

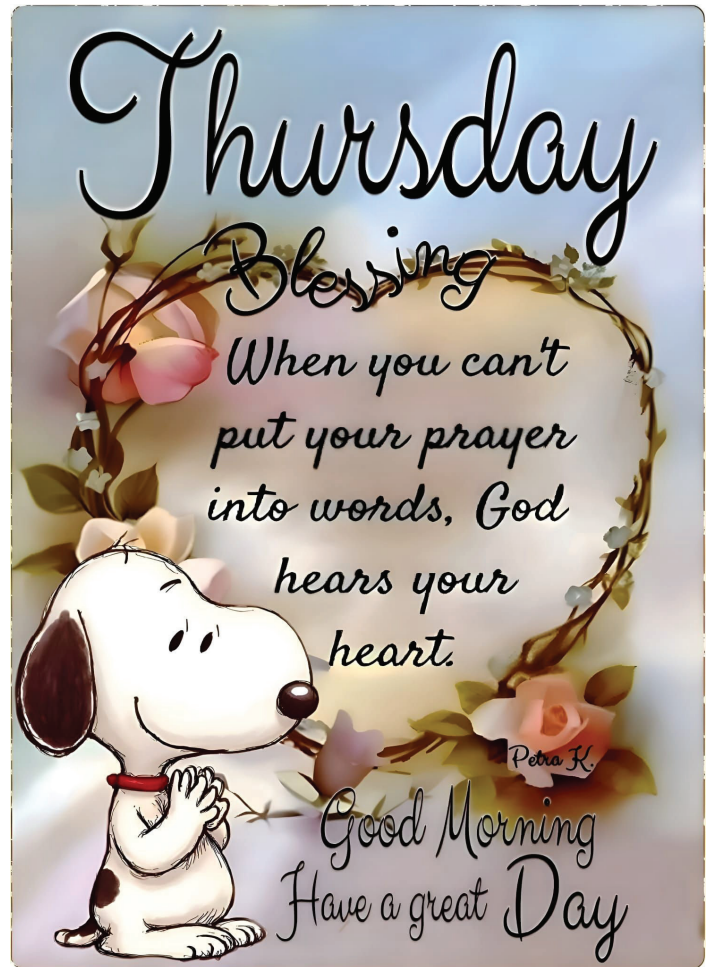
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## Thursday, Jan. 29, 2026

School Breakfast: Maple French toast bake.  
School Lunch: Chicken tacos, refried beans.  
JH BBB at Webster (7th at 4 p.m., 8th at 5 p.m.)  
GBB at Webster (JV at 6 p.m., Varsity to follow)  
2nd Grade BBB Practice, 5 p.m.  
4th Grade BBB Practice, 6 p.m.



## Corrections:

In Tuesday's edition, we had one of the music students listed with the wrong parents. In Tuesday's edition we had a wrong score in the wrestling story. Both editions have been corrected and updated on-line and the correct version is in the weekly. Thank you for pointing those out to me and sorry for the errors.

## Friday, Jan. 30, 2026

School Breakfast: Breakfast boats.  
School Lunch: Garlic Cheese Bread, Cooked carrots.  
Girls Wrestling at Aberdeen Central Invitational, 3:30 p.m.  
Boys Wrestling hosts Britton-Hecla, 6 p.m.

**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.**

## Border Agents Suspended

Two federal agents who fatally shot Alex Pretti in Minnesota were placed on administrative leave Saturday, the Department of Homeland Security said yesterday. The timeline marked a departure from a previous statement by CBP official Greg Bovino, suggesting the agents were working in another city to protect their safety.

The news comes as videos unearthed yesterday showed a confrontation between Pretti and federal officers at a protest 11 days before his death. Pretti was recorded spitting at agents and breaking a taillight on an SUV before he was tackled to the ground. A lawyer for Pretti's family released a statement that nothing that happened a week before Pretti's death could "have justified Alex's killing."

Separately, officials arrested the man suspected of using a syringe to spray an unidentified substance at Rep. Ilhan Omar (D, MN-5) Tuesday. Omar was calling for Homeland Secretary Kristi Noem to step down when she was charged onstage.

## Rates Hold, Dollar Wobbles

The Federal Reserve yesterday held interest rates steady at 3.5% to 3.75% for the first time since July. US stock markets closed near the flatline (S&P 500 -0.0%, Dow +0.0%, Nasdaq +0.2%) on the news.

The dollar also rebounded slightly after hitting a nearly four-year low Tuesday amid concerns about the Federal Reserve's independence and potential US military action in Greenland, Latin America, and the Middle East. The greenback's 1.3% slide against other major currencies was its biggest one-day drop since President Donald Trump announced sweeping tariffs in April. Over the past year, the dollar's value has fallen roughly 10%, weakening Americans' purchasing power abroad. Trump has largely dismissed concerns, citing that a weaker dollar can also boost domestic manufacturing by making US goods more attractive to foreign buyers.

Meanwhile, the Swiss franc climbed to an 11-year high against the dollar Tuesday, and gold surged to a record \$5.3K per ounce yesterday. Investors have historically flocked to both assets amid geopolitical instability.

## 'Money, Money, Money'

Spotify paid the music industry more than \$11B in royalties last year, the company said yesterday. The payout is reportedly the largest ever to musicians, and comes amid ongoing scrutiny over the company's handling of AI.

The streaming platform has long been accused of underpaying artists. Musicians receive an average of \$0.004 per stream, with compensation varying based on their share of platformwide streams. Last year's payout exceeded 2024's by \$1B; Spotify says half of the sum went to independent artists and labels. The company also claimed there are more artists making over \$100K annually on the platform today than artists who were stocked on record shelves during the CD era. Spotify says its royalties account for about 30% of the recording industry's total revenue.

Spotify has recently sought to ward off criticism over its inclusion of AI-generated music. The company said yesterday it will roll out features this year to verify artists' identities.]

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## Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Stephen Colbert says final episode of "The Late Show" will air May 21; Paramount cited financial reasons when it canceled the show last year, days after Colbert criticized its settlement with the Trump administration.

Bruce Springsteen releases song criticizing ICE operations in Minneapolis.

Late singer Jeff Buckley earns first US Hot 100 hit with a 32-year-old song after it goes viral on TikTok.

Patrick Reed leaves Saudi-funded LIV Golf, with intentions to return to the American-backed PGA Tour as early as September.

Cleveland Browns hire ex-Baltimore Ravens offensive coordinator Todd Monken as head coach.

## Science & Technology

Department of Energy seeks states to host nuclear waste and reprocessing sites, supporting advanced nuclear reactors and colocated data centers.

Researchers discover exposure to diverse microbes and proteins early in life creates an immune memory that blocks allergies later in life.

Three-decade study finds men's heart attack risk spikes in their mid-30s—years earlier than women's—pointing to a case for earlier screenings.

## Business & Markets

Amazon to lay off roughly 16,000 corporate employees; announcement comes a day after the tech giant said it was shutting down Amazon Fresh and Go grocery stores and after it laid off around 14,000 corporate employees in October.

Meta posts record Q4 sales and forecasts increased spending on AI in 2026.

Tesla reports Q4 revenue drop for third consecutive time and annual sales drop for first time on record.

Microsoft tops earnings and revenue estimates, fueled by cloud business and OpenAI deal.

Police reportedly search Deutsche Bank offices in Frankfurt and Berlin as part of money-laundering probe tied to past dealings with Russian billionaire Roman Abramovich.

## Politics & World Affairs

FBI agents search election office in Fulton County, Georgia, after Justice Department sues the county clerk to obtain access to 2020 election records.

President Donald Trump threatens Iran after USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group arrives in the Middle East, warns of potential military action if Iran does not agree to a nuclear deal.

Sicily landslide, triggered by days of heavy rain, forces more than 1,500 people to evacuate; government creates nearly 500-foot-wide "no-go zone".

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**Thurs., Jan. 29, 2026 - at Webster  
Girls C at 5 p.m., Girls JV at 6 p.m.  
Girls Varsity to follow**



## Krueger earns 100th pin

Liza Krueger earned her 100th pin at the Garretson wrestling tournament held earlier this week. She is pictured with Gavin Englund. (Photo

courtesy Carrie Moritz of the Garretson Gazette)

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## SOUTH DAKOTA SEARCHLIGHT

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### Legislation headed to SD Senate would authorize challenges to voters' citizenship

**Committee also advances bill specifying that cast-ballot images are public records**

**BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN**

PIERRE — Doubts about a person's citizenship status could be used to challenge their right to vote in South Dakota, if a proposal approved by a legislative committee Wednesday becomes law.

A person initiating a challenge would have to be registered to vote in the same county as the person being challenged. South Dakota's secretary of state or a local county auditor's office could also raise a challenge. The challenge would have to be filed with the county auditor at least 90 days before an election.

The Secretary of State's Office, which oversees elections in South Dakota, requested the bill.

Supporters of the measure said it would strengthen voting integrity.

"If you find somebody who's not a citizen and is trying to vote, then do something about it," said Thomas Deadrick, deputy secretary of state. "This would be a way to do something about it."

There are no specifics in the bill about what kind of proof a person would need to disprove another person's citizenship. Deadrick gave examples that ranged from a copy of a person's immigration visa to a sworn statement concerning a conversation about citizenship.

Sen. Liz Larson, D-Sioux Falls, was the only Senate State Affairs Committee member to vote against the measure. She raised concerns about what evidence or proof is needed to challenge a person's vote and whether the state should give everyday citizens that authority.

"It just seems too nefarious to me, to give that right," Larson said afterward.

Federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents fatally shot two U.S. citizens this month in Minneapolis. Larson said "especially in today's environment," the bill is "adding fuel to the fire."

"To have those issues of people challenging citizenship for other people, it comes with so much baggage and especially now with a lot of the violence that's going on in Minnesota," Larson said. "I think this is too far."

Other opponents said the bill is redundant, because there are already state and federal laws against non-citizens voting.

Melissa McCauley, a lobbyist for South Dakota Voices for Justice, said the legislation "does not add enforcement authority, new tools or cleaner standards," and "creates administrative work without added value."

The bill now goes to the state Senate floor.

### Committee also approves ballot transparency bill

Another bill advanced by the committee Wednesday would specify that images of cast ballots made by a type of vote-counting machine used in four South Dakota counties are public records. It would also specify that cast vote records — spreadsheets full of voting tabulations — are public records. Sen. Tom Pischke, R-Dell Rapids, introduced the bill.

The counties with machines capable of producing cast ballot images are Brown, Lincoln, Minnehaha and Pennington. Counties would not be required to use the machines. There are protections in the bill against releasing images containing personally identifying or other sensitive information.

Pischke said the bill's intent is to make the election system as open as it can be.

"As a Legislature, we provide transparency in the budget-making process, we provide transparency in the legislative process, and we do that because the people deserve it," he told the committee. "Election

results should be no different.”

Thomas Oliva, the Hughes County finance officer, said he had to process about 8,000 ballots in the 2024 general election. He shared concern for the amount of work that could be required of officials in the state’s larger counties if requests are made for the cast-ballot images.

“I don’t know in my office how I would be able to get this done personally,” he said. “I hope those commissions take a look at that administrative duty that this creates for their auditor.”

Lincoln County Auditor Sheri Lund agreed with the concern.

The committee sent the bill to the Senate without opposition.

*Meghan O’Brien is the audio reporter for South Dakota Searchlight where she covers the state government and its impact on South Dakotans. She’s previously reported in Nebraska with a focus on health care and rural communities across the state.*

## Lab-grown meat ban takes next step in South Dakota Legislature

**Lawmakers passed legislation last year requiring clear labels**

**BY: MEGHAN O’BRIEN**

PIERRE — New legislation could outlaw lab-grown meat in South Dakota.

It passed 45-22 in the state House on Wednesday and will now go to the Senate.

Rep. Julie Auch, R-Lesterville, said Tuesday during the bill’s first committee hearing that she proposed the legislation with concern for “the takeover of the livestock industry here in South Dakota.” She said that “takeover” is being orchestrated by people claiming the cattle industry is bad for the environment.

“Being a witness to my industry being taken over by a society that is more concerned with climate change and sustainability is disheartening,” Auch told the House Agriculture Committee. “I am not going to stand by and allow global elites to take over South Dakota’s livestock industry.”

Additional supporters of the proposal alleged the chemicals and processes used to create lab-grown meat can cause health problems. Rep. Tesa Schwans, R-Hartford, described the process as “a petri dish that’s full of hormones and sludge.”

Other lawmakers pushed back, citing freedom of choice.

Rep. Kevin Van Diepen, R-Huron, said he doesn’t like lab-created meat, but that doesn’t mean it should be banned.

“We shouldn’t hold back the free market,” he said. “If people want to buy this stuff, let them buy it.”

Some opponents worry that passing the bill could open the state up to lawsuits, similar to ones filed against state bans in Florida and Texas. Auch said her bill is modeled after a law in Nebraska.

Last year, South Dakota legislators passed a law requiring lab-grown meat to be clearly labeled. They also passed a law prohibiting the use of state money for the research, production, promotion, sale or distribution of lab-grown meat. There’s an exception for public universities, which can still do research on lab-grown meat. But the law prevents, for example, the awarding of state economic development grants to companies that sell the product.

Auch’s bill would effectively ban lab-grown meat by adding it to the state’s list of adulterated foods.

Opponents worry about listing a product as “adulterated” with laws that say those products are “filthy,” “putrid” and “unfit for food.”

Taya Runyan spoke against the bill Tuesday on behalf of the South Dakota Cattlemen’s Association.

“We do not support the cell-cultivated proteins,” she said. “However, not supporting them and not wanting people to eat them is altogether different than defining it as adulterated.”

Rep. Kady Wittman, D-Sioux Falls, said she spoke with a cattle producer about the bill.

“There’s producers out there that are not viewing this as competition or infringement on their production,” she said. “I’m not comfortable with us saying what people can and can’t spend their money on in South Dakota.”

Three other bills have been introduced this legislative session that could ban or temporarily ban lab-grown meat. Two have been withdrawn, and the other one hasn’t had a hearing yet.

*Meghan O'Brien is the audio reporter for South Dakota Searchlight where she covers the state government and its impact on South Dakotans. She's previously reported in Nebraska with a focus on health care and rural communities across the state.*

## **South Dakota Senate approves longer wait for officials turning state jobs into private employment**

**BY: JOSHUA HAIAR**

PIERRE — The South Dakota Senate approved a bill Wednesday that would make state officials involved in a big contract with a company wait longer before accepting a job with that company.

The 34-0 vote sends the bill to the state House of Representatives.

Under current law, state officers and employees involved in awarding or overseeing a contract with a company must wait one year after leaving government before taking a job with the company.

The bill would extend the waiting period to two years for contracts worth more than \$5 million, after it was amended by the Senate. The bill originally proposed a two-year wait for contracts over \$1 million.

Bill sponsor Sen. Tim Reed, R-Brookings, said the amendment was necessary because the state handles many million-dollar contracts, and he did not want the extended wait to apply to routine matters.

The amendment also adds a waiver process allowing a governing body to authorize earlier employment in limited cases, requiring written authorization that becomes a public record and is filed with the state for review.

Reed filed the bill in response to South Dakota Searchlight reporting about former state economic development commissioner Steve Westra. A year after leaving state government, Westra took a job with CJ Schwan's. While working for the state, Westra had signed the first pledge of state aid benefiting construction of the company's \$550 million, 650-employee food production plant in northern Sioux Falls. State aid benefiting the project now totals \$69 million worth of tax rebates, loans and grants.

Reed has said repeatedly that Westra followed the law as it stands currently.

"The bill does not allege wrongdoing by any individual in the past," Reed said Wednesday.

Reed also said the bill is not meant to slow or second-guess economic development efforts.

*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.*

## **Klobuchar, Smith pay tribute to Minnesota victims on US Senate floor, call for ICE reforms**

**BY: JACOB FISCHLER**

Minnesota's U.S. senators took to the chamber's floor Wednesday afternoon to honor two constituents killed by federal agents this month and call for the Department of Homeland Security to end its surge in the Twin Cities.

Sens. Amy Klobuchar and Tina Smith led a chorus of Democratic senators calling for an end to the aggressive tactics used by immigration officers during President Donald Trump's immigration crackdown following the fatal shootings of Renee Good on Jan. 7 and Alex Pretti on Jan. 24, by federal agents in Minneapolis.

The Democrats repeated their demand that Congress amend the annual DHS funding bill, which must pass by Friday at midnight to avoid a partial government shutdown, to add accountability measures.

Smith and Klobuchar, who is reported to be considering a bid for governor this year, added more personal reflections about the weeklong influx of immigration agents, and the massive protests against it, in their state.

"I want to just take a pause to acknowledge my beloved Minnesota," Smith said, her voice starting to shake. "I am so proud to be your senator, and, you know, so many people around the country are looking to you, to us, for hope, and you are showing the world how to respond to violence, how to stand up to bullies with strength and with dignity and with peace."

They said the DHS funding bill should not pass until the department withdraws its agents from the state. Klobuchar and other Democrats who spoke over the following hour-plus also called for DHS Secretary Kristi Noem to resign.

"There must be new leadership in the Department of Homeland Security now, and there must be major reforms to these agencies before this Congress should approve another cent," Klobuchar said.

Those reforms should include an end to immigration agents' "roving patrols," requirements that agents remove masks and wear body cameras, and that the department enforce a use-of-force policy and provide "meaningful accountability" and transparency into officer-involved shootings, Klobuchar said.

Minnesota's senators also called for Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to depart their home state.

"I can not state it more unequivocally: ICE must leave Minnesota," Klobuchar said.

*Jacob covers federal policy and helps direct national coverage as deputy Washington bureau chief for States Newsroom. Based in Oregon, he focuses on Western issues. His coverage areas include climate, energy development, public lands and infrastructure.*

## **US Senate Dems demand mask ban, body camera requirement, IDs for immigration agents**

**BY: JENNIFER SHUTT AND ARIANA FIGUEROA**

WASHINGTON — U.S. Senate Democrats on Wednesday detailed the "common sense" changes they want to implement for federal immigration enforcement, saying reforms must be added to a funding package that needs to become law before the weekend to avoid a partial government shutdown.

Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said after a closed-door lunch that lawmakers in the conference are united on several policy restrictions.

They include:

The end of roving patrols;

Tightening the rules governing the use of warrants;

Requiring Immigration and Customs Enforcement to coordinate with state and local law enforcement;

Implementing a uniform code of conduct that holds federal law enforcement to the same set of standards that apply to state and local agencies;

Barring the wearing of masks;

Requiring the use of body cameras;

Mandating immigration agents carry proper identification.

"These are common-sense reforms, ones that Americans know and expect from law enforcement," Schumer said. "If Republicans refuse to support them, they are choosing chaos over order, plain and simple. They are choosing to protect ICE from accountability over American lives."

Schumer said Democrats want to negotiate with Republicans, but called on Senate GOP leaders to separate out the funding bill for the Department of Homeland Security from a package that includes five other full-year appropriations bills.

The bills must become law before a Friday midnight deadline to avoid a partial government shutdown.

Schumer said he expects senators could "very quickly negotiate a bipartisan proposal" on restrictions to federal immigration activities.

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## Thune, White House weigh in

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., said shortly before Schumer spoke that he isn't ruling out any options for funding the government.

"These are all hypotheticals at this point, and I will reserve optionality to consider that," Thune said. "But I think the best path forward, as I've said, is to keep the package intact. And if there are things that the Democrats want that the administration can agree with them about, then let's do that."

Thune expressed concern that any changes to the six-bill government spending package, which includes funding for the Department of Defense, would require it to go back to the House for final approval before it could become law.

The House is out this week and isn't scheduled to return to Capitol Hill until

Monday, possibly causing a brief funding lapse if Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., doesn't call that chamber back early.

A White House official said in a statement to States Newsroom the administration wants to avoid a shutdown and is committed to a "productive dialogue with the Congress."

"A demand for agreement on legislative reforms as a condition of funding the Department of Homeland Security with a government funding deadline just 48 hours away is a demand for a partial government shutdown," according to a White House official. "This bipartisan appropriations package, which the Democrats agreed to and have now walked away from, has been under negotiation for more than a month. The White House urges congressional Democrats not to subject the country to another debilitating government shutdown."

Schumer said during his press conference the White House "has had no specific, good, concrete ideas."

## Alex Pretti killing

Congress has approved half of a dozen full-year government funding bills, but hasn't yet cleared the remaining measures, which make up a huge swath of government spending.

A partial government shutdown would affect the Departments of Defense, Education, Health and Human Services, Homeland Security, Housing and Urban Development, Labor, State, Transportation and Treasury. The Executive Office of the President, Supreme Court and judicial branch would also go without funding.

Democrats' insistence for additional guardrails on how federal immigration officers operate follows the death of 37-year-old Alex Pretti, the second person in Minneapolis shot and killed by federal immigration agents.

ICE would still be able to operate during a shutdown, due to an influx of funding from the massive tax and spending cuts package Republicans passed and President Donald Trump signed into law last summer.

The "One Big Beautiful Act" provided the Department of Homeland Security with \$170 billion for immigration enforcement spread across four years, with \$75 billion of that going directly to ICE.

The Homeland Security appropriations bill at the center of the current dispute in Congress keeps ICE flat funded at \$10 billion for the fiscal year that began on Oct. 1 and will end on Sept. 30.

In the wake of the Jan. 7 shooting of 37-year-old Renee Good by federal immigration officer Jonathan Ross, Democrats and Republicans agreed to some changes for the department that are provided for in the bill. That includes \$20 million for body cameras for ICE and other federal immigration officers, \$20 million for independent oversight of detention facilities and a \$1 billion cut to Customs and Border Protection funding, which totals \$18.3 billion.

Border Patrol agents' shooting of Pretti on Jan. 24 spurred Democrats to call for Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem to resign and demand additional reforms at DHS.

## No masks, body cameras required

Maine independent Sen. Angus King said Wednesday while the funding bill up for debate allocates money for optional body cameras, he wants to require immigration agents to wear them and to identify themselves.

"I think one of the things that should be in it is no masks," King said. "There's not a law enforcement

agency in the United States that wears masks. I've never encountered that before in my life."

King added he wants to see increased "accountability" for federal immigration officers, including "independent investigations of injuries to either detainees or private citizens."

The top Democrat on the panel that deals with Homeland Security funding, Sen. Chris Murphy of Connecticut, said the proposed changes are a start.

"I've got a much longer list of reforms that I would like, but we're operating in a world of possibility, and I think that these reforms are things that we could get done in the next couple days, or the next week," he said.

Alaska Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski said she's okay splitting off the Homeland Security spending bill from the rest of the package.

Murkowski also said she believes Trump should replace Noem.

"Ultimately it's his call as to who he keeps in this position, whether it's Secretary Noem or someone else. I understand that. And he'll decide," she said. "I just think that he deserves better."

## Two 'losers,' Trump says

North Carolina GOP Sen. Thom Tillis also called for Noem's resignation, and for White House senior advisor Stephen Miller to be removed. Miller is the main architect of the Trump administration's immigration policy, and played a pivotal role in the president's first administration.

On Tuesday during an interview with ABC News, Trump called Tillis and Murkowski "both losers" for calling for Noem's resignation and criticizing her handling of immigration operations in Minnesota. The president has stood by Noem.

"I'm kind of excited about being called a loser," Tillis said. "Apparently, that qualifies me for DHS secretary and senior advisor to the president."

South Dakota Republican Sen. Mike Rounds didn't entirely rule out supporting a five-bill funding package if GOP leaders agree to remove the DHS appropriations bill.

"I won't get ahead of the president on it ... but even if you do that, the House still has to approve that," Rounds said. "The question is, logistically, can they get back in time to do it by Friday night?"

Texas Democratic Rep. Henry Cuellar, ranking member on the House Homeland Security Appropriations subcommittee, wrote in a social media post that while the current bill isn't perfect, it "is better than those alternatives."

"But the worst thing Congress could do is allow a powerful department to operate with a blank check under a continuing resolution or shut the government down entirely."

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

*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 tries to shift attention away from woes with glitzy Trump

### Accounts rollout

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump touted the coming generation of "Trump Account children" Wednesday as the administration aims to deflect attention from rising food prices and a deadly federal immigration crackdown that in recent weeks took the lives of two U.S. citizens in Minneapolis.

The day-long U.S. Treasury Department event in Washington, D.C., brought together big names from corporate America and entertainment to promote forthcoming tax-deferred investment accounts that will be available to all U.S. children — and that will be seeded with one-time \$1,000 contributions from the

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government for babies born between Jan. 1, 2025 and Dec. 31, 2028.

Trump said the accounts, enacted under the massive tax and spending cuts package in July, will be "remembered as one of the most transformative policy innovations of all time."

"Perhaps no provision of the great, big, beautiful bill will prove more consequential than Trump Accounts," Trump said during his roughly 45-minute speech that included a brief appearance by Grammy-nominated rapper Nicki Minaj, who has become an advocate for the policy.

## Higher birth rate

Ahead of the president's remarks, panel speakers, including White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt and Dell Technologies CEO Michael Dell, framed the policy as celebratory of this year's 250th birthday of the United States, and as a carrot to encourage a higher birth rate.

"Today and forevermore, every child born in America becomes a shareholder in America," said Brad Gerstner, founder and CEO of Altimeter Capital, a California-based tech investment firm.

The Treasury event, titled the "Trump Accounts Summit," came one day after Trump delivered remarks on the economy in Iowa, where he told voters, "I hope you remember us for the midterms."

The event also followed days of protests and intense criticism of the administration, even from Trump's own party, over the Jan. 24 fatal shooting in Minneapolis by federal agents of 37-year-old Alex Pretti. Pretti's death occurred just over two weeks after an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent shot and killed a driver, Renee Good, 37, also amid the administration's immigration crackdown in the Midwestern city.

An interest-bearing account for American children has drawn bipartisan support.

U.S. Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., touted his own such proposal in late 2018, bringing the idea to the 2020 presidential campaign trail. Booker's "American Opportunity Account" bill proposed \$1,000 seed money from the government, with up to \$2,000 in annual contributions per child, depending on a family's income level.

In May, Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, with the backing of Dell and Gerstner, proposed similar accounts for every child born in the U.S. to be seeded with \$1,000 from the government. Cruz attended Wednesday's event and received public recognition from the president.

## Launch coming in July

The Trump Accounts, as named in the law, are set to launch July 5, according to the White House website, [TrumpAccounts.gov](http://TrumpAccounts.gov).

While the accounts will legally belong to a minor, they can only be managed by a parent or guardian until a child's 18th birthday. Parents and guardians will need to elect to open the account during tax filing season or via a government portal scheduled to launch this summer.

The accounts are structured like a traditional individual retirement account, but with different investment features and restrictions.

Annual contributions from parents and guardians, as well as their employers, are capped at \$5,000 per year. Parents can elect to divert pre-tax contributions from their paychecks directly into their child's account. Employers can match up to \$2,500.

Trump told the crowd Wednesday that "dozens of major employers have signed up to add the Trump account contributions to their employee benefit packages, including Uber, Schwab, Charter Communications and many, many others."

The government's \$1,000 seed money as well as contributions from state and local governments, and 501(c)3 organizations, will not count toward the \$5,000 annual cap.

The most high-profile foundation contribution to date has come from Dell, and his wife Susan, who pledged last month to give \$250 to children up to age 10 who were born before the time window to receive the government seed money. The money is targeted to children in ZIP codes where the median income is less than \$150,000, Dell said Wednesday.

Trump said other companies announced "really big contributions" Wednesday, including Intel, Nvidia, Broadcom, IBM, Steak and Shake, Coinbase, Continental Resources and Comcast.

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William McBride, chief economist at the Tax Foundation, told States Newsroom during an interview Tuesday that while specific federal guidance is still emerging, direct charitable contributions to individual investment accounts are “pretty much a completely new concept in the tax code.”

The Tax Foundation, a nonprofit that describes itself as nonpartisan, advocates for economic growth and simpler tax policies.

## Some exceptions to penalty

The accounts are bound by certain restrictions, including a prohibition on withdrawals until age 18, when the account essentially becomes an individual retirement account subject to tax penalties for early withdrawal before age 59.5.

Penalty-free exceptions include accessing the cash for a first-home purchase, up to \$10,000; birth or child adoption fees up to \$5,000; and qualifying medical expenses.

“It’s aimed at trying to get families to save and grow that balance,” said Rita Assaf, vice president of retirement offerings for Fidelity Investments.

“But for those that need flexibility of cash, this is where maybe that account, depending on your goal, may not be a right account for you. For day-to-day, or, some sort of big event needs before age 18, that’s where you might want to consider other accounts,” Assaf told States Newsroom in an interview Tuesday.

Other restrictions on the account include types of investments. Eligible investments include mutual funds or exchange traded funds, or ETFs, that track the returns of large American companies, for example the S&P 500 index.

A child’s account that receives the maximum family and employer contributions of \$5,000 at the start of each year could grow to nearly \$200,000 by age 18, assuming a 7% annual rate of return, according to a Fidelity Investment hypothetical example, not adjusted for inflation.

If a child qualified for the \$1,000 government seed money, and a parent left it untouched until age 18, the White House estimates the former minor would have \$5,800 upon reaching adulthood, assuming historical returns for the S&P 500.

McBride said that while several specifics remain unclear, the accounts have “a lot of potential” and that advocates hope children from varying socioeconomic levels become more engaged in the process of creating wealth, learning how to invest money, and manage money.

“I’d say it has huge upside, and it just remains to be seen if it will actually catch on and become a way to sort of encourage a broader swath of society to participate in the benefits of capitalism, if you will.”

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

## Tribal police recognition endorsed by South Dakota lawmakers

### Resolution urging a training academy encounters resistance but also passes

BY: JOHN HULT

The South Dakota House of Representatives overwhelmingly supported a bill Wednesday to recognize tribal officers as law enforcement officers under state law, but some members balked at a resolution urging a tribal law enforcement training academy before adopting it.

Tribal officers frequently offer mutual aid to state, county and city officers when asked, but are not extended the same legal protections extended to the officers they aid. If a tribal officer is assaulted while providing aid away from tribal land, the perpetrator can’t be charged with the felony state crime of assaulting a law enforcement officer.

House Bill 1007 came from the State-Tribal Relations Committee and is sponsored by Rep. Eric Emery, a Democrat from Rosebud and a member of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe. If passed and signed by the governor, legal protections would be extended to “any officer, prosecutor, or employee of an Indian tribe who is assisting or aiding in” the enforcement of state criminal or highway laws.

The House passed the bill 67-0, sending it to the Senate.

A resolution tied to tribal policing didn't get quite such clear support.

House Concurrent Resolution 6001 would signal the Legislature's support for locating a federal tribal law enforcement academy in South Dakota. Currently, most tribal officers are expected to attend basic law enforcement training at a federal Bureau of Indian Affairs facility in Artesia, New Mexico.

U.S. Sen. Mike Rounds, R-South Dakota, has called on the federal government to establish a tribal police training facility for the Great Plains and locate it in Pierre, in hopes of making it easier to recruit officers to work for one of the nine tribes in South Dakota.

Some consternation followed the addition of an amendment specifying that the resolution doesn't support such a BIA training facility being used to train officers for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, being used as an ICE detention facility, or the establishment of any memoranda of understanding between ICE and any South Dakota tribe.

The amendment was made by the House Judiciary Committee on Friday.

Emery was also the resolution's sponsor. Rep. Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, asked Emery where the amendment came from. Emery said it was added at the request of tribal officials.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs is not part of the Department of Homeland Security, but recruits from several federal agencies — including BIA and Border Patrol — train in Artesia.

"Because of that connection with Homeland Security and ICE, they just wanted to clearly lay out that there's a separation between the two," Emery said.

Some tribes in South Dakota have issued statements critical of ICE since the federal agency's operations ramped up in Minneapolis earlier this year. This week, the Yankton Sioux Tribe's Business and Claims Committee passed a resolution to "ban ICE on the reservation to protect our tribal citizens from dangerous enforcement activities."

Back at the Capitol, Odenbach said he was troubled by the language excluding ICE.

"My preference would frankly be the opposite," said Odenbach, a member of the State-Tribal Relations Committee who endorsed the concept of the resolution last fall.

Rep. Peri Pourier, R-Rapid City, a member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe, urged her colleagues to support the nonbinding resolution, saying that tribal governments are sovereign nations and want to make sure that their longstanding support of training for tribal officers wouldn't be interpreted as support for ICE immigration enforcement.

State, local or tribal governments can enter into agreements with ICE. Some South Dakota agencies have signed such agreements.

"The reason why this is being clarified is because the tribes have a right to go into those agreements or not," Pourier said.

The resolution passed 49-18.

*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.*

## South Dakota legislative committee advances proposal asking voters to repeal Medicaid expansion

BY: JOSHUA HAIAR

PIERRE — South Dakota lawmakers advanced a resolution Wednesday at the Capitol that would ask voters in November to repeal the state's obligation to provide expanded Medicaid coverage, potentially reopening a policy debate from four years ago.

The House State Affairs Committee voted 8-4 to send the bill to the full House of Representatives. If approved by the House and Senate, the measure would go to voters in the Nov. 3 election.

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The proposed state constitutional amendment would repeal the Medicaid expansion requirement that voters adopted in 2022 with 56% support.

Medicaid is a low-income health insurance and disability assistance program, jointly funded by the federal government and the states. The 2022 ballot question expanded eligibility to adults with incomes up to 138% of the poverty level. Because the expansion is part of the state constitution, it can only be altered by voters.

Rep. Aaron Aylward, R-Harrisburg, the new bill's sponsor, said the state cannot afford the expansion. He cited budget estimates showing South Dakota's cost for expansion enrollees would be roughly \$35 million to \$40 million annually over the next five years if the federal government continues to pay 90% of expansion costs. He added that the state faces a fiscal cliff if Congress reduces the federal share.

Americans for Prosperity lobbyist Don Haggar said placing a major policy directive in the state constitution was improper, adding that such decisions should be left to lawmakers who can adjust policy as budgets change.

"It's unsustainable, and it's a fiscal cliff, and we should at least allow the public to weigh in on this," Haggar said.

Opponents countered that voters settled the question in 2022 and put it in the constitution because lawmakers refused to expand eligibility. They said expansion has cost the state less than projected while covering about 30,000 South Dakotans at a cost of about \$39 million annually for the state. Initial projections were 55,000 people, costing \$70 million.

AARP South Dakota's Erik Nelson said repealing expansion would increase medical debt, delay preventive care, and increase insurance costs for all insured South Dakotans, who will be left paying for the care of uninsured people. He said the people in the expansion population are working, caregiving, in school, or dealing with chronic illness or disability.

Nelson added that when people are uninsured, they're likely to wait until they need to go to an emergency room, which is more costly than preventive care, and those costs will be pushed onto insured people's premiums.

Hospital and health care advocates — including Avera, Sanford and Monument Health — echoed the point, warning that repealing expansion would increase uncompensated care and shift costs to hospitals, who will have to pass them on to other patients and their insurance.

Tim Rave, former speaker of the House and current president and CEO of the South Dakota Association of Healthcare Organizations, said \$39 million, as part of a multi-billion-dollar state budget, is hardly the biggest issue for South Dakota's fiscal concerns.

"It's not Medicaid expansion that is busting the budget, just to be very clear about that," Rave said.

Several opponents also raised a procedural concern: A separate measure already placed on the November ballot by lawmakers would ask voters to authorize the termination of Medicaid expansion if federal support falls below 90%. Opponents of the new bill argued that adding a full-repeal question could create conflicting outcomes and invite a legal fight.

*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.*

## Republicans celebrate school choice in US Senate hearing, while Dems question fairness

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA

WASHINGTON — The fierce debate surrounding school choice initiatives took center stage Wednesday during a hearing in a U.S. Senate panel.

President Donald Trump's administration and congressional Republicans have made school choice a central point of their education agenda, including a sweeping national school voucher program baked into

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the GOP's mega tax and spending cut bill Trump signed into law in July.

The hearing came in the middle of National School Choice Week, which the U.S. Department of Education dubbed a "time to highlight the many different types of education across the United States and to empower families to choose the best learning option for their child's success."

The umbrella term "school choice" centers on alternative programs to one's assigned public school. Opponents argue these efforts drain critical funds and resources from school districts, though advocates say the initiatives are necessary for parents dissatisfied with their local public schools.

Sen. Bill Cassidy, chair of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, which held the hearing, described school choice as "the avenue for expressing the innovation that we need to meet a student's need."

"Traditional schools work for many students — what we're asking, though, is to give the parent the choice if it does not," the Louisiana Republican added.

## Many models for school choice

Proponents in Ohio and Florida touted the work of their respective organizations and the broader school choice efforts in their states.

Cris Gulacy-Worrel serves as vice president of Oakmont Education, an operator of dropout recovery charter schools serving more than 5,500 students in Ohio, Iowa and Michigan.

Gulacy-Worrel said last year, Oakmont Education "graduated 1,309 students, and we've placed over 4,500 young people directly into the workforce over the last three years alone."

"For far too long, we've been told school choice is about (Education Savings Accounts) or public charter schools — it's not," she said. "What we're really talking about is educational plurality, a system with room for many models and many pathways to success."

John Kirtley is chairman of Step Up For Students, a nonprofit scholarship funding organization that distributes scholarships for children in Florida.

Kirtley said his state "has been moving towards a new definition of public education: Raise taxpayer dollars to educate children, but then empower families to direct those dollars to different providers and even different delivery methods that best suit their individual children's learning needs."

More than half of all K-12 students in the Sunshine State participate in a school choice program rather than attending their local public school.

## Bernie Sanders sees two-tier system created

Meanwhile, Sen. Bernie Sanders, the panel's ranking member, said that while there are a "number of things we can and should be doing to strengthen and improve education" in the country, "we should not be creating a two-tier education system in America — private schools for the wealthy and well-connected and severely under-funded and under-resourced public schools for low-income, disabled and working-class kids."

The Vermont independent said that "unfortunately, that is precisely what the Trump administration and my Republican colleagues in Congress are doing," pointing to the national school voucher program that's now law.

Sanders' staff released a committee report Wednesday analyzing the state laws of 21 states with school voucher programs that scholarship granting organizations administer, in an effort to understand the forthcoming federal school voucher program's potential effects.

Among the findings, the report concluded that "nearly half of analyzed private schools (48%) explicitly state that they choose not to provide some or all students with disabilities with the services, protections, and rights provided to those students in public schools under federal law."

## Arizona voucher program

Marisol Garcia, president of the Arizona Education Association, testified about the negative repercussions

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of private school vouchers in the Grand Canyon state.

In 2022, Arizona became the first state in the country to enact a universal school voucher program.

Garcia described her state's voucher program as a "bloated mess costing three times more than it was projected" and said vouchers "often only offer the illusion of choice."

"Every child deserves a great public school in Arizona," she added. "Our experiences show that vouchers are not the way to achieve that goal."

## National school voucher program

The permanent national school voucher program, starting in 2027, allocates up to \$1,700 in federal tax credits for individuals who donate to organizations that provide private and religious school scholarships.

The program reflects a sweeping bill that Cassidy and GOP Reps. Adrian Smith of Nebraska and Burgess Owens of Utah had reintroduced in their respective chambers in 2025.

Cassidy defended the program during the hearing, saying: "We're not trying to supplant funding for public education — we're trying to supplement funding for education."

As of Tuesday, nearly half of all states have opted in to the initiative, per the Education Department.

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

## Attack on US Rep. Ilhan Omar follows major uptick in threats against members of Congress

BY: JENNIFER SHUTT

WASHINGTON — U.S. Capitol Police investigated a drastic increase in threats against members of Congress and their staffs last year, looking into nearly 15,000 statements, behaviors and communications.

The volume of investigations rose sharply from the 9,474 USCP checked during 2024, the 8,008 in 2023 and the 7,501 in 2022.

USCP Chief Michael Sullivan wrote in a statement released around the time a man squirted an unknown substance on Minnesota Democratic Rep. Ilhan Omar during a town hall Tuesday night that the agency has been strengthening its "partnerships with law enforcement agencies across the country to keep the Members of Congress safe when they are away from Capitol Hill."

"We want to make sure agencies have the resources they need to be able to enhance protection, which is critical to the democratic process," Sullivan added.

## Political violence

Last year saw several instances of political violence, including the arson at the official home of Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro, the killing of Minnesota House Speaker Melissa Hortman and her husband, the shooting at the CDC's headquarters in Atlanta and the killing of conservative activist Charlie Kirk during a rally at Utah Valley University.

Earlier Tuesday, at an appearance in Iowa, President Donald Trump singled out Omar, a Somali-American who came to the United States with family members as asylum seekers in 1995 and became a U.S. citizen in 2000.

Trump, who frequently criticizes Omar, said she should not speak about the U.S. Constitution when she comes from a country that is a "disaster," adding Somalia is known for "pirates."

USCP said in its announcement the number of partnerships with local or state law enforcement to bolster security for lawmakers when they are away from Capitol Hill tripled during the last year, rising from approximately 115 to 350 departments.

"For any agency that does not have a formal agreement with us, I would encourage them to proactively reach out," USCP Intelligence Services Bureau Director Ravi Satkalmi wrote in a statement. "The agree-

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ment provides a framework for us to reimburse partner agencies for support they provide to help secure Members of Congress.”

## Spending increase for lawmakers’ security

Congress approved USCP’s annual funding bill in November, increasing spending on the agency by \$46 million to a total of \$852 million.

The legislation included \$203.5 million “for the Senate and the House to enhance security measures and member protection,” according to a summary from Senate Appropriations Committee ranking member Patty Murray, D-Wash.

That same package, which ended the government shutdown, provided an additional \$30 million for USCP, \$30 million for the U.S. Marshals Service to bolster security for members of the judicial and executive branches, and \$28 million for enhanced safety for Supreme Court justices.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., said Wednesday morning the attack on Omar was “unfortunate” and that everyone has a responsibility to “dial down the temperature.”

“When you’re a public figure, obviously, those are some of the things that come with the job. But it’s up to our citizens in this country too, the people out there, to do their part, obviously, to make their views known and weigh in and exercise their First Amendment right. But do it in a way that’s lawful and hopefully respectful.”

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

## Alex Pretti ‘had a way of lighting up every room he walked into’

BY: ALYSSA CHEN

Alex Jeffrey Pretti, 37, was an ICU nurse at the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs hospital before he was shot and killed by federal agents Saturday morning on Nicollet Avenue. Family and friends, as well as former coworkers and teachers, described him as generous and kind-hearted.

“Through his work at the VA caring for the sickest patients, and passion to advance cancer research, he touched more lives than he probably ever realized,” said his sister Micayla Pretti, 32, in a statement. “All Alex ever wanted was to help someone — anyone. Even in his very last moments on this earth, he was simply trying to do just that.”

Videos from multiple angles of the killing show Pretti helping a woman who agents appeared to have pushed to the ground, after which eight agents tackle Pretti.

The videos show Pretti disarmed of a gun he never drew before he was shot by federal agents multiple times, contradicting the immediate narrative set by senior Trump administration officials that Pretti had posed a clear and present danger — including immediate accusations from Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem and White House deputy chief of staff Stephen Miller that Alex Pretti was a domestic terrorist.

Pretti’s family members have since denounced the Trump administration in public statements.

“The sickening lies told about our son by the administration are reprehensible and disgusting. Alex is clearly not holding a gun when attacked by Trump’s murdering and cowardly ICE thugs. He has his phone in his right hand and his empty left hand is raised above his head while trying to protect the woman ICE just pushed down all while being pepper sprayed,” said Michael and Susan Pretti, his parents, in a statement to media outlets Saturday.

In the aftermath of the shooting, Minneapolis Police Chief Brian O’Hara confirmed that Pretti, who Homeland Security said was carrying a gun, was a lawful gun owner with a permit to carry. O’Hara said police have not interacted with Pretti other than a few traffic tickets.

CNN reported that a group of federal agents tackled Pretti a week before he was killed, breaking a rib.

His parents told the Associated Press that they had told him in a recent conversation to be careful when protesting. He had also participated in George Floyd protests in 2020, his ex-wife told the AP.

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## 'A kindhearted soul'

His parents described him as "a kindhearted soul who cared deeply for his family and friends and also the American veterans" he cared for as a nurse.

His sister said Pretti "had a way of lighting up every room he walked into" and "made people feel safe."

Pretti grew up in Green Bay, Wis., where he graduated from Preble High School in 2006, a Green Bay school district spokesperson confirmed. Former teachers said he was a leader in choirs and in school drama productions. He was also a longtime member of the Green Bay Boy Choir.

Kristen Radke, creative director of the technology news site The Verge, wrote about growing up with Pretti as a neighbor and childhood friend. Radke, whose family moved away before she started high school, said Pretti was "generous, curious, sweet" as a kid.

"He loved mandarin oranges and macaroni and cheese, and we agreed it was especially pleasing when all the food on our plates was orange," Radke wrote.

At a Monday Green Bay Board of Education meeting, Pretti's former teachers and classmates remembered him as a friendly, funny and kind member of their community.

"I can vividly see him in my mind, standing in the bass section, right in front of me, second row, encouraging the young men around him with his quiet leadership skills," said Susan McAllister, who taught Pretti in Preble's music program.

"One of the things that he always did was brighten everyone's day with a joke or a witty comment, and I can see him doing that with the veterans as well," said Carol Miller, who directed plays and musicals that Pretti was in.

Travis Vanden Heuvel, another childhood friend of Pretti's, said at the school board meeting that Pretti was a "helper" and "kindness incarnate."

## Life in Minnesota

Pretti later attended the University of Minnesota and graduated in 2011, a U spokesperson confirmed. On an outdated LinkedIn page, Pretti is listed as a junior scientist at the University of Minnesota Medical School starting in 2012. He later went to nursing school and became an ICU nurse at the Minneapolis VA hospital. State records show Pretti has been a registered nurse since 2021.

Dimitri Drekonja, an infectious diseases researcher, said in a Bluesky post that Pretti was a colleague of his at the Minneapolis VA, when Pretti's job was recruiting for clinical trials before he became an ICU nurse.

"He was a good kind person who lived to help and these f\*ckers executed him," Drekonja wrote.

Pretti researched cancer treatments and is listed as a co-author on a 2023 cancer research poster as an affiliate of GeneSegues, a cancer research startup spun out of research at the U.

Pretti lived in the Lyndale neighborhood of south Minneapolis, according to online records — around a mile and a half from where he was killed, and a mile from where an ICE agent shot and killed Renee Good on Jan. 7. He enjoyed mountain biking and gravel biking, a representative of Pretti's family said. Angry Catfish Bicycle, a bike shop in Minneapolis, said in a social media post that he had been a member of the local cycling community and had frequented the store.

Pretti had a Catahoula Leopard dog named Joule who had recently died, whom he had adopted from a rescue shelter and took everywhere with him, the family's representative said.

A viral video published on Facebook shows Pretti delivering the final salute to Air Force veteran Terry Randolph at a VA hospital in 2024. The video was posted by the veteran's son, Mac Randolph, who said in the caption that his father "would be honored in Alex's sacrifice, and ashamed of this current administration."

In the video, Pretti reads in front of a gurney covered with a Department of Veterans Affairs flag: "Today we remember that freedom is not free. We have to work at it, nurture it, protect it, and even sacrifice for it."

*This story was originally produced by Minnesota Reformer, 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.*

## These are the states where incomes grew the most, least in recent decades

**Only one state saw incomes decline over the past 50 years**

**BY: KEVIN HARDY**

Household incomes have grown in nearly every state over the past 50 years, but a new study concludes that growth has been uneven across the country.

An analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data, released Tuesday from the Urban Institute's Center for Local Finance and Growth, found inflation-adjusted incomes in Western, mid-Atlantic and New England states have grown the most since 1970, while incomes in Midwestern states have grown the least.

Between 1970 and 2023, Utah household incomes increased at a higher rate than any other state: The median income went up 78%, an increase of \$40,820 in inflation-adjusted dollars to \$93,421. Utah was followed by Colorado, New Hampshire, California, Arizona and Virginia, all of which saw more than 60% growth in median household incomes adjusted for inflation.

Nationally, median household incomes grew by an average of 32%.

The study found only one state saw inflation-adjusted incomes drop over the past five decades: West Virginia's median household income fell by 0.4%, from \$56,161 to \$55,948 in inflation-adjusted dollars.

West Virginia had the second-lowest household income in the study, ranking ahead of only Mississippi's \$54,203. Massachusetts ranked the highest, with a median household income of \$99,858.

The Urban Institute, a left-leaning think tank, found that rates of state sales and income taxes had no association with changes in median household income. The analysis also found states with colder temperatures and higher property taxes saw greater median income growth, despite popular notions that lower property taxes and warm temperatures can lead to more prosperity.

The factors most strongly associated with household income growth were educational attainment and increases in the percentage of immigrants in the state population, the study concluded.

"This could be because immigration leads to economic growth, immigrants seek out growing areas, or both," the study said.

Stateline reporter Kevin Hardy can be reached at [khardy@stateline.org](mailto:khardy@stateline.org).

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

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

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

January 28, 2026



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Today



High: 14 °F

Partly Sunny

Tonight



Low: -7 °F

Partly Cloudy

Friday



High: 5 °F

Cold

Friday Night



Low: -9 °F

Mostly Clear

Saturday



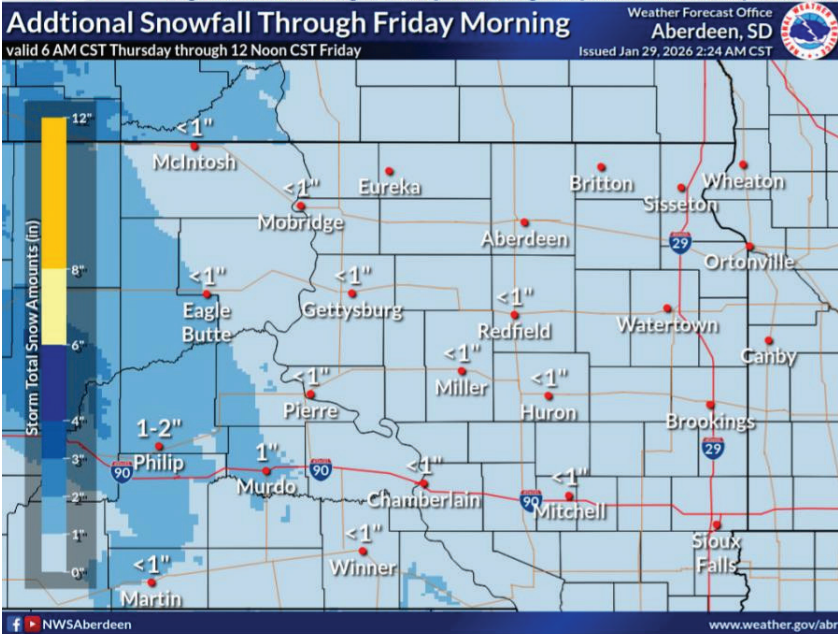
High: 24 °F

Chance Snow  
and Patchy  
Blowing Snow

## Snow Today through Friday Morning

January 29, 2026  
2:39 AM CST

Light snow through Friday morning may accumulate up to an additional inch.



### Key Messages:

- Light snow is expected to continue this morning through Friday morning.
- The highest snowfall totals are expected along and west of the Missouri River.
  - Additional accumulations **up to an inch** will be possible.
- Wind gusts will reach up to 15-20 mph, so visibility reductions from blowing/drifting snow is not expected.
- Roads may be slick! Use caution when traveling.



National Weather Service  
Aberdeen, SD

Light snow is expected to continue over central SD this morning through Friday morning. The highest snowfall totals are expected along and west of the Missouri River with additional accumulations up to an inch. Winds will remain light so visibility reductions from blowing/drifting snow are not expected. Roads may be slick this morning so use caution when traveling.

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## Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 13 °F at 3:02 PM

Low Temp: 0 °F at 1:13 AM

Wind: 16 mph at 10:35 AM

Precip: : 0.00

## Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1931

Record Low: -32 in 1951

Average High: 25

Average Low: 2

Average Precip in Jan.: .52

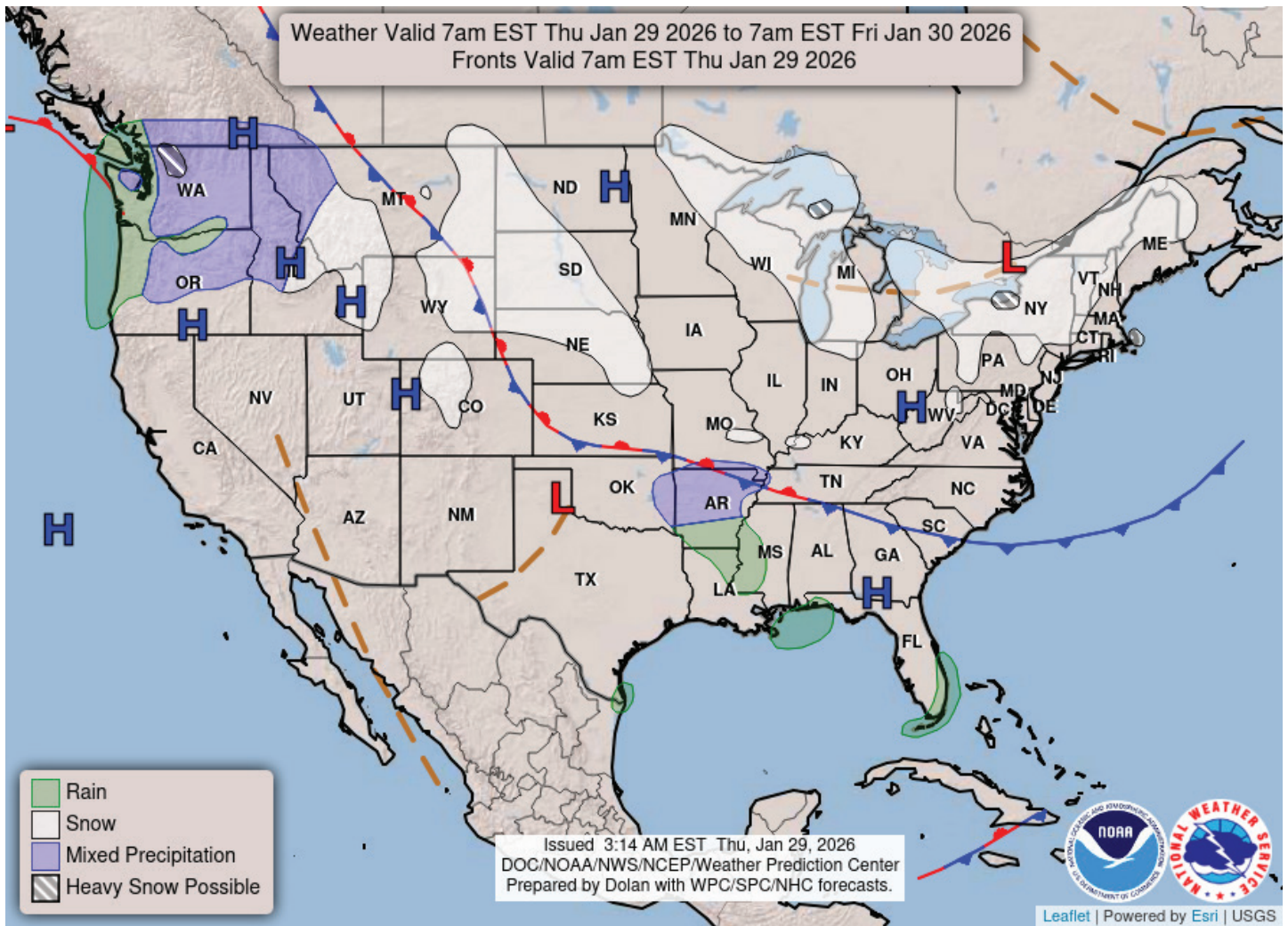
Precip to date in Jan.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.52

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:34 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:55 am



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## Today in Weather History

January 29, 2008: Arctic air combined with strong northwest winds of 20 to 40 mph to bring extreme wind chills to much of north-central and northeast South Dakota. The extreme wind chills began in the morning hours of January 29th across all of the area. The wind chills improved across north-central South Dakota by the evening and improved across northeast South Dakota during the morning hours of January 30th. The extreme wind chills ranged from 35 to 50 degrees below zero across the area. The extreme cold caused school delays and activity cancellations, along with much discomfort to people and livestock. On Monday, January 28th, the day before the extreme cold, a southerly flow brought very mild temperatures with some record highs set at several locations. Highs were in the 40s to the mid-50s across central and northeast South Dakota. When the Arctic front came through on January 28th, temperatures fell dramatically through the evening and early morning with below zero temperatures by Tuesday morning, January 29th. In fact, most locations across the area had a 40 to 55-degree temperature change from the 28th to the 29th.

1780 — On the coldest morning of a severe winter the mercury dipped to 16 degrees below zero at New York City, and reached 20 degrees below zero at Hartford CT. New York Harbor was frozen for five weeks, allowing a heavy cannon to be taken across the ice to fortify the British on Staten Island. (The Weather Channel)

1921: A small but intense windstorm resulted in the "Great Olympic Blowdown" in the Pacific Northwest. Hurricane-force winds funneled along the mountains downed vast expanses of Douglas fir trees, and the storm destroyed eight billion board feet of timber. Winds at North Head, WA, gusted to 113 mph. On January 31, 1921, the International News Services reported from Aberdeen, Washington, "It is reported that thousands of dollars in damage was done to buildings and storms in Aberdeen and Hoquiam. The wind velocity was estimated at from 125 to 150 miles an hour. Four steel smokestacks reaching almost 200 feet into the air were the first to collapse before the terrific onslaught of the gale. The giant chimneys crashed down on dwellings crushing them like houses of cardboard."

1947: On this date through the 30th, a fierce winter storm buried southern Wisconsin under two feet of snow. Strong northeasterly winds piled drifts up to 10 feet high in the Milwaukee area, shutting down the city for two days.

2008: A sharp cold front moved across Illinois during the day, producing a drastic temperature drop. Temperatures fell 20 to 40 degrees in just a couple of hours, with areas from Springfield, Illinois to St. Louis, Missouri seeing temperatures fall as much as 50 degrees between noon and 6 pm. Temperatures in the mid-60s in central Illinois at midday on the 29th had fallen to near zero by the next morning.

1983 — A series of Pacific coast storms finally came to an end. The storms, attributed in part to the ocean current, "El Nino," produced ocean swells 15 to 20 feet high which ravaged the beaches of southern California. Much of the damage was to homes of movies stars in the exclusive Malibu Colony. (The Weather Channel)

1989 — Bitter cold air continued to pour into Alaska. At McGrath, temperature dipped to 63 degrees below zero. Strong winds blowing through the Alaska Range between Fairbanks and Anchorage produced a wind chill reading of 120 degrees below zero at Cantwell. (National Weather Summary)

2002 — A major three-day winter storm blasted parts of Kansas and Missouri. A catastrophic ice storm occurred south of the snow area, with two inches of ice and snow accumulating in the Kansas City, Missouri area. Thousands of trees were felled by the storm, blocking roads, felling utility lines, and causing fires. Two "Bicentennial Trees," estimated at being over 200 years old, were badly damaged from this storm. After the 31st, 325,000 people were reported without power in Kansas City alone.

2008 — A sharp cold front moved across Illinois during the day, producing a drastic temperature drop. Temperatures fell 20 to 40 degrees in just a couple of hours, with areas from Springfield, Illinois to St. Louis, Missouri seeing temperatures fall as much as 50 degrees between noon and 6 pm. Temperatures in the mid-60s in central Illinois at midday on the 29th had fallen to near zero by the next morning.

## The Moments That Sustain Us

### How can we quiet our distractions long enough to hear God's voice?

Psalms 145:1-5: 1 I will extol You, my God, O King, And I will bless Your name forever and ever.  
2 Every day I will bless You, And I will praise Your name forever and ever.  
3 Great is the LORD, and highly to be praised, And His greatness is unsearchable.  
4 One generation shall praise Your works to another, And shall declare Your mighty acts.  
5 On the glorious splendor of Your majesty And on Your wonderful works, I will meditate.

Do you find that peace comes naturally, or does it feel like a constant struggle to attain? Sometimes it seems as if so many things are actively working against our peace that our spirit may never know a moment's rest. How can we quiet distractions long enough to hear God's voice?

The key is found in meditating. Perhaps you're thinking, Meditation is too self-focused; it serves no purpose in a Christian's life. But the truth is, meditation is not about listening to yourself; on the contrary, it is about quieting your own mind and listening for the gentle whispers of the Lord (Psalm 119:15).

Think about your prayer life. Whose voice is more prominent—yours or the Father's? For most people, the vast majority of prayer time is spent talking to God, thanking Him for what He's done, and asking for help. The Lord does tell us to let our requests be made known to Him (Philippians 4:6). But if you never spend time listening closely for a response, how will you know what He wants to communicate to you?

The time we spend listening to the Lord is a good indication of how much we respect and enjoy our relationship with Him. Consider your own prayer habits, and if you feel things could improve, commit to listen for what God wants to share.

*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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Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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## WINNING NUMBERS

### MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.27.26

4 20 38 56 66 5

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$303,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 30 Mins 49 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.28.26

25 31 33 36 41 2

All Star Bonus: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$14,300,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 15 Hrs 45 Mins 49 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.28.26

19 24 26 27 47 14

TOP PRIZE:

**\$7,000/week**

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 49 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.28.26

5 13 14 20 33

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$233,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 49 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.28.26

3 27 34 42 47 3

TOP PRIZE:

**\$10,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 29 Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

### POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:

01.28.26

21 35 40 46 68 11

Power Play: 10x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:

**\$57,000,000**

NEXT DRAW: 2 Days 16 Hrs 29 Mins 50 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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

### Omaha beats South Dakota State 80-71

By The Associated Press undefined

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Paul Djobet had 16 points and 10 rebounds as Omaha beat South Dakota State 80-71 on Wednesday night.

Tony Osburn shot 5 for 14, including 3 for 10 from beyond the arc to add 15 points for the Mavericks (11-12, 4-4 Summit League). Grant Stubblefield had 13 points and shot 3 of 8 from the field and 7 of 8 from the free-throw line.

Damon Wilkinson led the way for the Jackrabbits (10-12, 3-4) with 24 points. Kalen Garry added 22 points and four assists for South Dakota State. Bubz Alvarez finished with 10 points, six rebounds and two steals.

The Associated Press created this story using technology provided by Data Skrive and data from Spor-tradar.

#### BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Walthill, Neb. 64, Flandreau Indian 52

#### GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Walthill, Neb. 41, Flandreau Indian 32

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

### Starmer and Xi call for deeper UK-China ties as Trump shakes up global relations

By KEN MORITSUGU and JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The leaders of Britain and China called Thursday for a “strategic partnership” to deepen ties between their nations at a time of growing global turbulence as they sought to thaw relations after years of chill.

Neither Prime Minister Keir Starmer nor President Xi Jinping publicly mentioned Donald Trump, but the U.S. president’s challenge to the post-Cold War order was clearly on their minds.

“I think that working together on issues like climate change, global stability during challenging times for the world is precisely what we should be doing as we build this relationship in the way that I’ve described,” Starmer told Xi at the start of their meeting in Beijing.

The two met for 80 minutes — double the scheduled time — in the Great Hall of the People as their nations try to improve ties after several years of acrimony. Relations have deteriorated over allegations of Chinese spying in Britain, China’s support for Russia in Moscow’s war on Ukraine and the crackdown on freedoms in Hong Kong, the former British colony that was returned to China in 1997.

Starmer is the first British prime minister to visit in eight years. His trip, which ends on Saturday, has yielded a raft of business announcements and government agreements, including a deal allowing U.K. tourists and business visitors visa-free stays in China for up to 30 days.

Xi said that “China-U.K. relations experienced twists and turns in previous years, which was not in the interests of either country.”

“In the current turbulent and ever-changing international situation ... China and the U.K. need to strengthen dialogue and cooperation to maintain world peace and stability,” he said.

Chinese state broadcaster CCTV said Xi had stressed, without mentioning the U.S. directly, that “major powers” must adhere to international law or the world would regress into a “jungle.”

Relationship is in ‘a good place’

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Starmer's Downing Street office said Britain wanted "a consistent, long-term, and strategic partnership that will benefit both countries."

After the meeting, Starmer said the leaders had made "really good progress" on issues including slashing Chinese tariffs on Scotch whisky and introducing visa-free travel for British visitors.

"The relationship is in a good place, a strong place," the British leader said.

Xi appeared to acknowledge the criticism that Starmer has faced for reaching out to China despite national security and human rights concerns. The United Kingdom recently approved controversial plans for a huge Chinese Embassy in London, removing a sticking point in relations but also overriding fears that the "mega-embassy" would make it easier for China to conduct espionage and intimidate dissidents.

"Good things often come with difficulties," Xi said. "As long as it is the right thing to do in accordance with the fundamental interests of the country and its people, leaders will not shy away from difficulties and will forge ahead bravely."

Starmer's visit comes less than two months after a Hong Kong court convicted Jimmy Lai, a former newspaper publisher and British citizen, under a national security law that Beijing imposed on the territory after massive pro-democracy protests in 2019.

Starmer said he raised human rights issues with Xi and the two men had a "respectful discussion."

Starmer, who was elected in July 2024, has said he will protect national security while keeping up diplomatic dialogue and economic cooperation with China. He told Xi that it has "been far too long" since a U.K. prime minister visited.

"I made a promise 18 months ago when we were elected into government, that I would make Britain face outward again," the leader of the center-left Labour Party said. "Because as we all know, events abroad affect everything that happens back in our home countries, from prices on the supermarket shelves to how secure we feel."

Starmer's government has struggled to deliver the economic growth it promised and ease a cost-of-living crisis for millions of households and he sees China as a potential source of growth.

More than 50 U.K. business executives have joined him on the trip, along with the leaders of major cultural organizations, as he seeks to expand opportunities for British companies in China and secure Chinese investment in the U.K.

Among the business deals announced on the trip was a \$15 billion investment in China through 2030 by drugmaker AstraZeneca.

Britain is also keen to get more access to the vast Chinese market for U.K. professional and financial services. The two countries agreed to conduct a "feasibility study" as a first step before negotiating a services agreement.

Trump tariffs spur new trade talks

The disruption to global trade under Trump has made expanding trade and investment more imperative for many governments. Vietnam and the European Union upgraded ties to a comprehensive strategic partnership on Thursday, two days after the EU and India announced a free trade agreement.

"At a moment when the international rules-based order is under threat from multiple sides, we need to stand side by side as reliable and predictable partners," European Council President Antonio Costa said in Hanoi, Vietnam.

Starmer is the fourth leader of a U.S. ally to visit Beijing this month, following those of South Korea, Canada and Finland. The German chancellor is expected to visit next month.

The U.K. leader also met Thursday with Zhao Leji, the chairman of China's legislature, the National People's Congress, and Premier Li Qiang, who told Starmer his efforts to improve relations had been "widely welcomed" in both countries.

Starmer told the U.K.-China Business Council he was seeking "a more sophisticated relationship fit for these times."

"I would like to echo a Chinese phrase, which I think captures the essence of what I'm talking about: pursue common goals whilst reserving differences," he said. "That's what we are working together to achieve."

## Car rams into Chabad headquarters in New York City, damaging doors

By HALLIE GOLDEN Associated Press

A man was arrested after repeatedly crashing his car into the Chabad Lubavitch world headquarters in New York City on Wednesday night while people were gathered for prayer at the deeply revered Hasidic Jewish site.

No one was injured when the driver struck a door of a building in the complex before reversing and striking it several more times. Police Commissioner Jessica Tisch said that while it was too early in the investigation to speculate on the driver's motives, the incident was being investigated as a possible hate crime.

"This is deeply alarming, especially given the deep meaning and the history of the institution to so many in New York and around the world," said New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, who called the crash "intentional."

Video of the crash that was posted online shows a car with New Jersey license plates moving forward and backward on an icy driveway leading to a building in the complex and ramming its basement-level doors.

The driver, who is wearing shorts, emerges, shouts to bystanders that "It slipped" and says something to police about trying to park.

Chabad Lubavitch spokesperson Motti Seligson said some of the doors were damaged in the crash.

The Chabad Lubavitch headquarters and synagogue in Brooklyn's Crown Heights neighborhood receives thousands of visitors annually. Its Gothic Revival facade is very recognizable to adherents of the Chabad movement and has inspired dozens of replicas across the world.

Commonly referred to as 770, a nod to the Eastern Parkway address of the complex's original building, the headquarters encompasses multiple adjacent structures.

Brooklyn District Attorney Eric Gonzalez called the crash "disturbing and unacceptable."

"This could have been much worse and I'm grateful that no one was hurt," he said in a post on social platform X. "My office is working closely with the NYPD to ensure justice is done and the community is safe."

Neither bombs nor any other weapons were found in the car that hit the building, according to Tisch. She said it was also too early in the investigation to comment on the driver's mental state.

The incident happened on the 75th anniversary of the date that Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson became the leader of the Lubavitch movement. Schneerson died in 1994 but remains a revered figure globally.

There has been a near constant police presence around 770 Eastern Parkway for years.

The site was at the epicenter of the Crown Heights riots in 1991, when Black residents of the neighborhood attacked Jews after a child was killed by a car traveling in Schneerson's motorcade. In 2014, a disturbed man entered the synagogue and stabbed a rabbinical student, wounding him, before being shot dead by police.

## EU appears poised to sanction Iran's Revolutionary Guard over protest crackdown

By SAM McNEIL and JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union appeared poised Thursday to sanction Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard over Tehran's deadly crackdown on nationwide protests, further squeezing the Islamic Republic as it worries over a threat by U.S. President Donald Trump to potentially launch a military strike against it.

America has moved the USS Abraham Lincoln and several guided-missile destroyers into the Mideast, which can be used to launch attacks from the sea. Iran has kept up its own threats as well, saying it could launch a preemptive strike or broadly target the Mideast, including American military bases and Israel.

It remains unclear what Trump will decide about using force, though he has threatened to use it in response to the killing of peaceful demonstrators and over possible mass executions. At least 6,373 people

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have been killed in the protests, activists said.

But the move by Europe, long considered, will put new pressure on Iran as its economy already struggles under the weight of international sanctions. Its rial currency fell to a record low of 1.6 million to \$1 on Thursday. Economic woes had sparked the protests that broadened into challenging the theocracy before the crackdown.

### EU 'likely' to sanction the Guard

The EU's top diplomat, Kaja Kallas, told journalists it was "likely" the sanctions would be put in place.

"This will put them on the same footing with al-Qaida, Hamas, Daesh," Kallas said, using an Arabic acronym for the Islamic State group. "If you act as a terrorist, you should also be treated as a terrorist."

Iran had no immediate comment, but it has been criticizing Europe in recent days as it considered the move, which follows the U.S. earlier sanctioning the Guard.

By EU law, sanctions require unanimity across the bloc's 27 nations. That's at times hindered Brussels' ability to flex its economic clout to crack down on Russia over its invasion of Ukraine.

For Iran, France had objected to listing the Guard as a terrorist organization over fears it would endanger French citizens detained in Iran, as well as diplomatic missions, which provide some of the few communication channels between the Islamic Republic and Europe and its allies. However, the office of President Emmanuel Macron on Wednesday signaled Paris backed the decision.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noël Barrot said Thursday before the Foreign Affairs Council in Brussels that France supports more sanctions in Iran and the listing "because there can be no impunity for the crimes committed."

"In Iran, the unbearable repression that has engulfed the peaceful revolt of the Iranian people cannot go unanswered," he said.

### Guard key to crackdown

The Guard was born from Iran's 1979 Islamic Revolution as a force meant to protect its Shiite cleric-overseen government and later enshrined in its constitution. It operated parallel to the country's regular armed forces, growing in prominence and power during a long and ruinous war with Iraq in the 1980s. Though it faced possible disbandment after the war, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei granted it powers to expand into private enterprise, allowing it to thrive.

The Guard's all-volunteer Basij force likely was key in putting down the demonstrations, starting in earnest from Jan. 8, when authorities cut off the global internet for the nation of 85 million people. Videos that have emerged from Iran via Starlink satellite dishes and other means show men likely belonging to its forces shooting and beating protesters.

Sanctioning the Guard, however, would be complicated. Iranian men once reaching the age of 18 are required to do as much as two years of military service and many find themselves conscripted into the Guard despite their own politics.

### Death toll slowly rises

On Wednesday, the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency, which has been accurate in multiple rounds of unrest in Iran, said the violence killed at least 6,373 people, with many more feared dead. Its count included at least 5,993 protesters, 214 government-affiliated forces, 113 children and 53 civilians who weren't demonstrating. More than 42,450 have been arrested, it added.

The group verifies each death and arrest with a network of activists on the ground in Iran. The Associated Press has been unable to independently assess the death toll given that authorities cut off the internet and disrupted calls into the Islamic Republic. That communication cutoff also has slowed the full scale of the crackdown from being revealed.

Iran's government as of Jan. 21 put the death toll at a far lower 3,117, saying 2,427 were civilians and security forces, and labeled the rest "terrorists." In the past, Iran's theocracy has undercounted or not reported fatalities from unrest.

That death toll exceeds that of any other round of protest or unrest in Iran in decades, and recalls the chaos surrounding the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

## US appeals court says Noem's decision to end protections for Venezuelans in US was illegal

By SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

A federal appeals court ruled late Wednesday that the Trump administration acted illegally when it ended legal protections that gave hundreds of thousands of people from Venezuela permission to live and work in the United States.

A three-judge panel of the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld a lower court ruling that found Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem exceeded her authority when she ended temporary protected status for Venezuelans.

The decision, however, will not have any immediate practical effect after the U.S. Supreme Court in October allowed Noem's decision to take effect pending a final decision by the justices.

An email late Wednesday night to the Department of Homeland Security was not immediately returned.

The 9th Circuit panel also upheld the lower court's finding that Noem exceeded her authority when she decided to end TPS early for hundreds of thousands of people from Haiti.

A federal judge in Washington is expected to rule any day now on a request to pause the termination of TPS for Haiti while a separate lawsuit challenging it proceeds. The country's TPS designation is scheduled to end on February 3.

Ninth Circuit Judges Kim Wardlaw, Salvador Mendoza, Jr. and Anthony Johnstone said in Wednesday's ruling that the TPS legislation passed by Congress did not give the secretary the power to vacate an existing TPS designation. All three judges were nominated by Democratic presidents.

"The statute contains numerous procedural safeguards that ensure individuals with TPS enjoy predictability and stability during periods of extraordinary and temporary conditions in their home country," Wardlaw, who was nominated by President Bill Clinton, wrote for the panel.

Wardlaw said Noem's "unlawful actions have had real and significant consequences" for Venezuelans and Haitians in the United States who rely on TPS.

"The record is replete with examples of hard-working, contributing members of society — who are mothers, fathers, wives, husbands, and partners of U.S. citizens, pay taxes, and have no criminal records — who have been deported or detained after losing their TPS," she wrote.

Temporary Protected Status, or TPS, authorized by Congress as part of the Immigration Act of 1990, allows the Homeland Security secretary to grant legal immigration status to people fleeing countries experiencing civil strife, environmental disaster or other "extraordinary and temporary conditions" that prevent a safe return to that home country.

Designations are granted for terms of six, 12 or 18 months, and extensions can be granted so long as conditions remain dire. The status prevents holders from being deported and allows them to work, but it does not give them a path to citizenship.

In ending the protections, Noem said that conditions in both Haiti and Venezuela had improved and that it was not in the national interest to allow immigrants from the two countries to stay on for what is a temporary program.

Millions of Venezuelans have fled political unrest, mass unemployment and hunger. The country is mired in a prolonged crisis brought on by years of hyperinflation, political corruption, economic mismanagement and an ineffectual government.

Haiti was first designated for TPS in 2010 after a catastrophic magnitude 7.0 earthquake killed and wounded hundreds of thousands of people, and left more than 1 million homeless. Haitians face widespread hunger and gang violence.

Mendoza wrote separately that there was "ample evidence of racial and national origin animus" that reinforced the lower court's conclusion that Noem's decisions were "preordained and her reasoning pretextual."

"It is clear that the Secretary's vacatur actions were not actually grounded in substantive policy considerations or genuine differences with respect to the prior administration's TPS procedures, but were instead rooted in a stereotype-based diagnosis of immigrants from Venezuela and Haiti as dangerous criminals

or mentally unwell," he wrote.

Attorneys for the government have argued the secretary has clear and broad authority to make determinations related to the TPS program and those decisions are not subject to judicial review. They have also denied that her actions were motivated by racial animus.

## **Situation in US South grows more dire after days of ice, frigid temperatures and widespread outages**

By SOPHIE BATES, JEFF MARTIN and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Mississippi dispatchers are fielding desperate calls for medication or oxygen from people stuck in their homes. Troopers in Tennessee are fanning out for welfare checks on those who haven't been heard from in days. And in at least one rural area, officials have resorted to using trucks typically used for battling wildfires to transport patients to hospitals.

It could be days before power is restored across the South, where more subfreezing temperatures are expected by Friday in areas unaccustomed to and ill-equipped for such cold. The situation is reaching a breaking point for the elderly and those with medical conditions who lack electricity, some of whom are trapped by roads made impassable by ice and fallen trees.

Nancy Dillon, 87, spent three days without power on her family farm in the rural outskirts of Nashville, relying on her fireplace for warmth. When her phone battery started dying and her back-up battery pack stopped working, she said she became "alarmed."

"If I were to fall, if I were to need somebody, there would be no way to get help," she said, adding that electricity was restored on Tuesday night.

The growing misery and anxiety comes amid what Mississippi officials say is the state's worst winter storm in more than 30 years. About 60 warming centers were opened across a state known as one of the nation's poorest. But for some communities, they are not enough.

Hal Ferrell, mayor of Batesville, said Wednesday that no one in the city has power and, with roads still slippery with ice, it's too soon to begin recovery efforts.

"We're at a real mess and warming centers just don't exist for 7,500 people," Ferrell said.

Roughly 298,000 homes and businesses remained without power Wednesday night, the vast majority of them are in Tennessee and Mississippi.

At least 70 people have died across the U.S. in states afflicted by the dangerous cold.

In Hardin County, Tennessee, at the Mississippi state line, LaRae Sliger, the county's emergency management director, said while people were prepared to manage a couple of days without power, they can't go much longer without help.

"They're cold, they don't have power, they don't have heat, they're out of propane, they're out of wood, they're out of kerosene for their kerosene heaters," she said.

More than 96,000 outages remained in Nashville, Tennessee, where downed trees and snapped power lines blocked access to some areas. Utility workers will need at least the weekend, if not longer, to finish restoring power, said Brent Baker, a Nashville Electric Service vice president.

Forecasters say the subfreezing weather will persist in the eastern U.S. into February, with a new influx of arctic air arriving this weekend. There's a growing chance for heavy snow in the Carolinas and Virginia.

The National Weather Service said chances of additional, significant snowfall are low in places like Nashville, but weekend temperatures will reach dangerously low single digits with wind chills below zero.

Mississippi dispatched 135 snowplows and National Guard troops equipped with wreckers to sections of Interstates 55 and 22 gridlocked by vehicles abandoned in the state's ice-stricken northern region.

Cars and semitrucks trying to navigate the frozen highways single-file began getting stuck Tuesday. No injuries were reported, the Mississippi Department of Public Safety said.

Erik Lipsett in Benton County, Mississippi, spent the last several days scooping ice from the front yard so he can melt it to flush down his toilets. The area has been without water and power since the weekend.

On Wednesday morning, he lined up at a nearby gas station to shower and said that propane bottles,

canisters and hookups for heaters are hard to come by.

## Kendrick Lamar, Lady Gaga, K-pop and more: AP predicts who will win at the 2026 Grammys

By MARIA SHERMAN and JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writers

The competition is fierce. Kendrick Lamar's dominance continues at the 2026 Grammy Awards, where he leads the nominations with nine. He's followed closely by Lady Gaga, Jack Antonoff and Canadian record producer/songwriter Cirkut, who boast seven each. Then it's Sabrina Carpenter, Bad Bunny, Leon Thomas and Serban Ghenea with six.

But who will win? Who will make history at the 68th Grammy Awards on Feb. 1?

The Associated Press' Maria Sherman and Jonathan Landrum Jr. break down the close races for Grammy glory.

Album of the year

"Debí Tirar Más Fotos," Bad Bunny; "Swag," Justin Bieber; "Man's Best Friend," Sabrina Carpenter; "Let God Sort Em Out," Clipse, Pusha T and Malice; "Mayhem," Lady Gaga; "GNX," Kendrick Lamar; "Mutt," Leon Thomas; "Chromakopia," Tyler, the Creator.

SHERMAN: Starting off with the big guns. Last year's "Cowboy Carter" victory was long overdue for Beyoncé. That, and an evolving Recording Academy electorate, is enough to inspire hope that winners may soon be in sync with the current cultural zeitgeist. But change is slow, and it is most likely Lady Gaga will be awarded. "Mayhem" is a great album, but her victory will be more about narrative — recognizing a game-changing artist with her return-to-form record — instead of who should really win this year. That's Bad Bunny's "Debí Tirar Más Fotos." (Let's not forget all Latin Recording Academy members were invited to join the Recording Academy in 2025, but it is not clear how many can actually vote.) The world would love to see a Spanish-language album win for the very first time — Bad Bunny was once again the most streamed artist, globally, on Spotify last year.

There's also "GNX," which deserves the victory, as well. But the 2025 ceremony felt like Kendrick Lamar's victory lap, and even with three rap albums nominated in the top spot, it's not clear whether voters will give him the recognition he deserves.

LANDRUM: I understand the appeal of a breakthrough narrative here, especially with such a globally representative field. But this category tends to land with the project that moved most cleanly across multiple spaces without explanation. "GNX" stayed active across music, sports and everyday culture throughout the year. Let's not forget that songs "luther" and "Squabble Up" sustained long-term engagement; "TV Off" entered everyday language with the "Mustard" catchphrase; and "Dodger Blue" extended the project into sports culture during the Los Angeles Dodgers' championship run. Much respect to the other nominees here, but Lamar delivered a tightly structured album that circulated naturally. That kind of sustained presence usually carries more weight than momentum built around a single lane.

Record of the year

"DtMF," Bad Bunny; "Manchild," Sabrina Carpenter; "Anxiety," Doechii; "Wildflower," Billie Eilish; "Abra-cadabra," Lady Gaga; "luther," Kendrick Lamar with SZA; "The Subway," Chappell Roan; "APT.," Rosé and Bruno Mars.

LANDRUM: If one song feels both inescapable and effortless, it's "APT." I look at what songs listeners — especially younger ones including my soon-to-be 6-year-old — still keep in rotation. The song easily translates across age groups, platforms and borders. Bruno Mars brought a proven sense of structure that voters respond to, while Rosé's presence reflects the academy's growing comfort with global pop influence. If this wins, which I believe will happen, Rosé would become the first K-pop artist to take the record of the year milestone. I think it's time to make history.

SHERMAN: For all of the reasons you've listed above — as well as its total ubiquity and cultural meshing — "APT." is the most likely candidate. But because record of the year is meant to highlight performance and production (as opposed to song of the year, which focuses on songwriting and composition), "luther"

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should win.

Song of the year (songwriter's award)

"Abracadabra," Henry Walter, Lady Gaga and Andrew Watt; "Anxiety," Jaylah Hickmon; "APT.," Amy Allen, Christopher Brody Brown, Rogét Chahayed, Henry Walter, Omer Fedi, Philip Lawrence, Bruno Mars, Chae Young Park and Theron Thomas; "DtMF," Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio, Scott Dittrich, Benjamin Falik, Hugo René Senci3n and Tyler Thomas Spry; "Golden," EJAI and Mark Sonnenblick; "luther," Jack Antonoff, Roshwita Larisha Bacha, Matthew Bernard, Ink, Scott Bridgeway, Sam Dew, Kendrick Lamar, Mark Anthony Spears, Solána Rowe and Kamasi Washington; "Manchild," Amy Allen, Jack Antonoff and Sabrina Carpenter; "Wildflower," Billie Eilish O'Connell and Finneas O'Connell.

SHERMAN: There's no "Not Like Us" this year, but there is a lot of competition. Billie Eilish and Bruno Mars are back — two established favorites of Grammy voters — it would be a third win for both in this category, the most of any artist. And it wouldn't be wise to count out the gargantuan "Golden," though it may be awarded elsewhere. Signs point to Lady Gaga for this one. She has been nominated in this category four times with no victories. "Abracadabra" could take it home — and it will feel more justified than an album of the year win for many.

LANDRUM: I agree. The competition is strong here. But this category often comes down to precision. And "Abracadabra" is tightly constructed and intentional, shaped by Lady Gaga's renewed focus on lyric construction and melodic intent. That was something we spoke about ahead of her album. You hear that discipline in the writing itself with every line pulling its weight.

Best new artist

Olivia Dean; Katseye; The Marias; Addison Rae; sombr; Leon Thomas; Alex Warren; Lola Young.

LANDRUM: This category increasingly rewards artists who arrive with a fully formed identity. Leon Thomas separated himself by presenting a cohesive body of work rather than a moment driven by visibility alone. "Mutt" reflects songwriting discipline, genre fluency and a clear point of view shaped by years of experience. That foundation tends to resonate when voters are thinking long term.

SHERMAN: Points have been made! Thomas is an exemplar candidate. But there are other factors. If streaming was the ultimate metric, this would go to "Ordinary" singer Alex Warren. But it rarely is. In this category, Olivia Dean's name has been uttered the most.

Best pop duo/group performance

"Defying Gravity," Cynthia Erivo and Ariana Grande; "Golden," HUNTR/X: EJAE, Audrey Nuna, REI AMI; "Gabriela," Katseye; "APT.," Rosé and Bruno Mars, "30 for 30," SZA with Kendrick Lamar.

SHERMAN: Three of these nominees could be considered K-pop, or at the very least, K-pop-adjacent: "Golden," "APT.," and "Gabriela." If any of them win, it will mark the first time any K-pop act has won any Grammy — and who wouldn't want to see that? "Golden" feels most likely. If the Lamar and SZA song here was "Luther" instead of "30 for 30," this would be a different conversation.

LANDRUM: For me, this is a toss-up between "Golden" and "APT." But I'm going to give a slight nod to "APT." What sets the song apart is balance. It also features a voter favorite: Bruno Mars. The collaboration with him and Rosé feels settled, with neither artist competing for space. Mars understands how to shape performances that voters consistently recognize, and Rosé fits seamlessly into that structure. In this category, cohesion often matters more than ambition.

Best rap album

"Let God Sort Em Out," Clipse, Pusha T and Malice; "Glorious," GloRilla; "God Does Like Ugly," JID, "GNX," Kendrick Lamar, "Chromakopia," Tyler, the Creator.

LANDRUM: If I believe "GNX" deserves album of the year, then this category shouldn't even be a debate. Same logic would apply to Tyler, the Creator: You shouldn't crown the album at the top and ignore it in its home genre. "GNX" is cohesive, quotable and culturally dominant without chasing the algorithm. That's rap at its highest level.

SHERMAN: It's a no contest pick. "GNX" is more than an album, but a paragon — and should be awarded as such.

Best contemporary country album

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"Patterns," Kelsea Ballerini; "Snipe Hunter," Tyler Childers; "Evangeline vs the Machine," Eric Church; "Beautifully Broken," Jelly Roll; "Postcards from Texas," Miranda Lambert.

SHERMAN: This year, the Grammys renamed country album to contemporary country album and added a traditional country album category, a distinction that exists in other genres. But the news arrived right after "Cowboy Carter" won best country album, inspiring backlash online. In this inaugural edition, "contemporary" seems to mean "country that includes elements of other genres and/or left-of-center narratives." In the case of the former, Eric Church's inventive country-rock may sway voters over Kelsea Ballerini's pop affectations, Jelly Roll's hip-hop-informed phrasing or Tyler Childers' eclecticism.

LANDRUM: Like Jelly Roll said in an interview with Maria, it's his time. And I sure do believe him. This album fits the newly defined category almost too perfectly: emotional, honest, genre-fluid production and storytelling that connects beyond traditional country audiences. He expanded this genre, and I believe voters love a moment that feels both timely and redemptive. This checks both boxes.

Best R&B Album

"Beloved," Giveon; "Why Not More?," Coco Jones; "The Crown," Ledisi; "Escape Room," Teyana Taylor; "Mutt," Leon Thomas.

LANDRUM: There's only one album in this category that's also up for album of the year, and that matters. "Mutt" distinguished itself through restraint, allowing songwriting and performance to lead rather than production excess. This should be a lock ... which is exactly why I'm bracing for voters to surprise me.

SHERMAN: "Mutt" is a clear standout here. As Ty Dolla \$ign told AP in October, "There's definitely going to be a comeback in R&B very soon." And who did he name as its leader? "We're talking Leon specifically."

Best dance/electronic album

"EUSEXUA," FKA twigs; "Ten Days," Fred again ...; "Fancy That," PinkPantheress; "Inhale/Exhale," Rūfūs du Sol; "F--- U Skrillex You Think Ur Andy Warhol but UR Not! 3," Skrillex

SHERMAN: There are a lot of heavyweights in this category: Fred again ..., Rūfūs du Sol, PinkPantheress and more. FKA twigs' "EUSEXUA" made a big splash in 2025. But all signs point to Skrillex, one of the most Grammy-awarded dance/electronic artists, with nine career wins.

LANDRUM: This field is rich with compelling artistic statements. What gives Skrillex's "F--- U Skrillex You Think Ur Andy Warhol but UR Not! 3" an edge is direction. It pushes sound forward while maintaining structure. That balance between experimentation and clarity has historically resonated with voters in this category.

Best Latin pop album

"Cosa Nuestra," Rauw Alejandro; "Bogotá (Deluxe)," Andrés Cepeda; "Tropicoqueta," Karol G; "Cancionera," Natalia Lafourcade; "¿Y ahora qué?," Alejandro Sanz.

SHERMAN: This trophy is likely headed to Natalia Lafourcade or Alejandro Sanz, who took home record of the year at the 2025 Latin Grammys a few months ago. Even though this is a pop category, I sense voters will go traditional. The Latin categories at the Grammys often reflect the top winners at the Latin Grammys, too.

LANDRUM: There's a strong case for tradition in this field, but "Tropicoqueta" reflects forward movement. Karol G operates with clear creative authority here, balancing accessibility with cultural specificity. When voters meet the moment rather than default to familiarity, this type of project tends to stand out.

## New videos show Alex Pretti scuffle with federal officers in Minneapolis 11 days before his death

By MICHAEL BIESECKER and JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Alex Pretti was forcefully taken to the ground by federal immigration agents after kicking out the tail light of their vehicle during a Minneapolis protest 11 days before he was shot and killed by Border Patrol officers, videos that emerged Wednesday show.

The Jan. 13 scuffle was captured in a pair of videos that show Pretti shouting an expletive at the federal

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officers and struggling with them. His winter coat comes off when he's on the ground and he either breaks free or the officers let him go and he scurries away.

When he turns his back to the camera, what appears to be a handgun is visible in his waistband. At no point do the videos show Pretti reaching for the gun and it is unclear whether the federal agents saw it.

A person with knowledge of the incident confirmed to The Associated Press that the man in the videos is Pretti and that he had told his family of the confrontation. The person spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss matters sensitive to the family.

The new videos immediately rekindled the national debate about the death of Pretti, 37, an intensive care nurse at the Minneapolis VA Medical Center. Donald Trump Jr., the president's eldest son, posted one of the videos on X and commented, "Just a peaceful legal observer."

Lawyer says new videos don't excuse shooting

Steve Schleicher, a Minneapolis-based attorney representing Pretti's parents, said the earlier altercation in no way justified the officers fatally shooting Pretti on Saturday.

"A week before Alex was gunned down in the street — despite posing no threat to anyone — he was violently assaulted by a group of (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) agents," Schleicher said in a written statement. "Nothing that happened a full week before could possibly have justified Alex's killing at the hands of ICE on Jan 24."

Homeland Security Investigations is reviewing the new videos and incident, a spokesperson with the department said. It's not known if any of the officers involved were also there when Pretti was killed.

Last weekend's fatal shooting occurred on a sidewalk next to the street where Pretti had been videoing immigration officers. In video taken by bystanders, one officer pushes him, then Pretti is taken to the ground and a half-dozen officers try to subdue him. One spots Pretti's weapon, which he was licensed to carry, and shouts, "He's got a gun." Two officers then open fire and Pretti is killed.

Trump administration officials quickly reacted, saying Pretti had approached officers with a gun and attacked them.

The altercation and shooting was captured in multiple videos and showed Pretti never brandished his gun and didn't assault any officer. He was holding his phone when he was shot in the back while on the ground.

The new videos from the week prior to the shooting came from two sources. One, published by the Minnesota Star Tribune and later obtained by the AP, was taken by Max Shapiro, a witness who filmed the interaction. The second was by a crew for The News Movement, an online media outlet.

Confrontation came amid whistles and shouts

Shapiro, an attorney in Minneapolis, recounted in an interview Wednesday that he saw over a Signal chat that immigration enforcement was in the area. Driving over, Shapiro parked half a block from officers and got out.

"The observers were pretty distraught and screaming," he said, adding that the officers began trying to get the crowd back, but their directives were largely drowned out in whistles and shouts.

The video from The News Movement shows Pretti wearing glasses, a dark baseball cap and a winter coat yelling at federal vehicles, at one point appearing to spit and yell "trash" toward the driver's side of a dark Ford Expedition with flashing red and blue lights.

As the vehicle pulls slowly away, Pretti kicks at the taillight and then delivers a second kick that shatters the red plastic and leaves the taillight dangling.

Shapiro began filming on his phone just after Pretti kicked out the taillight.

Both videos capture the rear door of the SUV swinging open and an immigration officer wearing a gas mask and helmet getting out. He starts walking toward Pretti.

The officer grabs Pretti's shirt at his chest, pulling him back toward the vehicle as Pretti's arms flail. The officer pulls Pretti back onto the street and down onto his knees, falling over Pretti in the scuffle.

Other masked and helmeted officers surround them and try to subdue Pretti. Others stand guard between them and a screaming crowd, before the officers set off tear gas canisters and withdraw.

After Pretti stumbles away, Shapiro walks over and hugs Pretti, asking if he is OK.

Pretti affirms that he is, before turning to others involved in the melee and asking: "Are we all OK? Are

we all safe?"

Shapiro said he understands some will use the videos to try to vilify Pretti, but that he seemed like someone who cared deeply about what was happening to the people caught up in the Trump Administration's deportation push.

"I'm no immigration policy expert," Shapiro said. "But there has to be a better way to go about this."

## Democrats poised to trigger government shutdown if White House won't meet demands for ICE reform

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Democrats are threatening to block legislation that would fund the Department of Homeland Security and several other agencies Thursday, potentially bringing the government a step closer to a partial shutdown if Republicans and the White House do not agree to new restrictions on President Donald Trump's surge of immigration enforcement.

As the country reels from the deaths of two protesters at the hands of federal agents in Minneapolis, irate Senate Democrats laid out a list of demands ahead of a Thursday morning test vote, including that officers take off their masks and identify themselves and obtain warrants for arrest. If those are not met, Democrats say they are prepared to block the wide-ranging spending bill, denying Republicans the votes they need to pass it and triggering a shutdown at midnight on Friday.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said Wednesday that Democrats won't provide needed votes until U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is "reined in and overhauled."

"The American people support law enforcement, they support border security, they do not support ICE terrorizing our streets and killing American citizens," Schumer said.

There were some signs of possible progress as the White House has appeared open to trying to strike a deal with Democrats to avert a shutdown. The two sides were talking as of Wednesday evening, according to a person familiar with the negotiations who requested anonymity to speak about the private talks. One possible option discussed would be to strip the funding for the Homeland Security Department from the larger bill, as Schumer has requested, and extend it for a short period to allow time for negotiations, the person said. The rest of the bill would fund government agencies until September.

Still, with no agreement yet and an uncertain path ahead, the standoff threatened to plunge the country into another shutdown just two months after Democrats blocked a spending bill over expiring federal health care subsidies, a dispute that closed the government for 43 days as Republicans refused to negotiate.

That shutdown ended when a small group of moderate Democrats broke away to strike a deal with Republicans, but Democrats are more unified this time after the fatal shootings of Alex Pretti and Renee Good by federal agents.

Democrats lay out their demands

There's a lot of "unanimity and shared purpose" within the Democratic caucus, Minnesota Sen. Tina Smith said after a lunch meeting Wednesday.

"Boil it all down, what we are talking about is that these lawless ICE agents should be following the same rules that your local police department does," Smith said. "There has to be accountability."

Amid the administration's immigration crackdown, Schumer said Democrats are asking the White House to "end roving patrols" in cities and coordinate with local law enforcement on immigration arrests, including requiring tighter rules for warrants.

Democrats also want an enforceable code of conduct so agents are held accountable when they violate rules. Schumer said agents should be required to have "masks off, body cameras on" and carry proper identification, as is common practice in most law enforcement agencies.

The Democratic caucus is united in those "common sense reforms" and the burden is on Republicans to accept them, Schumer said, as he has pushed for the Homeland spending to be separated out to avoid a broader shutdown.

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Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., has indicated that he might be open to considering some of the Democrats' demands, but he encouraged Democrats and the White House to talk and find agreement.

Many obstacles to a deal

As the two sides negotiated, it was still unclear whether they could agree on anything that would satisfy Democrats who want Trump's aggressive crackdown to end.

The White House had invited some Democrats for a discussion to better understand their positions and avoid a partial government shutdown, a senior White House official said, but the meeting did not happen. The official requested anonymity to discuss the private invitation.

The House passed the six remaining funding bills last week and sent them to the Senate as a package, making it more difficult to strip out the homeland security portion as Democrats have demanded. Republicans could break the package apart with the consent of all 100 senators or through a series of votes that would extend past the Friday deadline.

Even if the Senate can resolve the issue, House Republicans have said they do not want any changes to the bill they have passed. In a letter to Trump on Tuesday, the conservative House Freedom Caucus wrote that its members stand with the president and ICE.

"The package will not come back through the House without funding for the Department of Homeland Security," according to the letter.

Republican opposition

Several Republican senators have said they would be fine with Democrats' request to separate the Homeland Security funds for further debate and pass the other bills in the package. But it might be more difficult for Democrats to find broad GOP support for their demands on ICE.

North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis said he's OK with separating the bills, but is opposed to the Democrats' proposal to require the immigration enforcement officers to unmask and show their faces, even as he blamed Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem for decisions that he said are "tarnishing" the agency's reputation.

"You know, there's a lot of vicious people out there, and they'll take a picture of your face, and the next thing you know, your children or your wife or your husband are being threatened at home," Tillis said. "And that's just the reality of the world that we're in."

Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas said that "what happened over the weekend is a tragedy," but Democrats shouldn't punish Americans with a shutdown and a "political stunt."

Democrats say they won't back down.

"It is truly a moral moment," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn. "I think we need to take a stand."

## Trump signals interest in easing tensions, but Minneapolis sees little change on the streets

By STEVE KARNOWSKI, JACK BROOK and GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — President Donald Trump seemed to signal a willingness to ease tensions in Minneapolis after a second deadly shooting by federal immigration agents, but there was little evidence Wednesday of any significant changes following weeks of harsh rhetoric and clashes with protesters.

The strain was evident when Trump made a leadership change by sending his top border adviser to Minnesota to take charge of the immigration crackdown. That was followed by seemingly conciliatory remarks about the Democratic governor and mayor.

Trump said he and Gov. Tim Walz, whom he criticized for weeks, were on "a similar wavelength" following a phone call. After a conversation with Mayor Jacob Frey, the president praised the discussion and declared that "lots of progress is being made."

But on city streets, there were few signs of a shift. Immigration enforcement operations and confrontations with activists continued Wednesday in Minneapolis and St. Paul.

A group of protesters blew whistles and pointed out federal officers in a vehicle on a north Minneapolis street. When the officers' vehicle moved, a small convoy of activists followed in their cars for a few blocks

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until the officers stopped again.

When Associated Press journalists got out of their car to document the encounter, officers with the federal Bureau of Prisons pushed one of them, threatened them with arrest and told them to get back in their car despite the reporters' identifying themselves as journalists. Officers from multiple federal agencies have been involved in the enforcement operations.

From their car, the AP journalists saw at least one person being pepper sprayed and one detained, though it was unclear if that person was the target of the operation or a protester. Agents also broke car windows.

Attorney General Pam Bondi, who is visiting Minnesota, said 16 people were arrested Wednesday on charges of assaulting, resisting or impeding law enforcement in the state. She said more arrests were expected.

"NOTHING will stop President Trump and this Department of Justice from enforcing the law," Bondi said in a social media post.

Messages seeking comment were left with Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Border Patrol.

Woman tells agents: 'They're good neighbors'

In the suburb of Brooklyn Center, a half a dozen agents went to a house in a small residential neighborhood.

One agent knocked on the door repeatedly. Another told the AP they were seeking a man who had been twice deported and was convicted of domestic abuse. The agent said the man had run into the home and the agents lacked a judicial warrant to get inside.

A handful of activists blew whistles. One agent said: "They'd rather call the police on us than to help us. Go figure."

As the agents prepared to leave, a woman called out to them saying, "You need to know they're good neighbors."

Kari Rod told the AP that she didn't know these neighbors well, but they had come to her garage sale, kept their yard clean and waved hello when she drove by. She didn't believe enforcement agents to be speaking the truth about whom they arrest, including another neighbor whom she said was deported to Laos last summer.

"I don't trust a single thing they said about who they are," Rod said. "From my interactions, I know them way better than anyone else does, any one of those federal agents."

Immigrants are 'still very worried'

Many immigrant families are still fearful of leaving their homes, and Latino businesses are still closed, said Daniel Hernandez, who owns the Minneapolis grocery store Colonial Market. He also runs a popular Facebook page geared toward informing the Hispanic community in the Twin Cities.

While Colonial Market is open, all but one of the dozen immigrant-run businesses that rented space inside have closed since late December, and none has plans to reopen, Hernandez said.

"The reality is the community is still very worried and afraid," Hernandez said.

Hernandez referenced Border Patrol commander Gregory Bovino, who helped lead the administration's crackdown in the Twin Cities and who has reportedly been assigned elsewhere.

Bovino "was removed, but the tactics so far are still the same," Hernandez said. "Nobody now is trusting the government with those changes."

Judge warns ICE about not complying with court orders

In Minnesota federal court, the issue of ICE not complying with court orders came to the fore as Chief Judge Patrick Schiltz said the agency had violated 96 court orders in 74 cases this month.

"This list should give pause to anyone — no matter his or her political beliefs — who cares about the rule of law," he wrote. "ICE has likely violated more court orders in January 2026 than some federal agencies have violated in their entire existence."

Schiltz earlier this week ordered ICE's acting director to personally appear in his courtroom Friday after the agency failed to obey an order to release an Ecuadorian man from detention in Texas. The judge canceled the order after the agency freed the man.

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The judge, who was appointed by President George W. Bush, warned ICE that future noncompliance may result in orders requiring the personal appearances of Acting Director Todd Lyons or other government officials.

ICE didn't respond to an email seeking comment.

Separately, another federal judge granted a temporary restraining order preventing federal officers from arresting and detaining resettled refugees in Minnesota. The order responded to a lawsuit challenging a new Homeland Security operation to reevaluate the refugee status of the nearly 5,600 people.

The order called for the immediate release of refugees detained in Minnesota and release within five days of those transferred to Texas.

Deputy White House Chief of Staff Stephen Miller quickly slammed the judge's decision on social media: "The judicial sabotage of democracy is unending."

Nurse says Pretti 'could have been any of us'

Hundreds gathered in the cold Wednesday night for a solemn vigil to honor intensive care unit nurse Alex Pretti, who was killed by immigration agents on Saturday. Some held candles and flowers as people sang and a band played at the spot where he was killed.

Harmonie Pirijs, a registered nurse, said she had been feeling depressed, heartbroken and enraged and thought it would be good to get together with other medical professionals.

"It could have been any of us," she said. "I mean, he was trying to help someone and that's kind of what we're all about."

Earlier, Vietnam veteran Donnie McMillan placed a cardboard sign reading "In remembrance of my angel" at a makeshift memorial for Pretti. McMillan said he remembered seeing Pretti during frequent visits to the Veterans Affairs hospital where he worked.

The Department of Homeland Security said two federal agents involved in Pretti's death have been on leave since the shooting happened.

U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar, a Democrat, spoke to journalists one day after a man attacked her during a town hall meeting by squirting a strong-smelling substance at her as she denounced the Trump administration.

"What is unfolding in our state is not accidental. It is part of a coordinated effort to target Black and brown, immigrant and Muslim communities through fear, racial profiling and intimidation," Omar said. "This administration's immigration agenda is not about law enforcement — it is about making people feel they do not belong."

## **FEMA could still support winter storm response in a shutdown, despite administration warnings**

By GABRIELA AOUN ANGUEIRA Associated Press

The Federal Emergency Management Agency would have enough money to respond to the massive winter storm still impacting large swaths of the U.S. even if a partial government shutdown begins at midnight Friday, experts and former FEMA officials said, despite Trump administration warnings to the contrary.

FEMA would have about \$7 billion to \$8 billion in its Disaster Relief Fund, even if the money Congress appropriated for the fund in the November spending bill that ended the longest-ever government shutdown were to expire Friday at midnight, according to two people familiar with the matter. They spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss FEMA funding with the media.

Experts said the remaining balance should be enough to limit impacts on the winter storm response, at least in the short term.

"They have enough money for winter storm recovery and anything else likely to come up in the next few weeks," said Sarah Labowitz, senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and author of the Disaster Dollar Database, which tracks federal disaster spending.

FEMA falls under the Department of Homeland Security, one of several departments whose funding for fiscal year 2026 depends on the Senate passing a spending package that the House already approved.

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After federal immigration officers killed a Minneapolis man Saturday, some Senate Democrats are demanding restrictions on the administration's mass deportations agenda in any DHS funding bill, a stand that increases the prospect of a partial government shutdown by the end of the week.

Trump administration officials have cited the storm and FEMA's response to it as a reason to avoid a shutdown.

"We are in the midst of the winter storm that took place over the weekend and many Americans are still being impacted by that, so we absolutely do not want to see that funding lapse," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt told reporters Monday.

DHS did not respond to requests for comment.

States still assessing winter storm impacts

The Disaster Relief Fund pays for FEMA's disaster response and recovery efforts and the staff who work on them. That work can continue unless the fund is in danger of running out.

FEMA is supporting state-led responses to last weekend's gigantic winter storm, which left hundreds of thousands of residents across multiple states without power and is tied to at least 70 deaths.

President Donald Trump approved emergency declarations for 12 states, unlocking federal support for emergency measures and debris removal. The agency pre-positioned generators in states like Louisiana and Texas and is coordinating federal assistance for tasks like clearing fallen trees from roads in Mississippi and Tennessee.

It's unclear how many states if any will request major disaster declarations after they assess damages, which can help pay for repairs to critical infrastructure and financial assistance for impacted households through the Disaster Relief Fund.

"The winter storm at this time is well within the capability of local communities and states," said Michael Coen, former FEMA chief of staff in the Obama and Biden administrations.

The timing of the potential shutdown also helps ease concerns over FEMA's coffers. "We're a bit of a ways off from wildfire season and hurricane season, so I don't see a huge impact in the short run in terms of FEMA operations," said Noah Patton, director of disaster recovery at the National Low Income Housing Coalition.

If a partial government shutdown does occur, some FEMA operations not funded by the Disaster Relief Fund, like the ability to write or renew National Flood Insurance Program policies, would once again pause as they did during last year's 43-day shutdown. Some essential employees would work unpaid.

An extended shutdown could put more pressure on the Disaster Relief Fund, especially if FEMA must respond to new disasters, and could result in a slowdown of reimbursements for past disasters. Several experts pointed out that those reimbursements have already lagged due to a DHS policy that expenditures of \$100,000 or more be personally approved by Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem.

The spending bill now before the Senate would give the Disaster Relief Fund over \$26 billion, as well as nearly \$4 billion for various FEMA emergency preparedness and security grants.

Mixed messages on FEMA as shutdown looms

Trump officials' warnings about FEMA's ability to help states come at a moment when the administration's own support for the agency is in question. Trump has repeatedly floated the idea of phasing out FEMA and often calls for states to take on more responsibility for disasters.

Now, Trump officials seem to be leaning on FEMA and its critical purpose as a reason not to shut down the government.

"This funding supports national security and critical national emergency operations, including FEMA responses to a historic snowstorm that is affecting 250 million Americans," DHS Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin told Fox News Tuesday.

The greater impacts to FEMA are not from a potential partial shutdown, Coen said, but from Trump's own policies.

"The administration has been dismantling FEMA over the last year," he said. "Using the agency as a justification for congressional action is laughable."

Despite saying he wants to overhaul FEMA, Trump has not yet articulated a vision for those reforms.

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The December release of a long-awaited report from his FEMA Review Council was abruptly canceled and has not been rescheduled.

Meanwhile, several administration policies have had significant consequences for the agency and the states, tribes and territories it supports, including the departure of thousands of staff and interruptions to grant programs.

Language in the proposed spending bill aims to rein in some of those actions, limiting FEMA's ability to pause grants and trainings, and requiring the agency to publicly report the status of FEMA's reimbursements to states for declared disasters.

Labowitz said some of the administration's policies contributed to why FEMA did not run out of money last year, pointing to delays in major disaster approvals and reimbursements. "All last year they were slow walking spending in the DRF."

## US life expectancy hit an all-time high in 2024, CDC says

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. life expectancy rose to 79 years in 2024 — the highest mark in American history. It's the result of not only the dissipation of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also waning death rates from all the nation's top killers, including heart disease, cancer and drug overdoses.

What's more, preliminary statistics suggest a continued improvement in 2025.

"It's pretty much good news all the way around," said Robert Anderson, of the National Center for Health Statistics at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which released the 2024 data on Thursday.

Life expectancy, a fundamental measure of a population's health, is an estimate of the average number of years a baby born in a given year might expect to live, given death rates at that time.

For decades, U.S. life expectancy rose at least a little bit almost every year, thanks to medical advances and public health measures. It peaked in 2014, just shy of 79 years.

It was relatively flat for several years before plunging as the COVID-19 pandemic killed more than 1.2 million Americans. In 2021, life expectancy fell to just under 76 1/2 years. It has been rebounding since.

The data reflect not only a complete turnaround from the pandemic but also a lasting improvement in the drug overdose epidemic, said Andrew Stokes, a researcher at Boston University.

The bad news is that the U.S. still ranks below dozens of other countries, Stokes noted.

"There's a lot more to be done," he said.

In 2024, about 3.07 million U.S. residents died, about 18,000 fewer than the year before. Death rates declined across all racial and ethnic groups, and in both men and women.

Heart disease remained the nation's leading cause of death, but the death rate due to it dropped by about 3% for the second year in a row. A combination of factors are likely at play, including advances in medical treatments and weight management, said Dr. Sadiya Khan, who treats and studies heart disease at Northwestern University.

Deaths from unintentional injuries — a category that includes drug overdoses — fell the most, dropping more than 14% in 2024. COVID-19, which only a few years ago was the nation's No. 3 killer, in 2024 dropped out of the top 10.

COVID-19's fall meant suicide moved into the top 10, even though suicides in 2024 declined. Homicides fell that year, too, this week's report said.

Deaths statistics for 2025 are not finalized, but preliminary data suggest around 3.05 million deaths have been recorded. That number may grow as more death certificates are rounded up and analyzed, but Anderson said he expects last year will end up at least a slight improvement over the 2024.

## **FBI raid in Georgia highlights Trump's 2020 election obsession and hints at possible future actions**

By NICHOLAS RICCARDI Associated Press

DENVER (AP) — Donald Trump lost his bid for reelection in 2020. But for more than five years, he's been trying to convince Americans the opposite is true by falsely saying the election was marred by widespread fraud.

Now that he's president again, Trump is pushing the federal government to back up those bogus claims.

On Wednesday, the FBI served a search warrant at the election headquarters of Fulton County, Georgia, which includes most of Atlanta, seeking ballots from the 2020 election. That follows Trump's comments earlier this month when he suggested during a speech at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, that charges related to the election were imminent.

"The man has obsessions, as do a fair number of people, but he's the only one who has the full power of the United States behind him," said Rick Hasen, a UCLA law professor.

Hasen and many others noted that Trump's use of the FBI to pursue his obsession with the 2020 election is part of a pattern of the president transforming the federal government into his personal tool of vengeance.

Sen. Jon Ossoff, a Georgia Democrat, compared the search to the Minnesota immigration crackdown that has killed two U.S. citizen protesters, launched by Trump as his latest blow against the state's governor, who ran against him as Vice President Kamala Harris' running mate in 2024.

"From Minnesota to Georgia, on display to the whole world, is a President spiraling out of control, wielding federal law enforcement as an unaccountable instrument of personal power and revenge," Ossoff said in a statement.

It also comes as election officials across the country are starting to rev up for the 2026 midterms, where Trump is struggling to help his party maintain its control of Congress. Noting that, in 2020, Trump contemplated using the military to seize voting machines after his loss, some worry he's laying the groundwork for a similar maneuver in the fall.

"Georgia's a blueprint," said Kristin Nabers of the left-leaning group All Voting Is Local. "If they can get away with taking election materials here, what's to stop them from taking election materials or machines from some other state after they lose?"

Georgia has been at the heart of Trump's 2020 obsession. He infamously called Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger on Jan. 2, 2021, asking that Raffensperger "find" 11,780 more votes for Trump so he could be declared the winner of the state. Raffensperger refused, noting that repeated reviews confirmed Democrat Joe Biden had narrowly won Georgia.

Those were part of a series of reviews in battleground states, often led by Republicans, that affirmed Biden's win, including in Michigan, Wisconsin and Nevada. Trump also lost dozens of court cases challenging the election results and his own attorney general at the time said there was no evidence of widespread fraud.

His allies who repeated his lies have been successfully sued for defamation. That includes former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, who settled with two Georgia election workers after a court ruled he owed them \$148 million for defaming them after the 2020 election.

Voting machine companies also have brought defamation cases against some conservative-leaning news sites that aired unsubstantiated claims about their equipment being linked to fraud in 2020. Fox News settled one such case by agreeing to pay \$787 million after the judge ruled it was "CRYSTAL clear" that none of the allegations were true.

Trump's campaign to move Georgia into his column also sparked an ill-fated attempt to prosecute him and some of his allies by Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis, a Democrat. The case collapsed amid conflict-of-interest charges against the prosecutor, and Trump has since sued Willis for the prosecution.

On his first day in office, Trump rewarded some of those who helped him try to overturn the 2020 election results by pardoning, commuting or vowing to dismiss the cases of about 1,500 people charged in

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the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. He later signed an executive order trying to set new rules for state election systems and voting procedures, although that has been repeatedly blocked by judges who have ruled that the Constitution gives states, and in some instances Congress, control of elections rather than the president.

As part of his campaign of retribution, Trump also has spoken about wanting to criminally charge lawmakers who sat on the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack, suggesting protective pardons of them from Biden are legally invalid. He's targeted a former cybersecurity appointee who assured the public in 2020 that the election was secure.

During a year of presidential duties, from dealing with wars in Gaza and Ukraine to shepherding sweeping tax and spending legislation through Congress, Trump has reliably found time to turn the subject to 2020. He has falsely called the election rigged, said Democrats cheated and even installed a White House plaque claiming Biden took office after "the most corrupt election ever."

David Becker, a former Department of Justice voting rights attorney and executive director of The Center for Election Innovation & Research, said he was skeptical the FBI search in Georgia would lead to any successful prosecutions. Trump has demanded charges against several enemies such as former FBI Director James Comey and New York's Democratic Attorney General, Letitia James, that have stalled in court.

"So much this administration has done is to make claims in social media rather than go to court," Becker said. "I suspect this is more about poisoning the well for 2026."

## **A shadow network in Minneapolis defies ICE and protects immigrants**

By TIM SULLIVAN Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — If there's been a soundtrack to life in Minneapolis in recent weeks, it's the shrieking whistles and honking horns of thousands of people following immigration agents across the city.

They are the ever-moving shadow of the Trump administration's Operation Metro Surge.

They are teachers, scientists and stay-at-home parents. They own small businesses and wait tables. Their network is sprawling, often anonymous and with few overall objectives beyond helping immigrants, warning of approaching agents or filming videos to show the world what is happening.

And it's clear they will continue despite the White House striking a more conciliatory tone after the weekend killing of Alex Pretti, including the transfer of Gregory Bovino, the senior Border Patrol official who was the public face of the immigration crackdown.

"I think that everyone slept a little better knowing that Bovino had been kicked out of Minneapolis," said Andrew Fahlstrom, who helps run Defend the 612, a hub for volunteer networks. "But I don't think the threat that we're under will change because they change out the local puppets."

The surge begins

What started with scattered arrests in December ramped up dramatically in early January, when a top ICE official announced the "largest immigration operation ever."

Masked, heavily armed agents traveling in convoys of unmarked SUVs became commonplace in some neighborhoods. By this week, more than 3,400 people had been arrested, according to Immigration and Customs Enforcement. At least 2,000 ICE officers and 1,000 Border Patrol officers were on the ground.

Administration officials insist they are focusing on criminals in the U.S. illegally, but the reality in the streets has been far more aggressive. Agents have stopped people, seemingly randomly, to demand citizenship papers, including off-duty Latino and Black police officers and city workers, area officials say.

They smashed through the front door of a Liberian man and detained him without a proper warrant, even though he'd been checking in regularly with immigration officials. They have detained children along with their parents and used tear gas outside a high school in an altercation with protesters after detaining someone.

To be sure, federal agents are barely a presence in many areas, and most people have never smelled a whiff of tear gas. But the crackdown rippled quickly through immigrant-heavy neighborhoods. Patients are

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avoiding life-saving medical care, doctors said. Thousands of immigrant children are staying home. Immigrant businesses shut down, cut their hours or kept their doors locked to everyone but regular customers.

Pushback comes quickly

Activist groups rapidly organized across deeply liberal Minneapolis-St. Paul and some suburbs. Small armies of volunteers began making food deliveries to immigrants afraid to leave their homes. They drove people to work and stood watch outside schools.

They also created interlocking webs of dozens, perhaps hundreds, of rapid response networks — sophisticated systems involving thousands of volunteers who track immigration agents, communicating with encrypted apps like Signal.

Tracking often means little more than quietly reporting the movement of convoys to dispatchers and recording the license plates of possible federal vehicles.

But it's not always quiet. Protester caravans regularly form behind immigration convoys, creating mobile protests of anger and warning that weave through city streets.

When agents stop to arrest or question someone, the networks signal the location, summoning more people who sound warnings with whistles and honking, film what's happening and call out legal advice to people being detained.

Many protesters come expecting trouble

Sometimes it all can feel performative, whether it's Bovino in body armor tossing a smoke grenade, or young activists who rarely take off their helmets and gas masks, even when law enforcement is nowhere to be seen.

But crowds often lead to real confrontations, with protesters screaming at immigration agents. Agents respond only sometimes, but when they do it's often with punches, pepper spray, tear gas and arrests.

Those confrontations worry some in the activist world.

Take the recent afternoon in south Minneapolis, where dozens of protesters, some in gas masks, clashed with immigration agents in south Minneapolis. Protesters screamed at agents, threw snowballs and tried to block their vehicles. Agents responded by shoving protesters who got too close, firing pepper balls and finally throwing tear gas grenades and driving away. Demonstrators without masks wretched in the streets as volunteers handed out bottles of water to flush their eyes.

By then, even many of the people in the protest weren't sure what started it, including the city council member who soon arrived.

Minneapolis has a long tradition of progressivism, and Jason Chavez is a proud part of that.

He bristled when asked about the confrontation.

"I didn't see anybody 'confronting,'" said Chavez. "I saw people alerting neighbors that ICE was in their neighborhood. And that's what neighbors should continue to do."

Tracking immigration in an immigrant neighborhood

To understand this world, talk to a woman known in the rapid response networks only by her nickname, Sunshine. She asked that her real name not be used, fearing retaliation.

A friendly woman who works in health care, she has spent hundreds of hours in her slightly beat-up Subaru patrolling an immigrant St. Paul enclave of taquerias and Asian grocery stores, watching for signs of federal agents. She can spot an idling SUV from the tiniest hint of exhaust, an out-of-state license plate from a block away, and quickly distinguish an undercover St. Paul police car from an unmarked immigration vehicle.

On the messaging apps, she's simply Sunshine. She knows the real names of few other people, even after working with some for weeks on end.

She hates what is happening, and feels deeply for people living in fear. She worries the Trump administration wants to push the nation into civil war, and believes she has no choice except to patrol -- "commuting" it's often called, half-jokingly -- every day.

"Sometimes people just want to pick up their kid and walk their dog and go to work. And I get that. I get that desire," she said while driving through the neighborhood last week. "I just don't know if that's the world we live in anymore."

She runs constant equations in her head: Should she report an immigration vehicle to the network's dispatcher, or honk her horn as a warning? Would honking unnecessarily scare residents who are already afraid? Are agents leading her around? Are federal vehicles moving to launch a raid, or are they distracting observers while other agents make arrests elsewhere?

She is careful and avoids confrontation. She also finds hope in the community that has been created, and how offers to volunteer exploded after the Jan. 7 killing of Renee Good by an ICE agent. And she understands the anger of the people who face off against agents.

"My strategy, my approach, my risk calculation is different than other peoples'. And at the same time, the vitriol, the frustration, I get it," she said. "And sometimes it feels good to see someone unleash that."

Not everyone agrees. Even nationally, some activist groups have pushed back against protest strategies that could lead to clashes.

"Loud does not equal effective," a group in a heavily immigrant Maryland county said in a recent social media post, explaining why their volunteers don't use whistles. Among other things, the Montgomery County Immigrant Rights Collective warned that whistling can "escalate already volatile ICE agents who don't respect our rights" and "increase the likelihood of aggression toward bystanders or the detained person."

"This is not an action movie," the post says. "You are not in a one-on-one fight with ICE."

## **Search warrant FBI served at elections office near Atlanta seeks records tied to the 2020 elections**

By KATE BRUMBACK Associated Press

ATLANTA (AP) — The FBI on Wednesday searched the election office of a Georgia county that has been central to right-wing conspiracy theories over President Donald Trump's 2020 election loss, acting just one week after the Republican leader predicted prosecutions over a contest he has baselessly insisted was tainted by widespread fraud.

The search at Fulton County's main election facility in Union City sought records related to the 2020 election. It appeared to be the most public step by law enforcement to pursue Trump's claims of a stolen election, grievances rejected time and again by courts and state and federal officials, who found no evidence of fraud that would have altered the outcome.

It also unfolds against the backdrop of FBI and Justice Department efforts to investigate perceived political enemies of Trump, including former FBI Director James Comey and New York Attorney General Letitia James.

Trump has for years focused on Fulton, Georgia's most populous county and a Democratic stronghold, as a key example of what he claims went wrong in the 2020 election. His pressure campaign there culminated in a sweeping state indictment accusing him and 18 others of illegally trying to overturn the vote.

The search

FBI agents secured an area around the large warehouse building that houses the county elections hub with yellow tape and could be seen loading boxes from the building into trucks. FBI spokesperson Jenna Sellitto confirmed that the boxes contained ballots. Among the 2020 election documents sought are ballots, tabulator tapes from the scanners used to tally the ballots, electronic ballot images and voter rolls.

An FBI spokesperson said agents were "executing a court authorized law enforcement action" at the county's main election office in Union City, just south of Atlanta. The spokesperson declined to provide any further information, citing an ongoing matter.

State and county Democratic officials expressed concern about the search and ballot seizures.

"We don't know why they took them, and we don't know where they're taking them to," county Board of Commissioners Chairman Robb Pitts said.

The Justice Department had no immediate comment. FBI Co-Deputy Director Andrew Bailey and U.S. Director of National Intelligence Tulsi Gabbard were seen onsite.

Trump's focus on Fulton County

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Trump has long insisted that the 2020 election was stolen even though judges across the country and his own attorney general said they found no evidence of widespread fraud that tipped the contest in Democrat Joe Biden's favor.

The president has made Georgia, one of the battleground states he lost in 2020, a central target for his complaints about the election and memorably pushed its secretary of state to help "find" enough votes to overturn the contest.

Last week, in reference to the 2020 election, he asserted that "people will soon be prosecuted for what they did." It was not clear what in particular he was referring to.

Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis in August 2023 obtained an indictment against Trump and 18 others, accusing them of participating in a wide-ranging scheme to illegally try to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election. That case was dismissed in November after courts barred Willis and her office from pursuing it because of an "appearance of impropriety" stemming from a romantic relationship she had with a prosecutor she had hired to lead the case.

The FBI last week moved to replace its top agent in Atlanta, Paul W. Brown, according to people familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss a non-public personnel decision. It was not immediately clear why the move, which was not publicized by the FBI, was made.

DOJ lawsuit

The warrant is a criminal document, but the Justice Department last month sued the clerk of the Fulton County superior and magistrate courts in federal court seeking access to documents from the 2020 election in the county. The lawsuit said the department sent a letter to the clerk, Che Alexander, but that she had failed to produce the requested documents.

Alexander has filed a motion to dismiss the suit. The Justice Department complaint says that the purpose of its request was "ascertaining Georgia's compliance with various federal election laws." It also says the attorney general is trying to help the State Election Board with its "transparency efforts under Georgia law."

A three-person conservative majority on the State Election Board has repeatedly sought to reopen a case alleging wrongdoing by Fulton County during the 2020 election. It passed a resolution in July seeking assistance from the U.S. attorney general to access voting materials.

The state board sent subpoenas to the county board for various election documents last year and again on Oct. 6. The October subpoena requested "all used and void ballots, stubs of all ballots, signature envelopes, and corresponding envelope digital files from the 2020 General Election in Fulton County." A fight over the state board's efforts to enforce the 2024 subpoena is currently tied up in court.

The Justice Department sent a letter to the county election board Oct. 30 citing the federal Civil Rights Act and asking for all records responsive to the October subpoena from the State Election Board. Lawyers for the county election board responded about two weeks later, saying that the records are held by the county court clerk. They also attached a letter the clerk sent to the State Election Board saying that the records are under seal in accordance with state law and can't be released without a court order.

The Justice Department said it then sent a letter to Alexander, the clerk, on Nov. 21 requesting the documents and that she failed to respond.

The department is asking a judge to declare that the clerk's "refusal to provide the election records upon a demand by the Attorney General" violates the Civil Rights Act. It is also asking the judge to order Alexander to produce the requested records within five days of a court order.

## Russia and Ukraine's combined war casualties could reach 2 million soon, report estimates

By KAMILA HRABCHUK Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The number of soldiers killed, injured or missing on both sides of Russia's war on Ukraine could be 2 million by spring, with Russia sustaining the largest number of troop deaths for any major power in any conflict since World War II, a report warned Tuesday.

The report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies came less than a month before the

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fourth anniversary of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24.

As the war grinds through another bitterly cold winter, Russian strikes damaged an apartment block Wednesday on the outskirts of Kyiv, killing two people. Nine others were injured in attacks in the Ukrainian cities of Odesa and Kryvyi Rih and in the front-line Zaporizhzhia region.

The CSIS report said Russia suffered 1.2 million casualties, including up to 325,000 troop deaths, between February 2022 and December 2025.

"Despite claims of battlefield momentum in Ukraine, the data shows that Russia is paying an extraordinary price for minimal gains and is in decline as a major power," the report said. "No major power has suffered anywhere near these numbers of casualties or fatalities in any war since World War II."

It estimated that Ukraine, with its smaller army and population, had suffered between 500,000 to 600,000 military casualties, including up to 140,000 deaths.

Neither Moscow nor Kyiv gives timely data on military losses, and each side seeks to amplify the other side's casualties.

Commenting on the report, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said Wednesday that the research could not be considered "reliable information" and that only Russia's Ministry of Defense was authorized to provide information on military losses.

The ministry has not released figures on battlefield deaths since a statement in September 2022 that said just under 6,000 Russian soldiers had been killed.

The Ukrainian government had no immediate comment on the report. In an interview with NBC in February 2025, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that more than 46,000 Ukrainian soldiers had been killed since the war began.

The CSIS report estimated that at current rates, combined Russian and Ukrainian casualties may be as high as 1.8 million and could reach 2 million by spring.

The figures from the CSIS were compiled using the Washington-based think tank's own analysis, data published by independent Russian news site Mediazona with the BBC, estimates by the British government and interviews with state officials.

## A war of attrition

Reports about military losses have been repressed in Russian media, activists and independent journalists say.

Mediazona, together with the BBC and a team of volunteers, has so far collected the names of more than 160,000 troops killed by scouring news reports, social media and government websites.

The report also said Russian forces were advancing at a sluggish pace since they seized the initiative on the battlefield in 2024, despite their much larger size.

Russia's advance in Ukraine has largely settled into a grinding war of attrition, and analysts say Russian President Vladimir Putin is in no rush to find a settlement, despite his army's difficulties on the roughly 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line.

The report said Russian forces have advanced at an average rate of between 15 and 70 meters (49 to 230 feet) per day in their most prominent offensives.

That is "slower than almost any major offensive campaign in any war in the last century," the report said.

Putin told his annual news conference last month that 700,000 Russian troops are fighting in Ukraine. He gave the same number in 2024, and a slightly lower figure — 617,000 — in December 2023. It was not possible to verify those figures.

## 2 killed in attack in Kyiv region

Officials said Wednesday that two people were killed near the Ukrainian capital and at least nine others were injured in attacks across Ukraine.

A man and a woman died in an overnight attack in the Bilohorodka area on the outskirts of Kyiv, according to Mykola Kalashnyk, head of the regional military administration.

Officials in the Ukrainian cities of Odesa and Kryvyi Rih, as well as the Zaporizhzhia region, also reported Russian strikes overnight, wounding at least nine people and damaging infrastructure.

Ukraine's air force said that Russia attacked overnight with one ballistic missile and 146 strike drones, 103 of which were shot down or destroyed using electronic warfare.

Meanwhile, Russia's Ministry of Defense said its air defenses destroyed 75 Ukrainian drones overnight. Twenty-four were shot down over Russia's southwestern Krasnodar region, with 23 more shot down over the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia illegally annexed in 2016.

Two drones were reportedly shot down over Russia's Voronezh region, where Ukraine's General Staff said Wednesday that it had struck the Khokholskaya oil depot. Regional Gov. Alexander Gusev wrote on Telegram that falling drone debris sparked a fire involving oil products, but did not give further details.

## Middle East worries over possible US strike on Iran one month after protests began

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Iranian officials reached out to the wider Middle East on Wednesday over the threat of a possible U.S. military strike on the country, while the value of Iran's currency reached a new low a month since the start of protests that spread nationwide and sparked a bloody crackdown.

Two nations, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, have signaled they won't allow their airspace to be used for any attack. But America has moved the USS Abraham Lincoln and several guided missile destroyers into the region, which can be used to launch attacks from the sea.

Iran's currency, the rial, fell to a record low of 1.6 million to \$1, according to local currency traders. Its value has been plunging since late last year, and is down from about 32,000 to \$1 a decade ago. Economic woes had sparked the protests that broadened into challenging the theocracy.

It remains unclear what U.S. President Donald Trump will decide about using force, though he has threatened to use it in response to the killing of peaceful demonstrators and over possible mass executions. At least 6,373 people have been killed in the protests, activists said.

Trump also indicated Wednesday that he wants movement toward a deal that his administration has been seeking with Tehran over its nuclear program.

"Hopefully Iran will quickly 'Come to the Table' and negotiate a fair and equitable deal - NO NUCLEAR WEAPONS - one that is good for all parties," Trump wrote on his Truth Social platform. "Time is running out, it is truly of the essence!"

Mentioning the June strikes on Iran as the U.S. inserted itself in Israel's 12-day war on the Islamic Republic, Trump wrote: "The next attack will be far worse!"

Iran's mission to the United Nations was quick to respond to Trump, posting on X that "Iran stands ready for dialogue based on mutual respect and interests—BUT IF PUSHED, IT WILL DEFEND ITSELF AND RESPOND LIKE NEVER BEFORE!"

Rubio comments on Iran

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said the increasing military presence in the Middle East has been put in place "to defend against what could be an Iranian threat against our personnel" -- a message that stands in contrast to Trump's continuing threats to strike Iran if it does not yield to his demands.

"I think it's wise and prudent to have a force posture within the region that could respond and ... if necessary, preemptively prevent the attack against thousands of American servicemen and other facilities in the region and our allies," Rubio told Congress.

He was cautious regarding the prospect of a change in government, though he described the theocracy as "probably weaker than it has ever been."

Iran's state-run media, which now only refers to protesters as "terrorists," remains the sole source of news for many as Tehran cut off access to the global internet some three weeks ago. But Iranians have become angry and anxious, seeing footage of protesters shot and killed while worrying about what may happen next as the economy sinks further.

"I feel that my generation failed to give a better lesson to younger ones," said Mohammad Heidari, a 59-year-old teacher in Tehran. "The result of decades of teaching by my colleagues and me led to death

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of thousands, and maybe more injured and prisoners.”

Rapid diplomacy between Iran, Arab nations

Egypt’s Foreign Ministry said its top diplomat, Badr Abdelatty, separately spoke with Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi and U.S. Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff to “work toward achieving calm, in order to avoid the region slipping into new cycles of instability.”

Witkoff, a billionaire real estate developer and Trump’s friend, had earlier negotiated over Iran’s nuclear program.

The Turkish foreign minister also spoke by phone with Araghchi about reducing regional tensions. Turkish officials have expressed concern that intervention in Iran could spark instability or trigger a refugee influx.

Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman held a call with Iranian President Masoud Pezeshkian, saying the kingdom would “not allow its airspace or territory to be used for any military actions against Iran or for any attacks from any party, regardless of their origin.” That follows a similar pledge by the UAE.

Both Saudi Arabia and the UAE host U.S. air assets and troops. Iranian officials also called Qatar, which hosts a major U.S. base in the Mideast.

“Our position is exactly this: Applying diplomacy through military threats cannot be effective or constructive,” Araghchi told journalists Wednesday outside of a Cabinet meeting. “If they want negotiations to take shape, they must abandon threats, excessive demands and the raising of illogical issues.”

Activists offer new death toll

While the protests have been halted for weeks after the crackdown, information trickling out of Iran via Starlink satellite dishes is reaching activists, who have been trying to tally the carnage.

On Wednesday, the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency, which has been accurate in multiple rounds of unrest in Iran, said the at least 6,373 dead it counted included at least 5,993 protesters, 214 government-affiliated forces, 113 children and 53 civilians who weren’t demonstrating. More than 42,450 have been arrested, it added.

The group verifies each death and arrest with a network of activists on the ground in Iran. The Associated Press has been unable to independently assess the death toll given that authorities cut off the internet and disrupted calls into the Islamic Republic.

Iran’s government has put the death toll at a far lower 3,117, saying 2,427 were civilians and security forces, and labeled the rest “terrorists.” In the past, Iran’s theocracy has undercounted or not reported fatalities from unrest.

That death toll exceeds that of any other round of protest or unrest in Iran in decades, and recalls the chaos surrounding the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

The protests began on Dec. 28, sparked by the fall of the Iranian currency, the rial, and quickly spread. The country has faced nearly three weeks of an internet blackout — the most comprehensive in its history.

## Worries deepen in US South after days of grappling with snow, ice and widespread outages

By SOPHIE BATES, JEFF MARTIN and RUSS BYNUM Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — Conditions were growing more dire in parts of the South still reeling from subfreezing temperatures and widespread power outages as vehicles got stranded for hours on major highways and officials warned Wednesday that people stuck at home were running out of food, medicine and other essentials.

Mississippi dispatched 135 snowplows and National Guard troops equipped with wreckers to sections of Interstates 55 and 22 gridlocked by vehicles abandoned in the state’s ice-stricken northern region. Tens of thousands of homes and businesses remained without power as cold daytime temperatures sunk below freezing overnight in a region unaccustomed and ill-equipped for such weather.

Cars and semitrucks trying to navigate the frozen highways single-file began getting stuck Tuesday. No injuries were reported, the Mississippi Department of Public Safety said. But one driver told The Associ-

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ated Press she feared she might freeze to death on I-22 when her car sat idle for more than 14 hours.

"There was nowhere to go, nothing to do, no one to save us," said Samantha Lewis, 78.

"Calls of desperation"

The growing misery and anxiety comes amid what Mississippi officials say is the state's worst winter storm in more than 30 years.

Roughly 332,000 homes and businesses remained without power Wednesday, the vast majority of them in Tennessee and Mississippi. At least 70 people have died across the U.S. in states afflicted by the dangerous cold.

In Hardin County, Tennessee, at the Mississippi state line, many people remain trapped in homes without electricity because of roads made impassable by ice and fallen trees, said LaRae Sliger, the county's emergency management director.

Sliger said people who were prepared to manage a couple of days without power can't go much longer without help.

"They're cold, they don't have power, they don't have heat, they're out of propane, they're out of wood, they're out of kerosene for their kerosene heaters," she said. "They have no food, they have no additional fuel for their alternative heating sources, so they're needing out."

In northeast Mississippi, emergency managers in Alcorn County were also receiving "calls of desperation" from people running out of food, water, medication and other supplies, said Evan Gibens, the emergency agency's director. He said dispatchers who have been sleeping at work since Friday have fielded more than 2,000 calls.

"We are doing everything we possibly can," said Gibens, noting 200 people were staying at a local arena being used as a warming shelter.

More than 100,000 outages remained in Nashville, Tennessee, where downed trees and snapped power lines blocked access to some areas. Utility workers will need at least the weekend, if not longer, to finish restoring power, said Brent Baker, a Nashville Electric Service vice president.

Forecasters say the subfreezing weather will persist in the eastern U.S. into February, with a new influx of arctic air arriving this weekend. There's a growing chance for heavy snow in the Carolinas and Virginia.

The National Weather Service said chances of additional, significant snowfall are low in places like Nashville, but weekend temperatures will reach dangerously low single digits with wind chills below zero.

An 'extremely frightening' night on a frozen highway

The impasse on Mississippi interstates began Tuesday when drivers began using single lanes the state's transportation agency had tried to keep open for emergency vehicles. Cars and semitrucks began getting stuck, Department of Transportation spokesperson David Kenney said.

The blocked highways were making it harder for authorities to distribute emergency supplies. Scott Simmons, spokesperson for the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency, said its drivers were having to find alternate routes to avoid the backups.

Lewis said she and a friend, Catherine Muldoon, were driving through Mississippi on a trip from Florida to Oklahoma when they got stuck on I-22 at about noon Tuesday. Cars and trucks were backed up in a single lane.

For hours, they would turn on the car for 15 minutes to warm up and then shut it off for 45 minutes to conserve fuel. Finally at about 3:30 a.m. Wednesday, they followed a pickup truck on one of the ice-covered, traffic-free lanes and reached a gas station.

"It was extremely frightening," Muldoon said. "If we didn't have the blankets and clothing that we had, it would have been dire straits."

All passenger vehicles were cleared from the frozen highways by 3 a.m. Wednesday, according to the Mississippi Department of Public Safety. But there remained long lines of commercial trucks still awaiting removal hours later.

In the small community of Red Banks, Mississippi, local authorities were asking people with all-terrain vehicles to bring water, food, blankets or gas to stranded motorists, said Lacey Clancy, who works at a

cafe near I-22 and neighboring Highway 178.

"The highway kind of looks like a parking lot," Clancy said in a phone interview. "A lot of people have run out of gas, abandoned their vehicles."

Angie Gresham, who lives in nearby Holly Springs, Mississippi, said hundreds of stranded vehicles were lining I-22 as well as streets in the city. She said stranded truck drivers were searching for stores and restaurants that had power.

"They're just trying to survive," Gresham said.

## Omar criticizes Trump's 'hateful rhetoric' after attack; suspect had made pro-Trump posts online

By MICHAEL BIESECKER, FARNOUSH AMIRI, MATT BROWN and JACK BROOK Associated Press  
MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — Democratic U.S. Rep. Ilhan Omar blamed President Donald Trump for threats to her safety on Wednesday, one day after she was accosted and squirted with liquid at an event in Minneapolis.

The man arrested for Tuesday's attack has posted online in support of the Republican president.

"Every time the president of the United States has chosen to use hateful rhetoric to talk about me and the community that I represent, my death threats skyrocket," Omar said during a press conference. Asked if she was nervous about appearing in public, she said, "Fear and intimidation doesn't work on me."

The attack came during a perilous political moment in Minneapolis, where two people have been fatally shot by federal agents during the White House's aggressive immigration crackdown.

Omar, a refugee from Somalia, has long been a fixture of Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric. After she was elected seven years ago, Trump said she should "go back" to her country. He recently described her as "garbage" and said she should be investigated. During a speech in Iowa on Tuesday, shortly before Omar was attacked, he said immigrants need to be proud of the United States — "not like Ilhan Omar."

"It's hard not to see the link between what happened and the attacks Trump has made against Omar personally, not to mention his siege of her city," said Jeremy Slevin, who worked for years as a spokesperson for Omar before becoming a senior advisor to Sen. Bernie Sanders.

The White House declined to comment. Trump baselessly accused Omar of staging the attack.

"She probably had herself sprayed, knowing her," he told ABC News.

The attack on Omar was a reminder of the country's threatening political climate, which has led some lawmakers to limit public events or not seek reelection.

Rep. Pramila Jayapal, a Democrat from Washington, said that she knows how Omar was feeling because an armed man showed up at her Seattle home in 2022, threatening her and her husband.

"It has to stop. I mean, we are just trying to do our jobs, and, it could be quieted and could be called out by Trump and leaders in elected office who refuse to go along with it, but they continue to do it, and this is the consequence," Jayapal told the Associated Press.

The suspect has supported Trump

The man accused of squirting the substance on Omar has a criminal history and has made online posts supportive of the Republican president.

Anthony Kazmierczak, 55, was convicted of felony auto theft in 1989, has been arrested multiple times for driving under the influence and has had numerous traffic citations, Minnesota court records show. There are also indications he has had significant financial problems, including two bankruptcy filings.

Police say Kazmierczak used a syringe to squirt liquid on Omar during Tuesday's event after she called for the abolishment of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the firing or impeachment of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem following the fatal shootings of Renee Good and Alex Pretti in Minneapolis. Officers immediately tackled and arrested Kazmierczak.

Photos of the syringe, which fell when the man was tackled, show what appears to be a light-brown liquid inside. Authorities haven't publicly identified the substance.

Kazmierczak hadn't been formally charged or scheduled for an initial court appearance as of Wednesday afternoon. Daniel Borgertpoopping, spokesman for Hennepin County Attorney's Office, said they had still

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not received the results of the police investigation. A statement from the Minneapolis Police Department said the FBI was now leading the investigation.

It's unclear if Kazmierczak had a lawyer who could speak on his behalf. The county's chief public defender, Michael Berger, said the case hasn't been assigned to his office.

In social media posts, Kazmierczak criticized former President Joe Biden and referred to Democrats as "angry and liars." Trump "wants the US is stronger and more prosperous," he wrote. "Stop other countries from stealing from us."

In another post, Kazmierczak asked, "When will descendants of slaves pay restitution to Union soldiers' families for freeing them/dying for them, and not sending them back to Africa?"

A target of Trump from the start

Omar's safety has been an issue for years. After Trump's initial round of social media attacks during her first year in Congress, then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi asked Capitol Police to conduct a security review. Omar said six officers provided around-the-clock protection for her and her family.

In 2021, Omar played an audio of a death threat she received by phone during a press conference. The caller used racist and anti-Muslim slurs during in the recording. The congresswoman at the time called on her Republican colleagues to stand up to "anti-Muslim hate" in their ranks.

The following year, a man was sentenced to three years' probation by a federal judge on federal hate crime charges after sending an email to Omar threatening to kill her.

Trump stepped up his criticism of Omar in recent months as he turned his focus on the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, which is home to about 84,000 people of Somali descent — nearly a third of the Somalis living in the U.S. And he has linked the Twin Cities immigration crackdown to a series of fraud cases involving government programs in which most of the defendants have roots in the East African country.

"I wouldn't be where I am at today, having to pay for security, having the government have to think about providing me security, if Donald Trump wasn't in office and if he wasn't so obsessed with me," Omar said Wednesday.

Lawmakers face rising threats

The attack on Omar came days after a man was arrested in Utah for allegedly punching U.S. Rep. Maxwell Frost, a Democrat from Florida, in the face at a private party during the Sundance Film Festival.

Christian Joel Young, 28, said "we are going to deport you and your kind" before striking the congressman, according to a probable cause affidavit. He was charged Tuesday in state court with two counts of misdemeanor assault and felony burglary for entering the bar illegally.

A judge ordered him held without bail. Young's attorney declined to comment.

Threats against members of Congress have increased in recent years, peaking in 2021 following the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol before dipping slightly only to climb again, according to the most recent figures from the U.S. Capitol Police.

"Almost all of us receive very regular threats," said Rep. Greg Casar, a Texas Democrat who chairs the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Omar has led the caucus in recent weeks while Casar has been on paternity leave. The congressman described Omar as "tough as nails" and said Trump should curb his rhetoric about her.

"The point of what these violent actors want is for us to shut up and we just can't give in to that," Casar said.

## Partial shutdown seems increasingly likely as Democrats demand ICE changes

By MARY CLARE JALONICK, KEVIN FREKING and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — With a partial government shutdown looming, Senate Democrats laid out a list of demands Wednesday for the Department of Homeland Security, including an enforceable code of conduct for federal agents conducting immigration arrests and a requirement that officers show identification as the country reels from the deaths of two protesters at the hands of federal agents in Minneapolis.

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It remained unclear if President Donald Trump and Republicans would be willing to meet those demands, even as funding for DHS and a swath of other government agencies was at risk of expiring Saturday.irate Democrats have pledged to block a spending bill unless their demands for reforms are met.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer said Wednesday that the legislation won't pass until U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement is "reined in and overhauled."

"The American people support law enforcement, they support border security, they do not support ICE terrorizing our streets and killing American citizens," Schumer said.

With an uncertain path ahead, the standoff threatened to plunge the country into another shutdown just two months after Democrats blocked a spending bill over expiring federal health care subsidies, a dispute that closed the government for 43 days as Republicans refused to negotiate. That shutdown ended when a small group of moderate Democrats broke away to strike a deal with Republicans, but Democrats are more united this time after the fatal shootings of Alex Pretti and Renee Good by federal agents.

There's a lot of "unanimity and shared purpose" within the Democratic caucus, Minnesota Sen. Tina Smith said after a lunch meeting Wednesday.

"Boil it all down, what we are talking about is that these lawless ICE agents should be following the same rules that your local police department does," Smith said. "There has to be accountability."

Democrats lay out their demands

As the administration's aggressive immigration enforcement surge goes on, Schumer said Democrats are asking the White House to "end roving patrols" in cities and coordinate with local law enforcement on immigration arrests, including requiring tighter rules for warrants.

Democrats also want an enforceable code of conduct so agents are held accountable when they violate rules. Schumer said agents should be required to have "masks off, body cameras on" and carry proper identification, as is common practice in most law enforcement agencies.

The Democratic caucus is united in those "commonsense reforms" and the burden is on Republicans to accept them, Schumer said. He has asked Republicans to separate out the Homeland Security bill from the others to avoid a broader shutdown.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., has said he was waiting for Democrats to outline what they want, and he suggested that they need to be negotiating with the White House. He indicated that he might be open to some of their demands, but encouraged Democrats and the White House to talk and find agreement.

Many obstacles to a deal

It was unclear whether Trump would weigh in, or how seriously the White House was engaged — or whether the two sides could agree on anything that would satisfy Democrats.

The White House had invited some Democrats for a discussion to better understand their positions and avoid a partial government shutdown, a senior White House official said, but the meeting did not happen. The official requested anonymity to discuss the private invitation.

With no serious negotiations underway, a partial shutdown appeared increasingly likely starting Saturday.

The House passed the six remaining funding bills last week and sent them to the Senate as a package, and that makes it difficult to strip out the homeland security portion as Democrats are demanding. Republicans could break the package apart with the consent of all 100 senators, which would be complicated, or through a series of votes that would extend past the Friday deadline.

Even if the Senate could resolve the issue, House Republicans have made clear they do not want any changes to the bill they have passed. In a letter to Trump on Tuesday, the conservative House Freedom Caucus wrote that its members stand with the president and ICE.

"The package will not come back through the House without funding for the Department of Homeland Security," according to the letter.

Republican opposition

Several Republican senators have said they would be fine with Democrats' request to separate the Homeland Security funds for further debate and pass the other bills in the package. But it was unlikely that Democrats would find broad GOP support for their demands on ICE.

North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis said he's OK with separating the bills, but opposed to the Democrats' proposal to require the immigration enforcement officers to unmask and show their faces, even as he blamed Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem for decisions that he said are "tarnishing" the agency's reputation.

"The thing about the masks, I really do disagree," Tillis said. "You know, there's a lot of vicious people out there, and they'll take a picture of your face, and the next thing you know, your children or your wife or your husband are being threatened at home. And that's just the reality of the world that we're in."

Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas said that "what happened over the weekend is a tragedy," but Democrats shouldn't punish Americans with a shutdown and a "political stunt."

Democrats say they won't back down.

"It is truly a moral moment," said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn. "I think we need to take a stand."

## **Two companies made dried milk powder linked to botulism in ByHeart baby formula**

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

Two companies processed and supplied dried milk powder that could be a culprit in the outbreak of botulism tied to ByHeart infant formula that has sickened dozens of babies, The Associated Press has learned.

Organic whole milk powder that tested positive for the type of bacteria that causes botulism was made from milk provided by Organic West Milk Inc., a California company, and processed at a Dairy Farmers of America plant in Fallon, Nevada, company officials said.

The source of the contamination, however, is not yet known. Both companies and the U.S. Food and Drug Administration emphasized that the investigation into the unprecedented outbreak that has sickened 51 babies in 19 states is ongoing.

Bill Van Ryn, an owner of Organic West Milk, said he learned last week that a sample of his company's milk powder collected by the FDA had tested positive for the germ that causes botulism.

But that doesn't mean his product is the source of the outbreak, Van Ryn stressed.

"Nothing has been proven about our milk yet," he said, adding: "Something happened in the process of converting the milk to powder and then in converting it to baby formula."

Organic West, which supplies milk from 55 farmers, didn't sell organic whole milk powder to any infant formula maker besides ByHeart, Van Ryn said. The milk company has halted sales of the powder used in any product intended for babies and children until more is known about the source of the outbreak, he added.

Powdered milk is made by pasteurizing liquid milk, concentrating it through evaporation and spraying it into a hot chamber, which causes the water to evaporate and leave behind fine, dry milk particles.

The Dairy Farmers of America is a global dairy cooperative. Its plant in Nevada processes about 1.5 million pounds of raw milk daily into 250,000 pounds of whole milk powder.

The Dairy Farmers of America said in a statement that Organic West was the source of milk for the sample that FDA collected that tested positive for botulism bacteria. The milk was processed into powder that met all required tests, the company said. Organic West subsequently sold the milk powder to ByHeart.

"Manufacturers of end-use consumer products have a responsibility to properly process ingredients to ensure product safety," the statement read.

FDA officials said on Jan. 23 that a sample of organic whole milk powder collected from a supplier had tested positive for the botulism bacteria, though the agency didn't identify the supplier. Tests showed that sample was a genetic match to a sample taken from a finished can of ByHeart formula.

The agency also found the bacteria in an unopened can of formula matched a sample from a sick baby — and it also matched contamination detected in samples of milk powder used to make ByHeart formula and collected and tested by the company.

ByHeart officials declined to identify the source of those milk powder samples. The infant formula company has recalled all its products.

Botulism spores are common in the environment and can be found in most foods at very low levels, said Kristin Schill, a botulism expert at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Healthy adults consume *Clostridium botulinum* spores every day without becoming sick. But babies have immature guts that may not be able to prevent the spores from germinating and growing. Once they do, the spores produce a toxin that can cause paralysis and death.

Spores can be found everywhere, including in milk, though typically at low levels, Schill said. Pasteurization doesn't kill the germs. They can be present in the processing environment, too.

Botulism spores have been found in infant formula in the past, but this is the first large outbreak linked to the product. The risk has been considered so low that testing for botulism in infant formula is not required, though some formula makers voluntarily screen for microbiological signals that could indicate contamination.

## Federal Reserve keeps interest rates unchanged even as Trump continues to insist they be lowered

By CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Federal Reserve pushed the pause button on its interest rate cuts Wednesday, leaving its key rate unchanged at about 3.6% after lowering it three times last year.

Chair Jerome Powell said at a news conference after the central bank announced its decision that the economy's outlook "has clearly improved since the last meeting" in December, a development that he noted should boost hiring over time. The Fed also said in a statement that there were signs the job market is stabilizing.

With the economy growing at a healthy pace and the unemployment rate appearing to level off, Fed officials likely see little reason to rush any further rate cuts. While most policymakers do expect to reduce borrowing costs further this year, many want to see evidence that stubbornly-elevated inflation is moving closer to the central bank's target of 2%. According to the Fed's preferred measure, inflation was 2.8% in November, slightly higher than a year ago.

Michael Gapen, chief U.S. economist at Morgan Stanley, said that Powell kept the door open for further rate cuts this year, "when they get enough evidence inflation is decelerating." Powell suggested in his remarks that the impact of tariffs, which have pushed up the cost of many goods such as furniture, appliances and toys, will peak in the middle of this year and inflation will fall after that.

In a sign of the unprecedented situation in which the Fed finds itself in Trump's second term, Powell was asked to address a number of issues not directly tied to monetary policy but that could very well decide how the Fed implements its policy going forward.

Two officials dissented from Wednesday's decision, with Governors Stephen Miran and Christopher Waller preferring another quarter-point reduction. President Donald Trump appointed Miran in September, and he had dissented at the three previous meetings in favor of a half-point cut. Waller is under consideration by the White House to replace Powell, whose term ends in May.

The Fed's decision to stand pat will likely fuel further criticism from Trump, who has relentlessly assailed Powell for not sharply cutting short-term rates. A reduction in the Fed's key rate tends to lower borrowing costs for things like mortgages, car loans, and business borrowing, though those rates are also influenced by market forces.

A key issue facing the Fed is how long it will remain on hold. The rate-setting committee has been split between those officials opposed to further cuts until inflation comes down, and those who want to lower rates to further support hiring.

Powell suggested that there may not be that many more rate cuts needed. The economy's solid 4.4% annual growth rate in the July-September quarter, the most recent data available, is a sign that interest rates aren't so high that they are noticeably slowing growth, he added.

In December, just 12 of the 19 participants in the committee's meetings supported at least one more rate cut this year. Most economists forecast the Fed will cut twice this year, most likely at the June meet-

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ing or later.

One issue still overhanging the Fed's decision-making is the administration's trade policy and the tariffs it has imposed on many U.S. trade partners. When asked if the impact of tariffs had already moved through inflation, Powell said "a lot of it has," and added that the Fed generally sees the import taxes as a one-time price increase.

"The expectation is that we will see the effects of tariffs flowing through goods prices peaking and then starting to come down, assuming there are no new major tariff increases," Powell said.

Fed officials met this week in the shadow of unprecedented pressure from the Trump White House. Powell said Jan. 11 that the Fed had received subpoenas from the Justice Department as part of a criminal investigation into his congressional testimony about a \$2.5 billion building renovation. Powell in an unusually blunt video statement said the subpoenas were a pretext to punish the Fed for not cutting rates more quickly.

On Wednesday, Powell declined to add anything to that earlier statement.

And last week, the Supreme Court took up Trump's attempt from last year to fire Fed governor Lisa Cook over allegations of mortgage fraud, which she denies. No president has fired a governor in the Fed's 112-year history. The justices at an oral argument appeared to be leaning toward allowing her to stay in her job until the case is resolved.

When asked why he decided to attend the Supreme Court hearing, Powell said, "I would say that that this case is perhaps the most important legal case" in the Fed's history. "And as I thought about it, I thought, it might be hard to explain why I didn't attend."

When asked by reporters if he was confident the Fed can retain its independence, Powell said, "Yes," and added, "I'm strongly committed to that and so are my colleagues."

Trump has suggested he is close to naming a new Fed Chair, to replace Powell once his term ends in May. The announcement could come as soon as this week, though it has been delayed before.

The president's efforts to pressure the Fed may have backfired, economists say, as Republicans in the Senate have voiced support for Powell and threatened to block Trump's replacement chair.

Powell has the option of remaining as a Fed governor beyond May but told reporters he hadn't made a decision about whether to stay or leave.

The chair was also asked if he had any advice for his successor. "Don't get involved in elected politics," he said. "Don't do it."

As for interest rates, Wall Street expected the Fed to hold steady at least until June.

Twelve of the 19 members of the Fed's rate-setting committee have a vote, including all seven members of the board of governors, the president of the New York Fed, and a rotating group of four presidents from the regional Fed banks.

This year, Beth Hammack, president of the Cleveland Fed; Neel Kashkari, president of the Minneapolis Fed; Lorie Logan, president of the Dallas Fed; and Anna Paulson, president of the Philadelphia Fed, will vote on rate decisions. All have recently expressed some skepticism of the need for further cuts in the immediate future.

With businesses barely adding jobs, consumers remain gloomy about the economy. The Conference Board's measure of consumer confidence dropped to an 11-year low in January, the business research group said Tuesday.

Powell noted that while consumers are pessimistic in surveys, they are still spending at a healthy pace, helping propel the economy.

"The economy has once again surprised us with its strength," Powell said. "Consumer spending, although it's uneven across income categories, (the) overall numbers are good."

## Rubio defends Trump on Venezuela while trying to allay fears about Greenland and NATO

By MATTHEW LEE, STEPHEN GROVES and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Secretary of State Marco Rubio gave a full-throated defense Wednesday of President Donald Trump's military operation to capture then-Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro, while explaining to U.S. lawmakers the administration's approach to Greenland, NATO, Iran and China.

As Republican and Democratic members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee offered starkly different readings of the administration's foreign policy, Rubio addressed Trump's intentions and his often bellicose rhetoric that has alarmed U.S. allies in Europe and elsewhere, including demands to take over Greenland.

In the first public hearing since the Jan. 3 raid to depose Maduro, Rubio said Trump had acted to take out a major U.S. national security threat in the Western Hemisphere. Trump's top diplomat said America was safer and more secure as a result and that the administration would work with interim authorities to stabilize the South American country.

"We're not going to have this thing turn around overnight, but I think we're making good and decent progress," Rubio said. "We are certainly better off today in Venezuela than we were four weeks ago, and I think and hope and expect that we'll be better off in three months and six months and nine months than we would have been had Maduro still been there."

The former Florida senator said Venezuela's current leaders are cooperating and would soon begin to see benefits. But he backed away from remarks prepared for the hearing that Washington would not hesitate to take further military action should those leaders not fully accept Trump's demands.

"I can tell you right now with full certainty, we are not postured to nor do we intend or expect to have to take any military action in Venezuela at any time," Rubio said. "I think it would require the emergence of an imminent threat of the kind that we do not anticipate at this time."

He said Venezuela soon will be allowed to sell oil that is now subject to U.S. sanctions, and the revenue would be set aside to pay for basic government services such as policing and health care. Oil proceeds will be deposited in a U.S. Treasury-controlled account and released after the U.S. approves monthly budgets to be submitted by Venezuela, he said.

Pushback against skepticism from Democrats

Republican senators, with few exceptions, praised the operation in Venezuela. Among Democrats, there was deep skepticism.

They questioned Trump's policies in Venezuela and their potential for encouraging moves by China against Taiwan and Russia even more so in Ukraine, as well as his threats to take Greenland from NATO ally Denmark and his insults about the alliance's contributions to U.S. security.

Rubio played them all down.

He said the uproar over Greenland within NATO is calming and that talks are underway about how to deal with Trump's demands. The Republican president insists the U.S. needs Greenland to counter threats from Russia and China, but he recently backed away from a pledge to impose tariffs on several European countries that sent troops to the semiautonomous Danish territory in a show of solidarity.

"I think we're going to get something positive done," Rubio said.

Rubio dismissed criticism that Trump was undermining the alliance, while repeating the long-running American complaint that member nations need to boost their defense budgets.

"NATO needs to be reimaged," Rubio said. "I just think this president complains about it louder than other presidents."

He said China's stated goal to reunify Taiwan with the mainland would not be affected by any other world event, including the Maduro operation.

"The situation on Taiwan is a legacy project" that Chinese President Xi Jinping has made "very clear that that's what he intends to do and that's going to be irrespective anything that happens in the world,"

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Rubio said.

As Trump once more threatens Iran with military action, Rubio said there was no current plan to attack. Asked about the potential for a change of government in Tehran, Rubio said that would require "a lot of careful thinking" because it would be "far more complex" than ousting Maduro.

He noted that the increased military presence in the Middle East — an aircraft carrier and accompanying warships arrived this week — is "to defend against what could be an Iranian threat against our personnel."

More details about the raid in Caracas

The Republican committee chairman, Idaho Sen. Jim Risch, offered new details on the operation in the Venezuelan capital, saying it involved "only about 200 troops" and a "firefight that lasted less than 27 minutes."

"This military action was incredibly brief, targeted and successful," Risch said, adding that the U.S. and other nations may have to assist Venezuela when it seeks to restore democratic elections.

"Venezuela may require U.S. and international oversight to ensure these elections are indeed free and fair," he said.

Sen. Jeanne Shaheen of New Hampshire, the committee's top Democrat, questioned whether that operation was worth it, considering most of Maduro's top aides and lieutenants still run the Venezuela and the economic situation there remains bleak.

"We've traded one dictator for another, so it's no wonder that so many of my constituents are asking, why is the president spending so much time focused on Venezuela instead of the cost of living and their kitchen table economic concerns?" she asked. "From Venezuela to Europe, the United States is spending more, risking more and achieving less."

Call for eventual democratic elections in Venezuela

Rubio delivered his strongest statement yet of support for democracy in Venezuela, while concerns persist that the administration's stabilization efforts are narrowly focused on oil and U.S. national security interests.

"What's the end state? We want a Venezuela that has legitimate democratic elections," said Rubio, who met Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado at the State Department after the hearing.

Machado reiterated her intention to return to Venezuela. "Dear Venezuelans, we are moving forward with firm steps," she posted on X. "I will return to Venezuela very soon to work together on the transition and the building of an exceptional country."

Before that, Rubio faced tough questioning from Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., about cooperating with interim leaders who had been part of Maduro's authoritarian government. Maduro's vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, is now the acting president.

The U.S. has said its demands for Rodríguez include opening Venezuela's energy sector to U.S. companies, providing preferential access to production, using oil revenue to purchase American goods, and ending subsidized oil exports to Cuba.

Neither Rodríguez nor her government's press office immediately commented on Rubio's remarks. She said Tuesday that her government and the U.S. "have established respectful and courteous channels of communication." So far, she has appeared to acquiesce to Trump's demands and to release prisoners jailed by the government under Maduro and his predecessor, Hugo Chávez.

In a key step to the restoration of diplomatic relations, the State Department said it intends to begin sending additional diplomatic and support personnel to Caracas to prepare for the possible reopening of the U.S. Embassy, which shuttered in 2019.

Fully normalizing ties, however, would require the U.S. to revoke its decision recognizing the Venezuelan parliament elected in 2015 as the country's legitimate government.

## US stocks hold near their all-time high while the dollar's value stabilizes

By STAN CHOE AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Few ripples washed through Wall Street Wednesday after the Federal Reserve decided to hold its main interest rate steady, just like investors expected.

The U.S. stock and bond markets each remained at a virtual standstill, while the U.S. dollar stabilized following its sharp recent slide. Some of the strongest action remained in the gold market, where the metal's price jumped to another record.

The S&P 500 was nearly unchanged and inched down by less than 0.1% from its all-time high. The Dow Jones Industrial Average added 12 points, or less than 0.1%, and the Nasdaq composite rose 0.2%.

Seagate Technology jumped 19.1% for the biggest gain in the S&P 500 after the seller of hard drives and other data-storage products reported a bigger profit for the latest quarter than analysts expected. CEO Dave Mosley cited demand driven by artificial-intelligence applications, among other things.

Nvidia, the stock that's become the poster child of the AI boom, climbed 1.6% and was the strongest single force lifting the S&P 500. It also benefited from an encouraging report from ASML, whose machinery helps make chips.

The Dutch company gave a forecast for revenue in 2026 that topped analysts' expectations, and CEO Christophe Fouquet said customers have been notably more encouraged about "the sustainability" of AI demand. That helped allay concerns that the AI frenzy has gone overboard and created a potential bubble that may burst.

On the losing end of Wall Street was Amphenol, whose stock tumbled 12.2% even though it reported a stronger profit than analysts had forecast. Expectations were high for the maker of fiber-optic connectors and other high-tech equipment after its stock came into the day with a surge of 23% for the young year so far.

Companies across the market are under pressure to deliver solid growth in profits following record-setting runs for their stock prices. Stock prices tend to follow the path of corporate profits over the long term, and earnings need to rise to quiet criticism that stock prices have grown too expensive.

Apple slipped 0.7% ahead of its profit report coming on Thursday. Because of its immense size, it was the single heaviest weight on the S&P 500.

All told, the S&P 500 edged down by 0.57 to 6,978.03 points. The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 12.19 to 49,015.60, and the Nasdaq composite rose 40.35 to 23,857.45.

In the foreign-exchange market, the U.S. dollar stabilized as Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent said in an interview on CNBC that the U.S. government is not intervening in the currency market and continues to want a "strong dollar."

The dollar climbed against the euro, British pound and other rivals, a day after an index measuring the U.S. dollar's value against several of its peers dropped to its weakest level since early 2022. It also climbed against the Japanese yen, which had jumped earlier in the week with rumors that U.S. and Japanese officials may intervene in the market to prop up the yen's value.

The dollar has been generally weakening since President Donald Trump entered the White House last year, and its descent accelerated after Trump threatened tariffs earlier this month against several European countries that he said opposed his taking control of Greenland.

Such threats, along with worries about risks like the U.S. government's heavy debt, have periodically pushed global investors to step away from U.S. markets, a move that's come to be called "Sell America."

In the bond market, Treasury yields held relatively steady following the Fed's widely expected move to hold its main interest rate steady.

The Fed cut rates several times last year in hopes of shoring up the job market, but inflation remains stubbornly above its 2% target. Lower interest rates could worsen inflation while giving the economy a boost. Lower rates could also further undercut the U.S. dollar's value, which would help U.S. exporters. Trump has been pushing aggressively for lower rates.

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The Fed's chair, Jerome Powell, said that interest rates look to be "in a good place" at the moment, giving the central bank time to and wait and see how things progress. In the meantime, "the economy has once again surprised us with its strength," he said.

The yield on the 10-year Treasury remained at 4.24%, where it was late Tuesday.

As global investors have stepped away from the U.S. dollar due to political instability and other worries, prices have surged for gold and other metals as investors searched for something safer to own. Gold's price topped \$5,000 per ounce this week for the first time, and it added another 4.3% to settle at \$5,340.20.

In stock markets abroad, indexes sank in Europe following better performances in Asia.

South Korea's Kospi rose 1.7% to another record, thanks in part to a 5.1% leap for chip company SK Hynix, while Hong Kong's Hang Seng rallied 2.6%.

## What to know about Gaza's Rafah crossing, which could open within days

By SAM METZ and JULIA FRANKEL Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — For Palestinians in Gaza, the Rafah border crossing to Egypt is their gateway to the world. But since Israel seized it in May 2024, it has been largely shut.

Now Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu says the crossing will reopen soon, as the U.S.-brokered Israel-Hamas ceasefire plan moves into its second phase.

That raises hopes for thousands of war-wounded Palestinians seeking travel abroad for medical care, and for tens of thousands of people outside Gaza seeking to return home.

But they face tight controls. Under conditions Netanyahu stipulates, only dozens of Palestinians will be allowed through the crossing each day, and no goods will cross for now. All other Gaza border crossings are with Israel.

Here's what to know.

Crossing might open in the coming days

An Israeli official who spoke on condition of anonymity in accordance with policy said the Rafah crossing would open in the coming days. A person familiar with discussions on the reopening said they had been told it could come as early as Thursday.

Ali Shaath, newly appointed to head the Palestinian administrative committee governing Gaza's daily affairs, said on Jan. 22 that the crossing would "open next week in both directions."

"Opening Rafah signals Gaza is no longer closed to the future and to the world," he said in a video the White House posted on X last week.

The U.S. has pressed Israel and Hamas to enter the ceasefire's second phase. The remains of the final hostage in Gaza were recovered this week, completing a key part of the first phase.

Shaath and the new Palestinian committee remain in Cairo, without Israeli authorization to enter Gaza through Rafah.

Netanyahu says people to cross, not goods

Preparations are underway to let a limited number of medical evacuees leave Gaza first. That's a significant shift from before the war, when most exited through Israel, according to World Health Organization data.

There are conflicting reports on how many people can cross each day. The Israeli official said 50 Palestinians will be allowed in and 50 out daily. The person familiar with discussions said 50 would be allowed in daily and 150 out.

That means a long wait for many of the estimated 20,000 sick and wounded that the territory's health ministry says need treatment outside Gaza. At a rate of 50 evacuations a day, it would take more than a year for everyone to leave.

In the past, those prioritized for evacuation have been mostly children, cancer patients and people suffering from physical trauma. Most received treatment in Egypt.

Medical evacuees typically exit Gaza with escorts. The person familiar with the discussions said two

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escorts likely would be allowed for each evacuee.

Meanwhile, at least 30,000 Palestinians have registered with the Palestinian Embassy in Cairo for return to Gaza, according to an embassy official, speaking on condition of anonymity because details of the re-opening remain under discussion.

Israel will control who enters and leaves

A complex web of countries and institutions will oversee the Rafah crossing, including Egypt, the Palestinian Authority and a European Union mission, but Israel has control over who enters or exits.

Egypt will provide Israel with a list of names daily to vet and decide on, the Israeli official said.

Under the ceasefire terms, Israel's military controls the area between the Rafah crossing and the zone where most Palestinians live. COGAT, Israel's military body in charge of coordinating aid to Gaza, will bus Palestinians to and from the crossing, the official said.

There will be no Israeli soldiers at the crossing, the official said, but Palestinians exiting and entering would undergo Israeli security screening inside Gaza. In the past, such screenings have been conducted by Israeli soldiers and private U.S. contractors.

"Anyone entering or exiting undergoes our inspection, a full inspection," Netanyahu said Tuesday.

Officers from the EU Border Assistance Mission and the Palestinian Authority will run the crossing. Plain-clothes officers with the Palestinian Authority will stamp passports, as they did during a brief ceasefire at the start of 2025 and before Hamas wrested control of Gaza in 2007, Palestinian officials told the AP.

Netanyahu seemed to acknowledge that members of Palestinian factions that historically have governed Gaza may play a role, noting that the majority of bureaucrats have a history of working for Hamas or the Palestinian Authority.

How Rafah functioned before the war

Even before the war, Palestinians faced heavy restrictions.

In 2022, the United Nations recorded more than 133,000 entries and 144,000 exits through Rafah, though many involved the same people crossing multiple times. Egyptian authorities allowed imports on 150 days of the year, and more than 32,000 trucks of goods entered.

Restrictions have tracked the region's politics. Egypt, alongside Israel, imposed a blockade after Hamas seized power in Gaza in 2007. It reopened the crossing after Egypt's 2011 revolution but closed it in 2013 after the military ousted President Mohammed Morsi, a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamist movement from which Hamas emerged.

Egypt gradually allowed the Rafah crossing to reopen in the years that followed, but the on-and-off restrictions led to a massive tunnel economy that sprung up beneath it. Tunnels served as an economic lifeline for Gaza and a conduit for weapons and cash, according to Israeli and Egyptian officials. Hamas collected tens of millions of dollars a month in taxes and customs on goods passing through the crossing.

Other details remain unclear

It is not clear when trucks will be allowed to pass through the Rafah crossing, what Palestinians will be permitted to bring and for how long daily entries and exits will be capped at or below 200.

That's a big uncertainty for humanitarian organizations seeking to further surge aid into devastated Gaza, where groups have long reported vast shortages of medical supplies, fuel and other essential needs.

The United Nations wants the crossing open for "both humanitarian cargo and private sector cargo, which is critically important for reviving the economy in Gaza," U.N. spokesperson Stephane Dujarric said Wednesday.

The U.N.'s deputy Middle East coordinator, Ramiz Alakbarov, told a U.N. Security Council meeting that humanitarian workers face "delays and denials of cargo at crossings and limited routes available for transporting supplies within Gaza."

Netanyahu said his focus is on disarming Hamas, a challenging part of the ceasefire's second phase, and destroying its remaining tunnels. He said there would be no reconstruction in Gaza without demilitarization, a stance that could make Israel's control over the Rafah crossing a key point of leverage.

## Your baby could qualify for \$1,000 with a Trump Account. Here's what to know

By MAKIYA SEMINERA and MORIAH BALINGIT AP Education Writers

As a continuation of President Donald Trump's pitch to Americans on affordability and the economy under his administration, the U.S. Treasury and White House are celebrating the upcoming launch of a program they view as a key milestone: Trump Accounts.

A provision of Trump's tax legislation, Trump Accounts are meant to give \$1,000 to every newborn, so long as their parents open an account. That money is then invested in the stock market by private firms, and the child can access the money when they turn 18.

A U.S. Treasury event Wednesday brought together an assortment of politicians and celebrities — from Texas Republican Sen. Ted Cruz to rapper Nicki Minaj and NBC's "Shark Tank" judge Kevin O'Leary — to discuss the program and its potential impact on the economy. Backers of Trump Accounts have said they're a way to help children from low-income households build wealth.

The investments will put money "in the hands of young Americans who otherwise have really started out with nothing," Trump said. He also called on employers across the country to make matching Trump Accounts contributions for employee benefits, as some companies have already pledged to do so.

"Every president in modern history has left our children with nothing but debt," Trump said. "But under this administration, we're going to leave every child with real assets and a shot at financial freedom."

Here's what you need to know about Trump Accounts and how to claim them.

What is a Trump Account?

It's a new savings tool where money is invested in the stock market on behalf of a child. The child can't access the money until they turn 18 and can only use it for specific purposes, such as paying tuition, starting a business or making a down payment on a home.

After a parent opens an account, the U.S. Treasury will contribute \$1,000 for newborns. Private banks and brokerages will manage the money, which must be invested in U.S. equity index funds that track the stock market and charge the accounts no more than 0.10% in annual fees.

Parents can contribute up to \$2,500 annually in pretax income, much like they do for retirement accounts. Parents' employers, relatives, friends, local governments and philanthropic groups can also pitch in. Yearly contributions are capped at \$5,000, but contributions from governments and charities don't count toward that total.

"We're doing something much better than giving the next generation a handout," Trump said. "We're giving them ownership of America's future."

Who gets \$1,000?

As part of the initiative's launch, parents of older children are also encouraged to open accounts, but they won't get the \$1,000 bonus. That money is reserved for babies born during the calendar years of the Trump administration.

To qualify for the \$1,000 seed money, a baby must be a U.S. citizen, have a Social Security number and be born between Jan. 1, 2025, and Dec. 31, 2028. Any parent can open an account for a qualifying child, regardless of the parent's immigration status.

It's important to note that the child won't be able to access the money until they turn 18, except in rare circumstances, so it can't help with immediate expenses. And disbursements from the accounts will be subject to taxes.

Can older kids get any bonuses for their Trump Account?

Some can, thanks to contributions from some of the country's wealthiest entrepreneurs.

In December, billionaires Michael and Susan Dell announced a \$6.25 billion donation that will allow some children who are 10 and under to receive \$250 in seed money if their parents open an account. That money is reserved for kids who live in ZIP codes with a median family income of \$150,000 or less and who won't get the \$1,000 seed money from the Treasury.

A few weeks later, hedge fund founder Ray Dalio and his wife Barbara pledged \$75 million for kids under

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10 in Connecticut, where Dalio lives. That would amount to \$250 for 300,000 children in qualifying ZIP codes.

At Wednesday's event, Trump announced another pledge from investor Brad Gerstner to donate \$250 into Trump Accounts for every child under 5 in Indiana.

Several major companies also plan to add Trump Accounts contributions to their benefits packages, including Uber, Intel, IBM, Nvidia and Steak 'n Shake. The administration has encouraged such donations through what U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent calls the "50 State Challenge."

How do I open a Trump Account for my kids?

The accounts won't be open for contributions until July 2026, but parents of eligible kids can sign up using Form 4547 from the Internal Revenue Service. Parents can fill out the form when filing taxes this year or when the administration opens an online portal this summer, according to the Trump Accounts website.

Registering for a Trump Account is required for a child to receive the money. In May, parents who sign up will get information about how to finish opening the accounts.

What's the idea behind the accounts?

Backers of the accounts say they want to introduce more people to the stock market and give even children born into poverty a chance to benefit from it. Supporters also say the accounts bolster capitalism at a time when openly socialist candidates are growing more popular.

"The answer to more socialism is more capitalism," Gerstner said at Wednesday's event. "This makes every child in America a capitalist from birth."

About 58% of U.S. households held stocks or bonds in 2022, according to the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission, though the wealthiest 1% owned almost half the value of stocks in that same year.

Before Trump created the accounts, California, Connecticut and the District of Columbia were piloting "baby bonds" programs that are similar to Trump Accounts in some ways. Several other states, including Maryland, are weighing programs.

But those programs are targeted for youth growing up in poverty or foster care, plus children who lost a parent to COVID-19. Wealthier children don't benefit. They're also managed by the state, not private investment firms.

What do critics say?

Critics point out the accounts do little to help children in their early years, when they're most vulnerable and most likely to be in poverty. The accounts, they say, also fail to offset cuts the Trump administration and congressional Republicans have made to other programs that benefit young people and their families, including food assistance and Medicaid. Republicans created the accounts in the same Trump tax bill that reduced spending for some of those programs.

And even with the contribution from the government, critics say the Trump Accounts will widen the wealth gap. Affluent families that can afford to make the maximum pretax contribution to the accounts will realize the greatest benefits. Poor families who can't afford to set aside money for the accounts will benefit the least. Assuming a 7% return, the \$1,000 in seed money would grow to roughly \$3,570 over 18 years.

## **A father awaits Rafah crossing reopening after 2-year separation from family in Gaza**

By SAMY MAGDY and ABDEL KAREEM HANA Associated Press

BADRASHIN, Egypt (AP) — Stranded in Egypt for the past two years, Raed Belal has had to watch helplessly as his wife and children in the Gaza Strip endured bombardment, displacement and hunger. Now he finally has hope he might return to them.

With Israel preparing to reopen the vital Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza, Belal, 51, has packed his suitcases, bought gifts for his children, and is ready to go as soon as he is allowed.

"It's the moment I have been waiting for," he said, speaking at the rented apartment where he has been living in the Egyptian village of Badrashin. "The moment when I reunite with my children, when I return to my home and homeland, even if everything is destroyed."

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Belal, who left Gaza to get treated for back pain three months before the war broke out, is one of tens of thousands of Palestinians eager to return to the territory, despite the vast destruction wreaked by Israel's military campaign against Hamas. The Rafah border crossing is expected to reopen within days, a process jump-started by Israel's recovery on Monday of the last hostage's remains in Gaza, where a ceasefire with Hamas has held for four months.

Gaza has been closed to entry for Palestinians since Israel launched its retaliatory campaign against Hamas for its Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel. In the first months of the war, some 110,000 Palestinians were able to leave Gaza. The Rafah crossing was completely closed in May 2024 when Israeli troops took it over.

Since then, people like Belal have been trapped abroad – most of them in Egypt. Many feared Israel would never allow them back to Gaza.

A 'limited opening' of the Rafah crossing

Still, Palestinians will likely face a long wait before going home even after Rafah reopens. Israel intends to keep returns to a trickle.

The exact date of Rafah's reopening has not been announced. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Tuesday called it a "limited opening," saying 50 Palestinians a day would be allowed into Gaza and that Israel will keep tight control over who enters, subject to security inspections. Before the war, several hundred people a day would enter Gaza from Egypt.

So far, some 30,000 Palestinians have registered with the Palestinian Embassy in Egypt to return to Gaza, according to an embassy official, speaking on condition of anonymity because details of the reopening remain under discussion.

Hamas in a statement Monday called on Israel to open the Rafah crossing in both directions "without restrictions." Ali Shaath, head of the new Palestinian committee administering Gaza's daily affairs, last week said the crossing would be opened this week to facilitate movement into and out of the territory.

Palestinians are also hoping that the crossing's reopening will mean medical evacuations out of Gaza will increase. Some 20,000 Palestinians needing urgent treatment abroad for war wounds or chronic medical conditions have been waiting for evacuation, according to the Gaza Health Ministry.

Throughout the war, the numbers allowed out have been low. The ceasefire since October brought only a tiny uptick, with an average of only 25 medical evacuations a week, according to U.N. figures.

Watching his family's trauma from afar

Belal, who owned a mobile phone store in the northern Gaza town of Beit Lahiya, left the territory in July 2023 to get treatment for his back. Weeks later, Hamas launched its attack on Israel, Israel's massive bombardment of Gaza began, and Gaza's borders slammed shut.

Belal was stranded, struggling to keep up with the turmoil that had enveloped his loved ones.

A few days into the war, he got a video call from his sons, who were rushing to move the merchandise out of the shop after they got a warning from the Israeli military that it was about to bomb the building, where both the shop and their family home was located.

The strike demolished the building, and Belal's 15-year-old son Younis was wounded in the back, he said. At first, doctors said he might be paralyzed, but after months of treatment he was able to walk again.

That began a long trek for his wife and children, who were displaced 12 times over the course of the war. They first moved to a neighbor's house, but that was bombed the next day. They sheltered for several weeks along with other displaced families in the nearby Indonesian Hospital, until Israeli forces besieged and raided the facility, forcing them to flee again in November 2023.

They eventually made it to a school-turned-shelter in the southern city of Khan Younis, but soon after Israeli forces invaded the area and they had to move again.

Sometimes, Belal spent days unable to reach his family because of communication blackouts.

One of his brothers, Mohammed, was killed along with his 2-year-old child when Israel bombed the school where they were sheltering in the Shati Refugee camp in northern Gaza in mid-2025.

At one point last year, Belal got a phone call from Gaza City's Shifa Hospital telling him that his son Younis had been killed. They sent him a photo of the body of someone who looked like Younis. He couldn't

reach his family, and it was only after a day of torment that he was able to call them and learned it was a case of mistaken identity.

"Being far away, while your children and family were in such a situation is awful. You live in constant fear; you don't eat because you're thinking about your hungry children," Belal said. "Sometimes you wake up at night, terrified. You rush to the phone and call them to make sure that they are OK."

A family reunion that can't come soon enough

Belal's wife and five children now shelter in a tent in Gaza City, depending on charity kitchens for food. Belal has been sending them money when he can, but his wife, Asmahan, told the AP their savings have almost run out and they've had to borrow money from others to get by.

Asmahan said she has had to bear the burden of moving from place to place and keeping her children fed and safe.

"I'm mentally exhausted. The responsibility is immense," she said. "We have been humiliated and degraded."

"God willing, the crossing will open, my husband will return, and we will be reunited," she said.

Belal's brother, Jaber, left Gaza on Oct. 1, 2023, seeking a job in the West Bank. After the war began, Israel launched a crackdown in the occupied territory, carrying out destructive raids targeting armed groups and imposing tough restrictions on movement.

"Life became impossible in the West Bank," Jaber said. So in February he joined his brother in Egypt, and he married an Egyptian woman in June. He, too, has registered to return to Gaza with his wife.

"This is our land. Our house is there, even though it's destroyed. We will rebuild it and rebuild Gaza," Jaber said.

Raed Belal knows it may still be a long time. After news of Rafah's opening came, he said, his children "think it will happen tomorrow." But it could be months, he said, before he presents the gifts he has bought for his children – shoes and clothes for his teenage sons, and makeup and perfume requested by his 8-year-old daughter.

With his bags packed, he is ready.

## Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem faces rising calls for her firing or impeachment

By LISA MASCARO AP Congressional Correspondent

WASHINGTON (AP) — A groundswell of voices have come to the same conclusion: Kristi Noem must go.

From Democratic Party leaders to the nation's leading advocacy organizations to even the most centrist lawmakers in Congress, the calls are mounting for the Homeland Security secretary to step aside after the shooting deaths in Minneapolis of two people who protested deportation policy. At a defining moment in her tenure, few Republicans are rising to Noem's defense.

"The country is disgusted by what the Department of Homeland Security has done," top House Democratic Reps. Hakeem Jeffries of New York, Katherine Clark of Massachusetts and Pete Aguilar of California said in a joint statement.

"Kristi Noem should be fired immediately," the Democrats said, "or we will commence impeachment proceedings in the House of Representatives."

Republicans and Democrats call for Noem to step down

What started as sharp criticism of the Homeland Security secretary, and a longshot move by Democratic lawmakers signing onto impeachment legislation in the Republican-controlled House, has morphed into an inflection point for Noem, who has been the high-profile face of the Trump administration's immigration enforcement regime.

Noem's brash leadership style and remarks in the aftermath of the shooting deaths of Alex Pretti and Renee Good — in which she suggested Pretti "attacked" officers and portrayed the events leading up to Good's shooting an "act of domestic terrorism" — have been seen as doing irreparable damage, as events on the ground disputed her account. Her alliance with Border Patrol chief Greg Bovino, who was recalled

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from the Minnesota operation Monday as border czar Tom Homan took the lead, has left her isolated on Capitol Hill.

"What she's done in Minnesota should be disqualifying. She should be out of a job," said Sen. Thom Tillis, R-N.C.

"I think the President needs to look at who he has in place as a secretary of Homeland Security," said Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska. "It probably is time for her to step down."

Trump stands by Noem and praises her work

President Donald Trump defended Noem on Wednesday at multiple junctures, strongly indicating her job does not appear to be in immediate jeopardy.

Asked by reporters as he left the White House on Tuesday for a trip to Iowa whether Noem is going to step down, Trump had a one-word answer: "No."

Pressed later during an interview on Fox News if he had confidence in Noem, the president said, "I do."

"Who closed up the border? She did," Trump said, "with Tom Homan, with the whole group. I mean, they've closed up the border. The border is a tremendous success."

As Democrats in Congress threaten to shut down the government as they demand restrictions on Trump's mass deportation agenda, Noem's future at the department faces serious questions and concerns.

The Republican leadership of the House and Senate committees that oversee Homeland Security have demanded that department officials appear before their panels to answer for the operations that have stunned the nation with their sheer force — including images of children, including a 5-year-old, being plucked from families.

"Obviously this is an inflection point and an opportunity to evaluate and to really assess the policies and procedures and how they are being implemented and put into practice," said Senate Majority Leader John Thune, a Republican from South Dakota, where Noem had been the state's House representative and governor before joining the administration.

Asked about his own confidence in Noem's leadership, Thune said, "That's the president's judgment call to make."

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer called Noem a "liar" and said she must be fired.

The fight over funding

Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin said in a statement that DHS enforces the laws from Congress, and if lawmakers don't like those laws, they should change them.

"Too many politicians would rather defend criminals and attack the men and women who are enforcing our laws," McLaughlin said. "It's time they focus on protecting the American people, the work this Department is doing every day under Secretary Noem's leadership."

The ability of Congress to restrict Homeland Security funding is limited, in large part because the GOP majority already essentially doubled department funding under Trump's big tax breaks and spending cuts law.

Instead, Democrats are seeking to impose restraints on Border Patrol and U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement operations as part of a routine annual funding package for Homeland, Defense, Health and other departments. Without action this week, those agencies would head toward a shutdown.

To be sure, Homeland Security still has strong defenders in the Congress.

The conservative House Freedom Caucus said Tuesday in a letter to Trump that he should invoke the Insurrection Act, if needed, to quell protests. The group said it would be "ready to take all steps necessary" to keep funds flowing for Trump's immigration enforcement and removal operations.

On the job for a year, Noem has clashed at times with lawmakers on Capitol Hill, as Republicans and Democrats have sought greater oversight and accounting of the department's spending and operations.

Noem has kept a low profile since the Saturday press conference following Pretti's death, though she appeared Sunday on Fox News. She doubled down in that interview on criticism of Minnesota officials, but also expressed compassion for Pretti's family.

"It grieves me to think about what his family is going through but it also grieves me what's happening to these law enforcement officers every day out in the streets with the violence they face," she said.

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Once rare, impeachments now more common  
Impeachment, once a far-flung tool brandished against administration officials, has become increasingly commonplace.

Two years ago, the Republican-led House impeached another Homeland Security secretary, Alejandro Mayorkas, in protest over the then-Biden administration's border security and immigration policies that allowed millions of immigrants and asylum seekers to enter the U.S. The Senate dismissed the charges.

On Tuesday, Maryland Rep. Jamie Raskin, the top Democrat on the House Judiciary Committee, said if the Republican chairman of the panel, Rep. Jim Jordan of Ohio, does not launch an impeachment probe, he would.

Raskin said he would work with the top Democrats on the Homeland Security and Oversight committees to immediately launch an impeachment inquiry related to the Minnesota deaths and other "lawlessness and corruption that may involve treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors."

More than 160 House Democrats have signed on to an impeachment resolution from Rep. Robin Kelly, D-Ill.

## Four big questions ahead of the 2026 Grammy Awards show

By MARIA SHERMAN AP Music Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The 68th annual Grammy Awards are Sunday, airing live from Los Angeles' Crypto.com Arena on CBS and Paramount+. What can viewers expect?

According to the Recording Academy: some new, some old and a lot of excitement. Executive producers Raj Kapoor, Ben Winston and Jesse Collins are returning for a different show from last year, when the event was completely transformed to help those affected by the devastating Los Angeles-area wildfires.

Here are four big questions — and answers — ahead of the event.

What's new at the 2026 Grammys?

A lot! A best album cover category is back for the first time in 53 years. Best country album has been renamed to best contemporary country album and a best traditional country album category has been added.

"In this case, we got a proposal that wanted an additional country category. It made its way through the proposal process — again, voted on by members, evaluated by members, submitted by members but ultimately voted on by members — and we deploy what the members ask for," Recording Academy CEO and President Harvey Mason jr. tells The Associated Press.

When the change was announced, some viewed it as backlash to Beyoncé's 2025 win for best country album. "It's not accurate," says Mason jr. "It's something we've been talking about for a number of years."

Also, in the last few years, the Grammy Awards have made a concerted effort to diversify its electorate. Last year, all Latin Grammy voting members were invited to join the Recording Academy.

"The idea was to make sure that the academy and the Grammys are representative of what's going on in music," says Mason jr. "Making sure that our membership was diverse around genre and geography and everything was really important to us. We acknowledged that Latin music is huge and it's omnipresent in the industry at this point."

What can we expect from the performances?

Surprises and variety, says Mason jr. "The new up-and-coming group is so incredible. The legends and the icons are so, so special to have around. And then the superstars, having some of them on our stage, and that mixture, I think, makes for a really fun show."

Winston is a bit more specific: "18 or 19" performances, he counts, "In 3 ½ hours. Yeah, so it's packed. ... We keep it tight and sharp and we put less other stuff in the show this year so we can have a bit more music."

"We definitely try to maximize the music performances on the show," adds Kapoor. "It's something that we challenge our team with every year."

And on an abridged timeline. Rehearsals start Thursday for Sunday's live event. It's "Thursday after-

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noon, all day Friday, all day Saturday, and that's it," Kapoor continues. "Everything that you see, those 19 performances, all happen between Thursday afternoon and Saturday evening. And it's kind of one of the most amazing processes you've ever seen, and it's absolutely insane how much work we get done, and how cooperative the artists are."

The artists confirmed to perform so far are Clipse, Pharrell Williams, Sabrina Carpenter and all of the best new artist nominees: Katseye, Olivia Dean, Leon Thomas, Addison Rae, Sombr, Lola Young, The Marías and Alex Warren.

Who might make history at the 2026 Grammys?

So many people. Kendrick Lamar leads nominations with nine, including an album of the year nod. If he wins for "GNX" — or if Tyler, the Creator's "Chromakopia" or Clipse's "Let Got Sort Em Out" wins — it will be only the third time a rap album has taken home the top prize, following Outkast in 2004 for "Speakerboxxx/The Love Below" and Lauryn Hill in 1999 for "The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill."

If Bad Bunny's "Debí Tirar Más Fotos" wins album of the year, it will be the first all-Spanish-language album to do so. It is only the second time an all-Spanish-language album has been nominated for the top prize. The first was also a Bad Bunny release — in 2023, for "Un Verano Sin Ti." Harry Styles' "Harry's House" won that year.

No K-pop artist has ever won a Grammy, but that may change. Rosé and Bruno Mars' "APT." and the "KPop Demon Hunters" track "Golden" are both nominated for song of the year, a first for any K-pop act. "APT." is also up for record of the year, also a K-pop artist first.

There are also a number of intriguing first-time nominees. Timothée Chalamet is up for best compilation soundtrack for visual media for "A Complete Unknown." Supreme Court Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson and the Dalai Lama are up for audio book, narration and storytelling recording. Steven Spielberg is also nominated in the music film category, for "Music By John Williams."

"There's history that could be made across the board," Winston says.

That competitiveness — and excitement — will be reflected in the show's production.

"This year we are just going to enjoy great performances and great music and tight races," he continues. "We're leaning very much into just making these music performances spectacular and also trying to push the boundaries in how we shoot them as well for a live show."

After 2025's wildfires, how will the Grammys transform?

"We were living in hotels," Winston reflects on the 2025 Grammys. "In this office, looking at the fires on the hills literally right there outside this window ... there was no rundown because we didn't know what we had. So, it's just a very different year for us."

Logistically, he says, this year his team has been able to "really appreciate the ability to finesse performances."

Kapoor says the fires taught his team "just how flexible we can be."

"And ... we got to spotlight what else the Recording Academy does. Because so much of their work is actually helping people," he adds.

Relief efforts were at the heart of the show, including highlighting small businesses affected by the wildfires.

"The fires last year brought some incredible challenges but also presented an amazing opportunity for us to see how we can amplify our work and our mission," Mason jr. said. "Which is to serve people, to serve music people, to serve the world."

MusiCares — the Recording Academy's philanthropic arm, which helps music professionals who need financial, personal or medical assistance — announced that it directed more than \$15 million toward fire relief efforts.

"The good thing about the organization as we stand now is there is never a business-as-usual mindset," Mason jr. adds. "Everything every year gets looked at. It gets improved."

## Eating snow cones or snow cream can be a winter delight, if done safely

By HOLLY RAMER Associated Press

CONCORD, N.H. (AP) — Take two snowballs and call me in the morning?

Dr. Sarah Crockett, who specializes in emergency and wilderness medicine, doesn't explicitly tell her patients at New Hampshire's Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center to swallow snow, but she often prescribes more time outside. If that time includes eating a handful of ice crystals straight or adding ingredients to make snow cones and other frozen treats, she's all for it.

"To stop and just be present and want to catch a snowflake on your tongue, or scoop up some fresh, white, untouched snow that's collected during something as exciting as a snowstorm, I think that there's space in our world to enjoy that," Crockett said. "And while we need to make good choices, I think these are simple things that can bring joy."

Getting outdoors to enjoy simple pleasures is unlikely to be front of mind for people in a 1,300-mile (2,100-kilometer) stretch of the United States where a massive weekend storm brought deep snow and bitter cold. Freezing rain and ice brought down power lines and tree limbs, leaving hundreds of thousands of homes without power or heating in the South, while snow upended road and air travel from Arkansas to New England.

As the storm recedes, residents of lesser-affected areas might be tempted to whip up bowls of "snow cream" — snow combined with milk, sugar and vanilla — after seeing techniques demonstrated on TikTok. Others might want to try "sugar on snow," a taffy-like confection made by pouring hot maple syrup onto a plate of snow.

Despite its pristine appearance, snow isn't always clean enough to consume. Crockett and other experts shared advice for digging in safely while digging out.

### The science of snow

Whether it's rain or snow, precipitation cleans the atmosphere, picking up pollutants as it falls, said Steven Fassnacht, a professor of snow hydrology at Colorado State University. But snowflakes pick up more impurities because they fall more slowly and have more exposed surface areas than raindrops, he said.

That means snow that falls near coal plants or factories that emit particulates into the air contains more contaminants, said Fassnacht, who was in Shinjo, Japan, last week studying the salt content of snow. He said he wouldn't have hesitated to take a taste there because there weren't any big industrial complexes upwind.

"Snow can be eaten, but you want to think about the trajectory. Where did that snow come from?" he said.

Timing is another consideration, according to Crockett. The first wave of snow holds the most particulate matter, she said, so waiting until a storm is well underway before putting out a bowl to collect falling snow is one precaution to take.

Ground contamination is an additional factor, experts say. Avoiding yellow snow, which may be tainted by urine or tree bark, is conventional wisdom, but it's also a good idea to stay away from any snow pushed by snowplows and packed with road salt, deicing chemicals and debris.

### Snack versus survival

What about eating snow to survive? Crockett, who oversees the wilderness medicine program at Dartmouth College's Geisel School of Medicine, says that's a bad idea.

The energy it takes to melt snow in your mouth as you're eating it essentially counteracts the hydration benefit, plus it decreases your core body temperature and increases the risk of hypothermia. While outdoor enthusiasts who plan to spend days in the mountains often melt and boil snow to purify it for drinking, it shouldn't be viewed as an immediate hydration source, she said.

"If you are disoriented on a local hike, I would say your number one priority is to try to reach out for help in any way you can, ... not 'Can I eat enough snow?'" Crockett said.

### Focus on rewards, not risks

Fassnacht, who has studied snow for more than 30 years, said he tried "snow cream" for the first time last year when some students made him some. He described it as a fun experience that got him thinking about flavors and textures, not contaminants.

"It's a whimsical thing," he said. "It made me think about what are the characteristics of that freshly fallen snow, and how does that change the taste sensation?"

Crockett likewise is a fan of finding inspiration and wonder in nature. She worries that overprotective parenting has contributed to anxiety in some young people, and that excessive warnings about eating snow could add to that.

"We have to strike that right balance of making sure we're avoiding danger while not being so protective that we encourage this 'Everything is going to harm me' mentality, particularly for children," she said.

Crockett has four children, including a daughter she described as a "passionate snow eater." As the recent winter storm got underway, she asked her why she liked eating snow so much and was told, "It makes me feel connected to the Earth."

"That is actually something that's really important to me, that we all have this connection to nature," Crockett said.

## 'I was lucky' says Djokovic after setting up Australian Open semifinal against Sinner

By JOHN PYE AP Sports Writer

MELBOURNE, Australia (AP) — After a walkover and an in-match retirement, 10-time Australian Open winner Novak Djokovic will meet two-time defending champion Jannik Sinner in the semifinals.

Djokovic dropped the first two sets of his quarterfinal 6-4, 6-3 Wednesday to fifth-seeded Lorenzo Musetti but was up a break in the third when the 23-year-old Italian retired with an injured right leg.

The 38-year-old Djokovic admitted he was "lucky this time."

It wasn't really the way Djokovic wanted to cap yet another record – his 103rd win at Melbourne Park, one better than Roger Federer's previous all-time mark – but he accepted any route through.

Sinner was all business in a 6-3, 6-4, 6-4 win over eighth-seeded Ben Shelton in a night match to extend his streak to 19 at Melbourne Park.

Sinner conceded he was lucky to still be in the tournament, too, after struggling with cramps and staggering in his third-round match until the roof was closed and he went back on court reinvigorated.

The top four seeds have reached the final four in the men's draw, with No. 1 Carlos Alcaraz and No. 3 Alexander Zverev set to meet in the other semifinal.

Sinner has a 6-4 lead in head-to-heads with Djokovic, but he's won the last five. That sequence includes semifinals at the 2024 Australian Open and at Roland Garros and Wimbledon last year. It was the semifinal here two years ago that propelled Sinner toward his first major title.

"It improves you as a player and a person," Sinner said of his matches with the tennis great. "We're still lucky to have Novak here playing incredible tennis at his age.

"As a 24-year-old, I'm lucky to have someone like him in front of my eyes and I can hopefully learn something. I feel like every day, every time he plays, I can learn something about him."

Since capturing his 24th Grand Slam singles title in 2023, unprecedented among men and for anyone in the Open Era, Djokovic has been bidding for a 25th and to become the most decorated tennis player of all time.

Djokovic's dramatic win

Djokovic was two sets down, slowed by a serious blister on his foot and already thinking about his flight home when fifth-seeded Musetti called it quits.

Musetti needed a medical timeout for treatment on his upper right leg after being broken in the third game of the third set. He played on for almost two games but couldn't continue.

After serving a double-fault in the fifth game to give Djokovic a breakpoint chance, Musetti wiped a

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hand across his face, walked toward the net and removed his headband before exchanging a handshake and quick hug.

"I honestly have no words to describe how I'm feeling right now and how tough it is for me with this injury in this moment," Musetti said. "I continued to play because I was playing really, really, really well, but I was feeling that the pain was increasing and the problem was not going away."

Djokovic said he felt for Musetti.

"It happened to me a few times. But being in the quarters of a Grand Slam, two sets to love up and being in full control — I mean, so unfortunate," Djokovic said. "He should have been a winner today."

Musetti was also forced to retire from the French Open semifinals last year — with a similar injury — against eventual champion Alcaraz.

"I feel really sorry for him," Djokovic said. "He was a far better player — I was on my way home tonight."

Late in the second set, Djokovic conceded a point after telling the chair umpire his racket frame had touched — barely and inaudibly — the ball before it went out. He soon lost that game and the set.

The situation appeared to get more dire for Djokovic when he needed a medical timeout after the second set for the blister on the ball of his right foot.

"I just wasn't feeling the ball today due to his quality and his variety in the game," he said. "I'm extremely lucky."

Flip side

No tennis player takes any victory for granted. Just a few days ago, Djokovic received a walkover into the quarterfinals.

Djokovic has seen it from the other side. None more dramatic than here last year when he had to quit the Australian Open semifinals with a torn leg muscle. He was booed off the court when he retired after dropping the first set against Zverev.

Asked in a news conference to compare eras from when he started chasing the Federer-Rafael Nadal rivalry and to now chasing Alcaraz and Sinner, Djokovic responded that it was disrespectful not to mention the "15-year period in between where I was dominating the Grand Slams."

"I don't feel like I'm chasing, to be honest," he said. "I'm creating my own history."

## Today in History: January 29, Bush warns of 'axis of evil'

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Thursday, Jan. 29, the 29th day of 2026. There are 336 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Jan. 29, 2002, in his first State of the Union address, President George W. Bush said terrorists were still threatening America — and warned of "an axis of evil" consisting of North Korea, Iran and Iraq.

Also on this date:

In 1891, following the death of her brother Kalākaua, Lili'uokalani was sworn in as the first and only queen of the Hawaiian Kingdom. (Her reign would end two years later when the Hawaiian monarchy was abolished following a U.S. military-supported coup d'état.)

In 1936, the first five inductees of baseball's Hall of Fame — Ty Cobb, Babe Ruth, Honus Wagner, Christy Mathewson and Walter Johnson — were elected in Cooperstown, New York.

In 1979, President Jimmy Carter formally welcomed Chinese Vice Premier Deng Xiaoping (dung shah-oh-ping) to the White House, following the establishment of full diplomatic relations.

In 1995, the San Francisco 49ers became the first team in NFL history to win five Super Bowl titles, beating the San Diego Chargers, 49-26, in Super Bowl XXIX.

In 1998, a bomb rocked an abortion clinic in Birmingham, Alabama, killing a security guard and critically injuring a nurse. (The bomber, Eric Rudolph, also admitted to carrying out the deadly bombing at the 1996 Atlanta Olympics and other attacks and is serving multiple life sentences.)

In 2013, the Justice Department ended its criminal probe of the 2010 Deepwater Horizon disaster and Gulf of Mexico oil spill, with a U.S. judge agreeing to let London-based oil giant BP PLC plead guilty to

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manslaughter charges for the deaths of 11 rig workers and pay a record \$4 billion in penalties.

In 2017, six people were killed in a shooting at a Quebec City mosque during evening prayers. (Alexandre Bissonnette, who was arrested nearby, pleaded guilty to murder and attempted murder charges and drew a life prison sentence.)

In 2025, a midair collision between an Army helicopter and an American Airlines regional jet killed all 67 people aboard both aircraft as the jet was landing at Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, D.C. At least 28 bodies were pulled from the icy Potomac River.

Today's birthdays: Feminist author Germaine Greer is 87. Actor Katharine Ross is 86. Actor Tom Selleck is 81. R&B singer Charlie Wilson is 73. TV host and media mogul Oprah Winfrey is 72. Olympic diving gold medalist Greg Louganis is 66. Football Hall of Famer Andre Reed is 62. Hockey Hall of Famer Dominik Hašek is 61. Actor-director Edward Burns is 58. Actor Sara Gilbert is 51. Pop-rock singer Adam Lambert is 44. Actor Jakob Davies is 23.