrats on the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform have been releasing a trickle of private files from Epstein's estate that were handed over in response to a congressional subpoena. Committee Democrats disclosed dozens more images Thursday.

The public disclosure of the digital files, released via a cloud folder without context, follows the committee Democrats' announcement Dec. 12 that it had received 95,000 more images from Epstein's estate.

Among those images was a photo of Trump surrounded by women whose faces had been redacted, and an image of apparent packaged condoms with Trump's face on them and a sign reading "I'm HUUUGE!" Another image, which featured an apparent "Bill Clinton" autograph, shows the former president posing with Epstein, Maxwell and others.

The latest batch of private records released included photos of Epstein with guests at meals and multiple photos of Epstein talking with former Trump strategist Steve Bannon across a sizable wooden desk in what appears to be an office with antique books and collectibles. Another photo shows Epstein dressed in traditional sheikh-style garments.

A few images of the New York Times' David Brooks surfaced in the latest batch as well. Epstein is not in the frame with Brooks, an opinion columnist. The Times released a statement to media outlets Thursday that "Mr. Brooks had no contact with (Epstein) before or after this single attendance at a widely-attended dinner" in 2011.

Other images feature former Microsoft CEO Bill Gates standing with a woman whose face has been redacted by the committee, and a solo photo of Google co-founder Sergey Brin.

"Oversight Democrats will continue to release photographs and documents from the Epstein estate to provide transparency for the American people," Garcia said in a statement Thursday. "As we approach the deadline for the Epstein Files Transparency Act, these new images raise more questions about what exactly the Department of Justice has in its possession. We must end this White House cover-up, and the DOJ must release the Epstein files now."

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

Trump administration moves to pause diversity visa program after Brown, MIT shootings

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA

WASHINGTON — Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said late Thursday she was suspending applications for a diversity visa program because the man suspected of killing two Brown University students and a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor this week obtained a green card through the program in 2017.

Noem said on social media she was "immediately directing (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services) to pause the DV1 program to ensure no more Americans are harmed by this disastrous program."

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Local authorities found the suspect, Portuguese national Claudio Manuel Neves Valente, dead in a New Hampshire storage unit late Thursday, five days after the shooting at Brown in Providence, Rhode Island, that wounded nine and killed two students.

Two days after the Brown shooting, an MIT professor was found shot in his home and later died at the hospital. Authorities also linked that killing to Neves Valente.

Neves Valente, 48, attended Brown in the early 2000s.

Visa program

Gov. Walz urges Noem to review Minnesota ICE arrests after reports of detained U.S. citizens.jpeg

Secretary of Homeland Security Kristi Noem holds a press conference in Minneapolis on Friday, Oct. 24, 2025. (Photo by Glen Stubbe/Minnesota Reformer)

The diversity visa program, also known as DV1, grants up to 50,000 immigrant visas each year under a lottery system that aims to select individuals from countries with low rates of immigration to the U.S.

Most lottery winners reside outside the United States and are processed by the State Department. Lottery winners who are within the U.S. are processed by USCIS.

More than 14 million individuals applied for the program in 2021, the most recent year for which the State Department has data.

Noem said in her post she was acting on behalf of President Donald Trump, who tried to end the diversity visa program in his first term after an individual from Uzbekistan who came through the program carried out an attack in New York City that killed eight people.

It's the latest effort by the Trump administration to curtail legal immigration after a tragedy.

The administration paused asylum applications after an Afghan national who was granted asylum was charged with killing one National Guard member and wounding another in last month's shooting in Washington, D.C.

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.

Suspected Brown mass shooter found dead in N.H. storage facility; linked to MIT physicist's killing

BY: NANCY LAVIN AND ALEXANDER CASTRO

"We got him."

With those three words from Ted Docks, FBI special agent in charge, the six-day manhunt for the person believed to be responsible for a mass shooting at Brown University ended. The suspect and former Brown graduate student, Claudio Manuel Neves Valente, was found dead in a storage unit in Salem, New Hampshire, shortly before 9 p.m. Thursday, Docks confirmed at a press conference in Providence.

Neves Valente, 48, is also the suspect in Monday's fatal shooting of Massachusetts Institute of Technology physics professor Nuno F.G. Loureiro in Brookline, Massachusetts, Rhode Island public officials confirmed Thursday. U.S. Attorney for the District of Massachusetts Leah B. Foley said Valente was found with a satchel when investigators arrived to execute a search warrant at a press conference in Boston Thursday night.

It's a marked turnaround from one day earlier, when clues appeared, at least publicly, scarce about the man captured on grainy video footage and still images around the Ivy League campus before and after the Saturday afternoon shooting. Frustration, criticism, and fear mounted as the university and the capital city desperately searched for answers and investigators searched for justice.

But just as Attorney General Peter Neronha promised, the seemingly unending case "cracked wide open," swiftly Thursday thanks largely to public assistance that helped connect the man captured on area security camera footage to a rental car agency in Massachusetts, and ultimately, 85 miles north to the storage unit where he took his own life Thursday night.

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A state arrest warrant issued by Rhode Island state court earlier Thursday charges Neves Valente with two counts of murder and 23 felony counts of assault and firearms offenses.

Evidence is still being processed, but Neronha added, "There won't be a prosecution now, of course."

A motive remains elusive.

"I don't think we have any idea why now, or why, why Brown, why these students, why this classroom, that that is really unknown to us, and it may become clear, I hope that it does, but it hasn't as of right now," Neronha said.

What is known is that Neves Valente was a Brown University student from the fall of 2000 to the spring of 2001, admitted to a master's graduate program in physics. He took a leave of absence in April 2001, before formally withdrawing in July 2003. During his time at the university, most physics classes were held in the Barus and Holley engineering building where the shooting took place, though the university course schedule for that time period is not available, Christina Paxson, university president said.

He was also described as a Portuguese national, whose last known address was in Miami. He is believed to have traveled by plane to Providence in October, moving throughout the region over the intervening months. Officials said Loureiro, 47, and Valente attended the same academic program in Portugal between 1995 and 2000.

"This was a highly dangerous individual capable of extreme violence," said Tom Greco, special agent in charge for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms' Boston division.

The thread that unraveled the mystery of who and where he was: a second person, identified in the affidavit as John, who was captured on property security camera footage in the East Side residential neighborhood at the same time as Neves Valente on the day of the shooting. Officials on Wednesday released photos of John, asking for tips or for him to come forward for questioning.

John previously posted on a popular Reddit forum relaying a piece of what he observed, according to the affidavit of a Providence police detective.

"The police need to look into a grey Nissan with Florida plates, possibly a rental," John, then still anonymous, wrote on the subreddit r/Providence on Dec. 15. "That was the car he was driving. It was parked in front of the little shack behind the Rhode Island Historical Society on the Cooke St side. I know because he used his key fob to open the car, approached it and then something prompted him to back away."

John spoke briefly with Neves Valente in the bathroom of the engineering building, following him out and asking him about his presence in the university building. He came forward to Providence police within an hour of his photo being released publicly Wednesday.

"He was as outstanding a witness as I've seen, and he deserves a lot of credit," Neronha said, adding that he would "vote" for the witness to receive the \$50,000 reward previously offered by the FBI.

John's interview and written tips helped investigators identify and trace the vehicle to the Boston car rental where he rented the car, in his own name, Neronha said.

The New Hampshire storage unit was also in his name, and evidence recovered in the car and the unit, including two firearms, confirmed he was responsible for the shooting, Neronha said.

"We are 100% confident that this is our target, and this case is closed from a perspective of pursuing people involved," Neronha said.

Perez later professed pride for the city, whose residents, students and public safety officials succeeded in the complex and winding investigation.

"In this nation, when horrific incidents happen, law enforcement steps up," Col. Oscar Perez, Providence police chief, said during the late evening press conference.

The sense of accomplishment and relief was also met with continued grief for the two students killed and nine wounded, along with the wider community. Six of the injured students remained at Rhode Island Hospital, where they were listed in stable condition Thursday.

"We hope this outcome tonight brings an increased sense of safety for Brown and our surrounding area," Paxson, university president, said. "This has been a period of great fear and anxiety for many people and now, perhaps some form of relief. Truly, this week has been devastating for our community in a number of ways."

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Including public doxxing, misinformation and rampant conspiracies that filled the void of facts on social media over the last six days.

"The endless barrage of misinformation, disinformation, rumors, leaks and click bait were not helpful in this investigation, distractions and unfounded criticisms do not support this work," said Col Darnell Weaver, superintendent of the Rhode Island State Police. "They complicate it and threaten to undermine the justice we seek for the victims and the grieving families."

This story was originally produced by Rhode Island Current, 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.

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Without pennies, should retailers round up or down? States offer their 2 cents.

Businesses and states are grappling with the fallout of the federal government's quick elimination of the penny

BY: KEVIN HARDY

As pennies vanish from the American landscape, many businesses are clamoring for federal guidance on how to handle cash transactions in a penniless world.

Should retailers round up or down? Should they round in favor of the customer? Or in favor of the business?

So far, calls for federal direction have gone unanswered. Some businesses are setting their own policies, but states are now beginning to act amid growing uncertainty.

While the question revolves around only a few cents per transaction, it does raise important consumer protection and legal questions for states to consider. Retailers must weigh threats of potential lawsuits, while policymakers worry about protecting the most vulnerable consumers who rely on cash for everyday purchases.

President Donald Trump in February moved to eliminate the penny from U.S. pocketbooks, citing the high cost of minting them — about 3.7 cents per penny. But even before the coin's final production run last month, U.S. retailers and banks were reporting widespread penny shortages.

To provide clarity, lawmakers in New York have proposed legislation mirroring Canada's rounding standard — up or down to the nearest five cents. And officials in Georgia and Utah have issued nonbinding guidance to businesses.

"States do not have the luxury of waiting for the federal government," said Katherine Tschopp, senior associate at government relations firm MultiState.

Complicating the issue are the growing number of jurisdictions requiring businesses to accept cash — a move aimed at protecting vulnerable consumers who may not have access to credit cards or electronic payment systems.

In November, New York became the ninth state to add such a rule, according to tracking from MultiState. At least eight major cities also require businesses to accept cash.

A bipartisan group of federal lawmakers have proposed legislation in the U.S. House and Senate to require all cash transactions be rounded to the nearest five cents, but neither proposal has made it to a floor vote.

The record-breaking federal government shutdown and heated debate on health insurance subsidies have sidelined the penny discussion, Tschopp said. She thinks the federal government will likely determine a national rounding policy — eventually. But in the meantime, she expects more states to weigh in.

New York Democratic Assemblymember John T. McDonald III said he agreed with Trump's move to phase

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out the costly production of the penny. But businesses are asking for some kind of guidance now, he said. "In the absence of federal action, I think it's important that the states act to provide clarity — clarity for everybody: clarity for the consumer, as well as the merchant and the state," McDonald told Stateline.

Approaches to rounding

McDonald's proposed legislation mirrors Canada's rounding policy following the 2012 elimination of its one-cent coin. His bill calls for so-called symmetrical rounding of after-tax cash purchases to the nearest five-cent mark. Purchases ending with one, two, six or seven cents would be rounded down. And purchases ending in three, four, eight or nine cents would be rounded up.

So, a consumer would get no cash back from a \$1.99 purchase. But a retailer would hand over a nickel to someone spending \$1.97.

McDonald sits on the National Conference of State Legislatures' State and Local Taxation Task Force that has been examining the penny issue. That task force has recommended symmetrical rounding as the fairest method for merchants and consumers.

McDonald noted that the NCSL group reached a bipartisan consensus on the issue. And he said he's found no opposition from New York businesses or consumer groups on his bill.

"In this day and age where we seem to have a lot of fractious conversations on other issues, it'd be nice to find something that actually we can all agree on," he said. "And to have it start with the good old little penny would be a good spot."

On Wednesday, South Dakota Republican state Sen. Tim Reed urged state lawmakers to start communicating with agencies, retailers and the public over the issue.

A co-chair of the NCSL task force, he said businesses need guidance and consumers may need reassurance. While he acknowledged concerns about "strategic pricing" — in which retailers set prices to push rounding to their advantage — the group's report characterized that as a "limited risk."

"Everybody's thinking, 'Oh, I'll get overcharged, or I'll get undercharged,'" Reed said at an NCSL virtual event about the penny. He said it would be good for people to know that "really this is all going to kind of wash out in the end."

New York Democratic state Sen. James Sanders Jr. said the cash acceptance law he sponsored earlier this year ensures people without access to smartphones or banking are not excluded from commerce. That law also says customers paying with cash cannot be charged more than other buyers.

"Otherwise, you absolutely have a two-tiered system," he said, noting that cash is "a lifeline" for working families, older adults, immigrants and small businesses.

Sanders said he would prefer for retailers to round down to the nearest nickel on cash transactions to protect consumers.

"For the large corporations, this could be a difference of hundreds of thousands of dollars if they are steadily rounding up," he said. While each rounding transaction represents a loss or gain of only a few cents, Sanders said, "multiply that by tens of thousands of people, and you've effectively raised the price of your product without any type of sanction."

Sanders said he plans to introduce legislation on the matter soon, but added that he remains open to McDonald's current proposal of symmetrical rounding. More than anything, he said, businesses desire some kind of guidance.

"We're not trying to cheat business. We're just trying not to be cheated by business," he said. "The people I've been speaking to are honest souls, and they just want to know the right thing to do in a penniless society."

A rapid change

The U.S. Mint in Philadelphia struck the last penny on Nov. 12, but pennies were already scarce at that time.

By mid-November, more than 100 of the government's 165 coin distribution sites across the country were without pennies, according to the Retail Industry Leaders Association, which represents major chains including CVS, Target and 7-Eleven.

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In a November survey of its members, that organization found six national chains had more than 1,000 stores that had no pennies.

The association said most of its survey respondents were rounding cash transactions to the benefit of customers — always down to the nearest five cents. While it's fair for shoppers, it's "costing businesses millions of dollars as small amounts add up across thousands of daily cash transactions."

While states weigh the issue, the association is pushing for a federal answer.

"We are urging the federal government to quickly address the problem, to allow for uniform adjustments by retailers that operate in a multitude of states," Austen Jensen, the organization's senior executive vice president of public affairs, said in a statement to Stateline.

Other groups, including the American Bankers Association, have also pushed for federal action.

"They're obviously concerned about it and wanting a federal fix," said Christopher Phillips, a partner at law firm Holland & Knight. "The government fairly abruptly decided they weren't going to mint any more pennies and these shortages of pennies spread fairly quickly across the country."

For retailers, the problem is both practical and legal, said Phillips, who represents payment system companies and financial technology firms.

In many of the jurisdictions that require merchants to accept cash, the laws explicitly forbid charging cash customers more — and have a per-transaction fine for violations, raising the possibility of big fees. And Phillips said merchants could face class-action lawsuits for rounding policies in which plaintiffs argue they are charged more than advertised or face unfair or deceptive business practices.

Federal regulations also ban retailers from charging more for purchases made with food stamps, through the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program, or SNAP. Cash rounding policies complicate that rule, as some customers would be charged less for certain cash purchases than those using SNAP cards.

"The unintended consequences of these administrative actions, and these laws and how they flow together to create real problems that were certainly never envisioned," Phillips said.

So far, merchants have come up with their own policies.

Because of the penny shortage, the East Coast convenience store chain Sheetz asked customers to move to cashless payments or round up to support charitable causes. It even offered free beverages for those willing to cash in 100 pennies.

Kwik Trip, which operates convenience stores across the Midwest, in October announced its registers would automatically round down cash transactions to the nearest nickel in favor of customers.

But without a federal standard, the landscape is patchy, Phillips said. Rounding creates a winner and a loser in each cash transaction. Some companies have pushed to standardize their practice across the country, but others will only choose to round down if required.

"Others are like, 'You know what? This is actual money for us,'" he said. "'We're not just going to give it up for the sake of convenience.'"

Stateline reporter Kevin Hardy can be reached at khardy@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.

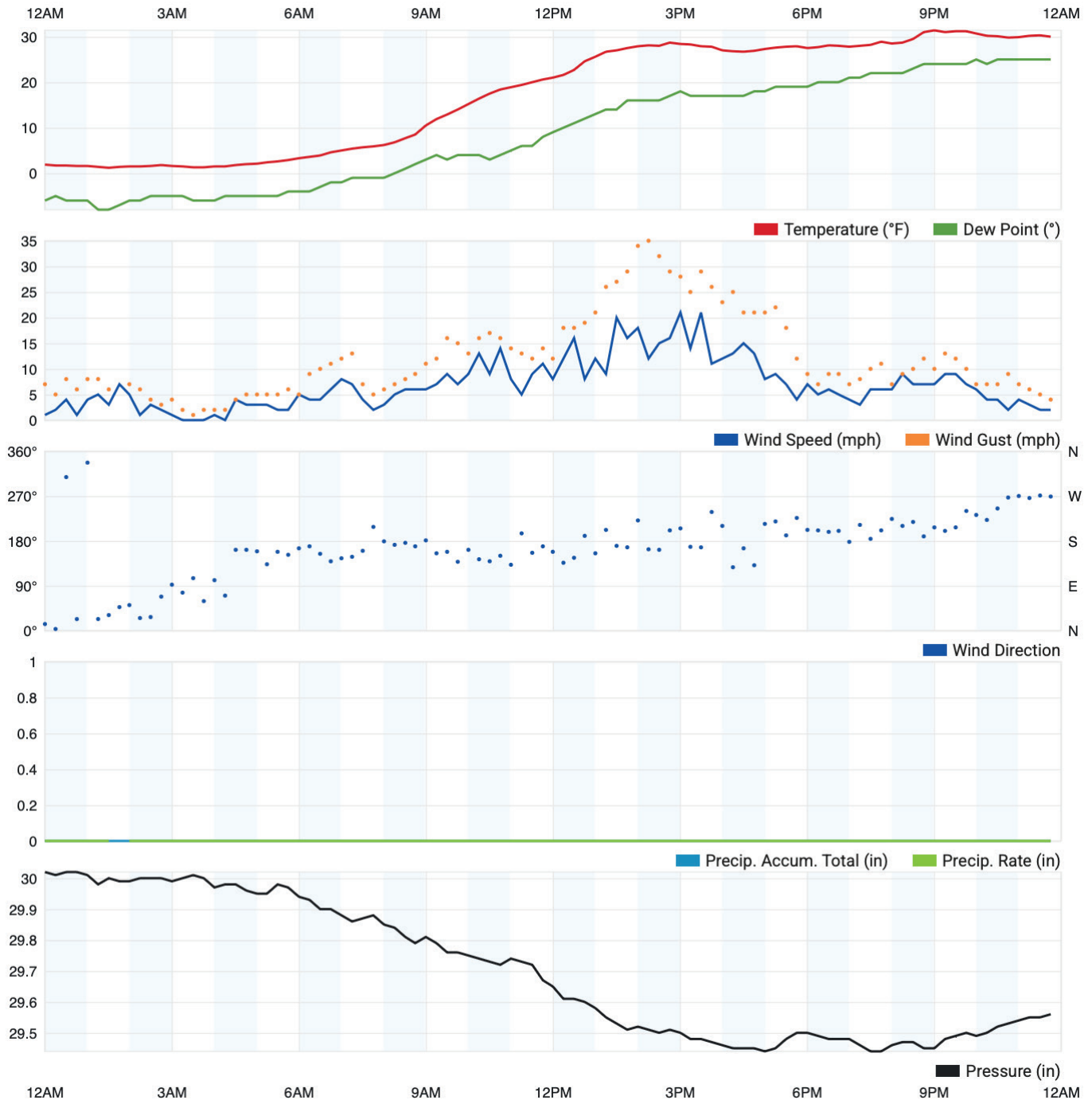
Kevin Hardy covers business, labor and rural issues for Stateline from the Midwest.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

December 19, 2025



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Today

Tonight

Sunday

Sunday Night

Monday



High: 24 °F

Low: 7 °F

High: 33 °F

Low: 22 °F

High: 36 °F

Sunny

Mostly Clear

Increasing
Clouds

Mostly Cloudy

Partly Sunny



Breezy Winds Today

December 20, 2025
2:50 AM

West to northwest winds with gusts exceeding 25 mph

Key Messages:

- Wind gusts will exceed 25 mph for most locations.
- The highest wind gusts of 35 to 40 mph over northeastern South Dakota.
- Isolated drifting snow, mainly over the higher terrain areas of the Sisseton Hills.

Maximum Wind Gust Forecast (mph)

	12/20 Sat												Maximum						
	6am	7am	8am	9am	10am	11am	12pm	1pm	2pm	3pm	4pm	5pm		6pm	7pm	8pm	9pm	10pm	11pm
Aberdeen	25	24	23	25	29	29	29	26	24	22	17	14	13	10	8	6	5	6	29
Britton	21	17	17	20	22	24	26	25	23	22	16	14	15	13	10	8	7	6	26
Chamberlain	17	17	16	16	17	21	22	22	22	20	17	14	10	9	9	9	8	9	22
Clark	28	22	21	24	28	29	30	29	26	26	21	17	17	16	14	10	9	8	30
Eagle Butte	23	20	20	22	21	26	25	22	21	20	13	9	10	10	10	10	10	12	26
Eureka	24	23	22	25	25	28	28	25	24	23	16	13	13	13	10	9	8	9	28
Gettysburg	22	21	20	20	20	23	24	23	22	21	16	13	12	12	12	10	12	12	24
McIntosh	28	24	22	24	22	24	23	20	17	15	10	9	10	10	9	9	9	10	28
Milbank	29	22	20	25	31	33	32	31	30	29	25	23	21	18	16	14	12	9	33
Miller	23	21	21	24	26	26	25	23	22	20	15	12	10	10	9	9	9	9	26
Mobridge	21	17	16	17	20	22	22	20	18	16	12	9	9	9	9	8	9	9	22
Murdo	17	15	16	20	22	23	24	25	25	23	20	14	10	8	8	9	10	10	25
Pierre	14	12	10	13	13	21	23	23	22	20	15	12	10	10	9	8	8	9	23
Redfield	20	17	20	22	23	26	25	22	22	21	17	14	13	12	10	9	8	8	26
Sisseton	33	29	28	32	35	35	33	32	30	30	24	21	22	20	17	14	13	9	35
Watertown	31	29	29	29	33	33	35	35	31	30	25	23	21	18	15	13	9	8	35
Webster	28	28	28	29	30	31	32	30	28	29	22	18	18	17	14	12	9	8	32
Wheaton	29	24	22	26	30	31	32	32	31	29	25	23	21	20	17	15	13	9	32



**National Weather Service
Aberdeen, SD**

West to northwest winds are expected today, with gusts exceeding 25 mph. The strongest winds with gusts of 35 to 40 mph will occur over the higher terrain area of the Sisseton Hills. The winds will subside later this afternoon and evening.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 32 °F at 9:39 PM

Low Temp: 1 °F at 1:31 AM

Wind: 36 mph at 2:14 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 60 in 1893

Record Low: -29 in 1916

Average High: 27

Average Low: 7

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.38

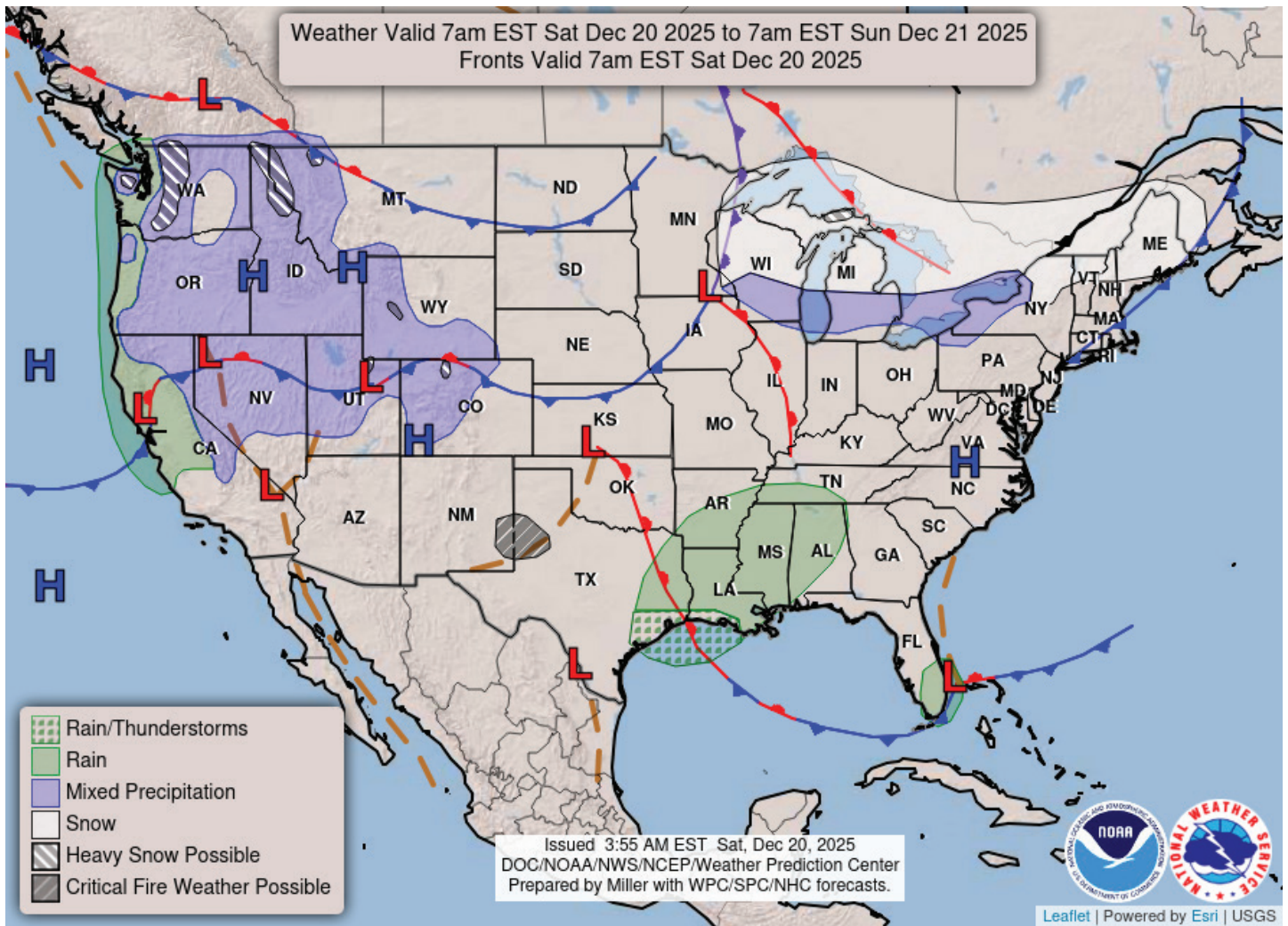
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.67

Average Precip to date: 21.59

Precip Year to Date: 25.48

Sunset Tonight: 4:51 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:09 am



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Today in Weather History

December 20, 1991: Light freezing drizzle and freezing rain developed over northern South Dakota from Timber Lake to Webster. Numerous car accidents were attributed to slippery conditions. The Aberdeen Police Department reported 24 accidents in Aberdeen, but only one resulted in an injury. Numerous businesses closed and schools were canceled.

December 20, 2008: Arctic air combined with blustery northwest winds brought extreme wind chills to the central and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota from the late afternoon of the 20th until the afternoon of the 21st. Wind chills of 35 below to 45 below zero were common across the area.

1836: A famous "sudden freeze" occurred in central Illinois. A cold front with 70 mph winds swept through around Noon, dropping the temperature from 40 degrees to near zero in a matter of minutes. Many settlers froze to death. Folklore told of chickens frozen in their tracks and men frozen to saddles. Ice in streams reportedly froze to six inches in a few hours.

1929: An exceptional storm produced snow from the Middle Rio Grande Valley of Texas to southern Arkansas on December 20 - 21st, 1929. The storm produced 26 inches of snow near Hillsboro, Texas, and 24 inches in 24 hours in Clifton.

1942 — An early cold wave sent the temperature plunging to 3 degrees below zero at Nantucket, MA, and to 11 degrees below zero at Boston MA. (The Weather Channel)

1977: A "Once in a Lifetime" wind and dust storm struck the south end of the San Joaquin Valley in California. Winds reached 88 mph at Arvin before the anemometer broke, and gusts were estimated at 192 mph at Arvin by a U.S. Geological Survey. Meadows Field in Bakersfield recorded sustained 46 mph winds with a gust of 63 mph. The strong winds generated a wall of dust resembling a tidal wave that was 5,000 feet high over Arvin. Blowing sand stripped painted surfaces to bare metal and trapped people in vehicles for several hours. 70% of homes received structural damage in Arvin, Edison, and East Bakersfield. 120,000 Kern County customers lost power. Agriculture was impacted as 25 million tons of soil was loosened from grazing lands. Five people died, and damages totaled \$34 million.

These strong winds also spread a large fire through the Honda Canyon on Vandenberg Air Force Base in southern California. This fire, which started from a power pole on Tranquillon Ridge being blown over, claimed the lives of Base Commander Colonel Joseph Turner, Fire Chief Billy Bell, and Assistant Fire Chief Eugene Cooper. Additionally, severe burns were experienced by Heavy Equipment Operator Clarence McCauley. He later died due to complications from the burns.

1984: Lili, a rare December hurricane, was officially declared a tropical system in the central Atlantic as a distinct eye type feature was apparent on satellite imagery. The hurricane peaked at sustained 80 mph winds and a pressure of 980 millibars or 28.94 inches of mercury, a very respectable Category 1 Hurricane in December.

1987 — Heavy snow fell in the northern mountains of Colorado, with 15 inches reported in the Mary Jane ski area. Strong and gusty winds prevailed from the Northern High Plains to the Great Lakes. Winds gusted to 54 mph at Buffalo NY, and reached 66 mph at Livingston MT. Rain, freezing rain, sleet and snow fell across New England, with up to seven inches of snow in Maine. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2006: Severe Cyclone Bondo, the equivalent of a Category 4, approaches the Madagascar coast with sustained winds of 138 mph.

Who We Are in Christ

When trials come, there's no need to fear—you are handpicked by God, deeply loved, and safely held..

1 Peter 1:1-7: 1 Peter 1:1-7

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen

2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.

3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,

4 to obtain an inheritance which is imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you,

5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

6 In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials,

7 so that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ;

Peter wrote the first of his two epistles to encourage people who were undergoing persecution. And the disciple decided to begin the letter by reminding Christians who they are in the Lord. Believers are ...

Chosen in Christ. The good news of Jesus Christ is offered to all humanity (John 3:16; Romans 1:20). Salvation is for everyone who receives the Savior through an act of free will. The bottom line is that God wants fellowship with you (2 Peter 3:9).

Blessed to receive mercy. We are saved through the mercy of Christ alone (Titus 3:5). God loved us so much that He made a way for us to be in relationship with Him forever.

Protected. Psalm 34:7 says, "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear Him." We are so well guarded that the only way our life can be touched by hardship is if God permits it. Sometimes the Father allows His children to walk through dark valleys, but ever the protective shepherd, He remains by their side (Psalm 23:4).

The message of Peter's letter is simple: When you go through trying times, don't be afraid. Focus on who you are in Christ. You have reason to be bold, because you are a chosen, beloved, and well-protected

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

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.19.25

1 11 27 39 59 18

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$100,000,000

NEXT DRAW:

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.17.25

14 30 38 40 47 6

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$10,020,000

NEXT DRAW: 15 Hrs 50 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.19.25

8 13 19 34 48 14

TOP PRIZE:

\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 5 Mins 35 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.17.25

17 19 20 27 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$135,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 5 Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.17.25

24 43 65 66 68 3

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 34 Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
12.17.25

25 33 53 62 66 17

Power Play: 4x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$1,500,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 34 Mins 36 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

News from the **AP** Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Belle Fourche 57, Sundance, Wyo. 47
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 51, Pine Ridge 38
Dakota Valley 76, Canton 48
Dell Rapids St Mary's 65, Colman-Egan 55
Deubrook 52, Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 48
Elkton-Lake Benton 62, Iroquois-Lake Preston 51
Faulkton 59, Florence-Henry 37
Garretson 57, Tri-Valley 54
Gordon/Rushville, Neb. 60, Bennett County 51
Great Plains Lutheran 57, Rosholt 46
Great Plains Lutheran 57, Tri-State, N.D. 46
Hanson 57, Scotland/Menno 55
Harrisburg 57, Sioux Falls Washington 41
Howard 59, McCook Central-Montrose 47
Huron 54, Rapid City Central 41
James Valley Christian School 69, Sunshine Bible Academy 19
Lead-Deadwood 68, Newcastle, Wyo. 56
Little Wound 49, Todd County 37
Mitchell 66, Rapid City Stevens 48
Mobridge-Pollock 79, Timber Lake 73
Northwestern 58, Gettysburg 55
Omaha Nation, Neb. 56, St. Francis Indian 35
Rapid City Christian 57, Dupree 33
Sioux Falls Jefferson 66, Sioux Falls O'Gorman 58
Sioux Falls Lincoln 62, Yankton 38
Spearfish 56, Aberdeen Central 45
Stuart, Neb. 71, Burke 69
T F Riggs High School 61, Sturgis Brown High School 50
Takini 57, Santee, Neb. 42
Viborg-Hurley 67, Irene-Wakonda 37
Webster 58, Britton-Hecla 47
West Central 69, Groton 42
Wilmot 70, Ortonville, Minn. 60
Wolsey-Wessington 67, Highmore-Harrold 24

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

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Central 52, Spearfish 36
Bennett County 75, Gordon/Rushville, Neb. 16
Brandon Valley 76, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 33
Burke 42, Stuart, Neb. 40
Custer 53, Santee, Neb. 43
Dakota Valley 67, Canton 45
Emery 49, Canistota 41

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Faith 48, Bison 33
Hanson 37, Scotland/Menno 19
Harding County 71, Bowman County, N.D. 25
Herried-Selby 55, Sully Buttes 23
Ipswich 57, Langford 27
Irene-Wakonda 40, Viborg-Hurley 29
Kadoka 55, Newell 30
Lead-Deadwood 51, Newcastle, Wyo. 48
Leola-Frederick High School 54, Strasburg, N.D. 10
McCook Central-Montrose 51, Howard 20
Mobridge-Pollock 58, Timber Lake 13
Morrill, Neb. 49, Edgemont 19
North Central 51, South Border, N.D. 24
Omaha Nation, Neb. 58, White River 32
Rapid City Stevens 49, Mitchell 35
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 76, Sioux Falls Jefferson 48
St Thomas More 52, Cheyenne Central, Wyo. 27
Sundance, Wyo. 60, Belle Fourche 50
T F Riggs High School 55, Sturgis Brown High School 48
Webster 62, Britton-Hecla 39
West Central 49, Groton 28
Wilmot 40, Ortonville, Minn. 31

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

Dixon, Augillard combine for 47 to lead Milwaukee 88-87 over South Dakota State

MILWAUKEE (AP) — Josh Dixon and Amar Augillard combined for 47 points as Milwaukee beat South Dakota State 88-87 on Friday.

Dixon poured in 24 points and contributed five rebounds for the Panthers (5-6). Augillard scored 23 points, shooting 7 for 16 (5 for 10 from 3-point range) and 4 of 4 from the free-throw line. Danilo Jovanovich finished 8 of 10 from the field to finish with 17 points.

The Jackrabbits (7-7) were led by Jaden Jackson, who posted 23 points, five assists and two steals. South Dakota State also got 18 points, six rebounds and eight assists from Kalen Garry. Damon Wilkinson also had 18 points.

The Panthers led 39-38 at the half, using a 10-2 run to erase a seven-point deficit. They used a 9-0 run in the second half to turn a three-point deficit into a lead of six. They took the lead for good with 5:06 remaining.

Suspect in Brown University shooting and MIT professor's killing was once a physics student

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, MARYCLAIRE DALE and HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Thirty years ago, Claudio Neves Valente and Nuno F.G. Loureiro were classmates with bright futures. Both excelled in physics and made their way from their home country of Portugal to the U.S., settling on the campuses of prestigious East Coast universities.

But Neves Valente's path took a darker turn than his former peer. Investigators say the 48-year-old fatally shot two students last week at Brown University in Providence, where he was a graduate student in the early 2000s, and later killed Loureiro, who led one of the largest laboratories at the Massachusetts

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Institute of Technology.

Authorities have offered no motive for the shootings or elaborated on what, if any, history was between the two men.

Neves Valente was found dead Thursday from a self-inflicted gunshot wound at a New Hampshire storage facility, ending a search that started with last Saturday's shooting in a Brown lecture hall, where nine other people were also wounded. Authorities believe that on Monday, two days after the Brown shooting, Neves Valente shot Loureiro at the professor's home in the Boston suburbs, about 50 miles (80 kilometers) from Providence. An autopsy found Neves Valente died Tuesday.

In high school, Neves Valente had been a promising physics student, but he was let go from Portugal's premier engineering school, Instituto Superior Técnico, in 2000 and withdrew from a Brown University graduate program three years later without a degree.

Before his death, he was renting a room in a home in a working class Miami neighborhood, the past two decades of his life a mystery. What he was doing for a job was unclear. One witness to the Brown shooting noted he was wearing the kinds of pants and shoes that are typical of restaurant workers.

Neves Valente and Loureiro were in the same academic program in Portugal

Neves Valente was born in Torres Novas, Portugal, about 75 miles (121 kilometers) north of Lisbon. As a high school student, he competed in a national physics competition in 1994, coming in third place, according to a Portuguese physics magazine. Five of the top finishers got to compete in an international competition the following year in Australia.

From 1995 to 2000, he was in the same physics program in Lisbon with Loureiro, federal prosecutor Leah B. Foley said. Loureiro graduated from Instituto Superior Técnico in 2000, according to his MIT faculty page. A termination notice from the Lisbon university's then president shows that Neves Valente was let go from a position at Instituto Superior Técnico that same year.

Neves Valente was a graduate student at Brown

Neves Valente came to Brown that fall as a graduate student on a student visa. Brown University President Christina Paxson said he took a leave in 2001 and formally withdrew effective July 31, 2003.

Around that time, he posted on the Brown physics website that he was back home in Portugal and had dropped out of the program permanently, according to a webpage saved by the Internet Archive. Then in Portuguese, he added: "And the moral of the story is: The best liar is the one who manages to deceive himself. These exist everywhere, but at times they proliferate in more unexpected places."

During his time at Brown, he enrolled only in physics classes. Paxson said it is likely that he would have taken courses and spent time at the building where the shooting occurred because that's where the vast majority of physics courses take place.

Paxson said Brown found no indication of any public safety interactions or other concerns while Neves Valente was a student.

"As of yet, we have not identified any employee who recalls Neves Valente nor is there any Brown record of recent contact between this individual and Brown," Paxson said.

Brown classmate says Neves Valente was 'genuinely impressive'

A former classmate of Neves Valente at Brown, Syracuse University professor Scott Watson, recalled being "essentially his only friend" in the graduate program in physics. Over dinners at a Portuguese restaurant near campus, Neves Valente shared his frustrations.

"He would say the classes were too easy — honestly, for him they were. He already knew most of the material and was genuinely impressive," Watson said.

When Neves Valente decided to leave, Watson encouraged him to stay but to no avail. He said he never saw or heard from Neves Valente again.

Renting a room outside Miami

In September 2017, Neves Valente obtained legal permanent residence status in the U.S., Foley said. It was not immediately clear where he was between taking a leave of absence from the school in 2001 and getting the visa in 2017.

His last known address was about 10 miles (16 kilometers) north of Miami. The yellow house with a red roof is in a working-class neighborhood that features large houses.

Some neighbors who talked with The Associated Press on Friday said they had never seen Neves Valente. No police were in sight.

Edward Pol, a race car mechanic who lives across the street from the home, said the owner rents some rooms to people. He said he never talked to Neves Valente but had seen him several times, most recently two or three months ago. He realized the man was the suspect when he saw his pictures on the news Friday morning.

A man who answered the door through an intercom at the home said he was the homeowner but declined to identify himself or make any comment.

Loureiro was excelling

While Neves Valente's life remained a mystery, his former classmate Loureiro was excelling. Loureiro joined MIT in 2016 and was named last year to lead the school's Plasma Science and Fusion Center, one of its largest laboratories. The 47-year-old scientist from Viseu, Portugal, had been working to explain the physics behind astronomical phenomena such as solar flares.

Portugal's top diplomat said Friday that the government was taken aback by revelations that a Portuguese man is the main suspect.

There are still "a lot of unknowns" in regard to motive, Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Neronha said. "We don't know why now, why Brown, why these students and why this classroom."

How surveillance technology and the 'Reddit Detective Agency' helped search for a killer

By MATT O'BRIEN AP Technology Writer

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — More than a decade ago, a frenzied 5-day search for the Boston Marathon bombers left some lessons in its aftermath.

One was that increasingly pervasive surveillance technology could help catch the culprits. Another was that amateur online sleuths on Reddit could not.

But the intense search this week for a suspect in a Brown University shooting that killed two students and wounded nine other people turned the tables on those expectations.

Sweeping surveillance, now found in doorbells, cars and a vast network of vehicle-tracking cameras, did eventually help track down the whereabouts of Claudio Neves Valente, the 48-year-old former Brown graduate student investigators believe was responsible for the Dec. 13 shooting and another killing two days later of an MIT professor in Brookline, Massachusetts.

But the latest artificial intelligence-powered surveillance was of little use in the early search for a gunman who walked away from the Brown campus after the shooting and slipped unnoticed into the surrounding neighborhoods of Providence, Rhode Island. He evaded detection for days, using a hard-to-trace phone, avoiding facial recognition software by obscuring his face with a medical-type mask and switching the license plates on his rental cars.

It wasn't until a local Reddit user "blew this case right open" with an old-fashioned tip first posted on the social media platform that police were able to connect a car to Neves Valente, said Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Neronha. They finally found the suspect dead Thursday in Salem, New Hampshire, days after he likely killed himself.

The Reddit tipster known only as John is "no less than a hero," Providence Mayor Brett Smiley wrote Friday to FBI Director Kash Patel, asking for the entirety of the FBI's \$50,000 award for information leading investigators to the suspect.

Strangers have invited him to Christmas dinner and suggested he get a "key to the city and free coffee and doughnuts for life," according to fellow contributors to Reddit's Providence forum.

It was a stark turn from 2013 when commentators on Reddit and other online discussion boards falsely smeared a Brown University student as a potential suspect in the deadly attack at Boston's famed mara-

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thon, just an hour's north of Providence, because of a supposed resemblance to a grainy suspect image.

"Hey Reddit, enough Boston bombing vigilantism," declared a headline in *The Atlantic* at the time.

"It definitely went sideways in the Boston Marathon situation," said Liza Potts, a professor at Michigan State University and director of a digital humanities lab that studied the online response. "That's why folks will jokingly refer to the 'Reddit Detective Agency' or the 'Reddit Bureau of Investigations.'"

The mistaken connection between the 2013 bombers and a missing Brown student — who was later found dead of an apparent suicide — is still remembered by many at the Ivy League school and its surrounding community.

Brown officials this week sought to swiftly tamp down another smear campaign circulating on X and other social media platforms falsely tying a current Brown student to the campus shooting because of his ethnicity, perceived political views and supposed resemblance to a police video of a person of interest. The "unimaginable nightmare" of false accusations led to "non-stop death threats and hate speech," the student said in a statement.

Frustrated that tip lines could be jammed with nonsense, U.S. Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, a Rhode Island Democrat and former state attorney general, urged social media speculators to "just shut up."

"There is simply no need from an investigative point of view for people who have no idea what they're talking about to offer their stupid and ill-informed views about what happened all over the internet," Whitehouse said from Congress on Wednesday.

But Potts said some social media has been working better than others, and "of all the spaces that I study, Reddit seems to be getting it right more than not."

Harmful accusations were largely absent from Reddit's Providence forum, in part because volunteer moderators who manage Reddit's subject matter forums — known as subreddits — are largely responsible for keeping the peace.

Reddit's chief moderator for the Providence subreddit said in an interview that he's been on the platform for about 15 years and remembers the trauma that false Boston Marathon report caused.

"The Providence subreddit is very sensitive about (not) trying to go on a witch hunt or the mob mentality," he said, speaking on condition of anonymity to avoid doxing and because of the platform's culture of anonymity.

The Associated Press also reached out to the tipster on Tuesday, a day after he wrote on Reddit urging police to look into a Nissan sedan with Florida license plates. Fellow Redditors urged him to contact the FBI, and he said he did.

He didn't respond to requests for comment and later posted that he doesn't plan to talk with media. When he finally met with police on Wednesday — after approaching them on the street and identifying himself as the Reddit tipster — his information gave new life to a stalled investigation.

With a known vehicle, Providence police started looking through the footage from dozens of AI-powered cameras positioned around the city that can read license plates as well as other identifying details about a car, such as make, color, side damage or even bird droppings on the window.

The cameras, run by surveillance company Flock Safety, spotted his vehicle at least 14 times starting nearly two weeks before the shooting, according to a police affidavit. Providence police could then ask Flock-using police agencies in nearby cities and states to look for the same car, although New Hampshire — because of privacy restrictions on how long they can hold images — doesn't have any.

It was a breakthrough Flock was happy to boast about, especially as wariness remains in Providence's immigrant communities about more aggressive federal immigration enforcement. Flock says each of its customers decides when to share camera data, and the city doesn't share it with federal immigration agents. But some still want more safeguards.

"Once you know what they are, you see them everywhere," said Madalyn McGunagle, a policy associate at the ACLU of Rhode Island. "People notice because they're distinct-looking — a solar panel on top with a little oval camera underneath."

But unlike the residential doorbell cameras that spotted him walking around Providence, had Neves

Valente walked by a Flock camera, it wouldn't have detected him.

"It is a technical impossibility. The camera does not have an ability for a user to search for people," said Flock Safety CEO Garrett Langley in an interview Friday. "Our cameras are focused on vehicles because if you look at America, people drive. It is very hard to get anywhere on foot."

"For the majority of our cities, they want to just know who is coming in and who is leaving," he said.

Still, without John the tipster — whom local Redditors dubbed "Reddit Guy" — no one would have known how he left.

"Someone who is in the area and sees stuff all the time, they're going to be better in a lot of ways than a random camera," said the Providence subreddit's moderator. "John saw this guy going back and forth, unlocking his car and all that, and he just thought it was kind of weird."

US military launches strikes in Syria targeting Islamic State fighters after American deaths

By KONSTANTIN TOROPIN, BEN FINLEY and AAMER MADHANI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration launched military strikes Friday in Syria to "eliminate" Islamic State group fighters and weapons sites in retaliation for an ambush attack that killed two U.S. troops and an American civilian interpreter almost a week ago.

A U.S. official described it as "a large-scale" strike that hit 70 targets in areas across central Syria that had IS infrastructure and weapons. Another U.S. official, who also spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive operations, said more strikes should be expected.

"This is not the beginning of a war — it is a declaration of vengeance. The United States of America, under President Trump's leadership, will never hesitate and never relent to defend our people," Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said on social media.

The new military operation in Syria comes even as the Trump administration has said it's looking to focus closer to home in the Western Hemisphere, building up an armada in the Caribbean Sea as it targets alleged drug-smuggling boats and vowing to keep seizing sanctioned oil tankers as part of a pressure campaign on Venezuela's leader. The U.S. has shifted significant resources away from the Middle East to further those goals: Its most advanced aircraft carrier arrived in South American waters last month from the Mediterranean Sea.

Trump vowed retaliation

President Donald Trump pledged "very serious retaliation" after the shooting in the Syrian desert, for which he blamed IS. Those killed were among hundreds of U.S. troops deployed in eastern Syria as part of a coalition fighting the militant group.

During a speech in North Carolina on Friday evening, the president hailed the operation as a "massive strike" that took out the "ISIS thugs in Syria who were trying to regroup."

Earlier, in his social media post, he reiterated his backing for Syrian President Ahmad al-Sharaa, who Trump said was "fully in support" of the U.S. effort.

Trump also offered an all-caps threat, warning IS against attacking American personnel again.

"All terrorists who are evil enough to attack Americans are hereby warned — YOU WILL BE HIT HARDER THAN YOU HAVE EVER BEEN HIT BEFORE IF YOU, IN ANY WAY, ATTACK OR THREATEN THE U.S.A.," the president added.

The attack was conducted using F-15 Eagle jets, A-10 Thunderbolt ground attack aircraft and AH-64 Apache helicopters, the U.S. officials said. F-16 fighter jets from Jordan and HIMARS rocket artillery also were used, one official added.

U.S. Central Command, which oversees the region, said in a social media post that American jets, helicopters and artillery employed more than 100 precision munitions on Syrian targets.

How Syria has responded

The attack was a major test for the warming ties between the United States and Syria since the ouster of autocratic leader Bashar Assad a year ago. Trump has stressed that Syria was fighting alongside U.S.

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troops and said al-Sharaa was “extremely angry and disturbed by this attack,” which came as the U.S. military is expanding its cooperation with Syrian security forces.

Syria’s foreign ministry in a statement on X following the launch of U.S. strikes said that last week’s attack “underscores the urgent necessity of strengthening international cooperation to combat terrorism in all its forms” and that Syria is committed “to fighting ISIS and ensuring that it has no safe havens on Syrian territory and will continue to intensify military operations against it wherever it poses a threat.”

Syrian state television reported that the U.S. strikes hit targets in rural areas of Deir ez-Zor and Raqqa provinces and in the Jabal al-Amour area near the historic city of Palmyra. It said they targeted “weapons storage sites and headquarters used by ISIS as launching points for its operations in the region.”

IS has not said it carried out the attack on the U.S. service members, but the group has claimed responsibility for two attacks on Syrian security forces since, one of which killed four Syrian soldiers in Idlib province. The group in its statements described al-Sharaa’s government and army as “apostates.” While al-Sharaa once led a group affiliated with al-Qaida, he has had a long-running enmity with IS.

The Americans who were killed

Trump this week met privately with the families of the slain Americans at Dover Air Force Base in Delaware before he joined top military officials and other dignitaries on the tarmac for the dignified transfer, a solemn and largely silent ritual honoring U.S. service members killed in action.

The guardsmen killed in Syria last Saturday were Sgt. Edgar Brian Torres-Tovar, 25, of Des Moines, and Sgt. William Nathaniel Howard, 29, of Marshalltown. Ayad Mansoor Sakat, of Macomb, Michigan, a U.S. civilian working as an interpreter, also was killed.

The shooting near Palmyra also wounded three other U.S. troops as well as members of Syria’s security forces, and the gunman was killed. The assailant had joined Syria’s internal security forces as a base security guard two months ago and recently was reassigned because of suspicions that he might be affiliated with IS, Interior Ministry spokesperson Nour al-Din al-Baba has said.

The man stormed a meeting between U.S. and Syrian security officials who were having lunch together and opened fire after clashing with Syrian guards.

The US Treasury wants more states to embrace Trump’s tax cuts. So far, only a few have done so

By DAVID A. LIEB Associated Press

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (AP) — To tax tips or not? That is a question that will confront lawmakers in states across the U.S. as they convene for work next year.

President Donald Trump’s administration is urging states to follow its lead by enacting a slew of new tax breaks for individuals and businesses, including deductions for tips and overtime wages, automobile loans and business equipment.

In some states, the new federal tax breaks will automatically apply to state income taxes unless legislatures opt out. But in many other states, where tax laws are written differently, the new tax breaks won’t appear on state tax forms unless legislatures opt in.

In states that don’t conform to the federal tax changes, workers who receive tips or overtime — for example — will pay no federal tax on those earnings but could still owe state taxes on them.

States that embrace all of Trump’s tax cuts could provide hundreds of millions of dollars of annual savings to certain residents and businesses. But that could financially strain states, which are being hit with higher costs because of new Medicaid and SNAP food aid requirements that also are included in the big bill Trump signed.

Most states begin their annual legislative sessions in January. To retroactively change tax breaks for 2025, lawmakers would need to act quickly so tax forms could be updated before people begin filing them. States also could apply the changes to their 2026 taxes, a decision requiring less haste.

So far, only a few states have taken votes on whether to adopt the tax breaks.

“States in general are approaching this skeptically,” said Carl Davis, research director at the nonprofit

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Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy.

Trump's treasury presses states to 'immediately conform'

A bill Trump signed on July 4 contains about \$4.5 trillion of federal tax cuts over 10 years.

It creates temporary tax deductions for tips, overtime and loan interest on new vehicles assembled in the U.S. It boosts a tax deduction for older adults. And it temporarily raises cap on state and local tax deductions from \$10,000 to \$40,000, among other things. The law also provides numerous tax breaks to businesses, including the ability to immediately write off 100% of the cost of equipment and research.

Forty-one states levy individual income taxes on wages and salaries. Forty-four states charge corporate income taxes.

Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent this month called on those states "to immediately conform" to the federal tax cuts and accused some Democratic-led states that haven't done so of engaging in "political obstructionism." Though Bessent didn't mention it, many Republican-led states also have not decided whether to implement the tax deductions.

"By denying their residents access to these important tax cuts, these governors and legislators are forcing hardworking Americans to shoulder higher state tax burdens, robbing them of the relief they deserve and exacerbating the financial squeeze on low- and middle-income households," Bessent said.

But some tax analysts contend there's more for states to consider. The tax break on tips, for example, could apply to nearly 70 occupation fields under a proposed rule from the Internal Revenue Service. But that would still exclude numerous low-wage workers, said Jared Walczak, vice president of state projects at the nonprofit Tax Foundation.

"Lawmakers need to consider whether these are worth the cost," Walczak said.

Only a few states offer tax breaks for tips and overtime

Because of the way state tax laws are written, the federal tax breaks for tips and overtime wages would have carried over to just seven states — Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, Montana, North Dakota, Oregon and South Carolina. But Colorado opted out of the state tax break for overtime shortly before the federal law was enacted.

Michigan this fall became first — and, so far, only — state to opt into the tax breaks for tips and overtime wages, effective in 2026. The overtime tax exemption is projected to cost the state nearly \$113 million and the tips tax break about \$45 million during its current budget year, according to the state treasury department.

Michigan lawmakers offset that by decoupling from five federal corporate tax changes the state's treasury estimated would have reduced Michigan tax revenues by \$540 million this budget year.

Republican state Rep. Ann Bollin, chair of the Michigan House Appropriations Committee, said the state could not afford to embrace all the tax cuts while still investing in better roads, public safety and education.

"The best path forward is to have more money in people's pockets and have less regulation — and this kind of moved in that direction," she said.

Arizona could be among the next states to act. Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs has called upon lawmakers to adopt the tax breaks for tips, overtime, seniors and vehicle loans, and follow the federal government by also increasing the state's standard deduction for individual income taxpayers. Republican state House leaders said they stand ready to pass the tax cuts when their session begins Jan. 12.

Several states have rejected corporate tax breaks

In addition to Michigan, lawmakers in Delaware, Illinois, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island have passed measures to block some or all of the corporate tax cuts from taking effect in their states.

A new Illinois law decoupling from a portion of the corporate tax changes could save the state nearly \$250 million, said Democratic state Sen. Elgie Sims, chair of the Senate Appropriations Committee. He said that could help ensure continued funding for schools, health care and vital services.

Illinois Gov. JB Pritzker, an outspoken Democratic opponent of Trump, also cited budget concerns for rejecting the corporate tax cut provision. He said states already stand to lose money because of other provisions in Trump's big bill, such as a requirement to cover more of the costs of running the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

"The decoupling is an effort to try to hold back the onslaught from the federal government to make sure that we can support programs like the one we're announcing today," Pritzker told reporters at a December event publicizing a grant to address homelessness in central Illinois.

Justice Department releases limited set of files tied to Epstein sex trafficking investigation

By MICHAEL R. SISAK, ERIC TUCKER and ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department released thousands of files Friday about convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, but the incomplete document dump did not break significant ground about the long-running criminal investigations of the financier or his ties to wealthy and powerful individuals.

The files included photographs of famous people who spent time with Epstein in the years before he came under suspicion, including some candid snapshots of Bill Clinton, who flew on Epstein's jet and invited him to the White House in the years before the financier was accused of wrongdoing. But there was almost no material related to another old Epstein friend, President Donald Trump, aside from a few well-known images, sparing the White House from having to confront fresh questions about a relationship the administration has tried in vain to minimize.

The records, consisting largely of pictures but also including call logs, grand jury testimony, interview transcripts and other documents, arrived amid extraordinary anticipation that they might offer the most detailed look yet at nearly two decades worth of government scrutiny of Epstein's sexual abuse of young women and underage girls. Yet the release, replete with redactions, seemed unlikely to satisfy the clamor for information given how many records had yet to be released and because some of the materials had already been made public.

Democrats and some Republicans seized on the limited release to accuse the Justice Department of failing to meet a congressionally set deadline to produce the files, while White House officials on social media gleefully promoted a photo of Clinton in a hot tub with a woman with a blacked-out face. The Trump administration touted the release as proof of its commitment to transparency, ignoring that the Justice Department just months ago said no more files would be released. Congress then passed a law mandating it.

In a letter to Congress, Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche wrote that the Justice Department was continuing to review files in its possession, was withholding some documents under exemptions meant to protect victims and expected additional disclosures by the end of the year.

Trump, who was friends with Epstein for years before the two had a falling-out, tried for months to keep the records sealed.

But bowing to political pressure from fellow Republicans, Trump last month signed a bill giving the Justice Department 30 days to release most of its files and communications related to Epstein, including information about the investigation into his death in a federal jail. The law set a deadline for Friday.

Limited details about Trump

Trump is hardly glimpsed in the files, with the small number of photos of him appearing to have been in the public domain for decades. Those include two in which Trump and Epstein are posing with now-first lady Melania Trump in February 2000 at an event at his Mar-a-Lago resort.

Trump's connection to Epstein is well-documented, but he has sought to distance himself from his former friend. He has said he cut off ties with Epstein after the financier hired young female employees from Mar-a-Lago and has repeatedly denied knowledge of his crimes.

The FBI and Justice Department abruptly announced in July that they would not be releasing any additional records, a decision that was supported by Trump. But the president reversed course once it became clear that congressional action was inevitable. He insisted the Epstein matter had become a distraction to the Republican agenda and releasing the records was the best way to move on.

The White House, meanwhile, has moved to shift focus away from Trump's ties to Epstein, with Attorney

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General Pam Bondi last month saying that she had ordered a federal prosecutor to investigate Epstein's connections to Trump's political foes, including Clinton.

Neither Trump nor Clinton has ever been accused of wrongdoing in connection with Epstein, and the mere inclusion of someone's name in the files from the investigation does not imply otherwise.

Among other prominent Epstein contacts is the former Prince Andrew, who appears in a photograph released Friday wearing a tuxedo and lying on the laps of what appear to be several women who are seated, dressed in formalwear. Pop star Michael Jackson also appears in multiple photos, including one showing him standing next to a smiling Epstein.

New photos of Clinton

Unlike Trump, Clinton is featured prominently in the files, though the records included no explanation of how the photographs of the former president related to any investigation or the context surrounding them.

Some photos showed him on a private plane, including one with a woman, whose face is redacted, seated alongside him with her arm around him. Another shows him in a pool with Epstein's longtime confidant, British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell, and a person whose face was also redacted. He is also seen in a hot tub with a woman whose face was redacted.

Senior Trump White House aides took to X to promote the Clinton photos.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt wrote "Oh my!" and added a shocked face emoji in response to a photo of Clinton in the hot tub.

"They can release as many grainy 20-plus-year-old photos as they want, but this isn't about Bill Clinton," Clinton spokesman Angel Ureña said in a statement.

"There are two types of people here," he said. "The first group knew nothing and cut Epstein off before his crimes came to light. The second group continued relationships after that. We're in the first. No amount of stalling by people in the second group will change that."

The Epstein investigations

After nearly two decades of court action, a voluminous number of Epstein records had already been public before Friday, including flight logs, address books, email correspondence, police reports, grand jury records, courtroom testimony and deposition transcripts.

Besides public curiosity about whether any of Epstein's associates knew about or participated in the abuse, Epstein's accusers have also sought answers about why federal authorities shut down their initial investigation into the allegations in 2008.

"Just put out the files," said Marina Lacerda, who says she survived sexual assault by Epstein. "And stop redacting names that don't need to be redacted."

One of the few revelations in the documents was a copy of the earliest known concern about Epstein's behavior -- a report taken by the FBI of a woman in 1996 who believed photos and negatives she had taken of her 12-year-old and 16-year-old sisters for a personal art project had been stolen by Epstein. The documents don't show what, if anything, the agency did with that complaint.

Police in Palm Beach, Florida, began investigating Epstein in 2005 after the family of a 14-year-old girl reported being molested at his mansion. The FBI joined the investigation. Authorities gathered testimony from multiple underage girls who said they'd been hired to give Epstein sexual massages.

Ultimately, prosecutors gave Epstein a deal that allowed him to avoid federal prosecution. He pleaded guilty to state prostitution charges involving someone under age 18 and was sentenced to 18 months in jail.

Epstein's accusers spent years in civil litigation trying to get that plea deal set aside. One of those women, Virginia Giuffre, accused Epstein of arranging for her to have sexual encounters, starting at age 17, with other men, including billionaires, famous academics, politicians and Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, then known as Britain's Prince Andrew.

Mountbatten-Windsor denied ever having sex with Giuffre, but King Charles III stripped him of his royal titles this year.

Prosecutors never brought charges in connection with Giuffre's claims, but her account fueled conspiracy theories about supposed government plots to protect the powerful. Giuffre died by suicide in April.

Federal prosecutors in New York brought new sex trafficking charges against Epstein in 2019, but he killed

himself in jail after his arrest. Prosecutors then charged Maxwell, his longtime confidant, with recruiting underage girls for Epstein to abuse. She was convicted in 2021 and is serving a 20-year prison sentence.

In Antarctica, photos show a remote area teeming with life amid growing risks from climate change

By MARK BAKER Associated Press

ANTARCTICA (AP) — The Southern Ocean is one of the most remote places on Earth, but that doesn't mean it is tranquil. Tumultuous waves that can swallow vessels ensure that the Antarctic Peninsula has a constant drone of ocean. While it can be loud, the view is serene — at first glance, it is only deep blue water and blinding white ice.

Several hundred meters (yards) off the coast emerges a small boat with a couple dozen tourists in bright red jackets. They are holding binoculars, hoping for a glimpse of the orcas, seals and penguins that call this tundra home.

They are in the Lemaire Channel, nicknamed the "Kodak Gap," referring to the film and camera company, because of its picture-perfect cliffs and ice formations. This narrow strip of navigable water gives anybody who gets this far south a chance to see what is at stake as climate change, caused mainly by the burning of oil, gas and coal, leads to a steady rise in global average temperatures.

The Antarctic Peninsula stands out as one of the fastest warming places in the world. The ocean that surrounds it is also a major repository for carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas that contributes to warming. It captures and stores roughly 40% of the CO₂ emitted by humans, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

On a recent day, Gentoo penguins, who sport slender, orange beaks and white spots above their eyes, appeared to be putting on a show. They took breaks from their dives into the icy water to nest on exposed rock. As the planet warms, they are migrating farther south. They prefer to colonize rock and fish in open water, allowing them to grow in population.

The Adelie penguins, however, don't have the same prognosis. The plump figures with short flippers and wide bright eyes are not able to adapt in the same way.

By 2100, 60% of Adelie penguin colonies around Antarctica could be threatened by warming, according to one study. They rely on ice to rest and escape predators. If the water gets too warm, it will kill off their food sources. From 2002 to 2020, roughly 149 billion metric tons of Antarctic ice melted per year, according to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

For tourists, Antarctica is still a giant, glacial expanse that is home to only select species that can tolerate such harsh conditions. For example, in the Drake Passage, a dangerous strip of tumultuous ocean, tourists stand in wonder while watching orca whales swim in the narrow strip of water and Pintado petrels soar above.

The majestic views in Antarctica, however, will likely be starkly different in the decades ahead. The growing Gentoo penguin colonies, the shrinking pieces of floating ice and the increasing instances of exposed rock in the Antarctic Peninsula all underscore a changing landscape.

Brown University attack suspect died 2 days before his body was found, autopsy finds

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, ALANNA DURKIN RICHER, ERIC TUCKER and HANNAH SCHOENBAUM Associated Press

An autopsy determined that the man suspected in last weekend's attack at Brown University and the fatal shooting of a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor days later had been dead for two days when his body was found, New Hampshire's attorney general's office said Friday.

Authorities found Claudio Neves Valente, 48, dead from a self-inflicted gunshot wound at a New Hamp-

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shire storage facility on Thursday night, said Providence's police chief, Col. Oscar Perez.

The autopsy determined that Neves Valente, a Portuguese national who had been living in the U.S., died on Tuesday, the same day that his countryman, MIT professor Nuno F.G. Loureiro died at a hospital, New Hampshire Attorney General John Formella's office said in a statement. It didn't note an exact time of death.

Authorities believe that after killing two students and wounding nine others last Saturday at Brown, where he was a graduate student studying physics during the 2000-01 school year, Neves Valente shot Loureiro at his Boston-area home on Monday night.

Investigators on Friday were still trying to sort out why Neves Valente allegedly opened fire on the campus decades after he dropped out and later killed Loureiro, whom he attended school with in Portugal in the 1990s.

Motive is still unclear

The discovery of Neves Valente's body at a New Hampshire storage facility ended the nearly weeklong hunt for the person who killed two students and wounded nine others in a Brown lecture hall last Saturday. Investigators believe the onetime Brown student killed Loureiro in his home in Brookline, a Boston suburb about 50 miles (80 kilometers) north of Providence, on Monday. Perez said as far as investigators know, Neves Valente acted alone.

Portugal's foreign minister, Paulo Rangel, said Friday that the government was taken aback by revelations that a Portuguese man is the main suspect in the mass shooting at Brown and the killing of Loureiro.

Rangel said Portugal has provided "very broad cooperation" in the case. He said in comments to the national news agency Lusa that "the investigation is far from over."

Brown University President Christina Paxson said while Neves Valente is a former Brown student, "he has no current affiliation with the university."

Neves Valente and Loureiro attended the same academic program at a university in Portugal between 1995 and 2000, U.S. attorney for Massachusetts Leah B. Foley said. Loureiro graduated from the physics program at Instituto Superior Técnico, Portugal's premier engineering school, in 2000, according to his MIT faculty page. That same year, Neves Valente was let go from his temporary student support and faculty liaison position at the Lisbon university, according to an archive of a termination notice from the school's president at the time.

Neves Valente, who was born in Torres Novas, Portugal, about 75 miles (121 kilometers) north of Lisbon, had come to Brown on a student visa. He eventually obtained legal permanent resident status in September 2017, Foley said. It wasn't immediately clear where he was between taking a leave of absence from the school in 2001 and getting the visa in 2017. His last known residence was in Miami.

After officials revealed the suspect's identity, President Donald Trump suspended the green card lottery program that allowed Neves Valente to stay in the United States.

There are still "a lot of unknowns" in regard to motive, Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Neronha said. "We don't know why now, why Brown, why these students and why this classroom," he said.

Tip helps investigators connect the dots

The FBI previously said it knew of no links between the Rhode Island and Massachusetts shootings.

Police credited a person who had several encounters with Neves Valente for providing a crucial tip that led authorities to him.

After police shared security video of a person of interest, the witness — known only as "John" in a Providence police affidavit — recognized him and posted his suspicions on the social media forum Reddit. Reddit users urged him to tell the FBI, and John said he did.

John said he encountered Neves Valente about two hours before the attack in a bathroom in the engineering building, where the shooting occurred, and noticed he was wearing inappropriate clothing for the weather, according to the affidavit. Still before the attack, he saw Neves Valente suddenly turn away from a Nissan sedan when he saw John.

"When you do crack it, you crack it. And that person led us to the car, which led us to the name," Neronha said.

His tip pointed investigators to a Nissan Sentra with Florida plates. That enabled Providence police to tap

into a street camera network operated in the city by surveillance company Flock Safety to track the vehicle.

After leaving Rhode Island, Providence officials said Neves Valente stuck a Maine license plate over his rental car's plate to help conceal his identity.

Investigators found footage of Neves Valente entering an apartment building near Loureiro's in a Boston suburb. About an hour later, Neves Valente was seen entering the Salem, New Hampshire, storage facility where he was found dead, Foley said. He had with him a satchel and two firearms, Neronha said.

Victims include renowned physicist, political organizer and aspiring doctor

Loureiro, a 47-year-old physicist and fusion scientist, joined MIT in 2016 and was named last year to lead the school's Plasma Science and Fusion Center, one of its largest laboratories. The scientist from Viseu, Portugal, had been working to explain the physics behind astronomical phenomena such as solar flares.

The two Brown students killed during a study session for final exams were 19-year-old sophomore Ella Cook, who was vice president of the Brown College Republicans, and 18-year-old freshman Mukhammad-Aziz Umurzokov, who aspired to be a doctor.

Six of those wounded were in stable condition and three had been discharged as of Thursday, officials said.

Although Brown officials say there are 1,200 cameras on campus, the attack happened in an older part of the engineering building that has few, if any, cameras. And investigators believe the shooter entered and left through a door that faces a residential street bordering campus, which might explain why the cameras Brown does have didn't capture footage of the person.

Los Angeles Angels settle lawsuit with family of pitcher Tyler Skaggs over fatal overdose

By AMY TAXIN Associated Press

SANTA ANA, Calif. (AP) — The Los Angeles Angels reached a confidential settlement Friday with the family of late pitcher Tyler Skaggs after a lengthy trial that detailed drug use by players.

The two-month trial centered on whether the Angels bore responsibility for Skaggs' 2019 overdose death on a team trip to Texas after he'd been given a counterfeit oxycodone pill laced with fentanyl by the team's then-communications director, Eric Kay. The last-minute settlement was reached as jurors were nearing the end of their deliberations, they said.

The jury had concluded the Angels were negligent and had moved on to determining what percentage of responsibility the team shared for Skaggs' death, said juror Jasson Thach.

"The repeated negligence of the Angels was really it," Thach said, adding the group had been estimating damages at between \$60 million and \$100 million.

The trial drew outfielder Mike Trout, Angels president John Carpino and other team employees to the stand, as well as relatives of Skaggs and Kay. Testimony described how players drank and partied on the team plane and paid Kay for clubhouse stunts including taking a fastball to the leg.

Skaggs' widow, Carli, and his parents said in their lawsuit that the MLB team knew or should have known Kay was a drug addict and dealing painkillers to players.

"Tomorrow is the first day of the rest of their lives after six years of living with this," Rusty Hardin, an attorney for the plaintiffs, told reporters.

The Angels contended that team officials would have gotten Skaggs help if they had known he was taking drugs.

"The death of Tyler Skaggs remains a tragedy, and this trial sheds light on the dangers of opioid use and the devastating effects it can have," the team said in a statement Friday.

In 2019, the 27-year-old left-handed pitcher was found dead in the suburban Dallas hotel room where he was staying as the Angels were supposed to open a four-game series against the Texas Rangers. A coroner's report said the player choked to death on his vomit, and a toxic mix of alcohol, fentanyl and oxycodone was found in his system.

Kay, a longtime Angels employee, was convicted in 2022 of providing Skaggs with the fentanyl-laced pill and sentenced to 22 years in prison. His criminal trial in Texas included testimony from five MLB players who said they received oxycodone from Kay at various times from 2017 to 2019.

During the civil trial in California, more than 40 witnesses testified about drug use and baseball, including how much money Skaggs was poised to make had he lived. They described how Kay got players massage appointments, tee times and even prescription medication and was found with plastic bags filled with pills at his home and later hospitalized for a drug overdose. Kay was sent on the Texas road trip shortly after returning to work from rehab, they said.

Witnesses also described how Skaggs struggled with painkillers earlier in his career and was found to have chopped up and snorted a pill when he died.

Skaggs had been a regular in the Angels' starting rotation since late 2016 and struggled with injuries repeatedly. He previously played for the Arizona Diamondbacks.

Jurors began deliberations this week. Late Wednesday, they sent out a question for the court asking whether they got to assign punitive damages. They didn't work on Thursday and resumed deliberations Friday morning.

Upon releasing the jurors, Orange County Superior Court Judge H. Shaina Colover thanked them for their diligence. "That is why this matter was able to be resolved today," she said.

Several jurors said they were heading into what many felt would be a tough issue — determining percentages of responsibility among Skaggs, Kay and the team. About a third of the group tended to side with plaintiffs, a third with the team and a third was in the middle in answering the 26-question verdict form, said Thach.

Juror Deborah Song said she was relieved the case settled after spending the last two months in court. "I am so happy because that way I don't have to put a number on somebody's life," Song said.

Young conservative women find a home in Turning Point with Charlie Kirk's widow at the helm

By SEJAL GOVINDARAO Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Camdyn Glover used to be a quiet conservative. She worried what her teachers would think or if she would lose friends over her convictions. But she said something changed when Charlie Kirk was assassinated in September, and she started crying in her classroom at Indiana University while other students cheered and clapped.

"We can't be silenced," Glover decided.

Now she's visiting Phoenix with her parents and brothers for this year's Turning Point USA conference, the first to take place since Kirk's death. Although the organization became a political phenomenon with its masculine appeals to college men, it's also been expanding outreach to young women like Glover. The shift is poised to accelerate now that Turning Point is led by Erika Kirk, Charlie's widow, who has embraced her new role at the helm of a conservative juggernaut with chapters across the country.

If successful, the organization that helped return President Donald Trump to the White House could narrow a gender divide that has been a persistent challenge for Republicans. Turning Point offers a blend of traditional values, such as encouraging women to prioritize marriage over careers, and health trends that have become popular online.

On Friday, young women lined up for selfies with wellness influencer Alex Clark while vendors sold health products and Trump merchandise. One of Clark's fans had a "Make America Pro-Life Again" hat and "MAHA red" lipgloss, a reference to the "Make America Healthy Again" agenda pushed by Robert F. Kennedy Jr. Another attendee sported a "grass-fed conservative" pin on her lanyard.

Glover, 18, said discovering Turning Point in high school gave her an appreciation for dialogue when she felt like an outcast for her beliefs, such as being anti-abortion. At her first conference, she feels like she's found a political and cultural home for herself.

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"They want to promote a strong independent woman who does hold these values and can go stand up for herself," she said. "But it's also OK to do it in heels, put some makeup on, wear a dress."

'If Erika can do it, I can do it'

One of Glover's classmates, Stella Ross, said she stumbled upon Charlie Kirk on TikTok in the months before the last presidential election.

She already felt like her perspectives were being treated differently on campus and thought she was receiving unfairly low grades in her political science classes. A devout Catholic, Ross said she was inspired by how Charlie Kirk wasn't afraid to weave his evangelical faith into his political arguments.

She also noticed how many women posted comments of appreciation on Erika Kirk's videos, and she joined Indiana University's Turning Point chapter in the same month that Trump won his comeback campaign.

"I was like, wow, if Erika can do it, I can do it," Ross said.

Ross has career aspirations of her own — she interns with Indiana's Republican Party and aspires to be a press secretary for a governor or president. But she hopes to have flexibility in her job to be fully present with her children and believes that a traditional nuclear structure — man, woman and their children — is "God's plan."

When she thinks of Erika Kirk, "it's really cool to see that she can live out that balance and it makes me feel like that could be a more realistic future for me because I'm seeing it firsthand."

A new messenger

Erika Kirk often appeared alongside with her husband at Turning Point events. A former beauty pageant winner who has worked as a model, actress and casting director, she also founded a Christian clothing line and a ministry that teaches about the Bible.

In a recent interview with The New York Times, she said she had fully bought into "boss babe" culture before Charlie showed her a "healthier" perspective on life. Now she leads the multimillion-dollar organization, which she said at a memorial for her husband would be made "10 times greater through the power of his memory."

The political gap between young men and women has been growing for years, according to a recent Gallup analysis. Not only have women under 30 become more likely to identify as ideologically liberal, they've also embraced liberal views on issues such as abortion, the environment and gun laws.

The schism was clearly apparent in the last presidential election, where 57% of male voters under 30 supported Trump, compared to only 41% of women under 30, according to AP VoteCast.

Turning Point has been working to change that, hosting events like the Young Women's Leadership Summit and urging attendees to embrace traditional family values and gender roles.

Charlie Kirk said earlier this year that if a young woman's priority is to find a husband, she should go to college for a "MRS degree." Matthew Boedy, a professor of rhetoric at University of North Georgia, said Erika Kirk could be a more effective messenger because she was focused on her career before meeting her husband.

"I do think her story resonates more because she tried it out and can tell them it is not for them," he said.

Some conservative women are turned off by this approach. Raquel Debono, an influencer who lives in New York City, described the event as a "Stepford wives conference," featuring women in pink floral dresses.

She said Turning Point's emphasis on being traditional wives "leaves out a lot of women who work," she said, "and I think they're going to lose all those voters, honestly, in the next election cycle if they keep it up."

Debono founded her own organization, Make America Hot Again, where she throws parties intended to make voters feel welcomed into the conservative movement and allow them to get to know people who share their politics.

'Big time' growth for some chapters

Aubree Hudson had been president of Turning Point's chapter at Brigham Young University for only two weeks when she visited nearby Utah Valley University for an event with Charlie Kirk.

She said she was standing only about six feet away when he was fatally shot. She ran to find her husband, who was at the back of the crowd, and they fled to her car.

Hudson, 22, is from a rural farm town in southwestern Colorado. Her conservative convictions are rooted

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in her family's faith and patriotism. A copy of the U.S. Constitution hangs in her parents' home, and her father taught her to value God, family and country, in that order. Her mother stayed at home, telling her children that "you guys are my career."

Since Kirk's assassination, Hudson said the number of people — particularly women — getting involved with the organization jumped "big time."

Emma Paskett, 18, is one of them. She was planning to attend the Utah Valley University event after one of her classes, but Kirk was shot before she made it there.

Although she wasn't very familiar with Turning Point before that point, Paskett said she started watching videos of Kirk later that night.

Paskett considers Erika Kirk to be a "one in a million" role model, and her role as a leader was a driving factor in signing up.

"That's exactly what I want to be like," she said.

Stocks rise on Wall Street as AI stocks turn higher again

By DAMIAN J. TROISE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Stocks gained ground on Wall Street Friday for a second straight day, wiping away losses from earlier in the week.

Technology stocks were once again the main force behind the market's broader moves, especially companies with a focus on artificial intelligence. Both the S&P 500 and the Nasdaq closed out the week with gains, despite several stumbles early this week.

The S&P 500 rose 59.74 points, or 0.9%, to 6,834.50. It notched a 0.1% gain for the week. The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 183.04 points, or 0.4%, to 48,134.89.

The technology-heavy Nasdaq made the biggest move. It rose 301.26 points, or 1.3%, to 23,307.62 and notched a 0.5% gain for the week.

Nvidia was the biggest force driving the market higher, with a 3.9% gain. Broadcom jumped 3.2%.

The technology sector has been fueling Wall Street throughout the year as companies with outsized values like Nvidia exert more pressure on markets. But, those pricey stock values have come under more scrutiny from investors wondering whether they are justifiable.

Oracle rose 6.6% on news that it, along with two other investors, had signed agreements to form a new TikTok U.S. joint venture. Oracle, Silver Lake and MGX each get a 15% share in the popular social video platform, ensuring that it can continue operating in the U.S.

Company earnings and how companies are performing amid tariffs and inflation were a key focus for Wall Street.

Nike slumped 10.5%, as the impact from tariffs overshadowed an otherwise strong quarterly profit report. Frozen potato maker Lamb Weston fell 25.9%, despite also beating Wall Street's profit and revenue forecasts.

Winnebago Industries jumped 8.4% after turning in profits and revenue for its latest quarter that easily beat analysts' estimates.

Homebuilders fell following a report showing that home sales slowed from a year earlier for the first time since May. KB Home fell 8.5%.

A survey from the University of Michigan showed that consumer sentiment in December improved slightly from November, but is deeply diminished from a year ago.

"Despite some signs of improvement to close out the year, sentiment remains nearly 30% below December 2024, as pocketbook issues continue to dominate consumer views of the economy," wrote Surveys of Consumers Director, Joanne Hsu.

Consumer confidence has been weakening throughout the year as persistent inflation squeezes consumers. The job market is also slowing while retail sales weaken. Businesses and consumers are also worrying about the continued impact of a wide-ranging U.S.-led trade war that has targeted key partners including China and Canada.

The latest inflation update on Thursday revealed a surprise cooling of prices in November. The Labor Department reported that its consumer price index rose 2.7%. But economists quickly warned that those numbers were suspect because they'd been delayed and likely distorted by the 43-day federal shutdown.

"The wave of economic data did little to provide clarity for investors this week, keeping the market in the trading range it has been in since September," said Mark Hackett, chief market strategist at Nationwide, in a note to investors.

Inflation is still above the Federal Reserve's 2% target. The central bank cut its benchmark interest rate at its most recent meeting. It has been concerned about the slowing job market hurting the economy. But cutting interest rates could add more fuel to inflation, which could also stunt economic growth.

The Fed has maintained a cautious stance about interest rate policy heading into 2026 and Wall Street is mostly betting that it will hold steady on rates at its next meeting in January.

Treasury yields rose in the bond market. The yield on the 10-year Treasury rose to 4.15% from 4.11% late Thursday.

Japanese stocks rose after the Bank of Japan raised its benchmark interest rate to its highest level in 30 years. In Tokyo, the Nikkei 225 gained 1%, leading the rise across Asia's key markets. Markets in Europe also gained ground.

Supreme Court sides with immigration judges in speech case for now, rebuffing Trump administration

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court sided with immigration judges on Friday, rebuffing the Trump administration for now in a case with possible implications for federal workers as the justices weigh expanding presidential firing power.

The decision is a technical step in a long-running case, but it touches on the effects of a series of high-profile firings under President Donald Trump. The justices let stand a ruling that raised questions about the Trump administration's handling of the federal workforce, though they also signaled that lower courts should move cautiously.

Immigration judges are federal employees, and the question at the center of the appeal is about whether they can sue to challenge a policy restricting their public speeches or if they are required to use a separate complaint system for the federal workforce.

Trump's Republican administration asked the Supreme Court to intervene after an appeals court found that Trump's firings of top complaint system officials had raised questions about whether it's still working as intended.

The Justice Department said the firings are within the president's power and the lower court had no grounds to raise questions. The solicitor general asked the Supreme Court to quickly freeze the ruling as he pushes to have the immigration judges' case removed from federal court.

The justices declined, though they also said the Trump administration could return if the lower courts moved too fast. There were no noted dissents. The court has allowed most of Trump's firings for now and is weighing whether to formally expand his legal power to fire independent agency officials by overturning job protections enshrined in a 90-year-old decision.

A union formerly representing immigration judges, who work for the Justice Department, first sued in 2020 to challenge a policy restricting what the judges can speak about in public. They say the case is a free-speech issue that belongs in federal court.

Ramya Krishnan, an attorney at the Knight First Amendment Institute who argued the case on the union's behalf, applauded the high court's Friday decision. "The restrictions on immigration judges' free speech rights are unconstitutional, and it's intolerable that this prior restraint is still in place," Krishnan said.

In recent months, the Trump administration's crackdown on immigration has included firing dozens of immigration judges who are seen by his allies as too lenient.

The White House did not immediately respond to an email message seeking comment Friday.

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While the order is not a final decision, the case could eventually have implications for other federal workers who want to challenge firings in court rather than the employee complaint system now largely overseen by Trump appointees.

The decision comes after a series of wins for the Justice Department on the high court's emergency docket. The court has sided with the Trump administration about two dozen times on issues ranging from immigration to federal funding.

At Putin's annual news conference, a Russian journalist pops the question — to his girlfriend

By HARRIET MORRIS and KATIE MARIE DAVIES Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The young journalist in a red bow tie stood during President Vladimir Putin's annual news conference Friday and displayed a sign saying he wanted to get married. But his main question wasn't directed at Putin — it was to his girlfriend, Olga, proposing marriage.

Putin complimented Kirill Bazhanov of Yekaterinburg's Channel 4 on his snazzy tie, saying, "You're ready to go to the registry office!" Bazhanov told Putin "we'd be very glad to see you at the wedding."

The Russian leader's year-end media session had serious questions, of course, about late pension payments, construction projects gone wrong, and the fighting in Ukraine, where Putin sent troops nearly four years ago.

But every year — amid the weighty questions from the domestic and international media — there are also odd and lighter moments, like this year when people asked Putin what his license plate number was and whether love at first sight existed.

It's all part of the spectacle of the tightly orchestrated event — an opportunity for Putin, who has ruled Russia for 25 years, to expound on a wide array of subjects as well as to burnish his image as a fatherly figure to address the concerns of ordinary Russians who submit questions in advance.

Bazhanov did actually have a question for Putin — about greater support for young families. Later in the 4 1/2-hour news conference, one of the anchors passed along the news that Bazhanov's girlfriend had said yes. Putin promptly quipped about collecting money for the wedding.

For those inside Moscow's Gostinny Dvor amphitheater, the most important task was to get Putin's attention. Most brought signs and some wore national dress. One reporter brought a clutch of Labubu dolls personalized to look like Russian officials and one in the form of U.S. President Donald Trump.

One reporter asked whether a comet approaching Earth could be a UFO, and reassured Putin that the city of Tyumen would be ready to welcome any extraterrestrial guests.

Putin seemed unfazed throughout, although Tajik journalist Shamsudin Boboyev caused a brief commotion when he tried to give Putin a book. Two security officials quickly stopped him from going onstage, and Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov suggested Boboyev should simply describe the gift, which would be given to him later.

Toward the end of the session, a journalist who noted that Putin had said earlier he believed in love at first sight asked him if he was in love. The Russian leader, whose private life remains closely guarded, answered simply, "Yes."

Turning Point USA's Erika Kirk backs Vice President JD Vance's potential 2028 presidential bid

By MATT BROWN and JONATHAN J. COOPER Associated Press

PHOENIX (AP) — Erika Kirk, widow of Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk and the organization's new leader, endorsed a potential presidential bid by Vice President JD Vance on the opening night of the conservative youth group's annual conference.

After telling the cheering crowd that Turning Point would help keep Congress in Republican hands next year, she said, "We are going to get my husband's friend JD Vance elected for 48 in the most resounding

way possible.”

Vance would be the 48th president if he takes office after President Donald Trump.

Kirk’s statement on Thursday is the most explicit backing of Vance’s possible candidacy by a woman who has been positioned as a steward to her late husband’s legacy. Charlie Kirk had become a powerbroker and bridge builder within the conservative movement before he was assassinated in September.

Vance was close with Charlie Kirk, whose backing helped enable his rapid political rise. After the assassination, Vance and his wife joined Erika Kirk in Utah to fly her husband’s remains home to Arizona aboard Air Force Two.

Vance is set to speak to Turning Point on Sunday, the conference’s last day. The convention has featured the usual spectacle and energy that have characterized the organization’s events, but the proceedings have also been marred by intense infighting among conservative commentators and estranged allies who have turned on each other in the wake of Kirk’s death.

As Trump’s vice president, Vance is well-positioned to inherit the movement that remade the Republican Party and twice sent Trump to the White House. But it would be no small task for him to hold together the Trump coalition, which is built around personal loyalty to him more than shared political goals.

Various wings of the conservative movement already are positioning to steer the party after Trump’s presidency, a skirmish that’s becoming increasingly public and pointed.

Turning Point, with its thousands of young volunteers, would provide a major boost for Vance in a fractious primary. Now 41, Vance would be the first Millennial president if elected, a natural fit for the organization built around mobilizing youth.

Trump has repeatedly mused about running for a third term despite a constitutional prohibition. However, he’s also speculated about a 2028 ticket featuring Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

Although Rubio previously ran for president in 2016, he has said he would support Vance as Trump’s successor.

Military lawyer swiftly fired from immigration bench after defying Trump deportation push

By JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

MIAMI (AP) — A U.S. Army Reserve lawyer detailed as a federal immigration judge has been fired barely a month into the job after granting asylum at a high rate out of step with the Trump administration’s mass deportation goals, The Associated Press has learned.

Christopher Day began hearing cases in late October as a temporary judge at the immigration court in Annandale, Virginia. He was fired around Dec. 2, the National Association of Immigration Judges confirmed.

It’s unclear why Day was fired. Day and the Pentagon did not comment when contacted by the AP, and a Justice Department spokeswoman declined to discuss personnel matters.

But federal data from November shows he ruled on asylum cases in ways at odds with the Trump administration’s stated goals.

Of the 11 cases he concluded in November, he granted asylum or some other type of relief allowing the migrant to remain in the United States a total of six times, according to federal data analyzed by Mobile Pathways, a San Francisco-based non profit.

Such favorable outcomes for migrants have become increasingly rare as the Trump administration seeks to slash a massive backlog of 3.8 million asylum cases by radically overhauling the nation’s 75 immigration courts.

As part of that drive, the Trump administration has fired almost 100 judges viewed as too liberal and over the summer eased rules allowing any attorney, regardless of their legal background, to apply to become what recent recruitment ads refer to as a “Deportation Judge.”

In response, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth in September approved sending up to 600 military lawyers to hear asylum cases. The goal, migrant advocacy groups say, is to redefine a judge’s traditional duties as a fair, independent arbiter of asylum claims into something akin to a rubber stamp in a robe for the

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White House's mass deportation goals.

The American Immigration Lawyers Association has decried the influx of military officers lacking expertise in immigration law, likening them to cardiologists attempting to do a hip replacement. But Pentagon and White House officials have defended the move, saying that a campaign to rule on pending asylum claims was something that all federal workers — as well as migrants sometimes in limbo for years — should rally behind.

So far, only 30 members of the military have been detailed to the immigration courts and for the most part appear to have lived up to the administration's expectations. Nine out of every 10 migrants whose asylum cases were heard by such judges in November were either ordered removed or requested to self-deport, according to federal data. Overall, the military judges ordered removal 78% of the time compared to 63% for all other judges.

But those like Day, whose rulings countered that trend, are especially vulnerable if it is determined they violated their military duties, said Dana Leigh Marks, a retired immigration judge.

"It is hard to imagine someone being fired so quickly, after five weeks on the bench, unless it was for ideological reasons," said Marks, the former head of the National Association of Immigration Judges. "It's especially unfair to military judges because they don't have the same civil service protections and could face severe consequences for failing in their assignment."

The Uniform Code of Military Justice, which governs service members, forbids senior military leaders from interfering or retaliating against military attorneys for their actions in a military tribunal. Army regulations also require JAG attorneys to proceed with candor and honesty much like all licensed lawyers are expected to do in civil courts.

But whether those standards apply to military lawyers working outside of the normal confines of a military tribunal is untested.

Brenner Fissell, a Villanova University law professor, said that there are a number of personnel actions that can be taken — letters of counseling or reprimand — that, even if found to be baseless later, would affect one's potential for promotion and impact their discharge. Appealing such decisions, he said, is a byzantine process that can take years and require hiring a costly lawyer.

"The process can be the punishment," said Fissell, who helps run the Orders Project, which helps provide counsel to military personnel who believe they are being asked to carry out illegal orders.

A graduate of American University law school, Day has held multiple jobs in the federal government over the past two decades while simultaneously serving as a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Army Reserve's Judge Advocate General's Corps. His last job was as an attorney for the Federal Communications Commission during the Biden administration.

Unlike federal judges, who have lifetime tenure, immigration judges are employees of the Justice Department, which runs immigration courts, and can be fired by the attorney general with fewer restraints.

That message was driven home during a two-week training course in October held for new judges, including those assigned by the Pentagon, according to someone who attended the training on the condition of anonymity to discuss the private sessions.

The Pentagon has offered extra incentives to military officers signing up for temporary detail on immigration courts. Those volunteering were promised their choice of assignments, according to an email sent by the JAG Corps leadership in the fall, a copy of which was shared with the AP. But if enough officers didn't come forward, officers might be required to relocate up to six months away from home to fulfill the mandate, according to the email.

Trump administration will appeal judge's order reversing federal funding cuts at Harvard

By COLLIN BINKLEY AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration will appeal a federal judge's order reversing billions of

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dollars in funding cuts to Harvard University, extending a standoff over the White House's demands for reforms at the Ivy League school.

The Justice Department filed a notice of appeal late on Thursday in a pair of consolidated lawsuits brought by Harvard and the American Association of University Professors. The case has tested the government's power to sway the nation's oldest and wealthiest university, which has resisted a pressure campaign targeting elite colleges around the country.

U.S. District Judge Allison Burroughs ruled in September that the Trump administration's sweeping funding cuts violated Harvard's First Amendment rights. The judge said the government put unconstitutional conditions on Harvard's federal funding and failed to follow federal procedures allowing the government to sanction universities for civil rights violations.

The Trump administration cut more than \$2.6 billion from Harvard over allegations that it had been slow to deal with anti-Jewish bias on campus. Burroughs rejected that notion, saying the government was using antisemitism "as a smokescreen for a targeted, ideologically-motivated assault on this country's premier universities."

The notice of appeal is a first step in the government's effort to have the ruling overturned. It does not provide legal arguments behind the appeal.

Liz Huston, a White House spokesperson, said Harvard has failed to protect students from discrimination on campus.

"Harvard is not entitled to taxpayer funding, and we are confident the university will be held fully accountable for their failures," Huston said in a statement.

Harvard officials said they're confident in their case.

"The federal district court ruled in Harvard's favor in September, reinstating critical research funding that advances science and life-saving medical breakthroughs, strengthens national security, and enhances our nation's competitiveness and economic priorities," the university said in a statement.

Todd Wolfson, president of the AAUP, said the administration's appeal is "just a continuation of their shameless campaign to halt critical research funding in an attempt to chill universities and faculty from engaging in any speech, teaching, and research that Donald Trump disfavors."

Harvard has been Trump's top target in a campaign to leverage federal control of research funding to push for reforms at elite colleges he has decried as overrun by "woke" ideology. Harvard has put up a fight against the government's wide-reaching demands, even as others like Columbia, Brown and Cornell universities reach deals with the government.

Harvard and the White House have continued negotiations amid the legal battle, and Trump has multiple times indicated a resolution was imminent. In September, he said officials were close to a deal that would require a \$500 million payment from Harvard to create a "giant trade school" to produce workers for American plants.

The deal never materialized and Trump has been quiet on the issue since then.

\Putin tells his annual news conference that the Kremlin's military goals in Ukraine will be met

By HARRIET MORRIS Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — President Vladimir Putin emphasized Friday that Moscow's troops were advancing across the battlefield in Ukraine and voiced confidence the Kremlin would achieve its goals militarily if Kyiv doesn't agree to Russia's conditions in peace talks.

Speaking at his tightly orchestrated annual news conference that lasted about 4 1/2 hours, Putin declared that Russian forces have "fully seized strategic initiative" and would make more gains by year's end.

In the early days of the conflict in 2022, Ukraine's forces thwarted an attempt by Russia's larger, better-equipped army, to capture the capital of Kyiv. But the fighting soon settled into grinding battles, and Moscow's troops have made slow and steady progress over the years. Putin frequently touts this progress — even though it's not the lightning advance many expected.

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"Our troops are advancing all across the line of contact, faster in some areas or slower in some others, but the enemy is retreating in all sectors," Putin said at the live news conference, which is combined with a nationwide call-in show that offers Russians across the country the opportunity to ask questions of their leader.

Putin, 73, has ruled the country for 25 years and uses the event to cement his power and air his views on domestic and global affairs during a broadcast that mixes criticism of the West with promises of more social payments. Although he is sometimes asked about his personal life, he gives scant details.

This year, the news conference took place against the backdrop of a peace plan in Ukraine put forward by U.S. President Donald Trump. Despite the extensive diplomatic push, Washington's efforts have run into sharply conflicting demands from Moscow and Kyiv.

While the event has previously focused heavily on domestic questions — and has offered Putin a chance to expound on topics from the price of eggs to water cuts — Ukraine dominated it this year. Since it is highly choreographed, that could reflect the Kremlin's desire to assuage the public after nearly four years of fighting.

Russian demands remain unchanged

Putin praised Trump's peace efforts and reaffirmed that Moscow was ready for a peaceful settlement that would address the "root causes" of the conflict, a reference to the Kremlin's tough conditions for a deal. He said he has agreed to make "certain compromises" and "uneasy decisions" at the Alaska summit with Trump in August but didn't elaborate.

He wants all the areas in four key regions captured by his forces, as well as the Crimean Peninsula, illegally annexed in 2014, to be recognized as Russian territory. He has also insisted that Ukraine withdraw from some areas in eastern Ukraine that Moscow's forces haven't captured yet. Kyiv has publicly rejected all these demands.

The Kremlin has also insisted that Ukraine abandon its bid to join NATO and warned that it wouldn't accept the deployment of any troops from members of the military alliance members and would view them as "legitimate target."

Putin also has repeatedly said Ukraine must limit the size of its army and give official status to the Russian language — demands he has made from the outset of the conflict.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has expressed readiness to drop Ukraine's bid to join NATO if the U.S. and other Western nations give Kyiv security guarantees similar to those offered to alliance members. But at the same time, he has emphasized that Ukraine believes NATO membership remains the best security guarantee.

"The United States don't see us in NATO, for now," Zelenskyy said this week. "Politicians change."

Commenting on Zelenskyy's statement that he was ready to call a presidential election if a ceasefire is established, Putin responded that Russia has held elections without demanding a truce. He said that Moscow was ready to consider the issue and could agree to halt attacks deep inside Ukraine on the election day, but noted that millions of Ukrainians living in Russia must have the right to vote. Ukraine introduced martial law banning elections, but Russia hasn't made such a move.

Putin rebuffed Western claims about purported Russian plans to attack European nations as "sheer nonsense" aimed at deflecting public attention from domestic problems.

He particularly singled out NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte for his statements about the Kremlin's aggressive intentions, pointing out Trump's recently published national security strategy that doesn't name Russia as a direct adversary. "How can you prepare NATO for a war with Russia if the main member of NATO doesn't consider us as an enemy?" Putin said.

He alleged that European elites "impudently" backed Trump's Democratic rival Kamala Harris in the 2024 presidential election and now hope the U.S. political landscape will change after the midterm elections to Congress, helping raise pressure on the White House.

Putin says seizing Russian assets will backfire

As it faces grinding Russian advances across the front line and relentless attacks on its energy facilities,

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Ukraine desperately cash infusions from its Western allies.

On Friday, European Union leaders agreed to provide a massive interest-free loan, but they failed to bridge differences with Belgium that would have allowed them to use frozen Russian assets to raise the funds.

The leaders tried to reassure Belgium, where most of the frozen assets are held, that they would protect it from any retaliation from Moscow if it backed the plan, but the leaders eventually opted to borrow the money on capital markets.

Using Russian assets to help Kyiv would have amounted to "robbery," Putin said, adding that the move would have spooked investors, "dealing not only an image blow but undermining confidence in the euro-zone."

Putin says troop numbers are strong

Putin said the flow of volunteer soldiers has remained strong, topping 400,000 this year. It was not possible to independently verify that claim since little is known about the recruitment effort.

But the government offers relatively high pay and extensive benefits that have helped swell troop ranks. The Kremlin says it exclusively relies on volunteers to fight in Ukraine, but some media reports and rights groups have said that military officers often coerce conscripts into signing military contracts.

Asked by a soldier's widow about slow pension payments, Putin apologized and vowed the issue would be quickly resolved — a typical exchange at the annual event, which he often uses to show his command of a wide array of subjects and his ability to solve problems.

The news conference featured questions from journalists in the Gostinny Dvor amphitheater as well as via video links from across Russia. A young man in a red bow tie who held a placard saying he wanted to get married used his question to Putin to propose to his girlfriend. Later, one of the anchors hosting the event reported that she had answered "yes," and Putin joked about collecting money for the wedding.

Nodding off is dangerous. Some animals have evolved extreme ways to sleep in precarious environments

By CHRISTINA LARSON AP Science Writer

Every animal with a brain needs sleep — and even a few without a brain do, too. Humans sleep, birds sleep, whales sleep and even jellyfish sleep.

Sleep is universal "even though it's actually very risky," said Paul-Antoine Libourel, a researcher at the Neuroscience Research Center of Lyon in France.

When animals nod off, they're most vulnerable to sneaky predators. But despite the risks, the need for sleep is so strong that no creature can skip it altogether, even when it's highly inconvenient.

Animals that navigate extreme conditions and environments have evolved to sleep in extreme ways — for example, stealing seconds at a time during around-the-clock parenting, getting winks on the wing during long migrations and even dozing while swimming.

For a long time, scientists could only make educated guesses about when wild animals were sleeping, observing when they lay still and closed their eyes. But in recent years, tiny trackers and helmets that measure brain waves — miniaturized versions of equipment in human sleep labs — have allowed researchers to glimpse for the first time the varied and sometimes spectacular ways that wild animals snooze.

"We're finding that sleep is really flexible in response to ecological demands," said Niels Rattenborg, an animal sleep research specialist at the Max Planck Institute for Biological Intelligence in Germany.

Call it the emerging science of "extreme sleep."

Chinstrap penguins and their 'microsleeps'

Take chinstrap penguins in Antarctica that Libourel studies.

These penguins mate for life and share parenting duties — with one bird babysitting the egg or tiny gray fluffy chick to keep it warm and safe while the other swims off to fish for a family meal. Then they switch roles — keeping up this nonstop labor for weeks.

Penguin parents face a common challenge: getting enough sleep while keeping a close eye on their newborns.

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They survive by taking thousands of catnaps a day — each averaging just 4 seconds long.

These short “microsleeps,” as Korea Polar Research Institute biologist Won Young Lee calls them, appear to be enough to allow penguin parents to carry out their caregiving duties for weeks within their crowded, noisy colonies.

When a clumsy neighbor passes by or predatory seabirds are near, the penguin parent blinks to alert attention and soon dozes off again, its chin nodding against its chest, like a drowsy driver.

The naps add up. Each penguin sleeps for a total of 11 hours per day, as scientists found by measuring the brain activity of 14 adults over 11 days on Antarctica’s King George Island.

To remain mostly alert, yet also sneak in sufficient winks, the penguins have evolved an enviable ability to function on extremely fractured sleep — at least during the breeding season.

Researchers can now see when either hemisphere of the brain — or both at once — are asleep.

Frigatebirds snooze half their brains in flight

Poets, sailors and birdwatchers have long wondered whether birds that fly for months at a time actually get any winks on the wing.

In some cases, the answer is yes — as scientists discovered when they attached devices that measure brain-wave activity to the heads of large seabirds nesting in the Galapagos Islands called great frigatebirds.

While flying, frigatebirds can sleep with one half of the brain at a time. The other half remains semialert so that one eye is still watching for obstacles in their flight path.

This allows the birds to soar for weeks at a time, without touching land or water, which would damage their delicate, non-water repellent feathers.

Frigatebirds can’t do tricky maneuvers — flapping, foraging or diving — with just one half of their brain. When they dive for prey, they must be fully awake. But in flight, they have evolved to sleep when gliding and circling upward on massive drafts of warm rising air that keep them aloft with minimal effort.

Back at the nest in trees or bushes, frigatebirds change up their nap routine — they are more likely to sleep with their whole brain at once and for much longer bouts. This suggests their in-flight sleeping is a specific adaptation for extended flying, Rattenborg said.

A few other animals have similar sleeping hacks. Dolphins can sleep with one half of the brain at a time while swimming. Some other birds, including swifts and albatrosses, can sleep in flight, scientists say.

Frigatebirds can fly 255 miles (410 kilometers) a day for more than 40 days, before touching land, other researchers found — a feat that wouldn’t be possible without being able to sleep on the wing.

Elephant seals slumber while diving deep

On land, life is easy for a 5,000-pound (2,268-kilogram) northern elephant seal. But at sea, sleep is dangerous — sharks and killer whales that prey on seals are lurking.

These seals go on extended foraging trips, for up to eight months, repeatedly diving to depths of several hundred feet (meters) to catch fish, squid, rays and other sea snacks.

Each deep dive may last around 30 minutes. And for around a third of that time, the seals may be asleep, as research led by Jessica Kendall-Bar of Scripps Institution of Oceanography revealed.

Kendall-Bar’s team devised a neoprene headcap similar to a swimming cap with equipment to detect motion and seal brain activity during dives, and retrieved the caps with logged data when seals returned to beaches in Northern California.

The 13 female seals studied tended to sleep during the deepest portions of their dives, when they were below the depths that predators usually patrol.

That sleep consisted of both slow-wave sleep and REM sleep. During REM, or rapid eye movement sleep, the seals were temporarily paralyzed — just like humans during this deep-sleep stage — and their dive motion changed. Instead of a controlled downward glide motion, they sometimes turned upside down and spun in what the researchers called a “sleep spiral” during REM sleep.

In the span of 24 hours, the seals at sea slept for around two hours total. (Back on the beach, they averaged around 10 hours.)

The winding evolution of sleep

Scientists are still learning about all the reasons we sleep — and just how much we really need. It's unlikely that any tired human can try these extreme animal sleep hacks. But learning more about how varied napping may be in the wild shows the flexibility of some species. Nature has evolved to make shut-eye possible in even the most precarious situations.

EU leaders agree on 90 billion-euro loan to Ukraine after a plan to use Russian assets unravels

By LORNE COOK and ANGELA CHARLTON Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — European Union leaders agreed on Friday to provide a massive interest-free loan to Ukraine to meet its military and economic needs for the next two years, but they failed to bridge differences with Belgium that would have allowed them to use frozen Russian assets to raise the funds.

After almost four years of war, the International Monetary Fund estimates that Ukraine will need 137 billion euros (\$161 billion) in 2026 and 2027. The government in Kyiv is on the verge of bankruptcy, and desperately needs the money by spring.

The plan had been to use some of the 210 billion euros (\$246 billion) worth of Russian assets that are frozen in Europe, mostly in Belgium.

The leaders worked deep into Thursday night to reassure Belgium that they would protect it from any Russian retaliation if it backed the "reparations loan" plan, but as the talks bogged down the leaders eventually opted to borrow the money on capital markets.

"We have a deal. Decision to provide 90 billion euros (\$106 billion) of support to Ukraine for 2026-27 approved. We committed, we delivered," EU Council President António Costa said in a post on social media.

Not all countries agreed to the loan package. Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic refuse to support Ukraine and opposed it, but a deal was reached in which they did not block the package and were promised protection from any financial fallout.

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán, who is Russian President Vladimir Putin's closest ally in Europe and describes himself as a peacemaker, said "I would not like a European Union in war."

"To give money means war," said Orbán. He also described the rejected plan to use the frozen Russian assets as a "dead end."

French President Emmanuel Macron said the deal was a major advance, saying that borrowing on capital markets "was the most realistic and practical way" to fund Ukraine and its war efforts.

German Chancellor Friedrich Merz also hailed the decision.

"The financial package for Ukraine has been finalized," Merz said in a statement, noting that "Ukraine is granted a zero-interest loan."

"These funds are sufficient to cover the military and budgetary needs of Ukraine for the two years to come," Merz added. He said the frozen assets will remain blocked until Russia has paid war reparations to Ukraine. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has said that would cost over 600 billion euros (\$700 billion).

"If Russia does not pay reparations we will — in full accordance with international law — make use of Russian immobilized assets for paying back the loan," Merz said.

Zelenskyy, who traveled to Brussels for a summit that took place during fiery protests by farmers angry about a proposed trade deal with five South American countries, had appealed for a quick decision to keep Ukraine afloat in the new year.

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk warned early on Thursday that it would be a case of sending "either money today or blood tomorrow" to help Ukraine.

The plan to use frozen Russian assets got bogged down as Belgian Prime Minister Bart De Wever rejected the scheme as legally risky, and warned that it could harm the business of Euroclear, the Brussels-based financial clearing house where 193 billion euros (\$226 billion) in frozen assets are held.

Belgium was rattled last Friday when Russia's Central Bank launched a lawsuit against Euroclear to prevent any loan being provided to Ukraine using its money, which is frozen under EU sanctions slapped on

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Moscow after its launched its full-scale war in 2022.

"For me, the reparations loan was not a good idea," De Wever told reporters after the meeting. "When we explained the text again, there were so many questions that I said, I told you so, I told you so. There are a lot of loose ends. And if you start pulling at the loose ends in the strings, the thing collapses."

"We avoided stepping into a precedent that risks undermining legal certainty worldwide. We safeguarded the principle that Europe respects law, even when it is hard, even when we are under pressure," he said, adding that the EU "delivered a strong political signal. Europe stands behind Ukraine."

Still, Costa said that the EU "reserves its right to make use of the immobilized assets to repay this loan."

Romanian court sentences US rapper Wiz Khalifa to 9 months for drug possession

BUCHAREST, Romania (AP) — American rapper Wiz Khalifa was sentenced by a court in Romania on Thursday to nine months in jail for drug possession, more than a year after he took part in a music festival in the Eastern European country.

Khalifa was stopped by Romanian police in July 2024 after allegedly smoking cannabis on stage at the Beach, Please! Festival in Costinesti, a coastal resort in Constanta County. Prosecutors said the rapper, whose real name is Cameron Jibril Thomaz, was found in possession of more than 18 grams of cannabis, and that he consumed some on stage.

The Constanta Court of Appeal handed down the sentence after Khalifa was convicted of "possession of dangerous drugs, without right, for personal consumption," according to Romania's national news agency, Agerpres. The decision is final.

The decision came after a lower court in Constanta County in April issued Khalifa a criminal fine of 3,600 lei (\$830) for "illegal possession of dangerous drugs," but prosecutors appealed the court's decision and sought a higher sentence.

Romania has some of the harsher drugs laws in Europe. Possession of cannabis for personal use is criminalized and can result in a prison sentence of between three months and two years, or a fine.

It isn't clear whether Romanian authorities will seek to file an extradition request, since Khalifa is a U.S. citizen and doesn't reside in Romania.

The 38-year-old Pittsburgh rapper rose to prominence with his breakout mixtape "Kush + Orange Juice." On stage in Romania last summer, the popular rapper smoked a large, hand-rolled cigarette while singing his hit "Young, Wild & Free."

Today in History: December 20, the Louisiana Purchase is completed

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Saturday, Dec. 20, the 354th day of 2025. There are 11 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 20, 1803, the Louisiana Purchase was completed as ownership of the territory was formally transferred from France to the United States.

Also on this date:

In 1860, South Carolina became the first state to secede from the Union on a vote of delegates at a secession convention, emboldening other Southern states to follow suit and helping to trigger the American Civil War.

In 1946, the classic holiday film "It's a Wonderful Life" premiered at the Globe Theater in New York City.

In 1986, three Black men were attacked by a group of white youths in the Howard Beach neighborhood of Queens, New York, resulting in the death of one of the men, Michael Griffith.

In 1987, more than 4,300 people were killed when the Doña Paz (DOHN'-yuh pahz), a Philippine passenger ship, collided with the tanker Vector off Mindoro island.

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In 1989, the United States launched Operation Just Cause, sending troops into Panama to topple the government of Gen. Manuel Noriega.

In 1995, American Airlines Flight 965 from Miami to Cali, Colombia, crashed into a mountain near Buga, Colombia, at night while descending into the Cali area, killing all but four of the 163 passengers and crew aboard.

In 2019, the United States Space Force was established when President Donald Trump signed the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2020.

In 2024, a car slammed into a Christmas market in Magdeburg, eastern Germany, killing six people and injuring more than 200. The suspect, who was arrested, was a doctor originally from Saudi Arabia who had expressed anti-Muslim views and support on social media for a far-right party.

Today's Birthdays: Rock drummer Peter Criss (Kiss) is 80. Producer Dick Wolf ("Law & Order") is 79. Musician Alan Parsons is 77. Author Sandra Cisneros is 71. Actor Michael Badalucco is 71. Rock singer Chris Robinson (The Black Crowes) is 59. Filmmaker Todd Phillips is 55. Actor Jonah Hill is 42. Soccer player Kylian Mbappé is 27.