

# Groton Daily Independent

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## Tuesday, Dec. 23

Senior Menu: Spaghetti with meat sauce, catalina blend, fruit, garlic toast.  
No School

## Wednesday, Dec. 24

Senior Menu: Hot pork sandwich, coleslaw, baked beans, fruit.  
No School  
Emmanuel Lutheran: Christmas Eve Service, 7 p.m.  
St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Eve Program, 4 p.m.  
United Methodist: Community Coffee Hour, 9:30 a.m.; Britton service at 10 a.m.; Groton service at



5 p.m.; Conde service at 7 p.m.  
Groton CM&A: Service, 5 p.m.

## Thursday, Dec. 25

No School  
St. John's Lutheran: Christmas Day Service at Zion, 9 a.m.

## Fri., Dec. 26

Senior Menu: Hamburger cabbage roll hot dish, mixed vegetables, fruit, cornmeal muffin.  
No School

## Sat., Dec. 27

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

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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.**

## Offshore Goes Offline

The Interior Department yesterday announced it was suspending leases for five offshore wind farms, citing national security concerns. The projects—in various stages of completion—collectively cost \$25B and are expected to be able to power 2.5 million homes.

The farms represent a fraction of all US wind turbines, but 100% of major offshore projects under construction. The five projects are all on the East Coast: two in New York, one in Massachusetts, one spanning Rhode Island and Connecticut, and one in Virginia. That last project—Dominion Energy's Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind—is the largest of its kind, featuring 176 wind turbines. The administration cited reports finding blade movement, combined with the towers' reflective nature, can create radar interference, making it more difficult to identify legitimate targets.

The announcement comes weeks after a federal judge struck down an executive order to end the projects. Developers claimed they lost \$15M to \$50M per week when the projects were stalled earlier this year.

## California Rivers in the Sky

Flood watches are in effect for most of California and parts of Nevada and Arizona as two atmospheric rivers—corridors of concentrated water vapor—drench the region.

The first atmospheric river, centered over Northern California from Sunday to Monday, caused at least one death and several water rescues. The second is expected to hit Southern and Central California, too, with the heaviest rainfall forecast tonight into Wednesday. Los Angeles, which saw no rain Dec. 1-22, could receive up to four times its 2.48-inch December average this week. Meteorologists also warn the parent storm could intensify into a bomb cyclone, with 50 to 70 mph winds.

Separately, Washington state directed \$3.5M toward flood relief and recovery after atmospheric rivers earlier this month killed one person, prompted over 600 water rescues, and hit Christmastown's economy. The average atmospheric river carries as much water as the flow at the mouth of the Mississippi River—and can transport up to 15 times more.

## Japan's Nuclear Comeback

Japanese authorities have approved restarting the world's largest nuclear plant for the first time since the Fukushima disaster nearly 15 years ago. The decision is part of the country's effort to reduce its reliance on imported fossil fuels.

Lawmakers yesterday passed a bill that allows the Tokyo Electric Power Company to bring one of seven reactors at the Kashiwazaki-Kariwa plant back online as early as next month. The plant was one of 54 nuclear power stations that Japan shut down after a 9.0-magnitude earthquake and subsequent tsunami, with waves reaching over 100 feet, triggered a nuclear meltdown at the Fukushima Daiichi plant in 2011. Nearly 20,000 people died from the natural disasters—about 2,000 from the meltdown, which marked the world's worst nuclear accident since Chernobyl in 1986. Japan has since restarted 14 of 33 operable nuclear reactors.

Roughly 69% of Japan's electricity is generated from imported fossil fuels, which cost the country around \$68B last year.

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Universal Studios releases first trailer for "The Odyssey," directed by Christopher Nolan and starring Matt Damon as Greek hero Odysseus.

American singer Barry Manilow is diagnosed with lung cancer, postpones arena tour dates originally scheduled for January.

British singer Chris Rea, known for holiday classic "Driving Home for Christmas," dies at age 74.

NBA to explore prospective teams and ownership groups for professional men's basketball league in Europe, with potential franchise values over \$1B.

## Science & Technology

Alphabet to acquire data center energy developer Intersect for \$4.75B to address AI's high energy demands.

Instacart ends program showing users different prices for the same item amid backlash from consumer advocacy groups.

Researchers find high-fat diets rewire liver cells, making them more likely to become cancerous.

New FDA-approved drug shown to delay progression of genetic subtype of ALS, stabilizing or improving symptoms in roughly 25% of clinical trial participants.

## Business & Markets

US stock markets close higher (S&P 500 +0.6%, Dow +0.5%, Nasdaq +0.5%); gold and silver prices hit record highs.

Paramount submits revised bid to acquire Warner Bros. Discovery's studios and HBO Max, including pledge from Larry Ellison—father of Paramount's CEO—to personally fund a portion of the deal.

America's largest bourbon maker, Jim Beam, to halt production at its flagship distillery in Kentucky for a year, beginning Jan. 1, amid whiskey oversupply.

## Politics & World Affairs

CBS News pulls "60 Minutes" segment on the Trump administration's deportation of Venezuelan migrants to Salvadoran prison after Editor-in-Chief Bari Weiss requires on-the-record statement from the administration before airing the piece.

Former Vice President Mike Pence's conservative nonprofit poaches more than a dozen staffers from the Heritage Foundation amid infighting in the movement over Israel, allegations of antisemitism.

Car bomb in Moscow kills Lt. Gen. Fani Sarvarov, head of the Russian army's operational training directorate.

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## Santa Day Photos

Santa came to Groton on Saturday and visited with children at Professional Management Services in downtown Groton. Here are some of the photos that were taken.



**Hank and Rudy Hoff, children of Delton and Jacque Hoff.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Mailki Taylor and Oaklee Haas, children of Dylan and Elexis Osburne.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Graham Dixon, son of Heather Phillips.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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**Lincoln Wanner, son of Sara and Andrew Wanner.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Maya, River and Waylon Anderson, children of Laura and Taylor Anderson.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Owen Reynolds, son of Amber Jonte and Cameron Reynolds.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Calli, Nash and Jett, children of Trent and Sydney Kurtz.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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**Erin Dennert, daughter of Darren Dennert.**

(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Sage and Sawyer Kappes, daughters of Emily and Andrew Kappes.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Taya and Brooks Swanson, children of Jenna and Scott Swanson.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Beau, Evelyn, Madilynn and Mekalynn Bentz, children of Thomas and Ashley Bentz.**

(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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**Bridger, Bryson and Briggs, children of Alicia and Jeff Krueger.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Weston Mitcheck, son of Mike and Jamie Mitcheck.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Roa Groft, son of Jedel and Jasmine Groft.**  
(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Kate Profeta is pictured with her children, Emersyn and Haven.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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**Drew, Teagan and Maryn Sombke, children of Bryan and Whitney Sombke.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Mia and Cooper Perman, children of Mitch and Savanna Perman.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Brantley Ahartz and Bellamy Wright, children of Chris and Kenzie West.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Luke and Isaac Fliehs, children of Danielle and Blake Fliehs.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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**Ayva Town and Fyjord Smith, children of Kensey Town and JJ Smith.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Avery, Davis and Welles Hanson, children of Cody and Bethany Hanson.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Logan, Kinsley and Noralyn Osterman, children of Jason and Bridget Osterman.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Max and Willa Olson, children of Brad and Karlie Olson.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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**Oliver Shilhanek, son of Mike and Regan Shilhanek.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Preslee, Wrenley, Hazel and Emersyn Giedt, children of Heath and Katelyn Giedt.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Devan, Landon and Blake Locke, children of Mitchell and Heidi Locke.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Ryah Menzia, daughter of McKenzie Menzia.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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**Emma and Camilla Schuring.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Sonny Patterson, son of Drake and Jacquelyn Patterson.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Bennix, Jacday and Braylee Harry, children of Zach and Jessica Harry.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Bo, Vic, Hank, Vee and Rae, children of Tigh and Adrienne Flihs.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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**Oliver and Raelynn Freeman, children of Chris and Nicole Freeman.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Henley Sombke, daughter of Bryce and Amber Sombke.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Kaylee Sippel, daughter of Lisa and John Sippel.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Hazel Hill, daughter of Jason and Tara Hill.**  
(Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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**Max and Haley Erickson, children of Seth and Megan Erickson.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Annie and Harper Harry, daughters of Alison and Kris Harry.** (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



**Janine Harry was in charge of the cookies at the Santa Day event held Saturday at Professional Management Services.** (Photo by Paul Kosel)

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## Groton Area sweeps Redfield with dominant performances across boys and girls programs

REDFIELD — The Groton Area basketball programs put together a complete night on the road Monday, sweeping Redfield in varsity, junior varsity and C games on both the boys and girls sides to head into the Christmas break with momentum.

### Boys: Tigers roll past Redfield, 81-32

The Groton Area boys responded to a tough loss the previous week with an emphatic 81-32 Northeast Conference victory over the Redfield Pheasants. The Tigers set the tone early, jumping out to a 33-12 first-quarter lead and extending the margin to 54-22 by halftime. Groton continued to pull away after the break, leading 71-29 after three quarters before closing out the win.

"I was just glad we had a game," head coach Greg Kjellsen said. "We talked about staying disciplined defensively, limiting them to one shot, and for most of the night we did a really good job with that."

Groton shot efficiently throughout the contest, finishing 21-of-40 on two-point attempts (53 percent) and 9-of-17 from beyond the arc (53 percent). Ryder Johnson, Keegen Tracy, Easton Weber and Jayden Schwan each knocked down two three-pointers, while Karson Zak added one. The Tigers went 12-of-20 at the free-throw line.

Johnson led the way with a double-double, scoring 19 points and grabbing 10 rebounds, while also adding two assists and a steal.

"He needed that," Kjellsen said. "He struggled a little bit against Hamlin and West Central, and teams were really physical with him. Tonight I thought he made a point to attack the basket early and get himself going."

Tracy followed with 16 points, two rebounds, an assist and two steals. Weber scored nine points with four rebounds, while Gage Sippel and Jayden Schwan each added eight. Becker Bosma contributed four points, six rebounds, four assists, four steals and a block in a strong all-around performance.

Zak finished with six points, two rebounds and three assists. Ethan Kroll had two points, three rebounds, an assist and a steal, while J.J. Muller added two points and a rebound. Asher Johnson posted two points, one rebound, one assist and a steal. Anthony Tracy chipped in three points, two rebounds and an assist, and Jordan Schwan added two points and two rebounds.

Groton controlled the glass 39-18 and committed just eight turnovers while recording 15 assists and nine steals.

"We're a balanced team," Kjellsen said. "We're not going to have a guy score 25 or 30 points very often. Some nights somebody gets a little hot and we've got to get him the ball, but overall I thought we shared it well. We missed some easy ones in transition that we need to clean up, but that's part of growing."

Redfield was led by Grady Hulscher with eight points, followed by Eloi Carnicero with six and Sylvan Silben Harden with five. Austin Snell scored four points, Isaac Bannister had three, and Jackson Rude, Keegan Hansen and Micah Zastrow each added two.

### Boys subvarsity

In the junior varsity game, Groton rolled to a 68-11 win after opening with a 23-0 run and leading 35-0 before Redfield scored its first basket late in the first half. The Tigers led 42-4 at halftime and 61-6 after three quarters. Jordan Schwan and Anthony Tracy each scored 17 points to lead Groton, followed by Asher Johnson with 10, Chase Johnson and Ethan Kroll with nine apiece, Riley Schellenberger with three, and Briggs Kahn with two.

The Tigers completed the sweep with a 58-22 C-game victory. Major Dolan led the way with 19 points, while Trey Tietz scored 10, Ryder Schwan added nine, Briggs Kahn had eight, Riley Schellenberger scored seven and Connor Kroll finished with five.

The win sends Groton into the Christmas break with a 3-1 record.

"We go into the break 3-1 instead of 2-2 like last year, and that's progress," Kjellsen said. "Our schedule is tough — as good as anybody's in the state — and we're just trying to keep getting better and figure

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things out on both ends of the floor.”

The Tigers return to action December 30 when they host Webster in a Northeast Conference matchup.

## **Girls: Defense, depth fuel sweep**

The Groton Area girls also completed a three-game sweep over Redfield, highlighted by a 42-20 varsity road victory. The opening quarter featured three lead changes before Groton settled in to take a 9-5 lead. The Tigers then used defensive pressure to string together a 12-point run, building a 16-5 advantage before adding another surge to take a 22-9 halftime lead. Groton continued to pull away in the second half, leading 35-14 after three quarters.

“I thought we got some things done with our press,” head coach Matt Locke said. “We probably could have gotten a little more out of it, but I didn’t see a lot of careless fouls, and that’s important.”

Groton finished 10-of-35 on two-point attempts and 6-of-20 from three-point range. The Tigers controlled the glass with 39 rebounds, dished out 11 assists, forced 14 steals and committed 15 turnovers.

Jerica Locke led the Tigers with 11 points, adding four rebounds, four assists and four steals. Jaedyn Penning finished with eight points, seven rebounds, an assist and four steals, while going a perfect 4-for-4 at the free-throw line. Taryn Traphagan added eight points, a team-high 10 rebounds and two steals, including a pair of three-pointers in the second half.

Mia Crank scored seven points with four rebounds, an assist and a steal. Sydney Locke added three points along with two rebounds, two assists and a steal. Rylee Dunker contributed two points, eight rebounds and two assists, and Tevan Hanson connected on a three-pointer to round out the scoring.

Redfield was limited to just three scorers, led by Brynn Giblin with 11 points. Hayden Gall added six and Charlie Jungwirth scored three.

“Jaedyn did a really good job defensively,” Locke said. “We were playing behind all night, but we told the girls they had to get them off their spots early. Once they catch it deep, you’re in trouble.”

## **Girls subvarsity**

Groton earned a 25-19 junior varsity win, leading 11-5 after the first quarter, 14-7 at halftime and 17-12 after three. Kella Tracy led the Tigers with nine points, followed by McKenna Krause with seven. Tevan Hanson scored four points, while Ashton Warrington and Talli Wright each added two.

The Tigers capped the night with a 37-27 C-game victory. Kinsley Rowen, Teagan Hanten, Brynlee Dunker and Anai Iverson each scored seven points to pace balanced scoring, while Taylynn Traphagan added five and Avery Crank chipped in four.

The sweep sends the Groton Area girls into the Christmas break with a 2-2 overall record and a 2-1 mark in Northeast Conference play. Groton will return to action Tuesday, December 30, when the Tigers face Lemmon at 3 p.m. at the Barnett Center in Aberdeen.

The varsity games were 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 provided the play-by-play with Paul Kosel doing the technical. The JV games were also broadcast sponsored by Ed and Connie Stauch.

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## New Years Resolution: Hands-Free Driving – Put the Phone Down!

The Citizen's Against Distracting Driving South Dakota group is purposing that everyone have a New Years Resolution for 2026 of "Put the Phones Down when Driving."

The life you save could be yours! There are over 32 States that currently have a Hands-Free law on the books. The last State to pass a law like this was Iowa in 2025. We are encouraging everyone to begin this as a New Years Resolution for 2026. The adage is that it takes 21 days to make a habit. While science has proved that depending on the complexity of the habit may take longer. Start the new year with forming this important safety habit.

Driving with distractions is a significant safety hazard that diverts a driver's attention from the critical task of safe driving, increasing the risk of crashes. Distractions are categorized into three main types: visual (eyes off the road), manual (hands off the wheel), and cognitive (mind off driving).

Distracted driving has become one of the leading causes of traffic accidents across the United States, with mobile device use playing a significant role in thousands of preventable crashes each year. In response to this growing safety crisis, an increasing number of states have enacted comprehensive hands-free driving laws that prohibit drivers from physically holding or touching their phones while operating a vehicle.

A true hands-free law requires that devices remain completely untouched while the vehicle is in motion or temporarily stopped at traffic signals.

There are so many people on the phones while driving. People are seen in school zones texting as they are moving through the pickup lines, at traffic lights, texting while going through an intersection, please protect our children and others--- "Put the Phone Down." Be the example, not the fatality.

Distracted Driving in 2023, claimed 3,275 people lives and nearly 325,000 were injured in crashes involving a distracted driver in the U.S., according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). There has also been a significant increase in single car accidents, rollovers causing fatality. Texting while driving is particularly dangerous because it combines all three types of distraction, taking a driver's eyes off the road for about five seconds—enough time to travel the length of a football field at 55 mph.

Unlike earlier texting-only bans that left significant loopholes, these modern no-touch cell phone laws represent a more comprehensive approach to combating distracted driving. Credible Law notes the distinction is crucial: while a texting-only ban might still allow drivers to hold their phones for calls or navigation, a true hands-free law requires that devices remain completely untouched while the vehicle is in motion or temporarily stopped at traffic signals.

William Shorma of District 17, Clay, Union County has presented a Bill in South Dakota for the last two years and we will bring it again this year in hopes that everyone realizes how important this is to everyone's safety. There has been an increase in single car accidents, head on collisions and crossing the center line into oncoming traffic. It is time that we get the law changed to Hands-free only.

So, we urge everyone to begin the new year forming a new habit of "Putting the Phone Down". If not for yourself, do it for your family. If you would like further information, please contact Pauline Akland of Citizens Against Distracted Driving South Dakota at pakland2015@gmail.com.

Remember the life you save could be yours.

## Names Released in Moody County Fatal Crash

What: Vehicle/pedestrian fatal crash

Where: 480th Avenue and 232nd Street, one mile south of Flandreau, SD

When: 10:05 p.m., Wednesday, Dec. 17, 2025

Driver 1: Laura Ann Simmons, 55-year-old female from Ruthton, MN, no injuries

Vehicle 1: 2012 Ford Escape

Seat belt Used: Yes

Pedestrian 1: Grace Frances Walker, 25-year-old female from Wentworth, SD, fatal injuries

Pedestrian 2: Jeremy Leo Davis, 34-year-old male from Springfield, SD, fatal injuries

Moody County, S.D.- Two pedestrians died in a single vehicle crash Wednesday evening one mile south of Flandreau, SD.

Preliminary crash information indicates Laura Ann Simmons, the driver of a 2012 Ford Escape, was traveling south on 480th Avenue. As the vehicle approached the intersection with 232nd Street, she came upon two pedestrians walking in the southbound lane, colliding with both.

Both pedestrians, identified as Grace Frances Walker, a 25-year-old female from Wentworth, SD, and Jeremy Leo Davis, a 34-year-old male from Springfield, SD, were pronounced deceased at the scene. Simmons 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>

### **Governor candidates say prison overdoses need stronger response**

**BY: JOHN HULT**

The number of preventable prison deaths in South Dakota should spark serious responses, candidates for the state's top elected post say.

Eight people have died of suspected or confirmed overdose deaths in South Dakota's prisons in 2025, outpacing neighboring states. Most are believed to be linked to a synthetic drug commonly called K2, which typically comes into correctional settings on pieces of paper that have been soaked with the drug and dried out for smoking.

The prisons have also tallied five deaths listed as suicides this year, and 24 total inmate deaths — higher numbers for the state than any year in recent memory.

Gov. Larry Rhoden, who recently hired Nick Lamb to succeed former Corrections Secretary Kellie Wasko, said he trusts the prison system to turn things around, citing new camera purchases for the Sioux Falls penitentiary campus and the purchase of two new body scanners meant to detect drugs hidden in body cavities.

There's a backlog on body scanners, but Rhoden said he talked to his predecessor as governor, U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, about speeding up their delivery to South Dakota.

"I believe we will still get them yet this winter," Rhoden said during a press conference on a new women's prison, now under construction in Rapid City.

He told reporters that he couldn't offer much more on the state's response to the overdoses.

"I can't talk about any deaths that are currently under pending or active investigation," Rhoden said. "And I also can't talk about a lot of the security initiatives or changes we may be making, because that will jeopardize our operations. But we are looking at a lot of changes."

Rhoden declined a request for an interview to talk in more detail about the issue. Spokeswoman Josie Harms said Rhoden's comments in Rapid City cover the bases of what the administration can say.

### **Primary candidates say more should be done**

Rhoden's Republican primary opponents in the 2026 governor race aren't sure that's enough.

U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, R-South Dakota, said in an interview an overdose death count "well above the national average" is a cause for alarm, and that scanning pieces of paper for contamination isn't enough.

He'd like to see the prisons patrol more closely to catch drones he says might be dropping drugs into prison yards. He'd also like to see more random searches of cells, better screening of staff members and daily sweeps of the prison yard to make sure drugs haven't been planted or dropped there before inmates leave their cells each day.

"You're never going to have perfection, so the fact that there have been problems is not as much a concern to me as the fact that there is no plan to fix them," Johnson said. "There doesn't appear to be any leadership."

Aberdeen businessman Toby Doeden also decried the situation as evidence of a lack of leadership. If elected, he said, he'd move for more collaboration with law enforcement investigators.

"If we can't even keep drugs out of our prisons, how on earth are we supposed to keep them off the streets and keep our kids safe?" Doeden said in an interview with South Dakota Searchlight.

Johnson and Doeden both talked about bolstering chemical dependency treatment as important steps, too.

Jon Hansen of Dell Rapids is speaker of the House in the state Legislature and a Republican candidate for governor. Hansen issued a statement on the overdose situation that read, in part, that "the buck stops

with the governor — who can't seem to get his house in order.”

“This dysfunction affects far more people than just the inmates within,” he wrote. “Repeated prisoner deaths like this opens us up to huge lawsuits, breeds a culture of prison disorder and violence, and makes it harder and harder to recruit and keep good corrections officers.”

### Independent candidate weighs in

Allison Renville of Sioux Falls, who's running for governor as an independent, volunteers at the penitentiary, working with a group of Native American inmates.

Renville said the Rhoden administration “needs to find out who is causing these casualties, either inmate or staff, before more lives are lost.”

But Renville sees other problems that need solving if the prison system expects to draw inmates out of cycles of drug use.

“Working to address the substance abuse and its underlying problems like depression, suicidal ideation and poverty will help people prone to predatory practices like K2 distribution,” Renville said.

Renville cited a shortage of space in chemical dependency treatment, a lack of options for activities and inmate lockdowns as factors contributing to drug use.

Robert Arnold, a college student who's declared his intention to seek the South Dakota Democratic Party's nomination for governor, did not respond to messages seeking comment on the prison overdoses.

*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.*

## Montana inmates sue SD-based jail food service for Hepatitis C exposure

**BY: DARRELL EHRICK, DAILY MONTANAN**

A recent lawsuit filed in federal court says that a contracted food preparation company operating the meal service for the Cascade County Detention Center saw an inmate who experienced a nosebleed during food service dripped blood into a pasta dish, and tried to throw out the contaminated food, only to be told to serve the food anyway.

Now, some of the inmates who were served the food have contracted hepatitis C, the same disease the inmate had tested positive for.

A group of 26 inmates who were in the Great Falls facility are suing the private prison food service company in Great Falls federal court, alleging a host of violations ranging from negligence to violating their constitutional rights.

Shortly after the incident occurred, the Cascade County Sheriff's Office put out a press release saying that the administration which operates the jail did not find out about the bleeding incident until two days later, suspended Summit Food Service, the company which contracts for meal preparation, and began testing the affected inmates.

Summit Food Service, LLC, which is incorporated in New Mexico but based in Sioux Falls, S.D., released a statement about the incident when contacted by the Daily Montanan on Friday:

“We understand the concerns raised by the filing of a lawsuit related to this incident. While we cannot comment on ongoing litigation, we want to inform our clients, partners, and community about our response to the incident.

“This was an isolated event caused by a supervisor failing to follow Summit's established food safety protocols. We were shocked to learn of this incident, as all Summit Food Service employees, including this supervisor, are properly trained and certified in food safety protocol. Once Summit leadership became aware, we acted immediately by investigating the matter, terminating the employee, and implementing additional safeguards.

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"Summit has developed additional specialized training and passed a subsequent health department inspection. We have also expanded our crisis and compliance hotline to directly give our clients access to our dedicated food safety and crisis response teams.

"We continue to work cooperatively with the Cascade County Sheriff's Office and Health Department. Summit remains committed to implementing improvements and ensuring that our staff provide service within the standards, values, and food safety culture of Summit."

According to court documents, before lunch on Sept. 28, an inmate who was assisting food preparation experienced a bloody nose. Blood fell into the food. However, when inmates tried to discard the food allegedly tainted with blood, a Summit Food Service employee demanded that pasta be served, and told staff to "scoop around (it)."

"(Summit employees) directed the inmates to place the contaminated food back into the serving line," the court documents said.

The inmate was known to be positive for hepatitis C.

Still, inmates consumed the food, and several have since tested positive for the disease when they had previously not had it. The 26 named plaintiffs in the lawsuit said they either saw blood in the tray of food, or were later made aware that they had been served the contaminated food, court documents said.

"Plaintiffs experienced, among other things, revulsion, disgust, anger, horror, humiliation, embarrassment, despair, anxiety, worry, concern and nausea at being served food contaminated with human blood," the lawsuit said. "Some of the plaintiffs have since tested positive for the first time in their lives with Hepatitis C."

The lawsuit says that they are likely to need medical care and treatment for the disease for the rest of their lives.

One of the counts the lawsuit raises is that being served blood-tainted food could be a violation of the inmates' rights under the U.S. Constitution, including being free from cruel and unusual punishment.

The lawsuit also seeks punitive damages because of the situation, which attorneys Tim Bechtold, Elijah Inabnit and John Heenan, characterize as "reckless or callous disregard," and that it happened because of an "evil motive or intent." The attorneys said that the court should consider punitive damages, in addition to other damages, to send a strong message to other contract service providers.

On Oct. 7, Cascade County Sheriff Jesse Slaughter issued a statement.

"Upon learning of the incident, the Cascade County Sheriff's Office acted immediately, revoking the security clearance of the SKS Kitchen Supervisor and initiating a full investigation into how contaminated food was knowingly served to inmates," Slaughter said. "This incident is both disturbing and inexcusable. Summit Correction Services' actions were reckless, violated every standard of sanitation and human decency, and placed individuals in unnecessary danger. The Cascade County Sheriff's Office took swift action the moment we were informed and will ensure accountability from those responsible."

Hepatitis C is a virus that is often spread through blood contact, according to the Mayo Clinic. In many people, the disease is asymptomatic, but it can also include jaundice, fatigue, nausea, and dark urine.

The highest risk groups include drug users, prisoners or those who have had many sexual partners. As the disease progresses, it can lead to cirrhosis, liver cancer or liver failure.

*This story was originally produced by Daily Montanan, 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.*

*Darrell Ehrlick is the editor-in-chief of the Daily Montanan, after leading his native state's largest paper, The Billings Gazette. He is an award-winning journalist, author, historian and teacher, whose career has taken him to North Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Utah, and Wyoming. With Darrell at the helm, the Gazette staff took Montana's top newspaper award six times in seven years. Darrell's books include writing the historical chapters of "Billings Memories" Volumes I-III, and "It Happened in Minnesota." He has taught journalism at Winona State University and Montana State University-Billings, and has served on the student publications board of the University of Wyoming.*

## Current and former incarcerated people allege that ever-present drug issues are exacerbated by policies, dearth of treatment

BY: JOHN HULT

Paul Cooper remembers when the crank radios showed up in Leavenworth.

By then, he'd done time in South Dakota's state prisons, where inmates used electrical outlets to light up and smoke bits of paper soaked with synthetic drugs commonly known as "K2" or "spice."

Things were different at the federal prison in Kansas.

The cells didn't have outlets, Cooper said. The best way to spark a fire for a drug fix was to pull batteries from electronics, like alarm clocks or radios, and reverse engineer heat by connecting the batteries' positive and negative ends with wire, aluminum foil or a gum wrapper.

To quash drug use, Cooper told South Dakota Searchlight, federal prison officials brought in solar-powered alarm clocks and crank-powered radios.

"None of that works," Cooper said. "You're talking about the most innovative people in the world. All you did when you gave these guys crank radios in the federal prison system was give them a rechargeable lighter."

The anecdote highlights an intractable challenge of prison management: Any security measure meant to tamp down drug use must contend with a highly motivated group of inmates, many of whom arrive in prison as addicts, whose desire to get high or make money selling drugs is durable enough to hold up under the weight of institutional pressure.

In interviews with South Dakota Searchlight, a former prison warden, a former corrections secretary and a county sheriff who oversees a jail all agreed that policing narcotics inside their institutions is a challenge that never ends.

South Dakota's had a particularly challenging year. The state has logged eight suspected or confirmed overdose deaths in 2025 inside its state prisons, a figure that leapfrogs the annual tally for any calendar year in recent memory. The count also outpaces surrounding states, even those with larger prison populations.

Cooper can't imagine a prison system free of drugs. But he can picture one with fewer overdose deaths.

If South Dakota wants to improve things inside the walls, he said, the state should pour its time and treasure into addiction treatment.

"If you take away the addicts," he said, "the dealers have no drugs to sell."

### 'What are you supposed to do in the meantime?'

Cooper is sober today. He runs a restaurant in southwest Sioux Falls and is serving out the remainder of his supervised release term. But he also spends a lot of time thinking about the safety of the inmates he used to call neighbors.

In April, he testified at a meeting of a state task force wrestling with the decision to build a new men's prison. Lawmakers and the governor ultimately chose to approve the project, but Cooper said drug treatment and job training would serve the state better than a new building.

When Cooper offered his testimony, most of 2025's prison overdoses — seven suspected or confirmed as K2-related, one from methamphetamine — hadn't happened yet.

Some of the dead are people Cooper knew and, he said, needed support to stay clean and turn their lives around.

Cooper got support from his older brother, Ryan Vanden Hoek, who's also a former South Dakota prisoner. Vanden Hoek and another former inmate named Steve Harrison now host a Sioux Falls-based podcast called "Unconfined Conversations." It's meant to encourage inmates and parolees to do right by themselves and others, but also to educate the public on what works and doesn't in South Dakota's prisons.

Vanden Hoek sees the availability of chemical dependency treatment as a major shortfall. Inmates rarely get a shot at treatment until near the end of their prison term, he said.

"It's hard to expect somebody to make great personal changes when all you have for treatment is six

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to eight weeks in the last two years of your sentence," Vanden Hoek said. "What are you supposed to do in the meantime?"

Department of Corrections spokesman Michael Winder said in an email that there's no policy forcing inmates to wait. But he also wrote that treatment slots are "subject to available space in a program."

During a presentation to the prison task force in April, Behavioral Health Chief Justin Elkins displayed a slide on substance abuse treatment that illustrated the system's crunch for space.

"The basic gist from this page," Elkins said, "is that there's over 700 individual offenders in Sioux Falls who are waiting for substance use disorder treatment."

That figure represents about half the Sioux Falls inmate population.

## **'You've got just a bunch of hurt guys here'**

Sam Lint, who's serving a life sentence in the South Dakota State Penitentiary, would like to see more rehabilitation and peer support groups, more classes in general and more mental health programming specifically.

Lint said he and his fellow inmates often spend years dulling childhood trauma with drugs before they get to prison.

"There's an urge, there's been nothing introduced to us to intervene, so you just use the maladaptive coping skills you used as a child," Lint said. "You've got just a bunch of hurt guys here, and the prison keeps hurting our families more and more, taking away our stuff and putting up barriers to communication."

Some of what Lint calls barriers came during efforts to limit drug trafficking in prison, but he said such moves can also fuel addictive behaviors. Things like the temporary shutdown of texting in the spring of 2024, limits on the number of calls inmates can make in a day and the loss of in-person visits at the penitentiary since Father's Day have worsened inmates' sense of isolation, he said.

He's also grown frustrated with the number of unit-wide lockdowns prisoners have experienced over the past few years.

One lockdown in 2024 lasted more than a month. During lockdowns, inmates are confined to their cells, including during meals and times when they might have in-person coursework or programming.

"You have guys who are making the conscious choice every day to get up, stay sober, go to class, go to work, go to church, go to groups, to just keep their head down and do their thing," Lint said. "And then one day you wake up and the door doesn't open because you're getting punished for somebody else's behavior."

Between the frustration, boredom and underlying addictions, Lint said there are plenty of people who'll say yes to K2, overdose risk be damned.

"We're a prison full of all-day weed smokers who don't have access to weed, right?" Lint said. "So yeah, people know the risks and roll the dice."

Winder, the Department of Corrections spokesman, said in an email that it does not track the number of lockdowns in its facilities.

## **Drug use responses**

Harrison, one of the ex-inmate podcasters, said correctional policies that have changed in the past decade or so can encourage drug use.

When Harrison got to prison more than two decades ago, people caught getting high would go into a cell designed for disciplinary segregation. So would those found to have helped them get drugs. If prison staff or volunteers were involved, he said, they'd also face consequences.

Nearer to the end of his term, Harrison said, things got lax. Since his departure, he said, he keeps hearing from friends inside that things have gotten even less strict.

Word has spread, Harrison said.

"When you've got somebody who's struggling, somebody who's addicted and what have you, they start to talk amongst themselves," Harrison said. "They tell other people, 'Hey, they're not locking people up

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for smoking.' It perpetuates the usage."

Vanden Hoek suspects that's because a spike in prison violence has made it more difficult to keep space for drug users and dealers in disciplinary cells.

The state's most recent annual statistical report says prison assaults on staff spiked to a five-year high in fiscal year 2025, with 142. Twenty-two of those assaults caused serious injuries. Inmate-on-inmate fights between males were at a five year high, as well, at 447. Of those, 49 caused serious injuries.

Winder said the agency would not specify how many disciplinary or isolation cells are available. He said those caught using or suspected of using drugs are placed on "restrictive housing" status, meaning they're confined to their cells for 22 hours a day.

Restrictive housing, Winder wrote, is "a condition of confinement, not a physical location."

But Lint, the current inmate, said 22 hours of lockup is a common condition for people who don't have jobs on the inside, regardless of drug infractions. He said there are fewer than 50 isolation cells overall in Sioux Falls, and that a portion of them are reserved for inmates in protective custody.

Gov. Larry Rhoden, during a recent press conference about a new women's prison currently under construction in Rapid City, said he is confident in new Department of Corrections leader Nick Lamb.

He pointed to scanners the prison system purchased to scan for drugs hidden in body cavities. He's also targeted rehabilitation programming, pledging \$1.5 million from a fund he controls to support a diesel mechanic training program on the penitentiary campus and appointing a 30-member rehabilitation task force to study ways to reduce repeat offenses and improve programming.

At a recent task force meeting, Lamb said he's visited all of the state's prisons and held listening sessions with staff members. Soon, he said, he intends to do the same with inmates.

"I'm going to be happy to listen to their concerns, especially with programming, what interests they have, and what they think will benefit them," Lamb said.

## Mentorship encouraged

The value of mentorship is something Vanden Hoek, Cooper, Harrison and Lint all see as key to turning things around. Long-term inmates who've figured things out ought to be encouraged to guide young people, they say, even if those long-timers are in prison for serious crimes.

Former Department of Corrections Secretary Denny Kaemingk hired an ex-inmate named Michael Standing Soldier to work with the most hardened prisoners about a decade ago. At the time, Kaemingk said Standing Soldier, a former troublemaker who came to prison with a long-term sentence for a violent crime, could relate to people in a similar predicament.

Standing Soldier has since died, but Vanden Hoek and Harrison each remember him as a force for good at the penitentiary.

Willingness to meet inmates where they're at and respond to their needs as individuals are pillars of what Vanden Hoek calls "moral leadership."

Group punishments and lockdowns are signs of its absence, he argued, and he sees the overdose deaths as an outgrowth of that.

"When there are things like empathy and kindness and morality on behalf of the administration, where they simply want to do what's best for everybody, you aren't going to see things like this happening," he said.

*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.*

## Governor-controlled fund gives \$200,000 to program that helps farmers with estate planning

BY: JOHN HULT

A program that helps farmers pass their operations along to their children got a \$200,000 boost from a South Dakota government fund under the exclusive control of the governor.

Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden said in a Monday press release that the Future Fund grant to the South Dakota Ag Foundation's "Keep Farmers Farming" initiative will make it easier for families to manage "essential estate and transition planning."

"Keep Farmers Farming is making sure that our kids and grandkids keep South Dakota agriculture strong for generations to come," Rhoden said in the press release. "It's about transferring more than just assets — it's about passing down experience, work ethic, morals, and history."

It's the second financial boost from state government for the transition planning program.

Prior to her departure for Washington, D.C., to serve as U.S. Homeland Security secretary, former Gov. Kristi Noem's office gave a \$200,000 grant to the Ag Foundation to "administer, market, and grow" the foundation's estate technical assistance work. That included transferring the program from First Dakota National Bank to the foundation.

Rhoden spokeswoman Josie Harms said in an email on Monday that the earlier money came from the Governor's Office of Economic Development's Rural Development Portfolio. South Dakota Searchlight asked for further specifics, because the office's website doesn't appear to list a program or fund matching that name. A letter of agreement provided on Monday by the office lays out terms and scope of work, but does not specify which program the money came from.

Noem announced the initial award to the program during her 2024 State of the State address. She said the idea to back and expand the estate planning program was born of an informal work group of agricultural leaders convened "to brainstorm ideas on how the state and the ag industry can more actively support the next generation of ag producers."

The number of participating families in the program has grown from 54 to 125 since that announcement, Rhoden's news release says.

The foundation that runs the program was founded in 2015 as what its website describes as an "independent, industry-led nonprofit." Alan Hojer, who runs the program for the foundation, says he works with families directly to help them decide what legal or professional help they might need as they prepare to pass along their operations.

The grant funding from the governor's office helped cover program expenses and hire a second consultant to work with families in 2025, Hojer said. Between the new grant and additional recent awards from Farm Credit Services of America and Pioneer Bank and Trust, he said, "we're looking to add another consultant in 2026."

Monday's announcement is the second in a month from Rhoden on his use of the Future Fund, a pool of money meant to be used "for purposes related to research and economic development for the state," according to state law. The governor has the sole authority to decide on grants from the fund, which is built from a tax on employers.

On Dec. 10, Rhoden announced that he'd given \$1 million from the Future Fund to help develop two business parks in Aberdeen.

*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.*

## SD economic development chair has multiple ties to food company receiving millions in state aid

**Jeff Erickson says he's followed the law and recused himself from related decision-making**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR**

The chairman of a state economic development board not only sits on the corporate board for a company benefiting from millions in state aid but also has connections to the company's landlord.

As reported Friday by South Dakota Searchlight, Jeff Erickson is the chairman of the South Dakota Board of Economic Development and a member of the CJ Schwan's corporate board. While he's held those positions, CJ Schwan's has benefited from a total of \$69 million in state grants, loans and tax rebates pledged or paid during the past four years. The money is helping CJ Schwan's build a 650-employee, \$550 million food production plant in northern Sioux Falls.

Erickson abstained from the state board's discussions and votes on aid for CJ Schwan's, and he told Searchlight for last week's story that he has "not financially benefited in any way" from the project.

After the publication of Friday's story, Searchlight received a tip that a company connected to Erickson owns the downtown Sioux Falls office building where CJ Schwan's is housing some of its employees while the northern Sioux Falls plant is under construction.

Searchlight confirmed in public records that the office building at 200 E. 10th St. is owned by Riverview Holdings, and that Erickson was listed as the original manager of Riverview Holdings when it was incorporated in 2001. In a 2017 financial interest statement filed with state government — the most recent one available from the Secretary of State's Office — Erickson described himself as a member of the corporation.

Searchlight asked Erickson how to reconcile his earlier statement about not financially benefiting from the CJ Schwan's project with his ties to a corporation owning the building where CJ Schwan's is housing employees.

"I recused and abstained as required by law. I had no control or influence over CJ's source of a home for its Sioux Falls headquarters," Erickson said in an emailed statement.

Erickson's 2017 financial interest statement also listed CJ Schwan's as 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.

Searchlight has asked the Secretary of State's Office why it does not have a more current financial interest statement from Erickson, but the office has not responded. State law says all appointees of the governor subject to state Senate confirmation must file a statement of financial interest before their confirmation. Board of Economic Development members serve four year-terms, and Erickson was reappointed and confirmed by the Senate this year.

State Rep. Erik Muckey, D-Sioux Falls, is one of four nonvoting legislative members of the state Board of Economic Development, serving alongside 13 citizen appointees, including Erickson. After Searchlight informed Muckey of Erickson's ties to the building housing CJ Schwan's offices, Muckey called for better "public disclosures of private benefit."

"We cannot make informed decisions with public funds if it is clouded by undisclosed conflicts after decisions are made," Muckey said Monday in a statement. "Legislative reform is necessary now."

South Dakota Searchlight also reported Friday that CJ Schwan's employs Steve Westra, who led the Governor's Office of Economic Development when that office first pledged assistance for the CJ Schwan's project in 2021. Westra left state government in May 2023, and his LinkedIn page says he began working as a vice president for CJ Schwan's in May 2024.

One year is the 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.

Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, another nonvoting legislative member of the state Board of Economic Development, said in Friday's story that "the optics" of Westra's transition "are absolutely terrible." Reed told

Searchlight on Monday that he plans to introduce legislation this winter that would increase the mandatory waiting period to two years.

State aid approved to benefit CJ Schwan's has included about \$38.7 million in grants to the Sioux Falls Development Foundation. The grants reimbursed the foundation for land it transferred to CJ Schwan's, for costs including the construction of an on-site wastewater treatment facility, and for gas-line infrastructure that will benefit CJ Schwan's and the rest of the industrial park where the project is located.

CJ Schwan's has also been approved for up to \$15 million in rebates of sales taxes paid on construction and equipment, and for a \$15 million low-interest loan to help with construction costs.

CJ Schwan's is part of CJ Group, which is publicly traded in South Korea and disclosed revenues of about \$30 billion last year. The CJ Schwan's plant in Sioux Falls 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.

*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.*

## Trump canceled temporary legal status for more than 1.5 million immigrants in 2025

BY: ARIANA FIGUEROA

WASHINGTON — Since Inauguration Day, more than 1.5 million immigrants have either lost or will lose their temporary legal status, including their work authorizations and deportation protections, due to President Donald Trump's aggressive revocation of legal immigration.

It's the most rapid loss in legal status for immigrants in recent United States history, experts in immigration policy told States Newsroom. The Trump administration curtailed legal immigration by terminating Temporary Protected Status for more than 1 million immigrants and ending Humanitarian Parole protections for half a million more individuals.

"I don't think we've ever, as a country, seen such a huge number of people losing their immigration status all at once," said Julia Gelatt, the associate director of the U.S. Immigration Policy Program at the Migration Policy Institute.

The move to strip so many immigrants of their work authorization is likely to not only affect communities, but also batter the economy, both immigration and economic experts told States Newsroom.

"Seeing well over 1 million people lose their work authorization in a single year is a really huge event that has ripple effects for employers and communities and families and our economy as well," Gelatt said.

Dozens of lawsuits have been filed by immigrant rights groups and TPS recipients themselves challenging the terminations as unlawful.

"This is the continuation of the Trump administration attack against the immigrant community, and specifically about the TPS program, a program that, for many of us has been a good program, a life-saving program," said Jose Palma, a TPS recipient from El Salvador and coordinator of the National TPS Alliance, which is part of several TPS lawsuits.

### Who is granted Temporary Protected Status?

A TPS designation is given because a national's home country is deemed too dangerous to return to due to violence, war, natural disasters or some other unstable condition.

When Congress created the program in 1990, it was initially meant to be temporary, which is why authorizations can be as short as six months and as long as 18 months.

Immigrants who are granted TPS must go through background checks and be vetted each time their status is renewed, but the program does not provide a path to citizenship.

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Under the Biden administration, the number of TPS recipients grew, as did the category of humanitarian parole.

That policy decision was heavily criticized by Republicans, and Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem vowed to reevaluate TPS country designations for terminations during her Senate confirmation hearing this year.

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

Before the Trump administration came into office in late January, there were more than 1.3 million immigrants in the TPS program, hailing from 17 countries. Under the first Trump administration, there were roughly 400,000 TPS recipients.

"Almost a million new people got onto TPS protections under President Biden, so we saw a really rapid expansion, and now we're seeing a very rapid contraction, which is all to say that in the first Trump administration, there weren't so many people who had TPS," Gelatt said.

Noem has terminated TPS for immigrants from 11 countries, and the more than 1 million immigrants affected will lose their protections by February.

Noem extended six months' protection for South Sudan earlier this year, but decided in November to terminate protections by January. She most recently terminated a TPS designation for Ethiopia on Dec. 12.

The other countries with TPS termination are Afghanistan, Burma, Cameroon, Haiti, Honduras, Nepal, Nicaragua, Syria and Venezuela.

"We've never seen this many people lose their legal status in the history of the United States," David Bier, the director of immigration studies at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said. "This is totally unprecedented."

People losing their status are also concentrated in certain areas. Florida has more than 400,000 TPS recipients, and Texas has nearly 150,000. Bier said he expects certain industries with high TPS workers to feel the impact, such as construction and health care.

## Haiti, Venezuela

Immigrants from two countries — Haiti and Venezuela — make up a majority of recipients set to lose their TPS protections, at nearly 935,000 people.

Venezuelans, who make up 605,000 of those 935,000 TPS recipients, were first granted protections during Trump's first term.

On his final day in office in 2021, his administration issued 18-month deportation protections for Venezuelans — known as Deferred Enforcement Departure, or DED — citing the country's unstable government under President Nicolás Maduro.

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

After the Trump administration's 18-month DED designation, the Biden administration issued the TPS designation for Venezuelans who came to the U.S. in 2021 and again in 2023. The move created two separate TPS groups for Venezuelans.

"The bottom line is that removing the 935,000 Venezuelans and Haitians would cause the entire economy to contract by more than \$14 billion," said Michael Clemens, a professor in the Department of Economics at George Mason University.

He added that not all the TPS recipients are in the labor market. Some are children or elderly dependents who cannot work. Clemens said the TPS workforce population of Haitians and Venezuelans is about 400,000.

## Humanitarian Parole program

Separately, under the Biden administration, nearly 750,000 immigrants had some form of humanitarian

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parole, granting them work and temporary legal status due to either Russia's war in Ukraine or efforts by the administration to manage mass migration from Central American countries.

DHS has moved to end humanitarian parole for 532,000 immigrants hailing from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua and Venezuela, opening them up for deportation proceedings.

"The onslaught of attacks that we've been seeing on temporary forms of immigration status, specifically with a humanitarian focus, is truly saddening and concerning," said Alice Barrett, a supervising immigration attorney at the immigrant rights group CASA.

Not every recipient has been affected. The agency has kept humanitarian parole for 140,000 Ukrainians who came to the United States after Russia's invasion in 2022, and 76,000 Afghans who were brought in after the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from their country.

But since the National Guard shooting last month in Washington, D.C., allegedly by an Afghan national granted asylum, the program is under increased scrutiny and all immigration-related paperwork from Afghans has been halted.

## Court decisions influential

This is not the first time the Trump administration has tried to end TPS.

During the president's first term, he tried to end TPS for Haiti, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Sudan, but the courts blocked those attempts in 2018.

This time is different, said Palma of the National TPS alliance.

"The only thing different right now is that the Supreme Court is allowing the Trump administration to continue with termination of TPS, even though lower courts are saying, 'No, we should stop the cancellation of TPS for now, until it's clear whether the decision was illegal or not,'" he said.

So far, in emergency appeals, the high court has allowed the Trump administration to move forward in stripping legal status for the two groups of Venezuelan TPS recipients and individuals in the humanitarian parole program.

Barrett at CASA, which is leading the legal challenge of TPS termination for Cameroon and Afghanistan, said when it comes to TPS termination, "what we are seeing in the second Trump administration is a supercharged version of what we saw in the first Trump administration."

"We are essentially seeing during this administration more actual terminations happening early on even while litigation is pending, which has certainly been disappointing for members of the community, because they're still left in this limbo," she said.

Barrett added that even when TPS recipients try to apply for longer-term legal status they face multiple hurdles.

"For example, we are seeing them questioned or denied relief at asylum interviews because they did not apply for asylum within one year of entering the United States, even though the Code of Federal Regulations clearly creates an exception to this one-year filing deadline for people who have been in other valid status before applying for asylum," Barrett said.

"These members of our community who have been in lawful status therefore now risk being placed in removal proceedings and even (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) detention, where conditions are increasingly inhumane and dangerous," she continued.

TPS recipients are still continuing to fight in the courts and share their stories, Barrett said.

"These cases are still in progress, and we remain hopeful that despite preliminary rulings leaving so many hardworking individuals and their families in a state of uncertainty, upon thorough review and litigation of these cases the courts will recognize the improper nature of recent TPS terminations and restore status for those seeking safety here in the United States," she said.

*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.*

## Trump's DOJ offers states, including SD, confidential deal to remove voters flagged by feds

**Justice Department attorney says 11 states have shown a willingness to stop residents from voting at DOJ's request**

**BY: JONATHAN SHORMAN**

The U.S. Department of Justice has sent a confidential draft agreement to more than a dozen states that would require election officials to remove any alleged ineligible voters identified during a federal review of their voter rolls.

The agreement — called a memorandum of understanding, or MOU — would hand the federal government a major role in election administration, a responsibility that belongs to the states under the U.S. Constitution.

A Justice Department official identified 11 states that have expressed an interest in the agreement during a federal court hearing in December, according to a transcript reviewed by Stateline. Two additional states, Colorado and Wisconsin, have publicly rejected the memorandum of understanding and released copies of the proposal.

The 11 states "all fall into the list of, they have expressed with us a willingness to comply based on the represented MOU that we have sent them," Eric Neff, the acting chief of the Justice Department's Voting Section, said at the hearing. He spoke at a Dec. 4 hearing in a federal lawsuit brought by the Justice Department against California, which has refused a demand for the state's voter data.

Neff's courtroom disclosure, which Stateline is the first to report, comes as the Justice Department has sued 21 states and the District of Columbia for unredacted copies of their voter rolls after demanding the data from most states in recent months. The unredacted lists include sensitive personal information, such as driver's license and partial Social Security numbers.

The states Neff identified are led by Republicans — Alabama, Mississippi, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, South Carolina, South Dakota, Texas, Tennessee, Utah and Virginia.

The draft memorandum of understanding represents a new effort by the Trump administration to gain access to some states' voter data without litigation.

The administration's lawsuits mostly target Democratic states, where election officials refused initial requests for voter data and allege the demand is unlawful and risks the privacy of millions of voters. They have also voiced fears that the Trump administration could use the information to target its political enemies.

Neff said four states with Republican secretaries of state — Arkansas, Indiana, Kansas and Wyoming — have "complied voluntarily" with the Justice Department's demand without memoranda of understanding.

The Justice Department says it needs voters' detailed information to ensure ineligible people are kept off state voter rolls and that only citizens are voting.

Federal officials say they will follow federal privacy laws, but critics fear voter data is being shared with the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, which operates a powerful citizenship verification tool known as SAVE. The Trump administration has previously confirmed the Justice Department plans to share voter data with Homeland Security.

"What the DOJ is trying to do is something that should frighten everybody across the political spectrum," said David Becker, executive director of the nonpartisan Center for Election Innovation & Research. "They're trying to use the power of the executive branch to bully states into turning over highly sensitive data: date of birth, Social Security number, driver's license — the holy trinity of identity theft."

Becker, who worked as a senior trial attorney in the Justice Department's Voting Section during the Clinton and George W. Bush administrations, told reporters on Dec. 8 that several states received the memorandum. But Neff's identification of 11 states wasn't widely available until the judge in the California lawsuit on Tuesday ordered the transcript of the Dec. 4 hearing immediately posted to the lawsuit's public docket, where Stateline accessed it.

The draft memorandum of understanding, which is labeled "confidential," outlines the terms of the

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proposed agreement between each state and the Justice Department. After a state provides its voter roll, the federal department would agree to test, analyze and assess the information. The department would then notify states of "any voter list maintenance issues, insufficiencies, inadequacies, deficiencies, anomalies, or concerns" found.

Each state would agree to "clean" its voter roll within 45 days by removing any ineligible voters, according to the memorandum. States would then resubmit their voter data to the Justice Department for verification.

While the Justice Department has demanded states' voter rolls since this summer, the memorandum of understanding offers the most detailed picture to date of how the Trump administration plans to use the data.

"It lays out in a way that we haven't seen in any other context their plan for one of the things, I will say, that they plan to do, which is disturbing," said Eileen O'Connor, a senior counsel and manager in the voting rights and election program at the Brennan Center for Justice at New York University, a progressive think tank.

O'Connor was a trial attorney in the Justice Department's Voting Section during the Obama, first Trump and Biden administrations. "I think with each passing lawsuit, they are clearly trying to create a national database of every voter in the country," she said.

The Justice Department didn't answer questions from Stateline about how many states had been sent the memorandum and whether any had signed it.

Assistant U.S. Attorney General Harmeet Dhillon, who leads the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division, wrote in a statement to Stateline that the department has a statutory mandate to enforce federal voting rights laws. Ensuring the voting public's confidence in election integrity is a top priority of the Trump administration, she wrote.

"Clean voter rolls and basic election safeguards are requisites for free, fair, and transparent elections," Dhillon wrote.

## Federal involvement in elections

The Justice Department memorandum, if implemented, would mark a significant departure from how election officials typically maintain voter rolls.

States, often in coordination with local election officials, check lists for changes in address, deaths and other reasons for ineligibility, such as a felony conviction. States typically perform this task with little to no federal involvement.

Some states participate in voluntary programs that allow election officials to share voter information with other states for the purposes of looking for voters who may have moved or who are registered in multiple locations. But those don't include the federal government, which plays a limited role in election administration under the United States' decentralized approach to elections.

Matt Crane, executive director of the Colorado County Clerks Association, said clerks continually look at death records and other sources of data to update voter lists. He said the United States' localized election system is a strength that guards against election interference.

"The federal government has no role in list maintenance," Crane said.

But that has begun to change under the Trump administration, as President Donald Trump has made removing noncitizen voters a priority.

Earlier this year, Homeland Security overhauled the SAVE program into a tool that can scan millions of voter records against government databases for evidence of citizenship. The program was previously used for one-off searches to check whether noncitizens were eligible for government benefits.

Some Republican secretaries of state have agreed to upload their voter rolls into SAVE. Democratic secretaries of state object to using the program and say they are wary of what will happen to the voter information once it's provided to the Trump administration, including its potential use by the Department of Homeland Security.

While SAVE can flag voters with potential eligibility issues, the onus now is still on state officials to in-

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investigate whether those voters are actually ineligible and decide whether to initiate a process to remove them from the rolls.

By contrast, the Justice Department memorandum would empower federal officials to take a more active role, allowing them to check the work of state election officials as they remove — or don't remove — voters.

"We have a system that allows Americans to voice their opinions and to hold government accountable, and that is so fundamentally central to the way our system works," Oregon Democratic Secretary of State Tobias Read, who has been sued by the Justice Department, said in an interview. "We should be focused on how to make that better, not on erecting artificial barriers and putting people's privacy and confidence at risk for no reason."

## Republican interest

Some GOP election officials have welcomed the Trump administration's interest and have accused the Biden administration of not doing enough to help states vet their voter rolls. In particular, they praise the overhaul of SAVE, which some GOP secretaries of state had requested before Trump took office.

Some secretaries have touted the removal of noncitizen voters after using SAVE. Wyoming Secretary of State Chuck Gray, a Republican, in November announced three voters identified as noncitizens had been removed from his state's voter rolls. Gray has also provided the Justice Department with full access to Wyoming's voter roll.

"The voter list maintenance that we have been conducting is extremely important for election integrity," Gray said in a news release.

But as of early December, nearly all states hadn't provided the Justice Department access to their unredacted voter rolls, with Neff identifying only four that had shared their lists. It also remains unclear whether any state has signed the memorandum of understanding. No state has told Stateline it signed the document.

Nebraska Secretary of State Robert Evnen, a Republican, has received a memorandum of understanding and plans to comply with the Justice Department request, pending the outcome of an ongoing lawsuit, Evnen spokesperson Rani Taborek-Potter wrote in an email to Stateline. A voting advocacy group has sued to block the release of the data.

In an interview with Kentucky Lantern, Kentucky Republican Secretary of State Michael Adams said that his office was "going back and forth a little bit" with the Justice Department over what federal law requires.

"We've not really figured out exactly where that line is of what-all they're entitled to," Adams said. "What's not in dispute is they're entitled to the vast majority of information — people's names, addresses, birthdays — and we've given them all of that."

Adams added that many state officials "are in the same boat of trying to figure out what exactly they need to do their job and what our obligations are legally."

Utah Lt. Gov. Deidre Henderson, a Republican, confirmed in a statement to Stateline that her office received a proposed memorandum of understanding from the Justice Department. "We are in the process of reviewing the document with our attorneys and carefully considering our options," Henderson wrote.

Rachael Dunn, a spokesperson for Missouri Republican Secretary of State Denny Hoskins, wrote in an email that the state hadn't entered into an agreement with the Justice Department "at this time."

## DOJ 'contractor' could get voter data

The draft agreement would give the Justice Department wide authority to share the voter data of states that sign on.

The department would be authorized to share the data with "a contractor" who needs access "to perform duties related" to voter list maintenance verification, according to the draft agreement. The agreement doesn't name any contractors or specify whether they would be inside or outside of government.

Two states have publicly rejected the draft agreement. Colorado Democratic Secretary of State Jena Griswold announced Dec. 3 she would refuse to sign the memorandum. The Justice Department later

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sued Colorado.

The Wisconsin Elections Commission also rejected the draft agreement that week. In a Dec. 11 letter to Neff, the Justice Department official, the commissioners wrote that state law prohibits them from releasing certain personally identifiable information, such as date of birth, Social Security numbers and driver's license numbers.

"I don't look at the action that we're taking today to be commentary on the motive of the appropriateness of the Department of Justice's request," Commissioner Don Millis, a Republican appointee, said at a virtual commission meeting the same day. "The U.S. DOJ is simply asking the commission to do something that the commission is explicitly forbidden by Wisconsin law to do."

The Justice Department on Thursday sued Wisconsin for its voter data.

Justin Levitt, who served as senior policy adviser for democracy and voting rights in the Biden White House and is now a law professor at Loyola Marymount University, told Stateline in an email that he expects no states to sign the agreement.

"It's no surprise that both Colorado and Wisconsin said no — and I don't think that's a question of political leadership," Levitt wrote. "It's hard for me to imagine any Republican state with faith in its own list maintenance capacity agreeing to outsource that decision to the DOJ."

## **No response from SD secretary of state FROM SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT**

South Dakota is one of 11 states that have "expressed willingness to comply" with a draft agreement that would require election officials to remove any alleged ineligible voters identified during a federal review of their voter rolls, according to a federal court hearing transcript.

The South Dakota Secretary of State's Office, which oversees elections, said in a statement it "has no additional comment beyond what has already been publicly shared."

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

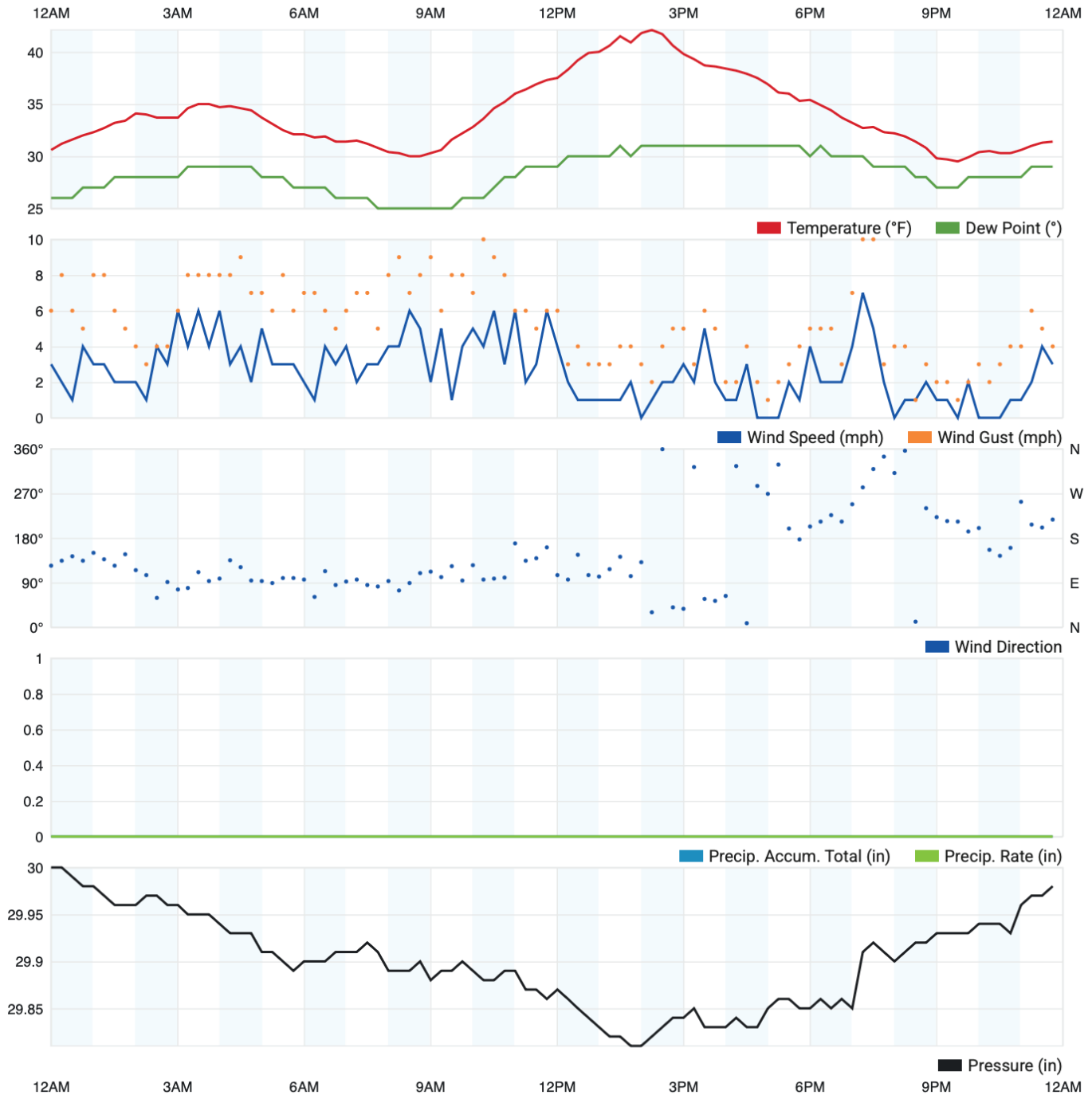
*Jonathan Shorman covers democracy for Stateline, including elections, voting rights, fights over state vs. federal power, civil liberties and more.*

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

December 22, 2025



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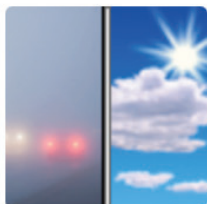
**Today**

**Tonight**

**Wednesday**

**Wednesday  
Night**

**Christmas Day**



**High: 25 °F**

**Low: 21 °F** ↑

**High: 33 °F**

**Low: 19 °F**

**High: 36 °F**

Partly Sunny

Mostly Cloudy

Patchy Fog  
then Mostly  
Sunny

Increasing  
Clouds

Mostly Cloudy



## Temperatures through the Week

December 23, 2025  
2:13 AM

### Maximum Temperature Forecast (°F)

	12/23 Tue			12/24 Wed			12/25 Thu				12/26 Fri				12/27 Sat				12/28 Sun				
	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm	12am	6am	12pm	6pm
<b>Aberdeen</b>	23	24	24	29	31	32	27	21	31	36	34	30	28	32	29	28	31	31	21	11	9	13	11
<b>Britton</b>	21	22	23	29	31	32	24	18	29	34	32	29	26	30	27	26	29	28	18	8	6	9	7
<b>Chamberlain</b>	36	44	38	39	45	50	42	32	42	53	48	41	39	50	45	40	41	42	31	19	18	24	21
<b>Clark</b>	28	30	30	33	35	37	32	26	32	38	36	34	30	34	33	33	32	32	22	13	10	12	10
<b>Eagle Butte</b>	31	35	33	33	35	37	33	28	37	46	41	33	33	40	36	36	33	31	21	14	15	21	18
<b>Eureka</b>	21	25	23	26	29	31	26	19	27	33	31	28	26	30	28	27	27	25	15	7	6	11	9
<b>Gettysburg</b>	29	33	32	33	36	37	32	24	36	44	39	31	31	38	34	32	30	30	20	12	12	17	15
<b>McIntosh</b>	25	30	27	26	28	30	27	24	29	36	33	28	28	34	32	29	28	26	16	9	10	16	14
<b>Milbank</b>	27	24	21	25	31	34	30	22	30	35	34	31	32	34	31	29	33	33	22	12	10	13	10
<b>Miller</b>	32	35	34	37	39	41	35	28	39	47	42	37	36	42	38	36	37	37	26	17	15	20	17
<b>Mobridge</b>	25	32	28	28	31	33	29	24	33	40	35	29	29	35	31	30	29	28	18	11	11	16	12
<b>Murdo</b>	36	45	42	41	45	47	41	32	48	60	55	42	42	54	49	42	39	40	29	18	19	26	22
<b>Pierre</b>	33	41	37	37	38	43	39	30	43	54	49	37	38	47	43	38	37	38	28	18	18	25	22
<b>Redfield</b>	29	31	31	33	36	38	30	25	35	41	38	32	31	37	34	31	35	35	23	14	13	18	15
<b>Sisseton</b>	24	22	21	25	30	31	27	20	27	34	34	31	29	32	29	29	30	30	20	11	7	10	8
<b>Watertown</b>	27	28	25	30	34	37	32	24	32	38	36	33	32	35	33	31	32	32	22	12	9	12	10
<b>Webster</b>	24	24	24	30	32	34	28	23	29	35	35	32	28	32	30	29	30	29	19	10	7	10	8
<b>Wheaton</b>	23	19	18	23	29	30	26	18	26	33	33	30	28	31	28	27	29	29	19	10	6	9	7



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Temperatures will remain above average through the week, with highs in the 30s and 40s over much of the area. Warmer temperatures are expected across central and south central South Dakota. Today and Sunday will feature the only colder days. Mostly dry conditions are anticipated through the week.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 42 °F at 2:04 PM

Low Temp: 29 °F at 9:26 PM

Wind: 11 mph at 7:25 PM

Precip: : 0.00

## Today's Info

Record High: 56 in 2023

Record Low: -34 in 1983

Average High: 26

Average Low: 6

Average Precip in Dec.: 0.44

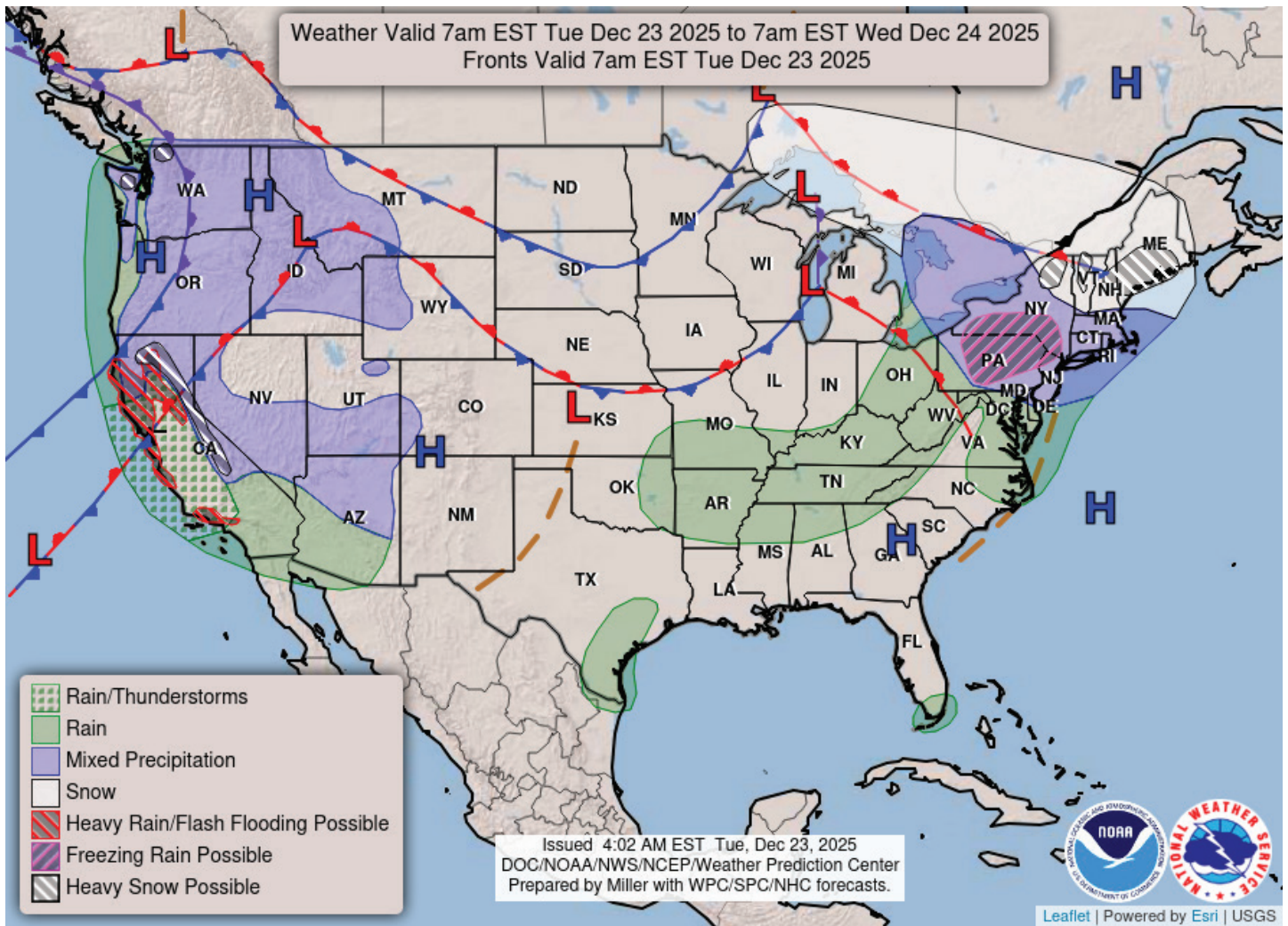
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.67

Average Precip to date: 21.65

Precip Year to Date: 25.48

Sunset Tonight: 4:52 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:10 am



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## Today in Weather History

December 23, 1987: Five to sixteen inches of snow fell in 24 hours in east-central and southeast South Dakota from the morning of the 23rd through the morning of the 24th. Some of the more significant amounts measured were 9 inches at Huron, 10 inches at Mitchell, Platte and Brookings, twelve inches at Chamberlain, and sixteen inches at Alpena. Heavy snow also fell in southwestern Minnesota, with Big Stone and Traverse Counties in the west-central portion of the state missing out on the heaviest snow. Considerable blowing and drifting snow hampered removal, particularly in South Dakota, due to reduced visibilities. Snowfall amounts also included three inches at Castlewood, five inches at Clear Lake, and six inches at Bryant.

December 23, 1996: Blizzard conditions developed across northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota in the late afternoon of the 23rd and continued into the late evening. Visibilities were frequently below one-quarter of a mile. Two to six inches of new snowfall combined with the already significant snow cover and north winds of 20 to 40 mph to cause widespread blizzard conditions and heavy drifting on area roads. Travel was significantly impacted if not impossible, and one fatality resulted from a head-on collision. Some snowfall amounts in Minnesota included 5 inches at Artichoke Lake and 6 inches at Wheaton and Browns Valley. In South Dakota, 7 inches fell at Britton, Webster, and Clear Lake, with 6 inches at Sisseton and 5 inches at Summit.

1811 — A cold storm hit Long Island sound with a foot of snow, gale force winds, and temperatures near zero. During the storm many ships were wrecked, and in some cases entire crews perished. (David Ludlum)

1921: An estimated F3 tornado struck the town of Clarkedale, Arkansas, killing six and injuring 60 others. Four people died in the destruction of the Banks and Danner store, where 50 people were doing their Christmas shopping.

1924: A storm producing winds of 70 mph caused extensive damage to Sydney, Australia during the evening hours.

1955 — The barometric pressure dipped to 28.97 inches (981 millibars) at Boise ID, an all-time record for that location. (The Weather Channel)

1982 — A major winter storm struck Colorado producing heavy snow and blizzard conditions. A record two feet of snow was reported at Stapleton Airport in Denver, which was shut down for 33 hours. Up to 44 inches of snow fell in the foothills surrounding Denver. The storm hurt the ski industry as skiers were unable to make it out of Denver to the slopes, and the closed airport became a campground for vacationers. (23rd-25th) (The Weather Channel) (Storm Data)

1983 — The temperature plunged to 50 degrees below zero at Williston ND to equal their all-time record. Minneapolis MN reported an afternoon high of 17 degrees below zero, and that evening strong northerly winds produced wind chill readings of 100 degrees below zero in North Dakota. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 — Low pressure in the Upper Midwest produced strong and gusty winds across the Great Lakes Region and the Ohio Valley. Winds in Ohio gusted to 47 mph at Cincinnati, and reached 51 mph at Cleveland. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1998: A major ice storm struck central and southeast Virginia and much of North Carolina beginning on Wednesday, December 23, and lasting until Christmas Day morning. Icy conditions caused injuries from slips and falls and numerous vehicle accidents. Ice accumulations of up to an inch brought down trees and power lines. Outages were so widespread with 400,000 customers were without power on Christmas Eve. Some people were without power for up to ten days.

2009 — Severe storms and heavy rainfall were associated with the same storm that brought blizzard conditions to the central parts of the U.S. on December 23rd and 24th. At least one death in Louisiana was blamed on the heavy rainfall and storms. There were 35 preliminary tornado reports and 34 hail and wind reports along the Gulf Coast over the 2-day period. The 10-year average number of tornadoes across the country in December is 36. (NCDC)

## Indifference to Christmas

**In the busyness of the holiday season, let's remember to worship Jesus.**

Matthew 2:1-6: 1 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying,

2 "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him."

3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.

4 Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

5 They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:

6 "AND YOU, BETHLEHEM, LAND OF JUDAH, ARE BY NO MEANS LEAST AMONG THE LEADERS OF JUDAH; FOR OUT OF YOU SHALL COME FORTH A RULER WHO WILL SHEPHERD MY PEOPLE ISRAEL."

Each year, there's a variety of responses to the holiday season. Over the next three days, we will examine different reactions to Christmas. Although more than 2,000 years have passed since Christ was born, His birth still elicits similar attitudes.

One common response is apathy. Even if they are filled with the holiday spirit and celebrate Christmas with gifts, decorations, and parties, some people remain indifferent to Jesus. He doesn't even register in their minds because they've lost sight of the reason for Christmas.

The Bible story about the Magi searching for the newborn King of the Jews reveals a similar indifference on the part of the religious leaders. The entourage from the East caused quite a stir in Jerusalem. It wasn't every day that impressive visitors arrived with such a shocking and exciting announcement. Yet when King Herod asked the scribes and chief priests where the Messiah was to be born, they simply told him the answer but made no attempt to go to Bethlehem themselves as the Magi did.

Sometimes it's easy to let the activities and pressures of Christmas push Jesus out of our thoughts. Though it may take a deliberate effort, this year let's intentionally make Jesus the priority of Christmas.

*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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## The Groton Independent

Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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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: 16 Hrs 33 Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.22.25

1 9 18 19 44 2

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$10,410,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 48 Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.22.25

9 16 23 34 46 7

TOP PRIZE:  
**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 3 Mins 31 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.20.25

4 15 17 23 35

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$136,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 3 Mins 31 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.22.25

14 32 47 48 69 17

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

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 32 Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:  
12.22.25

3 18 36 41 54 7

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:  
**\$1,700,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 32 Mins 32 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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

### **GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL**

Aberdeen Roncalli 57, Herried-Selby 36  
Avon 49, Hanson 42  
Chamberlain 48, Kimball-White Lake 16  
DeSmet 70, Dell Rapids St Mary's 49  
Dell Rapids 47, Elk Point-Jefferson 33  
Groton 42, Redfield 20  
Iroquois-Lake Preston 43, Estelline-Hendricks 37  
Lennox 55, Canton 26  
Milbank 64, Lac qui Parle Valley, Minn. 17  
WWSSC 37, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 25  
Wolsey-Wessington 55, Sully Buttes 34

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

### **BOYS PREP BASKETBALL**

Avon 74, Hanson 69, 3OT  
Chamberlain 65, Kimball-White Lake 31  
Corsica/Stickney 58, Canistota 38  
DeSmet 59, Dell Rapids St Mary's 48  
Dell Rapids 80, Elk Point-Jefferson 56  
Estelline-Hendricks 59, Iroquois-Lake Preston 58  
Groton 81, Redfield 32  
Lennox 67, Canton 37  
Milbank 63, Lac qui Parle Valley, Minn. 10  
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 57, Arlington 55, OT  
Sully Buttes 63, Wolsey-Wessington 49  
WWSSC 56, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 41  
West Sioux, Iowa 57, Alcester-Hudson 55

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

## **Colorado faces \$24M federal funding cut over illegal commercial driver's licenses**

DENVER (AP) — The head of the U.S. Department of Transportation threatened Monday to withhold \$24 million in federal funding from the state of Colorado for what he described as a slow response to a major violation of federal commercial driver's license regulations.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy pointed to a nationwide audit conducted in October that found about 22% of the commercial licenses doled out by Colorado to immigrants were done so illegally, many to Mexican nationals — a practice that's prohibited under federal law.

Duffy accused Colorado of "slow walking" the required purge of these licenses. He said the state has failed to complete a full audit, provide a complete accounting of affected drivers, or revoke the invalid credentials despite being notified of non-compliance.

Colorado Gov. Jared Polis called it a case of "crossed-wires," saying that if Duffy had reached out, he would know that the state has "finished the investigation and we are conducting a final review of the

findings, with letters likely going out this week to CDL holders whose credentials were improperly issued.” He said in a statement that the state is working quickly to revoke these licenses.

In addition to Duffy’s ultimatum, he also noted that the Transportation Department has the authority to decertify Colorado’s entire CDL program if the state doesn’t act swiftly.

“Every day that goes by is another day unqualified, unvetted foreign truckers are jeopardizing the safety of you and your family,” Duffy said in a statement.

Polis, a two-term Democrat, has been at odds with the Trump administration in recent months. Tensions flared as recently as this past weekend when the Trump administration denied disaster declaration requests following wildfires and flooding earlier this year. Last week, Polis also criticized the administration’s plans to dismantle a federal climate research lab located in the state.

Colorado’s Division of Motor Vehicles has paused the issuance and renewal of term-limited non-domiciled CDLs and commercial learner’s permits indefinitely, The Denver Post reported last week. That pause is expected to remain in place pending an audit of all such licenses to ensure compliance with federal regulations.

Duffy has threatened federal highway funding for other states, too, in his effort to make sure truck drivers and bus drivers are qualified to either haul passengers or 80,000 pounds (36,000 kilograms) of cargo down the highway.

New York was the fourth state run by a Democratic governor to be called out publicly earlier this month. Questions also have been raised about similar practices in California, Pennsylvania and Minnesota.

Letters also have gone out from the agency to Republican-run Texas and South Dakota.

Duffy launched the review this summer, but it became more prominent after officials reported that a truck driver who was not authorized to be in the U.S. made an illegal U-turn and caused a crash in Florida that killed three people in August.

The rules on these licenses the Transportation Department is enforcing have been in place for years. According to the federal audit, it was discovered that in some instances states may not have even checked a driver’s immigration status before issuing a license.

Since Duffy began pressing the issue in California, that state has revoked some 21,000 commercial driver’s licenses that were issued improperly.

## **Ex-aide says Netanyahu tasked him with making a plan to evade responsibility for Oct. 7 attack**

By JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — A former close aide to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says that immediately following the October 2023 Hamas attack that triggered Israel’s two-year war in Gaza, the Israeli leader instructed him to figure out how the premier could evade responsibility for the security breach.

Former Netanyahu spokesperson Eli Feldstein, who faces trial for allegedly leaking classified information to the press, made the explosive accusation during an extensive interview with Israel’s Kan news channel Monday night.

Critics have repeatedly accused Netanyahu of refusing to accept blame for the deadliest attack in Israel’s history. But little is known about Netanyahu’s behavior in the days immediately following the attack, while the premier has consistently resisted an independent state inquiry.

Speaking to Kan, Feldstein said “the first task” he received from Netanyahu after Oct. 7, 2023, was to stifle calls for accountability.

“He asked me, ‘What are they talking about in the news? Are they still talking about responsibility?’” Feldstein said. “He wanted me to think of something that could be said that would offset the media storm surrounding the question of whether the prime minister had taken responsibility or not.”

He added that Netanyahu looked “panicked” when he made the request. Feldstein said he was later told by people in Netanyahu’s close circle to omit the word “responsibility” from all statements.

On Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas-led militants killed some 1,200 people in southern Israel and took 251 hostages

back to Gaza. Israel then launched a devastating war in Gaza that has killed nearly 71,000 Palestinians in Gaza, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants but says around half the deaths were women and children.

Netanyahu's office called the interview a "long series of mendacious and recycled allegations made by a man with clear personal interests who is trying to deflect responsibility from himself," Hebrew media reported.

Feldstein's statements come after his indictment in a case where he is accused of leaking classified military information to a German tabloid to improve public perception of the prime minister following the killing of six hostages in Gaza in August of last year.

Feldstein is also a suspect in the "Qatargate" scandal, one of two close aides to Netanyahu accused of accepting money from Qatar while also working for the prime minister.

## Major Russian drone and missile attack on Ukraine kills at least 3 people and cuts power

By ILLIA NOVIKOV Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Russia fired more than 650 drones and three dozen missiles at Ukraine in a large-scale attack that began during the night and stretched into daylight hours Tuesday, officials said. At least three people were killed, including a 4-year-old child, two days before Christmas.

The barrage struck homes and the power grid in 13 regions of Ukraine, causing widespread outages in bitter temperatures, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said, a day after he described recent progress on finding a peace deal as "quite solid."

The bombardment demonstrated Russian President Vladimir Putin's intention of pursuing the invasion of Ukraine, Zelenskyy said in a post on the Telegram messaging app. Ukrainian and European officials have complained that Putin is not sincerely engaging with U.S.-led peace efforts.

The attack "is an extremely clear signal of Russian priorities," Zelenskyy said. "A strike before Christmas, when people want to be with their families, at home, in safety. A strike, in fact, in the midst of negotiations that are being conducted to end this war. Putin cannot accept the fact that we must stop killing."

U.S. President Donald Trump has for months been pressing for a peace agreement, but the negotiations have become entangled in the very different demands from Moscow and Kyiv.

U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff said Sunday he held "productive and constructive" talks in Florida with Ukrainian and European representatives. Trump was less effusive Monday, saying, "The talks are going along."

Initial reports from Ukrainian emergency services said the child died in Ukraine's northwestern Zhytomyr region, while a drone killed a woman in the Kyiv region, and another civilian death was recorded in the western Khmelnytskyi region, according to Zelenskyy.

Russia launched 635 drones of various types and 38 missiles, Ukraine's air force said. Air defenses stopped 587 drones and 34 missiles, it said.

It was the ninth large-scale Russian attack on Ukraine's energy system this year and left multiple regions in the west without power, while emergency power outages were in place across the country, acting Energy Minister Artem Nekraso said. Work to restore power would begin as soon as the security situation permitted, he said.

Ukraine's largest private energy supplier, DTEK, said the attack targeted thermal power stations in what it said was the seventh major strike on the company's facilities since October.

DTEK's thermal power plants have been hit more than 220 times since Russia's full-scale invasion began in February 2022. Those attacks have killed four workers and wounded 59.

Authorities in the western regions of Rivne, Ternopil and Lviv, as well as the northern Sumy region, reported damage to energy infrastructure or power outages after the attack.

In the southern Odesa region, Russia struck energy, port, transport, industrial and residential infrastructure, according to regional head Oleh Kiper.

A merchant ship and over 120 homes were damaged, he said.

## Gaza's tiny Christian community tries to capture the holiday spirit during the ceasefire

By MARIAM FAM Associated Press

Attallah Tarazi recently received Christmas presents that included socks and a scarf to shield him against the Gaza winter, and he joined some fellow Palestinian Christians in a round of hymns.

"Christ is born," the group sang in Arabic. "Hallelujah."

The presents and hymns offered the 76-year-old a taste of the holiday in a devastated Gaza, where a fragile ceasefire has provided some relief, but the losses of the Israel-Hamas war and the ongoing struggles of displaced people are dampening many traditional festivities.

Tarazi and much of the rest of Gaza's tiny Palestinian Christian community are trying to capture some of the season's spirit despite the destruction and uncertainty that surround them. He clings to hope and the faith that he said has seen him through the war.

"I feel like our joy over Christ's birth must surpass all the bitterness that we've been through," he said. He's been sheltering for more than two years at the Holy Family Church compound in Gaza, where a church group including choir members toured among displaced people this Christmas season, he said.

"In such a glorious moment, it's our right to forget all that's war, all that's danger, all that's bombardment."

But for some, the toll is inescapable.

This will be the first Christmas for Shadi Abo Dowd since the death of his mother, who was among those killed in July when an Israeli attack hit the same Catholic church compound where Tarazi lives and which has been housing displaced people. Israel issued statements of regret and said it was an accident.

Abo Dowd said his son was wounded in the assault that also hurt the parish priest.

Ahead of Christmas, the Latin patriarch of Jerusalem, Cardinal Pierbattista Pizzaballa, paid a visit to the Holy Family Parish. A patriarchate statement said the visit marked the beginning of Christmas celebrations in "a community that has lived and continues to live through dark and challenging times."

Suffering and a state of 'no peace and no war'

Abo Dowd, an Orthodox Christian who observes Christmas on Jan. 7, said he does not plan to celebrate beyond religious rituals and prayers. "There's no feast," he said.

"Things are difficult. The wound is still there," he said. "The suffering and pain are still there."

He added: "We're still living in a state of no peace and no war."

Israeli strikes have decreased since the ceasefire agreement took effect in October, but deadly attacks have not entirely ended. Israel and Hamas have traded accusations of breaking the truce and the more challenging second phase has yet to be implemented.

The war began when Hamas-led militants stormed into Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, killing some 1,200 people and taking about 250 hostages.

Israel's ensuing offensive has killed nearly 71,000 Palestinians in Gaza, according to Gaza's Health Ministry, which does not differentiate between civilians and combatants but says around half the deaths were women and children.

The ministry, which operates under the Hamas-run government, is staffed by medical professionals and maintains detailed records viewed as generally reliable by the international community.

Israel's offensive in Gaza has also caused widespread destruction and displaced the vast majority of the territory's some 2 million residents. Highlighting some of the many struggles and needs of the enclave and its people was torrential rain that recently flooded displacement camps and collapsed already badly damaged buildings.

"I always tell my children, 'God only gives the toughest battles to his strongest soldiers,'" Abo Dowd said. "We're holding onto our Christian faith and onto our country, and we love our country."

He and others know of many Christians among those who fled Gaza during the war and more who hope to leave if given the opportunity. He worries about the effect on the Christian presence and on Gaza's social fabric. "It's a tragedy," he said.

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His children would like to study abroad. "They're young. What will they stay to do? There's no future."  
A Christmas without many familiar faces  
The departure of many relatives and friends means Christmas doesn't feel the same for 23-year-old Wafa Emad ElSayegh.

He and family members gathered with others at Gaza's Greek Orthodox church compound to put up decorations. But the absence of friends who escaped Gaza fueled his nostalgia.

"We used to be together in everything," said ElSayegh, who's now staying with his family at the home of an aunt who left Gaza during the war.

His favorite part of Christmas was the togetherness — the family gatherings, the celebratory events that he said drew Christians and some Muslims, and the excitement of children receiving gifts.

"There would be celebrations, songs and an indescribable joy that we, unfortunately, haven't felt in a long time," he said. And with many relatives away, he said the usual Christmas atmosphere cannot be recreated.

Joy amid the pain

Elynour Amash, 35, is trying to bring some of that cheer to her children "through decorating and lighting the tree so they can feel that joy is possible despite all pain."

"My children feel a little bit of joy, like breathing after a long period of suffocation," she said in written responses to The Associated Press. "They're happy they're celebrating without fear of a nearby explosion and because some chocolates and sweets have returned to their lives, in addition to foods that they had long been deprived of."

She's thankful her home is still standing, but the scenes of displaced people in tents that cannot shield them from the cold and rain often drive her to tears.

"The sounds of explosions and gunfire can still be heard, and the fear hasn't left the hearts. There's continuous worry that the ceasefire won't last." She sees the toll in her youngest, who trembles when he hears loud noises.

"It's as if the war lives inside of him," she said. "As a mother, that pain is indescribable."

She also worries that someday Christians could disappear from Gaza. But, for now, "our presence, no matter how small, is a testimony of love, steadfastness and faith in this land," she said.

Tarazi is determined to stay.

Early in the war, he lost a sister, who was among those killed when an Israeli airstrike hit the Orthodox church compound housing displaced people. The Israeli military said it had targeted a nearby Hamas command center. Tarazi said a brother also died after he could not get needed medical care due to the war.

He prays for peace and freedom for the Palestinian people. "Our faith and our joy over Christ's birth are stronger than all circumstances," he said.

## At least 5 killed after Mexican Navy plane on medical mission crashes in Texas

By HALLIE GOLDEN and MEGAN JANETSKY Associated Press

A small Mexican Navy plane transporting a young medical patient and seven others crashed Monday near Galveston, killing at least five people and setting off a search in waters along the Texas coast, officials said.

Four of the people aboard were Navy officers and four were civilians, including a child, Mexico's Navy said in a statement to The Associated Press. Two of the passengers were from a nonprofit that provides aid to Mexican children with severe burns, including transports to a Galveston hospital.

U.S. Coast Guard Petty Officer Luke Baker said at least five aboard had died but did not identify which passengers.

The cause of the crash is under investigation.

Mexico's Marines said in a statement that it is sending "its deepest condolences to the families of those who lost their lives in this tragic accident."

The crash took place Monday afternoon in Galveston Bay near the base of the causeway that connects

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Galveston Island to the mainland. Emergency responders and search teams rushed to the scene near the popular beach destination along the Texas coast that is about 50 miles (80.5 kilometers) southeast of Houston.

Sky Decker, a professional yacht captain who lives about a mile (1.6 kilometers) from the crash site, said he jumped in his boat to see if he could help. He said he picked up two police officers who directed him through thick fog to a nearly completely submerged plane. Decker jumped in the water and found a badly injured woman trapped beneath chairs and other debris.

"I couldn't believe. She had maybe 3 inches of air gap to breathe in," he said. "And there was jet fuel in there mixed with the water, fumes real bad. She was really fighting for her life."

He said he also pulled out a man sitting in front of her who had already died. He described both of them as dressed in civilian clothes.

Mexico's Navy said the plane was helping with a medical mission in coordination with the Michou and Mau Foundation, which provides emergency transports to children with life-threatening burns to Shriners Children's hospital in Galveston, according to the nonprofit's website.

The foundation said in a post on social media, "We express our deepest solidarity with the families in light of these events. We share their grief with respect and compassion, honoring their memory and reaffirming our commitment to providing humane, sensitive, and dignified care to children with burns."

The statement from Mexico's Navy said the plane had an "accident" during its approach to Galveston but did not elaborate.

Teams from the Federal Aviation Administration and National Transportation Safety Board have arrived at the scene of the crash, the Texas Department of Public Safety said on the social platform X.

A spokesperson from NTSB said they are "aware of this accident and are gathering information about it." The Galveston County Sheriff's Office said officials from its dive team, crime scene unit, drone unit and patrol were responding to the crash.

It's not immediately clear if weather was a factor. The area has been experiencing foggy conditions over the past few days, according to Cameron Batiste, a National Weather Service meteorologist. He said that at about 2:30 p.m. Monday a fog came in that had about a half-mile visibility.

## US strikes another alleged drug-smuggling boat in eastern Pacific

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. military said Monday that it had conducted another strike against a boat it said was smuggling drugs in the eastern Pacific Ocean, killing one person.

In a social media post, U.S. Southern Command said, "Intelligence confirmed the low-profile vessel was transiting along known narco-trafficking routes in the Eastern Pacific and was engaged in narco-trafficking operations." Southern Command provided no evidence that the vessel was engaged in drug smuggling.

A video posted by U.S. Southern Command shows splashes of water near one side of the boat. After a second salvo, the rear of the boat catches fire. More splashes engulf the craft and the fire grows. In the final second of the video, the vessel can be seen adrift with a large patch of fire alongside it.

Earlier videos of U.S. boat strikes showed vessels suddenly exploding, suggesting missile strikes. Some strike videos even had visible rocket-like projectiles coming down on the boats.

The Trump administration has said the strikes were meant to stop the flow of drugs into the U.S. and increase pressure on Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

At least 105 people have been killed in 29 known strikes since early September. The strikes have faced scrutiny from U.S. lawmakers and human rights activists, who say the administration has offered scant evidence that its targets are indeed drug smugglers and say the fatal strikes amount to extrajudicial killings.

Meanwhile, the U.S. Coast Guard has stepped up efforts to interdict oil tankers in the Caribbean Sea as part of the Trump administration's escalating campaign against Maduro.

## Bureaucratic mishap delayed gun license for accused Bondi Beach

## shooter in Australia

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — A man accused of shooting dead 15 people at Sydney's Bondi Beach in an antisemitic attack faced a lengthy delay in getting a gun license because of a bureaucratic mishap, not because he raised suspicions, a state government leader said on Tuesday.

Sajid Akram, who was killed by police during the attack, and his 24-year-old son Naveed Akram are accused of assailing hundreds of Jews celebrating Hanukkah on Dec. 14, in Australia's worst mass shooting since 1996.

Questions have been raised about how the 50-year-old father came to legally own six rifles and shotguns.

Alleged shooter waited 3 years for gun license

New South Wales Premier Chris Minns on Tuesday confirmed that the father applied for a state license to own firearms in 2000, three years before it was granted. The process typically takes six to 10 weeks.

"The latest information that we have is that there was a real mess in relation to the bureaucracy when it comes to gun licenses and the delays related to that — not a specific threat" posed by the father, Minns told reporters.

Reporters asked Minns on Monday why the father was allowed to own guns when he shared his Sydney home with Naveed Akram, who had been investigated in 2019 by the spy agency Australian Security Intelligence Organization over his extremist links.

"I don't know. I'd give anything to go back a week, month, two years, to ensure that didn't happen. But we need to make sure that we take steps so that it never happens again," Minns said.

A wide ranging and powerful form of public investigation known as a royal commission will examine circumstances surrounding the massacre and the surge of antisemitism in Australia since the war between Israel and Hamas began in 2023.

State leader promises Australia's toughest gun laws

New South Wales Parliament was asked this week to pass laws that Minns said would provide the state with Australia's toughest gun laws.

Experts say video of the attack show the gunmen apparently using guns with straight-pull mechanisms, which enable more rapid fire than a comparable bolt-action mechanism.

Straight-pull guns would not be available to recreational shooters such as Sajid Akram under the proposed new laws.

The new restrictions would include making Australian citizenship a condition of qualifying for a gun license. That would have excluded Sajid Akram, who was an Indian citizen with a permanent resident visa.

A government decision to refuse a gun license, for reasons including spy agencies' suspicions, could no longer be appealed under the proposed reforms.

Recreational shooters would be allowed to own a maximum of four guns. Farmers and sports shooters would be allowed up to 10.

There are currently no limits in New South Wales. One individual currently has 298 guns registered in his name.

Farmers and rural lawmakers oppose gun reform

Farmers' groups have complained that 10 guns won't be enough for some. The Nationals party, which represents rural voters, opposed the proposed laws.

"The NSW Nationals Parliamentary team will not be supporting the Bill that uses gun reforms as a political tool rather than addressing the real issue of antisemitism," a party statement said.

Prime Minister Anthony Albanese agreed with Minns that six guns were too many for anyone living in suburban Sydney.

"The terrible events at Bondi show that we do need more guns off our streets," Albanese said.

"There is no reason why someone living in (suburban) Bonnyrigg needs six heavy arms," he added.

Home Affairs Minister Tony Burke said the federal government was drafting national reforms including a gun buy-back scheme for newly restricted weapons and new offenses related to 3D-printed guns.

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Police allege the day after the massacre, they found in a room rented by Sajid Akram 3D-printed parts for a shotgun speed loader. A speed loader enables a shooter to place multiple cartridges into a shotgun magazine at once rather than loading the cartridges one by one.

Police allege in court documents the Akrams adhered to a "religiously motivated ideology linked to Islamic State."

Police shot Naveed Akram in the abdomen during the massacre. He was in Sydney's Long Bay Correctional Complex on Tuesday after being transferred from a hospital on Monday.

He was charged last week with 59 offenses, including 15 counts of murder, 40 counts of causing harm with intent to murder in relation to the wounded survivors and one count of committing a terrorist act.

Victims' funerals continued on Tuesday. A service for Marika Pogany, 82, was held at a Catholic church in Sydney. She was Christian, but her mother was Jewish and she was close to Sydney's Jewish community.

The health department said 12 people wounded in the attack remained in hospitals on Tuesday, including four in critical condition.

A gunman armed with semiautomatic rifles killed 35 people at Port Arthur in Tasmania in 1996, leading Australia to make major national gun reforms that drastically reduced the number of rapid-fire weapons in the community.

## **Nigerians welcome 130 schoolchildren and teachers released after mass abduction**

MINNA, Nigeria (AP) — Nigerians on Monday got their first look at 130 children and teachers released after being seized in one of the largest mass abductions in the country's history.

Some of the children appeared to be malnourished or in shock as they arrived at a government ceremony. Police said they were freed Sunday, a month after gunmen stormed their Catholic school in Niger state's Papiri community in a predawn attack.

Authorities said plans were underway to reunite the children with their families before Christmas.

Authorities earlier said 303 schoolchildren and 12 teachers were seized and 50 of them escaped in the hours that followed. But on Monday, Niger state Gov. Mohammed Bago indicated that 230 had been taken and all had now been released.

School kidnappings have come to define insecurity in Africa's most populous country.

Officials did not say whether a ransom — common in such abductions — had been paid. No group has claimed responsibility, but residents blamed armed gangs that target schools and travelers in kidnappings for ransom across Nigeria's conflict-battered north.

Most of those seized in the attack were aged between 10 and 17, the school said. One of the children released earlier told The Associated Press that gunmen threatened to shoot them during the attack.

Maj. Gen. Adamu Garba Laka, national coordinator at Nigeria's Center for Counter Terrorism, told Monday's event that Nigeria will work with community leaders to boost safety in high-risk areas.

## **Powerball jackpot soars to \$1.7 billion after another night with no big winner**

By OLIVIA DIAZ Associated Press/Report for America

The Powerball jackpot has jumped to an eye-popping \$1.7 billion, after the 46th drawing passed without a big winner.

The numbers drawn Monday night were 3, 18, 36, 41, 54 and the Powerball 7.

Since Sept. 6, there have been 46 straight drawings without a big winner.

The next drawing will be Christmas Eve on Wednesday, with the prize expected to be the 4th-largest in U.S. lottery history.

Powerball's odds of 1 in 292.2 million are designed to generate big jackpots, with prizes growing as they roll over when no one wins. Lottery officials note that the odds are far better for the game's many smaller

prizes. There are three drawings each week.

The estimated \$1.6 billion jackpot goes to a winner who opts to receive 30 payments over 29 years through an annuity. Winners almost always choose the game's cash option, which for Monday night's drawing would be an estimated \$735.3 million.

Powerball tickets cost \$2, and the game is offered in 45 states plus Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico and the U.S. Virgin Islands.

## Trump warns Maduro against playing 'tough' as US escalates pressure campaign on Venezuela

By AAMER MADHANI, REGINA GARCIA CANO and EMMA BURROWS Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. (AP) — President Donald Trump on Monday delivered a new warning to Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro as the U.S. Coast Guard steps up efforts to interdict oil tankers in the Caribbean Sea as part of the Republican administration's escalating pressure campaign on the government in Caracas.

Trump was surrounded by his top national security aides, Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, as he suggested that he remains ready to further escalate his four-month pressure campaign on the Maduro government, which began with the stated purpose of stemming the flow of illegal drugs from the South American nation but has developed into something more amorphous.

"If he wants to do something, if he plays tough, it'll be the last time he'll ever be able to play tough," Trump said of Maduro as he took a break from his Florida holiday vacation to announce plans for the Navy to build a new, large warship.

Trump levied his latest threat as the U.S. Coast Guard on Monday continued for a second day to chase a sanctioned oil tanker that the Trump administration describes as part of a "dark fleet" Venezuela is using to evade U.S. sanctions. The tanker, according to the White House, is flying under a false flag and is under a U.S. judicial seizure order.

"It's moving along and we'll end up getting it," Trump said.

It is the third tanker pursued by the Coast Guard, which on Saturday seized a Panama-flagged vessel called Centuries that U.S. officials said was part of the Venezuelan shadow fleet.

The Coast Guard, with assistance from the Navy, seized a sanctioned tanker called Skipper on Dec. 10, also part of the shadow fleet of tankers that the U.S. says operates on the fringes of the law to move sanctioned cargo. That ship was registered in Panama.

Trump, after that first seizure, said the U.S. would carry out a "blockade" of Venezuela. Trump has repeatedly said that Maduro's days in power are numbered.

Last week, Trump demanded that Venezuela return assets that it seized from U.S. oil companies years ago, justifying anew his announcement of a blockade against sanctioned oil tankers traveling to or from the South American country.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, whose agency oversees the Coast Guard, said in a Monday appearance on "Fox & Friends" that the targeting of tankers is intended to send "a message around the world that the illegal activity that Maduro is participating in cannot stand, he needs to be gone, and that we will stand up for our people."

Russian diplomats evacuate families from Caracas

Meanwhile, Russia's Foreign Ministry started evacuating the families of diplomats from Venezuela, according to a European intelligence official speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive information.

The official told The Associated Press the evacuations include women and children and began on Friday, adding that Russian Foreign Ministry officials are assessing the situation in Venezuela in "very grim tones." The ministry said in an X posting that it was not evacuating the embassy but did not address queries about whether it was evacuating the families of diplomats.

Venezuela's Foreign Minister Yván Gil on Monday said he spoke by phone with his Russian counterpart,

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Sergey Lavrov, who he said expressed Russia's support for Venezuela against Trump's declared blockade of sanctioned oil tankers.

"We reviewed the aggressions and flagrant violations of international law that have been committed in the Caribbean: attacks against vessels and extrajudicial executions, and the unlawful acts of piracy carried out by the United States government," Gil said in a statement.

The scene on a Venezuelan beach near a refinery

While U.S. forces targeted the vessels in international waters over the weekend, a tanker that's considered part of the shadow fleet was spotted moving between Venezuelan refineries, including one about three hours west of the capital, Caracas.

The tanker remained at the refinery in El Palito through Sunday, when families went to the town's beach to relax with children now on break from school.

Music played on loudspeakers as people swam and surfed with the tanker in the background. Families and groups of teenagers enjoyed themselves, but Manuel Salazar, who has parked cars at the beach for more than three decades, noticed differences from years past, when the country's oil-dependent economy was in better shape and the energy industry produced at least double the current 1 million barrels per day.

"Up to nine or 10 tankers would wait out there in the bay. One would leave, another would come in," Salazar, 68, said. "Now, look, one."

The tanker in El Palito has been identified by Transparencia Venezuela, an independent watchdog promoting government accountability, to be part of the shadow fleet.

Area residents on Sunday recalled when tankers would sound their horns at midnight New Year's Eve, while some would even send up fireworks to celebrate the holiday.

"Before, during vacations, they'd have barbecues; now all you see is bread with bologna," Salazar said of Venezuelan families spending the holiday at the beach next to the refinery. "Things are expensive. Food prices keep going up and up every day."

Venezuela's ruling party-controlled National Assembly on Monday gave initial approval to a measure that would criminalize a broad range of activities that could be linked to the seizure of oil tankers.

Lawmaker Giuseppe Alessandrello, who introduced the bill, said people could be fined and imprisoned for up to 20 years for promoting, requesting, supporting, financing or participating in "acts of piracy, blockades or other international illegal acts against" commercial entities operating with the South American country.

The Defense Department, under Trump's orders, continues its campaign of attacks on smaller vessels in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific Ocean that it alleges are carrying drugs to the United States and beyond.

At least 105 people have been killed in 29 known strikes since early September. The strikes have faced scrutiny from U.S. lawmakers and human rights activists, who say the administration has offered scant evidence that its targets are indeed drug smugglers and that the fatal strikes amount to extrajudicial killings.

## Ukraine's Zelenskyy says progress in US-led peace talks is 'quite solid'

By SAMYA KULLAB and VASILISA STEPANENKO Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — Initial drafts of U.S. proposals for a peace deal between Ukraine and Russia meet many of Kyiv's demands, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Monday, although he suggested that neither side in the almost four-year war is likely to get everything it wants in talks on reaching a settlement.

"Overall, it looks quite solid at this stage," the Ukrainian leader said of recent talks with U.S. officials who are trying to steer the neighboring countries toward compromises.

"There are some things we are probably not ready for, and I'm sure there are things the Russians are not ready for either," Zelenskyy told reporters in Kyiv.

U.S. President Donald Trump has for months been pushing for a peace agreement, but the negotiations have run into sharply conflicting demands from Moscow and Kyiv.

U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff said Sunday he held "productive and constructive" talks in Florida with Ukrainian and European representatives, though Trump was less effusive the following day, saying, "The talks

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are going along.”

“We are talking. It’s going OK,” Trump said Monday while on vacation at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida. Asked if he planned to speak to Zelenskyy or Russian President Vladimir Putin, Trump didn’t say, offering only of the fighting, “I’d like to see it stopped.”

Zelenskyy, meanwhile, said “nearly 90%” of Ukraine’s demands have been incorporated into the draft agreements.

The backbone of the proposed deal is a 20-point plan, he said. There is also a framework document on security guarantees between Ukraine, European countries, and the United States, as well as a separate document on bilateral security guarantees granted to Ukraine by the U.S.

Zelenskyy mentioned several key points, such as the Ukrainian army remaining at a peacetime level of 800,000; membership in the European Union; and European forces, under the leadership of France and the U.K. and with a “backstop” from Washington, ensuring “Ukraine’s security in the air, on land, and at sea.”

“Some key countries will provide presence in these domains; others will contribute to energy security, finance, bomb shelters, and so on,” the Ukrainian president said.

Ukraine is arguing that the bilateral document with the U.S. should be reviewed by the U.S. Congress, with some details and annexes kept classified, Zelenskyy said.

The U.S. team is now in talks with Russian envoys, and Washington has asked that no details be released, he added.

#### Ukraine strikes deep inside Russia

Zelenskyy said Monday he met with his military commanders who reported that defensive lines are holding firm against the Russian onslaught.

“In (recent) weeks, the Russian army has significantly increased the intensity of attacks, and the number of Russian losses has increased accordingly,” he said in a post on Telegram.

Ukrainian forces hit an oil terminal, a pipeline, two parked jet fighters and two ships in a series of strikes on Russian soil, officials said Monday.

The attacks are part of an ongoing campaign to disrupt the Russian war effort and sow fear behind the front line, where outnumbered Ukrainian troops are straining to hold back Russia’s bigger army.

The strikes also seek to undermine Putin’s attempt to portray Russia as negotiating from a position of military strength in U.S.-led peace efforts, which have yet to make a breakthrough on key points.

The killing of a top Russian general by a car bomb in Moscow on Monday, with investigators suspecting Ukraine was behind it, could be another instance of Kyiv picking surprise targets.

#### Ukrainian partisans burn Russian fighter jets

Ukrainian forces struck the Tamananeftegaz oil terminal, an ammunition depot and a launch site for attack drones inside Russian territory and Russian-held Ukrainian territory, Ukraine’s General Staff said in a statement Monday.

A pipeline, two docks and two ships were damaged in the southern Krasnodar region, and a large blaze broke out, the statement said, without specifying what kind of weapons were used in the attack.

It added that a Ukrainian-made missile also hit a temporary base for Russia’s 92nd River Boat Brigade in Olenivka, in the occupied Crimean Peninsula.

A separate strike targeted an ammunition depot in a Russian-controlled portion of the Donetsk region, aiming to slow the Russian advance there, the General Staff said. A Russian launch site for attack drones was also hit.

Ukrainian partisans set fire to two Russian jet fighters in an operation on Sunday evening at a base near Lipetsk, a city in western Russia, according to Ukraine’s military intelligence.

Russia’s Ministry of Defense said only that its forces shot down 41 Ukrainian drones overnight, three of them over the Krasnodar region.

#### Russia targets the power grid again

Meanwhile, Russian forces kept up their targeting of Ukraine’s energy sector, aiming to deprive civilians of heat and running water during the frigid winter. Russia has tried to knock out power in Ukraine throughout

the war, in a tactic that Ukraine refers to as “weaponizing winter.”

Energy infrastructure across five regions were attacked during the night, Ukraine’s Ministry of Energy said.

Russia struck Ukraine with 86 drones of different types overnight, Ukraine’s air force said. Ukrainian forces stopped 58 of them, it said.

## **An American Dream at risk: What happens to a small Nebraska town when 3,200 workers lose their jobs**

By JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

LEXINGTON, Neb. (AP) — On a frigid day after Mass at St. Ann’s Catholic Church in rural Nebraska, worshippers shuffled into the basement and sat on folding chairs, their faces barely masking the fear gripping their town.

A pall hung over the room just as it hung over the holiday season in Lexington, Nebraska.

“Suddenly they tell us that there’s no more work. Your world closes in on you,” said Alejandra Gutierrez.

She and the others work at Tyson Foods’ beef plant and are among the 3,200 people who will lose their jobs when Lexington’s biggest employer closes the plant next month after more than two decades of operation.

Hundreds of families may be forced to pack up and leave the town of 11,000, heading east to Omaha or Iowa, or south to the meatpacking towns of Kansas or beyond, causing spinoff layoffs in Lexington’s restaurants, barbershops, grocers, convenience stores and taco trucks.

“Losing 3,000 jobs in a city of 10,000 to 12,000 people is as big a closing event as we’ve seen virtually for decades,” said Michael Hicks, director of the Center for Business and Economic Research at Indiana’s Ball State University. It will be “close to the poster child for hard times.”

All told, the job losses are expected to reach 7,000, largely in Lexington and the surrounding counties, according to a report from the University of Nebraska, Lincoln, released Monday. Tyson employees alone will lose an estimated \$241 million in pay and benefits annually.

Tyson says it’s closing the plant to “right-size” its beef business after a historically low cattle herd in the U.S. and the company’s expected loss of \$600 million on beef production next fiscal year.

The plant’s closure threatens to unravel a Great Plains town where the American Dream was still attainable, where immigrants who didn’t speak English and never graduated high school bought homes, raised children in a safe community and sent them to college.

Now, those symbols of economic progress — mortgages and car payments, property taxes and tuition costs — are bills that thousands of Tyson workers won’t have an income to pay.

At St. Ann’s church, Gutierrez sat between her daughters and recalled being told of the plant closure just before Thanksgiving while she visited a college campus with her high school senior, Kimberly.

“At that moment, my daughter said she no longer wanted to study,” Gutierrez said. “Because where would we get the money to pay for college?”

A tear slipped down Kimberly’s cheek as she looked at her mother and then down at her hands.

‘Tyson was our motherland’

If you threw a dart at a map of the United States, Lexington — called “Lex” by locals — would be just about bullseye.

It’s easy to miss driving down Interstate 80, half hidden by barren hackberry trees, corn fields and pastures of Black Angus cattle, but a driver can spy the plant’s hulking industrial buildings pumping steam.

The plant opened in 1990 and was bought by Tyson 11 years later, attracting thousands of workers and nearly doubling the town’s population within a decade.

Many came from Los Angeles, then stricken by recession, including Lizeth Yanes, who initially hated what she called “a little ghost town.”

But soon Lexington flourished, with suburbs sprouting among bur oak and American elm trees. The downtown, a strip of cobblestone streets and brick buildings, has a Somali grocer that abuts a Hispanic bakery; locals attend over a dozen churches and several city recreation centers.

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To this day, the plant creates the town's rhythm as workers roll on and off the daily A, B and C shifts and fill restaurants, school pickup lines and the one-screen movie theater showing "Polar Express."

"It took a long time for me to actually enjoy this little place," said Yanes. "Now that I enjoy it, now I have to leave."

The atmosphere inside the Tyson plant, where workers process as many as 5,000 head of cattle a day, laboring on slaughter floors, cleaning crews or trimming cuts of meat, feels "like a funeral," she said.

"Tyson was our motherland," said plant worker Arab Adan. The Kenyan immigrant sat in his car with his two energetic sons, who asked him a question he has no answer to: "Which state are we gonna go, daddy?"

The only thing Adan is set on is that his kids finish the school year in Lexington, where school officials say nearly half of students have a parent working for Tyson.

The school district, where at least 20 languages and dialects are spoken, has higher high school graduation and college attendance rates than the state and national average, and one of Nebraska's biggest marching bands. Residents are proud of the diversity and the tightknit community, where young people return to raise families.

During Mass at St. Ann's, parishioners gave the cash in their pockets to a fund for families in financial need, despite knowing they'll be out of work next month. Afterward, Francisco Antonio ran through his future employment options with a sad smile.

After the plant closes on Jan. 20, the 52-year-old father of four said he'll stay a few months in Lexington and look for work, though "now there's no future." He took off his glasses, paused, apologized and tried to explain his emotions.

"It's home mostly, not the job," he said, replacing his glasses with an embarrassed smile.

"We need another opportunity, job, here in Lex," he said. "Otherwise Lex is gonna disappear."

'Tyson owes this community'

The domino effect could go something like this: If 1,000 families skip town, said economist Hicks — who wouldn't be surprised if it were double that — seats would be left empty in schools, leading to teacher layoffs; there would be far fewer customers in restaurants, shops and other businesses.

Most of the customers at Los Jalapenos, a Mexican restaurant down the street from the plant, are Tyson workers. They fill booths after work and are greeted by owner Armando Martinez's mustachioed grin and bellow of "Hola, amigo!"

Martinez's grandson once told his grandfather that when he grows up he wants to work at Tyson. The child's fifth-grade sister recently gathered with classmates to talk about the changes happening with their parents. Some were headed to California, others to Kansas. All were in tears.

If he can't keep up with bills, the restaurant will close, but "there's just nowhere we can go," said Martinez, who undergoes dialysis for diabetes, has an amputated foot and prays for a miracle: that Tyson will change its mind.

He knows it's unlikely. Asked by The Associated Press for comment about plans for the site, Tyson said in a statement that it "is currently assessing how we can repurpose the facility within our own production network." It did not provide details, or say whether it plans to offer support to the community through the plant closure.

Many, including City Manager Joe Pepplitsch, are hoping Tyson puts the plant up for sale and a new company comes in bringing jobs. That isn't a quick fix, requiring time, negotiations, renovations and no guarantee of comparable jobs.

"Tyson owes this community a debt. I think they have a responsibility here to help ease some of the impact," he said, noting Tyson doesn't pay city taxes due to a deal negotiated decades ago.

'It's not easy, at our age, to go back and start over'

Near the plant, at the Dawson County Fairgrounds, Tyson workers recently filled a long hall as state agencies — responding with the urgency of a natural disaster — offered information on retraining, writing a resume, filing for unemployment and avoiding scammers when selling homes.

Attendees' faces were subdued, like listening to a doctor's prognosis. "Your financial health is going to

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change," they were told. "Don't ignore the bank, they will not go away."

Many of the older workers don't speak English, haven't graduated high school and aren't computer savvy. The last application some filled out was decades ago.

"We know only working in meat for Tyson, we don't have any other experience," said Adan, the Kenyan immigrant.

Back at St. Ann's, workers echoed that concern.

"They only want young people now," said Juventino Castro, who's worked at Tyson for a quarter-century. "I don't know what's going to happen in the time I have left."

Lupe Ceja said she's saved a little money, but it won't last long. Luz Alvidrez has a cleaning gig that will sustain her for awhile. Others might return to Mexico for a time. Nobody has a clear plan.

"It won't be easy," said Fernando Sanchez, a Tyson worker for 35 years who sat with his wife. "We started here from scratch and it's time to start from scratch again."

Tears rolled down his wife's cheeks and he squeezed her hand.

## **Brown University police chief placed on leave after fatal shooting, feds launch investigation**

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI and JEFF AMY Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (AP) — Brown University's president on Monday placed its campus police chief on leave as the Rhode Island university reviews its security policies after a gunman killed two students and injured nine others earlier this month.

Questions surrounding Brown's security policies have only intensified since the Dec. 13 shooting that rocked the Providence community and led to a lengthy search for the killer. Much of the focus has centered on whether the Ivy League school had security cameras installed in the building where the attack took place in and the overall ease of accessing campus buildings.

University President Christina Paxson said Rodney Chatman will be replaced by Hugh T. Clements, former police chief of the Providence Police Department. Chatman had previously faced a vote of no confidence by the union representing school police officers in October. Local media outlets reported at the time that the union said the vote reflected "serious concerns over the failed leadership, contract violations, and policies that jeopardize public safety."

The scrutiny over the school's security has led to an investigation by the U.S. Department of Education, which said earlier Monday that officials are asking Brown for information to help determine if school officials violated federal campus safety and security requirements. This has included seeking security reports, audits, dispatch and call logs, and when emergency notifications have been utilized.

Meanwhile, hundreds gathered at the Cathedral Church of the Advent in downtown Birmingham, Alabama, on Monday to remember Ella Cook, a Brown sophomore who was killed in the attack.

On Dec. 13, gunman Claudio Neves Valente, 48, entered a study session in a Brown academic building and opened fire on students, killing Cook and 18-year-old freshman MukhammadAziz Umurzokov and wounding nine others.

Two days later, authorities say Neves Valente, who had been a graduate student at Brown studying physics during the 2000-01 school year, also fatally shot Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Nuno F.G. Loureiro at Loureiro's Boston-area home.

Neves Valente, who had attended school with Loureiro in Portugal in the 1990s, was found dead days later in a New Hampshire storage facility. Authorities say he killed himself. An autopsy determined that Neves Valente died Dec. 16, the same day Loureiro died in a hospital.

In Alabama, Cook's family on Monday invited attendees to wear "Easter colors," underscoring Cook's Christian faith, at an Episcopal funeral service that also nodded to the Christmas season.

The Rev. Paul F.M. Zahl, who formerly led the church, read from several letters written by members of the Brown community to Cook's parents, Anna Bishop Cook and Richard Cook, who raised Ella and her

two younger siblings in the affluent Birmingham suburb of Mountain Brook.

"Ella was smart, confident, curious, kind, principled, brave. She had a big impact on campus in only three semesters," wrote Brown professor of political economy David Skarbek. "I used to tell Ella, 'We need an Alabama to Brown pipeline.' In fact, her nickname on campus was Ellabama."

Zahl told the congregation that the funeral was "a kind of bigger stage, a kind of more amplified mic" for Cook to spread her Christian faith. Zahl said he dreamed last week that he was skiing behind Cook and her family. "Ella turned around and shouted confidently, self-assuredly, 'Come on, will you?'" he said, saying he believed God had shown himself through the dream.

"I pray now that everyone who has loved Ella so much in this life would be given a vivid, individual feeling of Ella's love, still present with us," Zahl said. "Because Ella's love is eternal and entirely altruistic."

Cook was an accomplished pianist who was studying French, math and economics at Brown, where she also served as vice president of the college Republicans. Her political activity brought a wave of reaction from national and Alabama Republicans. Alabama Gov. Kay Ivey ordered flags to be flown at half-staff statewide in Cook's memory.

## Flash flooding in northern California leads to soaked roads, water rescues and 1 death

By NOAH BERGER and TRẦN NGUYỄN Associated Press

REDDING, Calif. (AP) — Heavy rain and flash flooding soaked roads in northern California, leading to water rescues from vehicles and homes and at least one confirmed death, authorities said Monday.

In Redding, a city at the northern end of California's Central Valley, one motorist died after calling 911 while trapped in their vehicle as it filled up with water, Mayor Mike Littau posted online Monday. Police said they received numerous calls for drivers stranded in flooded areas.

"Redding police officer swam out into the water, broke the windows and pulled victim to shore. CPR was done but the person did not live," Littau wrote.

The Redding area saw between 3 and 6 inches (7.6 centimeters and 15.2 centimeters) of rain from Saturday through Sunday night, the National Weather Service said.

As scattered showers lingered into Monday, some local roads remained flooded as street crews worked to clear debris and tow abandoned cars.

Dekoda Cruz waded in knee-deep muddy water to check on a friend's flooded tire business, where the office was littered with a jumble of furniture and bobbing tires.

Redding's mayor warned of even more dangerous weather in the coming days, and the city distributed free sand bags to residents in preparation for the next storm.

The National Weather Service expects rain through the Christmas week as a series of atmospheric rivers was forecast to make its way through Northern California. A large swath of the Sacramento Valley and surrounding areas were under a flood watch through Friday.

An atmospheric river is a long, narrow band of water vapor that forms over an ocean and flows through the sky, transporting moisture from the tropics to northern latitudes.

The weather pattern was expected to intensify by midweek, which could lead to potential mudslides, rockslides and flooding of creeks and streams, forecasters warned. Up to 6 feet (1.83 meters) of snow was predicted for parts of the Sierra Nevada and winds could reach 55 mph (90 kph) in high elevations by Wednesday.

Travel in the mountain passes on Christmas day would be "difficult to near impossible," the weather service said.

Southern California can also expect a soggy Christmas, with some areas in Ventura County are forecast to get up to 11 inches (28 centimeters) of rain by Saturday. Parts of Los Angeles, including areas with burn scars from the deadly Palisades fire, will be under evacuation warnings beginning Tuesday.

The weather service urged people to make backup plans for holiday travel.

Earlier this month, stubborn atmospheric rivers drenched Washington state with nearly 5 trillion gallons

(19 trillion liters) of rain in a week, threatening record flood levels, meteorologists said. That rainfall was supercharged by warm weather and air, plus unusual weather conditions tracing back as far as a tropical cyclone in Indonesia.

## Judge chides Ghislaine Maxwell for mentioning victim names in papers seeking to overturn conviction

By MICHAEL R. SISAK and LARRY NEUMEISTER Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — A judge on Monday scolded Jeffrey Epstein's longtime confidant Ghislaine Maxwell for including confidential victim names in court papers seeking to set aside her 2021 sex trafficking conviction and free her from a 20-year prison sentence.

Judge Paul A. Engelmayer said exhibits included with Maxwell's habeas petition — which she filed on her own, without a lawyer — will be kept under seal and out of public view "until they have been reviewed and appropriately redacted to protect the identities of victims."

Any future papers Maxwell files must be submitted under seal, the judge wrote.

He said he "reminds Maxwell, in strong terms, that she is prohibited from including in any public filings any information identifying victim(s) who were not publicly identified by name during her trial."

A message seeking comment was left with Maxwell's lawyer, David Markus.

Maxwell filed the petition last Wednesday, two days before the Justice Department started releasing investigative records pertaining to her and Epstein in accordance with the recently enacted Epstein Files Transparency Act.

Maxwell contends that information that would have resulted in her exoneration was withheld and that false testimony was presented to the jury. She said the cumulative effect of the constitutional violations resulted in a "complete miscarriage of justice."

Engelmayer said Maxwell has until Feb. 17, 2026, to notify him whether she plans to include any information from the so-called Epstein files in her petition and must file an amended version by March 31, 2026.

A slow, heavily redacted release of files

Protecting victim identifies has been a key sticking point in the Justice Department's ongoing release.

The department has said it plans to release records on a rolling basis by the end of the year, blaming the delay on the time-consuming process of obscuring victims' names and other identifying information. So far, the department hasn't given any notice when new records arrive.

That approach angered some accusers and members of Congress who fought to pass the transparency act. Records that were released, including photographs, interview transcripts, call logs, court records and other documents, were either already public or heavily blacked out, and many lacked necessary context.

The Senate's top Democrat on Monday urged colleagues to take legal action over the incremental and heavily redacted release.

Minority Leader Chuck Schumer introduced a resolution that, if passed, would direct the Senate to file or join lawsuits aimed at forcing the Justice Department to comply with the Epstein Files Transparency Act, the law enacted last month that required disclosure of records by last Friday.

"Instead of transparency, the Trump administration released a tiny fraction of the files and blacked out massive portions of what little they provided," Schumer, D-N.Y. said in a statement. "This is a blatant cover-up."

In lieu of Republican support, Schumer's resolution is largely symbolic. The Senate is off until Jan. 5, more than two weeks after the deadline. Even then, it'll likely face an uphill battle for passage. But it allows Democrats to continue a pressure campaign for disclosure that Republicans had hoped to put behind them.

There were few revelations in the tens of thousands of pages of records that have been released so far. Some of the most eagerly awaited records, such as FBI victim interviews and internal memos shedding light on charging decisions, weren't there.

Nor were there any mentions of some powerful figures who've been in Epstein's orbit, like Britain's former Prince Andrew.

Some files removed, then restored

Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche on Sunday defended the Justice Department's decision to release just a fraction of the files by the deadline as necessary to protect survivors of sexual abuse by the disgraced financier.

Blanche pledged that the Trump administration would meet its obligation required by law. But he stressed that the department was obligated to act with caution as it goes about making public thousands of documents that can include sensitive information. And he said legal precedent had long established that obligations to protect the privacy of victims permit authorities to go beyond deadlines to ensure they are protected.

Blanche, the Justice Department's second-in-command, also defended its decision to remove several files related to the case from its public webpage, including a photograph showing Trump, less than a day after they were posted.

The missing files, which were available Friday but no longer accessible by Saturday, included images of paintings depicting nude women, and one showed a series of photographs along a credenza and in drawers. In that image, inside a drawer among other photos, was a photograph of Trump alongside Epstein, Melania Trump and Epstein's longtime associate, Ghislaine Maxwell.

Blanche said the documents were removed because of a concern that they might also show victims of Epstein. Blanche said the Trump photo and the other documents would be reposted once redactions, if necessary, were made to protect survivors.

The Trump photograph was returned to the public webpage without alterations Sunday after it was determined that a concern by some government workers that victims may have been depicted in the picture proved unfounded, the Justice Department said.

"We are not redacting information around President Trump, around any other individual involved with Mr. Epstein, and that narrative, which is not based on fact at all, is completely false," Blanche told NBC's "Meet the Press."

Blanche said Trump, a Republican, has labeled the Epstein matter "a hoax" because "there's this narrative out there that the Department of Justice is hiding and protecting information about him, which is completely false."

"The Epstein files existed for years and years and years and you did not hear a peep out of a single Democrat for the past four years and yet ... lo and behold, all of a sudden, out of the blue, Senator Schumer suddenly cares about the Epstein files," Blanche said. "That's the hoax."

## **Trump administration suspends 5 wind projects off the East Coast, cites national security concerns**

By MATTHEW DALY Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Trump administration on Monday suspended leases for five large-scale offshore wind projects under construction along the East Coast due to what it said were national security risks identified by the Pentagon.

The suspension, effective immediately, is the latest step by the administration to hobble offshore wind in its push against renewable energy sources. It comes two weeks after a federal judge struck down President Donald Trump's executive order blocking wind energy projects, calling it unlawful.

The administration said the pause will give the Interior Department, which oversees offshore wind, time to work with the Defense Department and other agencies to assess the possible ways to mitigate any security risks posed by the projects. The statement did not detail the national security risks. It called the move a pause, but did not specify an end date.

"The prime duty of the United States government is to protect the American people," Interior Secretary Doug Burgum said in a statement. "Today's action addresses emerging national security risks, including the rapid evolution of the relevant adversary technologies, and the vulnerabilities created by large-scale offshore wind projects with proximity near our east coast population centers."

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Wind proponents slammed the move, saying it was another blow in an ongoing attack by the administration against clean energy. The administration's decision to cite potential national security risks could complicate legal challenges to the move, although wind supporters say those arguments are overstated.

Projects paused over national security concerns

The administration said leases are paused for the Vineyard Wind project under construction in Massachusetts, Revolution Wind in Rhode Island and Connecticut, Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind, and two projects in New York: Sunrise Wind and Empire Wind.

The Interior Department said unclassified reports from the U.S. government have long found that the movement of massive turbine blades and the highly reflective towers create radar interference called "clutter." The clutter caused by offshore wind projects can obscure legitimate moving targets and generate false targets in the vicinity of wind projects, the Interior Department said.

National security expert and former Commander of the USS Cole Kirk Lippold disputed the administration's national security argument. The offshore projects were awarded permits "following years of review by state and federal agencies," including the Coast Guard, the Naval Undersea Warfare Center, the Air Force and more, he said.

"The record of decisions all show that the Department of Defense was consulted at every stage of the permitting process," Lippold said, arguing that the projects would benefit national security because they would diversify the country's energy supply.

Sen. Sheldon Whitehouse, D-R.I., said Revolution Wind was thoroughly vetted and fully permitted by the federal government, "and that review included any potential national security questions." Burgum's action "looks more like the kind of vindictive harassment we have come to expect from the Trump administration than anything legitimate," he said.

A judge ruled blocking wind projects was unlawful

The administration's action comes two weeks after a federal judge struck down Trump's executive order blocking wind energy projects, saying the effort to halt virtually all leasing of wind farms on federal lands and waters was "arbitrary and capricious" and violates U.S. law.

Judge Patti Saris of the U.S. District Court for the District of Massachusetts vacated Trump's Jan. 20 executive order blocking wind energy projects and declared it unlawful.

Saris ruled in favor of a coalition of state attorneys general from 17 states and Washington, D.C., led by New York Attorney General Letitia James, that challenged Trump's Day One order that paused leasing and permitting for wind energy projects.

Trump has been hostile to renewable energy, particularly offshore wind, and prioritizes fossil fuels to produce electricity. Trump has said wind turbines are ugly, expensive and pose a threat to birds and other wildlife.

Wind proponents slam the move

Wind supporters called the administration's actions illegal and said offshore wind provides some of the most affordable, reliable electric power to the grid.

"For nearly a year, the Trump administration has recklessly obstructed the build-out of clean, affordable power for millions of Americans, just as the country's need for electricity is surging," said Ted Kelly of the Environmental Defense Fund.

"Now the administration is again illegally blocking clean, affordable energy," Kelly said. "We should not be kneecapping America's largest source of renewable power, especially when we need more cheap, homegrown electricity."

The administration's actions are especially egregious because, at the same time, it is propping up aging, expensive coal plants "that barely work and pollute our air," Kelly said.

Connecticut Attorney General William Tong called the lease suspension a "lawless and erratic stop-work order" that revives an earlier, failed attempt to halt construction of Revolution Wind.

"Every day this project is stalled is another day of lost work, another day of unaffordable energy costs and burning fossil fuels when American-made clean energy is within reach," Tong said. "We are evaluating all legal options, and this will be stopped just like last time."

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Suspension is praised by anti-wind group

A New Jersey group that opposes offshore wind hailed the administration's actions.

"Today, the president and his administration put America first," said Robin Shaffer, president of Protect Our Coast New Jersey, a nonprofit advocacy group.

"Placing largely foreign-owned wind turbines along our coastlines was never acceptable," he said, arguing that Empire Wind, in particular, poses a threat because of its close proximity to major airports, including Newark Liberty, LaGuardia and JFK.

Offshore wind projects also pose a threat to commercial and recreational fishing industries, Shaffer and other critics say.

Developers of U.S. offshore projects include Denmark-based Orsted, Norway-based Equinor and a subsidiary of Spanish energy giant Iberdrola. Orsted, which owns two of the projects affected, saw stock prices decline by more than 11% Monday.

Richmond-based Dominion Energy, which is developing Coastal Virginia Offshore Wind, said its project is essential for national security and meeting Virginia's dramatically growing energy needs, driven by dozens of new data centers.

"Stopping CVOW for any length of time will threaten grid reliability ... lead to energy inflation and threaten thousands of jobs," the company said in a statement.

Pausing the Virginia project, which is nearly 70% complete, creates a "perfect storm" to harm customer affordability and grid reliability, said David Shephard, an energy expert at Baringa, a global consulting firm.

East Coast residents are familiar with winter storms that can devastate local economies, Shephard said, adding: "This is a new one for the area: a Washington-borne nor'easter where the political winds are going to stop the blades from spinning."

## Most US adults aren't making year-end charitable contributions, new AP-NORC poll finds

By JAMES POLLARD and LINLEY SANDERS Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — Most Americans aren't making end-of-year charitable giving plans, according to the results of a new AP-NORC poll, despite the many fundraising appeals made by nonprofits that rely on donation surges in the calendar's final month to reach budget targets.

The survey, which was conducted in early December by The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, found that about half of U.S. adults say they've already made their charitable contributions for 2025. Just 18% say they've donated and will donate again before the year is over. Only 6% report they haven't given yet but will do so by December's end. The rest, 30%, haven't donated and don't plan to.

Everyday donors faced competing priorities this year. President Donald Trump's social services grant cuts, severe foreign aid rollbacks and November SNAP benefits freeze — plus natural disasters like Los Angeles' historically destructive wildfires — left no shortage of urgent causes in need of heightened support. But weaker income gains and steep price inflation meant lower-income households had less money to redistribute. Other surveys have also found a yearslong decline in the number of individuals who give.

Trump's tax and spending legislation offered an extra incentive to give more starting in January; most filers will see new charitable deductions next tax year of up to \$1,000 for individuals and \$2,000 for married couples. Some itemizers may make more gifts this year, though, ahead of a new floor for donation write-offs that takes effect in 2026.

December still serves as a "very important deadline" for donors, according to Dianne Chipps Bailey, managing director of Bank of America's Philanthropic Solutions division. She cited estimates from the National Philanthropic Trust that nearly one-third of annual giving happens in the final month.

"December 31 does provide a target to make sure that they've given what they intended to give before the year is over," Bailey said.

Few donate on GivingTuesday

Perhaps no day is more consequential for fundraisers than GivingTuesday. The well-known celebration of

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generosity sees many nonprofits leverage the attention to solicit donations on the Tuesday after Thanksgiving. Americans donated an estimated \$4 billion to nonprofits this most recent GivingTuesday.

But Americans were much more likely to make a Black Friday purchase than a GivingTuesday gift this year. Just under half say they bought something for Black Friday, according to the poll, compared to about 1 in 10 who say they donated to a charity for GivingTuesday.

"Black Friday gets the lion's share of things," said Oakley Graham, a 32-year-old from Missouri. "And then you've got GivingTuesday a couple days later. Most people have probably spent all their spending money at that point."

Graham said his family has "definitely tightened the financial belt" in recent years. He and his wife are dealing with student loan debts now that the Trump administration suspended their repayment plan. Their two young children are always growing out of their clothes. It's good if there's anything left for savings.

He still tries to help out his neighbors — from handiwork to Salvation Army clothing donations.

"Not that I'm not willing to give here and there," he said. "But it seems like it's pretty tough to find the extra funds."

Checkout charity proves more popular

Another avenue for nudging Americans to give is more widely used, even if individual donations are small. The AP-NORC poll found that about 4 in 10 U.S. adults say they donated to a charity when checking out at a store this year.

Among them is Graham. As an outdoorsy person who enjoys hunting and fishing when he can, he said he is "always susceptible to giving for conservation" — likely rounding up once or twice at Bass Pro Shops for that reason.

"With the finances, I don't do a lot of buying these days. But a couple cents here or there is like — I can do that," he said. "It doesn't sound like much. But I know if everybody did it would make a difference."

The poll found that older adults — those over 60 — are more likely than Americans overall to donate at store checkouts.

One Texas architect's unusual process for year-end donations

About one-quarter of Americans plan to donate in the last weeks of the year, and Chuck Dietrick is one of them. The 69-year-old architect applies what he calls a "shotgun approach" as the year comes to a close.

He and his wife give monthly to Valley Hope, a nonprofit addiction services provider where their son did inpatient rehab. And then there are eight or so organizations that they support with end-of-the-year gifts.

"We're doing our own thing," he said. "I don't do Black Friday or Cyber Monday, either ... So, I don't do the GivingTuesday thing."

Dietrick estimates their household donated somewhere between \$501 and \$2,500. The Dallas-Fort Worth area couple mostly contributes to organizations that touched their lives or the lives of their friends.

There's the Florida hospice that Dietrick said did a "super job" caring for his mother. He has relatives and friends who served in the military, so he also gives to the Disabled American Veterans and the Wounded Warrior Project.

"I would rather give a smaller amount of money to a variety of institutions that I care about rather than giving a big chunk of money to one," he explained.

Giving plans went unaffected by federal funding cuts or the shutdown

Most 2025 donors say the amount they gave wasn't affected much by this year's federal funding cuts or the government shutdown, according to the AP-NORC poll, although about 3 in 10 say those situations did impact the charities they chose to support.

The survey suggests that, while private donors mobilized millions to fill funding gaps and hunger relief groups saw donation totals spike last month, many Americans did not respond with their pocketbooks to the nonprofit sector's newfound pressures this year.

The cuts did compel Jeannine Disviscour to give more.

"I did not donate on GivingTuesday," the 63-year-old Baltimore teacher said. "But I did donate that week because I was feeling the need to support organizations that I felt might not continue to get the support

they needed to get to be successful.”

She estimates her household gave between \$501 and \$2,500. That included support for National Public Radio. Congress eliminated \$1.1 billion allocated to public broadcasting this summer, leaving hundreds of NPR stations with some sort of budget hole. She said she wanted to ensure journalism reached news deserts where residents have few media options.

Living in an area that is home to many refugees, Disviscour also donated her time and money to the Asylee Women Enterprise. She said the local nonprofit helps asylum-seekers and other forced migrants find food, shelter, clothing, transportation and language classes.

“There is a gap in funding and there’s more need than ever,” she said. “And I wanted to step up. And it’s in my community.”

## Judge allows Kilmar Abrego Garcia to remain free while she considers immigration issues

By GARY FIELDS and TRAVIS LOLLER Associated Press

GREENBELT, Md. (AP) — A federal judge on Monday questioned whether government officials could be trusted to follow orders barring them from taking Kilmar Abrego Garcia into immigration custody or deporting him.

U.S. District Judge Paula Xinis noted that Abrego Garcia was already deported without legal authority once and said she was “growing beyond impatient” with government misrepresentations in her court. “Why should I give the respondents the benefit of the doubt?” she asked, referring to the government attorneys.

Abrego Garcia’s mistaken deportation and imprisonment in El Salvador in March has galvanized both sides of the immigration debate. The Trump administration initially fought efforts to bring him back to the U.S. but eventually complied after the U.S. Supreme Court weighed in. He returned to the U.S. in June, only to face an arrest warrant on human smuggling charges in Tennessee.

Xinis ordered Abrego Garcia released from immigration custody on Dec. 11 after determining that the government had no viable plan for deporting him. She followed that with a temporary restraining order the next day barring Immigration and Customs Enforcement from immediately taking him back into custody. The Monday hearing was to determine if the temporary restraining order should be dissolved.

The hearing was a glimpse into the complexity of immigration proceedings as Xinis tried to get information on the status of Abrego Garcia’s case. “I am trying to get to the bottom of whether there are going to be any removal proceedings,” she said as she questioned the government’s lawyer. “You haven’t told me what you’re going to do next.”

Xinis said she would leave the restraining order in place for now while she considers the issue.

“This is an extremely irregular and extraordinary situation,” Xinis told attorneys.

Abrego Garcia, his wife and his legal team were welcomed to the federal court building in Maryland by a boisterous reception that included a choir, bullhorn and drum as scores of supporters cheered. Inside the courtroom, Abrego Garcia sat with at least half a dozen defense team members while a lone government attorney sat across from them.

Before his release, Abrego Garcia had been in immigration detention since August. In that time, the government has said it planned to deport him to Uganda, Eswatini, Ghana and, most recently, Liberia. However, officials have made no effort to deport him to the one country he has agreed to go to — Costa Rica. Xinis has even accused the government of misleading her by falsely claiming that Costa Rica was unwilling to take him.

The government’s “persistent refusal to acknowledge Costa Rica as a viable removal option, their threats to send Abrego Garcia to African countries that never agreed to take him, and their misrepresentation to the Court that Liberia is now the only country available to Abrego Garcia, all reflect that whatever purpose was behind his detention, it was not for the ‘basic purpose’ of timely third-country removal,” she wrote.

In court Monday, Abrego Garcia’s attorneys reiterated that he is prepared to go to Costa Rica “today.”

Simon Sandoval-Moshenberg, one of Abrego Garcia’s attorneys, said after the hearing that the judge

was clearly unhappy with the government's inability to outline its intentions for Abrego Garcia. He said it was clear the government simply wants to punish his client rather than resolving the case.

"You know who's keeping Mr. Garcia in the United States right now? The federal government," he said.

Abrego Garcia would prefer to stay in Maryland with his family, but absent that, he would willingly self-deport to Costa Rica, which offered him refugee status months ago, Sandoval-Moshenberg said.

Abrego Garcia has an American wife and child and has lived in Maryland for years, but he immigrated to the U.S. illegally from El Salvador as a teenager. In 2019, an immigration judge granted him protection from being deported back to his home country, finding he faced danger there from a gang that had targeted his family. Although he is back in the U.S. now, Department of Homeland Security officials have said he cannot stay and have vowed to deport him to a third country.

In addition to the Maryland case, Abrego Garcia is fighting the human smuggling charges in Tennessee. His attorneys in that case on Friday asked the judge for sanctions after Border Patrol's Gregory Bovino made disparaging comments about their client on national news. The judge previously ordered Justice Department and Homeland Security officials to cease making comments that could prejudice Abrego Garcia's right to a fair trial.

## What's an atmospheric river? AP explains the weather phenomenon

The Associated Press undefined

Atmospheric rivers are massive plumes of moisture carried across the sky that can dump heavy rains or snow over land.

Here's a look at the phenomenon:

Where do atmospheric rivers come from?

Atmospheric rivers generally form in tropical regions, where warm temperatures can cause water vapor to rise into the atmosphere, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. The winds aloft then carry that moisture to northern and southern latitudes.

They occur globally but are especially significant on the West Coast of the United States, where they create 30% to 50% of annual precipitation and are vital to water supplies but also can cause storms that produce flooding and mudslides, according to NOAA.

Formed by winds associated with cyclones, atmospheric rivers typically range from 250 miles to 375 miles (400 to 600 kilometers) in width and move under the influence of other weather.

Many atmospheric river events are weak. But the powerful ones can transport extraordinary amounts of moisture. Studies have shown they can carry seven to 15 times the average amount of water discharged daily by the Mississippi River, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

They're also getting bigger, wetter and more frequent as Earth's atmosphere warms, according to a 2025 study.

What happens when an atmospheric river reaches land?

When the moisture-laden air moves over mountain ranges such as the Sierra Nevada along the California-Nevada line, the water vapor rises and cools, becoming heavy precipitation that falls as rain or snow, according to NOAA.

While traditional cold winter storms out of the north Pacific build the Sierra snowpack, atmospheric rivers tend to be warm. Snow may still fall at the highest elevations but rain usually falls on the snowpack at lower elevations. That can quickly prompt melting, runoff and flooding and decrease the snowpack needed for California's water supply.

What is a pineapple express?

It is a nickname for a strong atmospheric river that originates in the tropical Pacific near Hawaii.

Where did the term atmospheric river come from?

The name came from research published in the 1990s by scientists Yong Zhu and Reginald E. Newell of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Atmospheric rivers are often referred to as ARs.

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## '60 Minutes' pulls story about Trump deportations from its lineup

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

An internal CBS News battle over a "60 Minutes" story critical of the Trump administration has exploded publicly, with a correspondent charging it was kept off the air for political reasons and news chief Bari Weiss saying Monday the story did not "advance the ball."

Two hours before airtime Sunday, CBS announced that the story where correspondent Sharyn Alfonsi spoke to deportees who had been sent to El Salvador's notorious CECOT prison, would not be a part of the show. Weiss, the Free Press founder named CBS News editor-in-chief in October, said it was her decision.

The dispute puts one of journalism's most respected brands — and a frequent target of President Donald Trump — back in the spotlight and amplifies questions about whether Weiss' appointment was a signal that CBS News was headed in a more Trump-friendly direction.

Alfonsi, in an email sent to fellow "60 Minutes" correspondents said the story was factually correct and had been cleared by CBS lawyers and its standards division. But the Trump administration had refused to comment for the story, and Weiss wanted a greater effort made to get their point of view.

"In my view, pulling it now after every rigorous internal check has been met is not an editorial decision, it is a political one," Alfonsi wrote in the email. She did not immediately respond to requests for comment from The Associated Press.

Alfonsi said in the email that interviews were sought with or questions directed to — sometimes both — the White House, State Department and Department of Homeland Security.

"Government silence is a statement, not a VETO," Alfonsi wrote. "Their refusal to be interviewed is a tactical maneuver designed to kill the story. If the administration's refusal to participate becomes a valid reason to spike a story, we have effectively handed them a 'kill switch' for any reporting they find inconvenient."

"Spike" is a journalist's term for killing a story. But Weiss, in a statement, said that she looked forward to airing Alfonsi's piece "when it's ready."

Speaking Monday at the daily CBS News internal editorial call, Weiss was clearly angered by Alfonsi's memo. A transcript of Weiss' message was provided by CBS News.

"The only newsroom I'm interested in running is one in which we are able to have contentious disagreements about the thorniest editorial matters with respect and, crucially, where we assume the best intent of our colleagues," Weiss said. "Anything else is completely unacceptable."

She said that while Alfonsi's story presented powerful testimony about torture at the CECOT prison, The New York Times and other outlets had already done similar work. "To run a story on this subject two months later, we need to do more," she said. "And this is '60 Minutes.' We need to be able to get the principals on the record and on camera."

It wasn't clear whether Weiss' involvement in seeking administration comment was sought. She reportedly helped the newscast arrange interviews with Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff this past fall to discuss Trump's Middle East peace efforts. Trump himself was interviewed by Norah O'Donnell on a "60 Minutes" telecast that aired on Nov. 2.

Trump has been sharply critical of "60 Minutes." He refused to grant the show an interview prior to last fall's election, then sued the network over how it handled an interview with election opponent Kamala Harris. CBS' parent Paramount Global agreed to settle the lawsuit by paying Trump \$16 million this past summer. More recently, Trump angrily reacted to correspondent Lesley Stahl's interview with Trump former ally turned critic Marjorie Taylor Greene.

"60 Minutes" was notably tough on Trump during the first months of his second term, particularly in stories done by correspondent Scott Pelley. In accepting an award from USC Annenberg earlier this month for his journalism, Pelley noted that the stories were aired last spring "with an absolute minimum of interference."

Pelley said that people at "60 Minutes" were concerned about what new ownership installed at Paramount this summer would mean for the broadcast. "It's early yet, but what I can tell you is we are doing the same kinds of stories with the same kind of rigor, and we have experienced no corporate interference

of any kind," Pelley said then, according to deadline.com.

## **Cyberattack disrupts France's postal service and banking during Christmas rush**

PARIS (AP) — With just three days to go before Christmas, a cyberattack knocked France's national postal service offline Monday, blocking and delaying package deliveries and online payments.

The timing was miserable for millions of people at the height of the Christmas season, as frazzled postal workers fended off frustrated customers.

No one immediately claimed responsibility, but suspicions abounded.

At a post office in southern Paris, usually bustling this time of year, workers questioned whether the attack could be linked to Russia. Or a disgruntled customer, or colleague.

Officials didn't comment on the culprit. Paris prosecutors were examining the case.

What the postal service La Poste called a "major network incident" remained unresolved by Monday evening, more than eight hours after it was first reported. For a company that delivered 2.6 billion packages last year and employs more than 200,000 people, that's a big hit.

La Poste said in a statement that a distributed denial of service incident, or DDoS, "rendered its online services inaccessible." It said the incident had no impact on customer data, but disrupted package delivery.

Letters, including holiday greeting cards, could still be mailed and delivered. But transactions requiring tracking or access to the postal service internal computer systems were impossible.

The cyberattack also hurt online banking. Customers of the company's banking arm, La Banque Postale, were blocked from using the application to approve payments or conduct other banking services. The bank redirected approvals to text messages instead.

"Our teams are mobilized to resolve the situation quickly," the bank said in messages posted on social networks.

The disruption came a week after France's government was targeted by a cyberattack that targeted the Interior Ministry, in charge of national security.

In that incident, a suspected hacker extracted a few dozen sensitive files and obtained access to data relating to police records and wanted persons, Interior Minister Laurent Nunez said on broadcaster France-Info. He blamed "imprudence" at the ministry for the incident. French media reported that a 22-year-old was detained.

Also last week, prosecutors said that France's counterespionage agency is investigating a suspected cyberattack plot involving software that would have allowed remote users to control computer systems of an international passenger ferry. A Latvian crew member is in custody facing charges of having acted for an unidentified foreign power, officials said.

France and other European allies of Ukraine allege that Russia is waging "hybrid warfare" against them, using sabotage, assassinations, cyberattacks, disinformation and other hostile acts that are often hard to quickly trace back to Moscow.

## **Bondi Beach shooting suspect conducted firearms training with his father, Australian police say**

By ROD McGUIRK Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — A man accused of killing 15 people at Sydney's Bondi Beach conducted firearms training in an area of New South Wales state outside of Sydney with his father, according to Australian police documents released on Monday.

The documents, made public following Naveed Akram's video court appearance from a Sydney hospital where he has been treated for an abdominal injury, said the two men recorded footage justifying the meticulously planned attack.

Officers wounded Akram at the scene of the Dec. 14 shooting and killed his father, 50-year-old Sajid

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Akram.

The state government confirmed Naveed Akram was transferred Monday from a hospital to a prison. Authorities identified neither facility.

The 24-year-old and his father began their attack by throwing four improvised explosive devices toward a crowd celebrating an annual Jewish event at Bondi Beach, but the devices failed to explode, the documents said.

Police described the devices as three aluminum pipe bombs and a tennis ball bomb containing an explosive, gunpowder and steel ball bearings. None detonated, but police described them as "viable" IEDs.

The pair had rented a room in the Sydney suburb of Campsie for three weeks before they left at 2:16 a.m. on the day of the attack. CCTV recorded them carrying what police allege were two shotguns, a rifle, five IEDs and two homemade Islamic State group flags wrapped in blankets.

Police also released images of the gunmen shooting from a footbridge, providing them with an elevated vantage point and the protection of waist-high concrete walls.

The largest IED was found after the gun battle near the footbridge in the trunk of the son's car, which had been left draped with the flags.

Authorities have charged Akram with 59 offenses, including 15 counts of murder, 40 counts of causing harm with intent to murder in relation to the wounded survivors and one count of committing a terrorist act.

The antisemitic attack at the start of the eight-day Hanukkah celebration was Australia's worst mass shooting since a lone gunman killed 35 people in Tasmania state in 1996.

The New South Wales government introduced draft laws to Parliament on Monday that Premier Chris Minns said would become the toughest in Australia.

The new restrictions would include making Australian citizenship a condition of qualifying for a firearms license. That would have excluded Sajid Akram, who was an Indian citizen with a permanent resident visa.

Sajid Akram also legally owned six rifles and shotguns. A new legal limit for recreational shooters would be a maximum of four guns.

Police said a video found on Naveed Akram's phone shows him with his father expressing "their political and religious views and appear to summarise their justification for the Bondi terrorist attack."

The men are seen in the video "condemning the acts of Zionists" while they also "adhere to a religiously motivated ideology linked to Islamic State," police said.

Video shot in October shows them "firing shotguns and moving in a tactical manner" on grassland surrounded by trees, police said.

"There is evidence that the Accused and his father meticulously planned this terrorist attack for many months," police allege.

An impromptu memorial that grew near the Bondi Pavilion after the massacre, as thousands of mourners brought flowers and heartfelt cards, was removed Monday as the beachfront returned to more normal activity. The Sydney Jewish Museum will preserve part of the memorial.

Victims' funerals continued Monday with French national Dan Elkayam's service held in the nearby suburb of Woollahra, at the heart of Sydney's Jewish life. The 27-year-old moved from Paris to Sydney a year ago.

The health department said 12 people wounded in the attack remained in hospitals on Monday.

## Addiction-stricken community struggles to keep a syringe program going after Trump's order

By LAURA UNGAR AP Medical Writer

JEFFERSONVILLE, Ind. (AP) — Inside a storage room at the Clark County Health Department are boxes with taped-on signs reading, "DO NOT USE." They contain cookers and sterile water that people use to shoot up drugs.

The supplies, which came from the state and were paid for with federal money, were for a program where drug users exchange dirty needles for clean ones, part of a strategy known as harm reduction. But under a July executive order from President Donald Trump, federal substance abuse grants can't pay

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for supplies such as cookers and tourniquets that it says "only facilitate illegal drug use." Needles already couldn't be purchased with federal money.

In some places, the order is galvanizing support for syringe exchange programs, which decades of research show are extremely effective at preventing disease among intravenous drug users and getting them into treatment.

In others, it's fueling opposition that threatens the programs' existence.

Republican-led Indiana passed a law allowing exchanges a decade ago after the tiny city of Austin became the epicenter of the worst drug-fueled HIV outbreak in U.S. history. Unless lawmakers extend it, that law is scheduled to sunset next year, and the number of exchanges has been dwindling. State officials told remaining programs to comply with Trump's order — and even to discard federally funded supplies such as cookers and tourniquets.

For now, Clark County health workers have found a way to keep distributing cookers and other items: buy them with private money and package them in "mystery bags," assembled by employees who aren't paid with state or federal funds.

Democratic-led California, meanwhile, has continued using state funds for supplies such as pipes and syringes. California is home to a rising number of exchanges, with 70 of the more than 580 listed by the North American Syringe Exchange Network.

Some public health experts lament that syringe services programs have become subject to growing politicization and dissent.

Clark County Health Officer Dr. Eric Yazel says IV drug users will likely inject themselves with or without clean supplies. Exchanges prevent people from sharing needles and spreading disease, he said, "decreasing the public health risk for the whole population."

But Curtis Hill, a Republican former Indiana attorney general, is among critics who raise the same concern Trump's order does: "We don't want to get into a situation where we're promoting drug use."

Help without judgment

When participants arrive at the Clark County health department, they look down at a list of services and say they are there for "No. 1."

They choose from a cart with needles, bandages, sharps containers and the overdose reversal drug naloxone. They can receive testing for HIV and hepatitis C; information on drug treatment; and fliers on food banks, housing, and job placement. There are even handmade knit hats with encouraging notes like, "You've got this!"

"We spend a half hour, 45 minutes or so talking to them about where they are, if they want treatment, if they're ready," Program Director Dorothy Waterhouse said. "These are our brothers, our sisters, our mothers, our fathers. ... We need compassion to make sure they're getting into treatment."

It's the closest exchange to Austin, a 35-minute drive away. Scott County, where Austin is located, already ended its program.

Joshua Gay lived in an apartment across the street when he used the Clark County exchange. He shot up meth daily.

"The addiction, it took away everything. It took away my life. It took away my job, took away my health. I mean, it made my mind so bad that I wouldn't even shower," said the 44-year-old, who now lives in Austin. "God was telling me, 'You need to do something,' and he led me to the needle exchange."

He's sober today. He sought drug treatment at LifeSpring Health Systems after encouragement from health workers and now encourages others in recovery to stay healthy.

He believes the syringe exchange not only saved him, but helped him save someone else, providing the naloxone he used to revive a friend who overdosed on heroin.

Keeping the program going

After Trump's order — which focused on homelessness — Indiana health officials told exchanges that certain items they provided were now off-limits, citing a letter from the U.S. Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

Although Clark County workers have found ways to provide privately funded items for now, they worry

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about Indiana's exchange law expiring on July 1. Six counties have exchanges — down from nine in 2020 — despite the programs' successes.

Statewide, exchanges have made more than 27,000 referrals to drug treatment and provided naloxone that reversed nearly 25,000 overdoses, according to information collected by the nonprofit Damien Center in Indianapolis.

Since its 2017 start, Clark County's program alone has given out more than 2,000 doses of naloxone; made more than 4,300 referrals to drug treatment; and made more than 4,400 referrals for HIV or hepatitis C testing. Its syringe return rate is 92%.

Local and national public health and addiction experts point to research showing exchanges don't increase syringe litter, crime or IV drug use — and that every dollar invested returns an estimated \$7 in avoided health care costs.

Exchanges are associated with an estimated 50% reduction in the incidence of HIV and hepatitis C, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said last year. Scott County — where the HIV outbreak ultimately sickened 235 people — had fewer than five new cases a year in 2020 and 2021, just before that syringe program ended. The numbers have stayed low.

"When these programs first started, I was like, 'I don't know.' I didn't get it," Yazel said. "And then I took a deep dive and started to understand the impact."

Elsewhere, a mix of support and opposition

Indiana is among 43 states with syringe services programs, according to health care research nonprofit KFF.

Support remains strong in many places. This year in Hawaii, for example, legislators passed a law allowing people to get as many clean needles as needed rather than only one for one.

But bills elsewhere, including two introduced in West Virginia this year, propose eliminating syringe programs.

This month, West Virginia's Cabell-Huntington Health Department stopped giving out needles. Naloxone and fentanyl test strips remain available, along with services such as education, disease testing and links to care.

"The folks who come in to see us are going to get the same smiles and the same hugs," said Health Officer Dr. Michael Kilkenny. "We're just not going to be dispensing syringes or the other things that are in disfavor."

Andrew Nixon, spokesman for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, stressed in an email that federal funds can still be used for "life-saving services" like education and naloxone, reflecting a "commitment to addressing the addiction and overdose crisis impacting communities across our nation."

A murky future

Yazel expects a difficult path ahead in Indiana.

"To be very blunt," he said, "we have an uphill battle coming up this legislative session."

Damien Center CEO Alan Witchey, whose organization runs a syringe program, said he and a group of advocates created a website with information and a way to contact lawmakers. They've met with elected officials, and a state senator introduced a bill to extend the sunset date to 2036.

"Without these programs, there will be one less tool to address the diseases of substance use disorder, hepatitis C and HIV," Witchey said. "And that could lead to a very dangerous place for us. We have seen where this leads."

## Car bomb kills Russian general in Moscow

MOSCOW (AP) — A car bomb killed a Russian general on Monday, the third such killing of a senior military officer in just over a year. Investigators said Ukraine may be behind the attack.

Lt. Gen. Fanil Sarvarov, head of the Operational Training Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces' General Staff, died from his injuries, said Svetlana Petrenko, the spokesperson for Russia's Investigative Committee, the nation's top criminal investigation agency. He was 56.

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"Investigators are pursuing numerous lines of inquiry regarding the murder. One of these is that the crime was orchestrated by Ukrainian intelligence services," Petrenko said.

Since Moscow sent troops into Ukraine nearly four years ago, Russian authorities have blamed Kyiv for several assassinations of military officers and public figures in Russia. Ukraine has claimed responsibility for some of them. It has not yet commented on Monday's death.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that President Vladimir Putin had been immediately informed about the killing of Sarvarov, who fought in Chechnya and had taken part in Moscow's military campaign in Syria.

Russia has blamed a series of other apparent assassinations on Ukraine.

Just over a year ago, Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the chief of the military's nuclear, biological and chemical protection forces, was killed by a bomb hidden on an electric scooter outside his apartment building. Kirillov's assistant also died. Ukraine's security service claimed responsibility for the attack.

An Uzbek man was quickly arrested and charged with killing Kirillov on behalf of the Ukrainian security service.

Putin described Kirillov's killing as a "major blunder" by Russia's security agencies, noting they should learn from it and improve their efficiency.

In April, another senior Russian military officer, Lt. Gen. Yaroslav Moskalik, a deputy head of the main operational department in the General Staff, was killed by an explosive device placed in his car parked near his apartment building just outside Moscow. A suspected perpetrator was quickly arrested.

Days after Moskalik's killing, Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he received a report from the head of Ukraine's foreign intelligence agency on the "liquidation" of top Russian military figures, adding that "justice inevitably comes" although he didn't mention Moskalik's name.

Ukraine, which is outnumbered by Russia's larger, better equipped military, has frequently tried to change the course of the conflict by attacking in unexpected ways. In August last year, Ukrainian forces staged a surprise incursion into Russia's Kursk region even as they struggled to stem Russian offensives on many parts of the front line. Moscow's troops eventually drove them out, but the incursion distracted the Russian military resources from other areas and raised Ukrainian morale.

Ukraine has also launched repeated attacks on the Russian navy in the Black Sea with sea drones and missiles, forcing it to relocate its warships and limit the scale of its operations.

And in June, swarms of drones launched from trucks targeted bomber bases across Russia. Ukraine said over 40 long-range bombers were damaged or destroyed, although Moscow said only several planes were struck.

Meanwhile, Western officials have accused Russia of staging a campaign away from the battlefield, accusing it of orchestrating dozens of incidents of disruption and sabotage across Europe as part of an effort to sap support for Ukraine. Moscow has denied the claims.

## Here's what stores are open, and which ones are closed, on Christmas

From department stores to grocery stores, most retailers across the U.S. close early on Christmas Eve and shut their doors entirely on Christmas Day — while others opt to cut back hours. But there's also a handful of businesses that will be open during the holiday.

Before you run out the door this Christmas — whether it's to buy last-minute gifts or simply get out of the house — it's wise to double-check operating hours, which can differ depending on their location. When in doubt, call ahead or look up more specific schedules online for stores in your neighborhood.

Here's a rundown of major chains on Christmas Day this year.

**IS WALMART OPEN ON CHRISTMAS?**

Walmart will be closed on Christmas Day — and reopen at 6 a.m. on Dec. 26.

**IS TARGET OPEN ON CHRISTMAS?**

Target will be closed on Christmas and reopen at 7 a.m. on Dec. 26.

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IS COSTCO OPEN ON CHRISTMAS?

All Costco warehouses in the U.S. are closed on Christmas Day.

IS CVS OPEN ON CHRISTMAS?

Many CVS locations will have modified hours on Christmas Day. Customers are encouraged to call ahead or double-check local hours online.

IS WALGREENS OPEN ON CHRISTMAS?

Walgreens stores will be open on Christmas Day but pharmacy hours may vary. All 24-hour locations will continue to remain open. You can double-check local hours here.

IS STARBUCKS OPEN ON CHRISTMAS?

Many Starbucks locations will be closed on Christmas, while some may have limited hours. It's best to check ahead online.

IS MCDONALD'S OPEN ON CHRISTMAS?

Many McDonald's locations in the U.S. are open on holidays like Christmas, but hours vary by location. Consumers can use the chain's online store locator to confirm.

IS KROGER OPEN ON CHRISTMAS?

Kroger stores are closed on Christmas Day and will resume regular hours on Dec. 26.

IS ALBERTSONS OPEN ON CHRISTMAS?

Many Albertsons stores will be closed on Christmas — but there will also be locations that remain open with adjusted hours. Select pharmacies may also be closed or have different hours.

WHAT STORES ARE CLOSED ON CHRISTMAS?

Here's some other grocery, convenience and retail stores that are closed on Christmas Day:

1. ALDI: Stores are closed.
2. Harris Teeter: Stores are closed.
3. Home Depot: Stores are closed.
4. IKEA: Stores are closed.
5. Jewel-Osco: Stores and pharmacies are closed.
6. Lowe's: Stores are closed.
7. Macy's: Stores are closed.
8. Meijer: Stores are closed.
9. Publix: Stores are closed.
10. Rite Aid: Stores are closed.
11. Sam's Club: Stores are closed.
12. Sprouts Farmer's Market: Stores are closed.
13. Trader Joe's: Stores are closed.
14. Whole Foods: Stores are closed.

WHAT STORES ARE OPEN ON CHRISTMAS?

Here are some stores that are open on Christmas Day (or have select locations that are):

1. Safeway: Many stores are closed, but there will also be some locations open with adjusted hours.
2. Sheetz: Stores are open with regular hours (24/7).
3. 7-Eleven: Most stores are open 24/7 (including on Christmas), but some locations' hours can vary.

## Pop culture in 2025: A ring for Taylor, an ill-timed KissCam ... and whatever '6-7' means

By JOCELYN NOVECK AP National Writer

Dictionaries define things. It's their job. So when dictionary.com pronounced "6-7" as their 2025 word of the year, you'd think they would have, well, defined it.

But no. "We're all still trying to figure out exactly what it means," they told us of this year's "linguistic time capsule."

But that's just how pop culture works, isn't it? Who's to explain why parents alone in their cars were

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suddenly singing “up up up” from that “KPop Demon Hunters?” song? Or why, in the Venn diagram of pop culture and zoology, it was the capybara that emerged victorious and beloved? Goodbye, Moo Deng. You’re adorable, but so 2024.

Despite our new obsessions, though, some things remained constant — by which we mean Taylor Swift and Beyoncé, of course. It seems like every year gets bigger for Swift. But in 2025, she put a bow — or ring — on it with Travis Kelce, announcing “your English teacher and your gym teacher are getting married.” As for Beyoncé, the musical goddess finally won that best album Grammy she long deserved — and, on tour, introduced a new force: her daughter, Blue Ivy.

So from the inexplicable to the familiar, here’s our annual, highly selective journey down pop culture memory lane:

## JANUARY

They may not be TAYVIS, but they’re a delightful couple just the same: ZENDAYA and TOM HOLLAND are engaged. Let’s hear it also for DEMI MOORE, who wins a GOLDEN GLOBE for her wild performance in “The Substance.” At the bookstore, fans go wild for “ONYX STORM,” the third installment of REBECCA YARROS’ romantasy series. A NIRVANA reunion highlights FireAid, a fundraiser for relief efforts following the Los Angeles wildfires. At the Australian Open, U.S. tennis star COCO GAUFF mourns the temporary loss of TikTok’s app back home, drawing a broken heart on a TV lens.

## FEBRUARY

“Salutations!” says SAMUEL L. JACKSON, introducing KENDRICK LAMAR, the first solo hip-hop artist — and Pulitzer winner — to headline the Super Bowl halftime show. (P.S. Is that SERENA WILLIAMS?) At the GRAMMYS, members of the Los Angeles Fire Department present BEYONCÉ with her best album trophy for “COWBOY CARTER” — the most awarded and nominated artist in Grammy history becomes the first Black woman to win the top prize in the 21st century. In the age of TikTok, you never know what’s going to catch fire — like those hand-penned party invitations from 87-year old DOUG TURNER to his Pennsylvania neighbors, with the priceless line: “4 p.m. until the cops arrive.”

## MARCH

It’s OSCAR month! All hail to SEAN BAKER’S victorious, Brooklyn-set “ANORA” and its star, MIKEY MADISON. Also scoring an acting prize is ADRIEN BRODY for “THE BRUTALIST” — who probably should have found another place to put his chewing gum. “WICKED,” an audience favorite, misses out on big prizes, but its stars, CYNTHIA ERIVO and ARIANA GRANDE, perform a rousing opening number. Meanwhile, the once-promising Netflix contender “EMILIA PÉREZ” wins two prizes but sees best picture chances evaporate in the wake of an uproar over past tweets from star KARLA SOFÍA GASCÓN.

## APRIL

The blender! The poisonous fruit! The lizard! And SAM ROCKWELL! The Thailand-set third season of “THE WHITE LOTUS” is certainly a talker. KATY PERRY may be wishing she’d headed to Thailand rather than outer space: her Earth-kissing return from an 11-minute trip on a JEFF BEZOS Blue Origin rocket is widely mocked — even by Wendy’s, which writes on X: “Can we send her back.” On BEYONCÉ’S “Cowboy Carter” tour, a star has emerged — 13-year old BLUE IVY. In a megadeal, HAILEY BIEBER sells her Rhode skincare and makeup brand for a cool \$1 billion.

## MAY

A crisis, at CANNES! The film fest bans nudity on the carpet — do they think this will halt the “naked dress” phenomenon? Bonne chance. Also at Cannes, TOM CRUISE again shows he’ll risk life and limb to entertain, this time atop a classic biplane in “MISSION IMPOSSIBLE: THE FINAL RECKONING.” Across the ocean, the MET GALA turns its focus to menswear and Black style over the centuries. “It took a minute,” says an approving SPIKE LEE. “You belong with me,” SWIFT sings, buying back the rights to her first six albums. Finally, cue the “Chicago Pope” memes — in honor of the first American pope, LEO XIV. Later this year, he’ll reveal his WORDLE strategy.

## JUNE

“The world will know you as pop stars — but you will be much more than that.” Like, perhaps, the surprise, multigenerational hit of the summer? “KPOP DEMON HUNTERS” starts streaming this month, and

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in August will give Netflix a big box office win with its singalong screenings. On TV, it's a new season of love — "LOVE ISLAND USA," that is, chronicling the goings-on at a luxury villa in Fiji. It's the album cover that launched a thousand conversations: Some are offended when SABRINA CARPENTER illustrates her "MAN'S BEST FRIEND" album with a photo of her on all fours, with a man holding her hair. Is it offensive, a purposeful joke, or nothing at all? Meanwhile politics finds its way into the GLASTONBURY FESTIVAL in Britain, as rap-punk duo BOB VYLAN spark a police probe after leading a chant calling for "death" to the Israeli military.

## JULY

OASIS begins a reunion tour, and the GALLAGHER brothers are still getting along! "SYDNEY SWEENEY has great jeans," goes the much-discussed advertisement, and American Eagle insists it's about the denim. CBS says it will end STEPHEN COLBERT'S show in May 2026 — a move that will remove from air one of President DONALD TRUMP'S most outspoken critics. We cannot leave July behind — although at least two people would have loved to — without mentioning the saga of the COLDPLAY KISSCAM. Finally, within six days, the world loses three '80s icons: mustachioed wrestling icon HULK HOGAN, heavy metal godfather OZZY OSBOURNE, and beloved "Cosby Show" actor MALCOLM-JAMAL WARNER.

## AUGUST

Let's just give this whole entry to pop culture's biggest "LOVE STORY" — because, baby, she said yes! TAYLOR-TRAVIS skeptics eat their words when the couple announces their happy news, in what's destined to become one of the most liked posts in Instagram history. It's the fairytale culmination of a courtship that began during the Eras Tour and for two years captivated millions around the world but especially Swifties, the pop star's loving and fiercely protective fan base.

## SEPTEMBER

Proving once again that Hollywood loves stories about itself, the EMMYS heap awards on SETH ROGEN'S movie-biz satire "THE STUDIO." Also triumphing is "THE PITT," the edgy medical drama starring beloved "ER" veteran NOAH WYLE that beats out the mighty "SEVERANCE." Perhaps the biggest Cinderella story of all: 15-year-old OWEN COOPER, the youngest Emmy winner in over 40 years for the searing "ADOLESCENCE." Also this month, JIMMY KIMMEL is temporarily suspended by ABC bosses for comments that angered supporters of the slain CHARLIE KIRK. The world says goodbye to ROBERT REDFORD, Hollywood's golden screen idol turned influential activist.

## OCTOBER

"So, how was your October?" "Oh, 6-7." That's apparently how one should use the new viral term — accompanied by that palms-up gesture. You know who has better moves than that? BAD BUNNY, who hosts the season premiere of "SATURDAY NIGHT LIVE." In SWIFT updates, her new album "THE LIFE OF A SHOWGIRL" sets sales records. The shocking LOUVRE HEIST captures the world's attention, not least for the impossibly dapper stranger who walks into an AP photographer's frame. Another sad loss: DIANE KEATON, famous for her fedoras, vests and especially "La di da, La di da."

## NOVEMBER

Are we at the end of the yellow brick road? The "WICKED" press tour, which reached all ends of the universe actual and fictional, wraps with the release of JON M. CHU'S second installment, "WICKED: FOR GOOD." The reviews are much less, er, enthusiastic this time, but the movie defies gravity at the box office. That's not enough for JONATHAN BAILEY, aka FIYERO, who is named People's Sexiest Man Alive. Another fan favorite, ROBERT IRWIN, is also having a very good month: a decade after his sister, BINDI, did the same, the son of late conservationist STEVE IRWIN is crowned winner of "DANCING WITH THE STARS."

## DECEMBER

One award after another! Excuse the rather obvious pun, but it's the perfect one to describe momentum in the OSCARS race. While some films see their fortunes fade on GOLDEN GLOBE nominations day, the emerging favorite is "ONE BATTLE AFTER ANOTHER," director PAUL THOMAS ANDERSON'S father-daughter saga of political resistance starring LEONARDO DiCAPRIO and newcomer CHASE INFINITI. Its success also lends a victory to WARNER BROS. in the middle of its NETFLIX acquisition deal — which, at year's

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end, is in a holding pattern, facing antitrust challenges and a hostile takeover effort from PARAMOUNT, and sowing one fear after another that the very nature of entertainment will change.

## Today in History: December 23 Franco Harris makes the 'Immaculate Reception'

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Tuesday, Dec. 23, the 357th day of 2025. There are eight days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Dec. 23, 1972, in an NFL playoff game between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Oakland Raiders, Steelers running back Franco Harris scored a game-winning touchdown on a deflected pass with less than 10 seconds left. The "Immaculate Reception," as the catch came to be known, is often cited as the greatest NFL play of all time.

Also on this date:

In 1823, the poem "Account of a Visit from St. Nicholas" was published anonymously in the Troy Sentinel of New York; the verse, more popularly known as "The Night Before Christmas," was later attributed to Clement C. Moore.

In 1913, the Federal Reserve System was created as President Woodrow Wilson signed the Federal Reserve Act.

In 1941, during World War II, American forces on Wake Island surrendered to Japanese forces.

In 1948, former Japanese Premier Hideki Tojo and six other Japanese World War II leaders were executed in Tokyo after being tried for war crimes and sentenced to death by hanging.

In 1968, 82 crew members of the intelligence ship USS Pueblo were released by North Korea, 11 months after they had been captured.

In 1986, the experimental airplane Voyager, piloted by Dick Rutan and Jeana (JEE'-nuh) Yeager, completed the first nonstop, non-refueled round-the-world flight as it returned safely to Edwards Air Force Base in California.

In 2003, a Virginia jury sentenced teen sniper Lee Boyd Malvo to life in prison, sparing him the death penalty. Malvo and his older partner in crime, John Allen Muhammad, shot and killed 10 people over three weeks in October 2002, terrorizing the Washington, D.C., area. Muhammad was executed in 2009.

In 2024, President Joe Biden announced he was commuting the sentences of 37 of the 40 people on federal death row, converting their punishments to life imprisonment weeks before Donald Trump, an outspoken proponent of capital punishment, was to begin a second term.

Today's Birthdays: Former Emperor Akihito of Japan is 92. Actor-comedian Harry Shearer is 82. Retired U.S. Army Gen. Wesley K. Clark is 81. Actor Susan Lucci is 79. Distance runner Bill Rodgers is 78. Football Hall of Famer Jack Ham is 77. Political commentator William Kristol is 73. Author Donna Tartt is 62. Rock musician Eddie Vedder of Pearl Jam is 61. Singer, model and former first lady of France Carla Bruni is 58. Actor Finn Wolfhard is 23.