

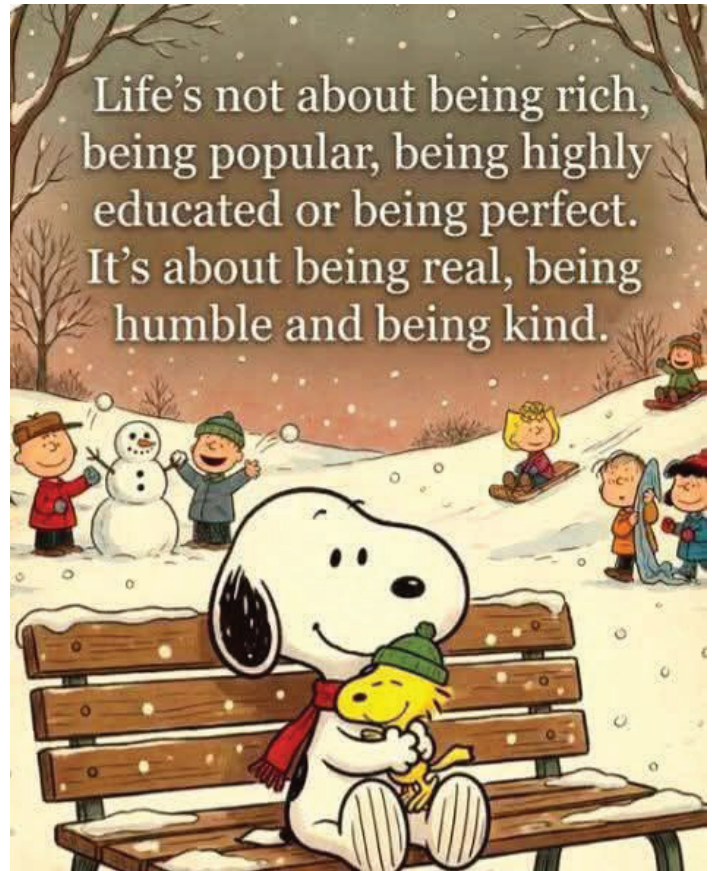
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Friday, Feb. 6

Senior Menu: Baked fish, baked potato, antigua blend, fruit, whole wheat bread.
School Breakfast: Egg wraps.
School Lunch: Cheese pizza, green beans.
3rd grade BBB practice, 3:30 p.m., elementary gym.



Varsity girls wrestling at Yankton, 4 p.m.
Varsity boys wrestling at Lyman Quad, 5 p.m.
JH BBB hosts Waubay/Summit (7th at 6 p.m., 8th at 7 p.m.)

Saturday, Feb. 7

Varsity girls wrestling at Dell Rapids, 9 a.m.
Pickleball at Elementary gym, 9:30 a.m.
Boys Varsity Wrestling at Big Dakota Conference Tournament, 10 a.m., in Pierre
Dak XII-NEC Clash: Groton Area vs. Canton, 5 p.m., Madison Auxiliary Gym.
HOSA Middle School dance in the gym.

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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.

Winter Olympics Begin

The 2026 Winter Olympics officially open tonight in Milan, marking Italy's third time hosting the Winter Games. The ceremony takes place at San Siro Stadium with 2,916 athletes from 92 national Olympic committees, including 232 from the US. The live ceremony begins at 2 pm ET (8 pm local time) on NBC and Peacock.

The Milan-Cortina Games span nearly 8,500 square miles across northern Italy, combining Milan's urban arenas with Cortina d'Ampezzo's alpine venues more than 250 road miles apart. It's the first dual-host Olympics, promoting sustainability and reuse with nearly 90% existing or temporary venues. The closing ceremony is set for Verona, about 100 miles east of Milan.

The Games run through Feb. 22, featuring 16 sports, including ski mountaineering—the first new stand-alone Olympic sport since skeleton's 2002 return. Athletes will compete for 116 gold medals worth about \$2,300 each, more than double their 2024 value. The Paralympics follow March 6-15.

TrumpRx Goes Live

President Donald Trump launched TrumpRx yesterday—a direct-to-consumer website where Americans can search for medications and compare prices. Consumers can then purchase the medications through pharmaceutical companies' websites, with or without insurance.

The medications offered on TrumpRx require a prescription, including weight-loss drugs Wegovy and Zepbound. Some, like the blood thinner Plavix, will cost as low as \$16 per month, while more expensive drugs can exceed \$2K. TrumpRx aims to reduce costs by featuring price comparisons, giving more choice to consumers. However, if generic versions of a drug are not featured on the site, or consumers fail to apply savings from insurance, they could miss out on cheaper alternatives. Experts recommend checking insurance coverage to avoid overpaying for drugs.

Drug prices have ballooned in recent decades, increasing at three times the rate of inflation. Heart and diabetes medications are especially driving up costs.

Guthrie Search Continues

The FBI yesterday announced a \$50K reward for information that leads to the finding of Nancy Guthrie, the mother of NBC's "Today" cohost Savannah Guthrie. Authorities believe the 84-year-old is "still out there" after she was allegedly taken from her Arizona home last weekend.

Savannah Guthrie addressed her mother's possible abductor in a video posted to social media Wednesday. She and her siblings recorded it with the FBI's guidance after unverified ransom notes were sent to local and national media outlets. Authorities arrested one person in connection with a phony ransom demand, but say another note is being taken seriously. Neither a suspect nor a person of interest has been publicly identified as of this writing. The search grows increasingly urgent because Nancy Guthrie has cardiac issues and requires daily medication.

President Donald Trump, who has been interviewed by Savannah Guthrie, spoke with the journalist by phone Wednesday and has directed federal law enforcement to support the investigation.

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Sports, Entertainment, & Culture

Drew Brees, Larry Fitzgerald are among five inductees to the Pro Football Hall of Fame from a shortlist of 15 players.

Detroit Tigers pitcher Tarik Skubal wins salary arbitration case, securing record \$32M this season instead of team's \$19M offer; Skubal made nearly \$10.2M last year and won the MLB's Cy Young Award in 2024 and 2025.

Singer LaMonte McLemore, a founding member of The 5th Dimension and six-time Grammy winner, dies at age 90.

Science & Technology

Anthropic releases Claude Opus 4.6, designed for coding and creating higher-quality professional outputs; roughly 80% of Anthropic's business comes from enterprise customers.

Researchers make strides toward successful HIV vaccine with development of DNA-based vaccine that generates eight times more precursor B cells—immune cells that can produce virus-neutralizing antibodies—than protein-based vaccines.

Apes may have imagination and the capacity to play pretend, according to a series of experiments in which scientists staged tea party-like experiences.

Business & Markets

US stock markets close down (S&P 500 -1.2%, Dow -1.2%, Nasdaq -1.6%); bitcoin dips below \$65K to lowest level since 2024.

US job openings fall to 6.5 million in December from 6.9 million in November; figure is fewest since September 2020.

Amazon shares drop on earnings miss, \$200B spending forecast.

Reddittops earnings estimates, projects strong sales, and announces \$1B share buyback.

Estée Lauder shares sink 20% on \$100M tariff hit.

Mining giant Rio Tinto and rival Glencore abandon talks for a \$260B merger, which would have created the world's largest mining company.

Politics & World Affairs

Iran seizes two foreign oil tankers in the Persian Gulf, accusing them of smuggling; move comes hours before direct face-to-face negotiations with US delegates in Oman.

US and Iran slated to hold talks in Oman, see preview.

Russia and the US agree to reestablish military-to-military talks.

Ukraine and Russia end second round of peace negotiations without deal but agree to engage in prisoner swap.

Trump administration reclassifies 50,000 career federal workers to status similar to political appointees, making it easier to fire or discipline them.

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Wolves Split Home Doubleheader Against Minnesota Crookston

ABERDEEN, S.D. — The Northern State Wolves earned a split in their home doubleheader Thursday night at Wachs Arena, as the men pulled away late for a 79–71 win over Minnesota Crookston Golden Eagles, while the women fell 68–48 to the Golden Eagles earlier in the evening.

Men: Northern State 79, Minnesota Crookston 71

Sharp shooting from Simon Akena and Tobi Obiora carried the Wolves to a seven-point victory in a tightly contested NSIC matchup that featured 11 lead changes. Northern led 39–37 at halftime and matched that output in the second half to secure the win.

The Wolves shot 41.5% from the floor, knocked down nine 3-pointers, and converted 71.4% at the free-throw line. Northern also held a slim edge on the glass, 39–38, including 13 offensive rebounds, and finished with 13 assists and four blocks.

Akena led four Wolves in double figures with 21 points on 9-of-17 shooting, adding seven rebounds and three assists. Obiora narrowly missed a double-double with 17 points and a team-high nine rebounds while shooting 70% from the field. Joshua Book chipped in 12 points and a team-best four assists, with James Glenn adding 10 points. Off the bench, Benjamin Bowen and Marshawn Smith each scored six, while Ty Rogers provided eight rebounds in just 11 minutes.

Women: Minnesota Crookston 68, Northern State 48

The Northern State women struggled to find an offensive rhythm early, scoring just 17 first-half points as Minnesota Crookston built momentum with hot shooting. The Wolves rallied in the fourth quarter with 18 points, but the Golden Eagles answered with 20 of their own to seal the win.

Northern finished the night shooting 30.5% overall and 23.5% from beyond the arc, recording 31 rebounds, nine assists, seven steals, and two blocks. Izzy Moore paced the Wolves with 16 points, five rebounds, two assists, and two steals. Morgan Fiedler, Megan Counts, and Reagan Rus each scored six points, with Rus leading the team with three assists.

Minnesota Crookston was led by Rayna Klejeski's 21-point, 13-rebound double-double, while Riley Jenkins added 18 points, hitting 50% from three. Emma Miller rounded out the Golden Eagles' scoring in double figures with 15 points.

Up Next

The Wolves return to action Saturday at Wachs Arena against MSU Moorhead Dragons. The women tip off at 4 p.m., followed by the men's game at 6 p.m. during the annual Glacial Lakes Energy Night.

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Tigers Outlast Deuel/Deubrook 42–39 in Clear Lake Dual

The Groton Area wrestling team edged Deuel/Deubrook Area 42–39 in a tightly contested dual Thursday night in Clear Lake, using a strong run through the middle and upper weights to secure the victory.

The dual opened with Deuel/Deubrook claiming early momentum, as Dusty Bolden pinned Preston Hinkelman at 3:39 in the 106-pound bout, followed by Bentley Fokken's fall over Luke Gauer at 1:35 at 113 to put the Cardinals ahead 12–0.

Groton answered quickly at 120 pounds, where Wyatt Hagen delivered a momentum-shifting pin of Brock Mellendorf in just 50 seconds. Kyson Kucker followed at 126 with another fall, putting Gage Landmark on his back at the 1:31 mark to close the gap.

Deuel/Deubrook picked up a narrow win at 132, as Erich Fokken edged Noah Scepaniak by a 7–6 decision, before regaining control with a string of falls. Aiden Warren pinned Aiden Strom at 1:08 (138), Tyson Hagberg defeated Grayson Flores by fall at 2:27 (144), Ryker Gauger pinned Kason Oswald at 1:21 (150), and Zane Miller closed the stretch with a fall over Donavon Block at 4:41 (157).

Groton Area responded when it mattered most in the upper weights. Ben Hoeft picked up a key fall over Hayden Landmark at 3:39 at 165 pounds, and Isaiah Scepaniak followed with a pin of William Foulk at 3:12 in the 175-pound match.

The Tigers continued to build their lead with forfeits at 190 and 215 pounds, as Walker Zoellner and Layne Johnson each collected six team points. At heavyweight, Gavin England capped the night with a fall over Raymond Klein at 1:55, sealing the dual victory for Groton.

Dunker had double-double night in Tigers win over Deuel

CLEAR LAKE — The Groton Area Tigers shook off a slow start Thursday night and used a dominant defensive stretch to pull away from the Deuel Cardinals, earning a 45-27 victory in a Northeast Conference matchup.

The game was a defensive battle early, with Groton holding a slim 5-4 lead after the first quarter. The Tigers began to find their rhythm late in the second quarter and into the third, putting together a decisive 17-point run that turned a 12-9 advantage into a commanding 29-9 lead.

Groton led 23-9 at halftime and extended the margin to 33-18 after three quarters before cruising to the win.

"We struggled early just getting used to what they were doing defensively," head coach Matt Locke said. "It's not something you see every day, but once we made some adjustments and settled in, I thought we did a much better job."

Defense fueled the Tigers' surge. Groton forced 27 Deuel turnovers while committing just 12 of its own, recording 17 steals on the night. The Tigers also dished out 13 assists compared to just three for the Cardinals.

"I really liked our anticipation," Locke said. "Everybody was getting into the passing lanes, not just our guards. We've just got to finish better when we get those opportunities."

Groton shot 44% from two-point range (14-of-32) and went 8-of-17 from the free-throw line. The Tigers struggled from beyond the arc, hitting 3-of-18, but made up for it with pressure defense and ball movement. Deuel finished 9-of-29 shooting on two-pointers, 2-of-12 from three, and 3-of-6 at the line.

Rylee Dunker recorded another double-double, leading Groton with 11 points and 11 rebounds. Jaedyn Penning continued her strong stretch of play with 11 points, four rebounds, three assists, and three steals.

"Jayden's had a really good year so far," Locke said. "She's been looking to score and knocking down shots, and we need her to keep doing that."

Kella Tracy added eight points, three rebounds, and two steals, while Jerica Locke chipped in seven points, four rebounds, three assists, and three steals. McKenna Tietz finished with six points and four assists, and Sydney Locke scored two points with two steals. Taryn Traphagen contributed defensively with two rebounds, a steal, and a block.

Deuel was led by Camdyn Peterreins with nine points, followed by Graclyn Nielsen with eight and Morgan Theisen with six.

Deuel won the rebounding battle narrowly, 30-28.

With the win, Groton Area improves to 11-5 on the season and will travel to Madison on Saturday for a DAK12/NEC clash with the Canton Chawks at 5 p.m. Deuel drops to 4-9.



Rylee Dunker had her second consecutive double-double on the night with 11 points and 11 rebounds. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



Taryn Traphagen dribbles past her defender. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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JV: Groton Area 27, Deuel 10

Groton also claimed the junior varsity contest, pulling away for a 27-10 victory. The Tigers led 9-2 after the first quarter, 19-6 at halftime, and 25-9 after three quarters.

Mckenna Krause led Groton with seven points, followed by Ashlynn Warrington with six and Taylynn Traphagen with four. Sydney Locke, Kinsley Rowen, Brynlee Dunker, Kella Tracy, and Teagan Hanten each added two points.

For Deuel, Parker Holt scored five points, Amelia Giese had three, and Lilly Mabior finished with two.

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Groton Area clamps down defensively in road win over Deuel

CLEAR LAKE — The Groton Area Tigers boys basketball put together one of their most complete defensive efforts of the season Thursday night, rolling past the Deuel Cardinals boys basketball 55-24 in a Northeast Conference road victory.

Groton seized control early, jumping out to a 12-4 lead after the first quarter before stretching the margin to 32-14 at halftime. The Tigers continued to pull away after the break, leading 49-21 through three quarters and cruising to the 31-point win.

Defense set the tone all night long. Groton limited Deuel to just two players in the scoring column and forced a staggering 34 Cardinal turnovers, turning those miscues into transition chances and easy baskets. The Tigers finished with 15 steals and allowed just 24 total points, committing only three team fouls in the game.

"I thought our effort was really good," said head coach Greg Kjellsen, who noted the team's continued work on its matchup zone defense. "It's not anywhere close to where we want it to be yet, but the way you get better is by doing it. I liked our activity — hands on the ball, deflections, and guys flying around."

Offensively, Groton relied on efficiency inside rather than the perimeter. The Tigers were 23-of-40 (58%) on two-point attempts while going just 2-of-13 from beyond the arc. They added 16 assists on the night and out-rebounded Deuel 27-23.

Keegen Tracy led the Tigers with a strong all-around performance, finishing with 13 points, three rebounds, four assists, and five steals. Karson Zac added 10 points, three rebounds, an assist, and a block, while Gage Sippel chipped in eight points, five rebounds, two steals, and a block. Ryder Johnson also scored eight points to go with three rebounds, two assists, and a steal.

Becker Bosma contributed five points, six rebounds, four assists, and three steals, and Easton Weber added three points, four rebounds, and three assists. Additional scoring came from Ethan Kroll, Jayden Schwan, Logan Warrington, and Anthony Tracy, who each finished with two points.

Kjellsen pointed to Sippel's response after having a couple of shots blocked as a teaching moment during the game. "We told him, so what if someone blocks your shot — go right back at them," Kjellsen said. "I thought he stayed engaged, rebounded well, and made plays after that. That's growth."

Deuel was led by Troy Jensen with 16 points, including three three-pointers, while Jaxtin Winter added eight. The Cardinals shot 3-of-12 from three-point range and 7-of-26 on two-pointers.

Groton improved to 11-4 on the season and will travel to Frederick on Tuesday to face the Leola-Frederick Titans.

JV dominates early

The Groton Area junior varsity also turned in a lopsided win, defeating Deuel 62-13. The Tigers jumped out to a 28-1 first-quarter lead and never looked back.

Easton Weber knocked down four three-pointers to lead the JV with



Karson Zak looks for a teammate to pass off the ball. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)



Gage Sippel goes up for a basket towering over his defenders. (Photo by Jeslyn Kosel)

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14 points. Jace Johnson scored 11, Asher Johnson had 10, Ryder Schelle added nine, and Anthony Tracy finished with eight. Ethan Kroll scored six, Jordan Schwan added four, and Riley Schellenberger chipped in three.

Case Schreienbeck led Deuel with five points, while Braxton Winter scored three, Carsen Wiesner added two, and James Ulmer had one.

The varsity games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Avantara - Groton, Agtegra, Bierman Farm Service, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Blocker Construction, Dacotah Bank, Dan Richardt at Groton Ford, Full Circle Ag, Groton Ag Partners, Groton Chamber, Groton Ford, John Sieh Agency, Heartland Energy and The MeatHouse in Andover. Rich Bosma and Mike Imrie did the commentary, Jeslyn Kosel ran the camera and Paul Kosel did the stats and technology. The boys junior varsity game was sponsored by Jerry and Becky Johnson. The girls junior varsity was sponsored by grandparents.

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\$20.00



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\$25.00



Bear sucker cake with life savers and dum dum suckers in it
\$15.00

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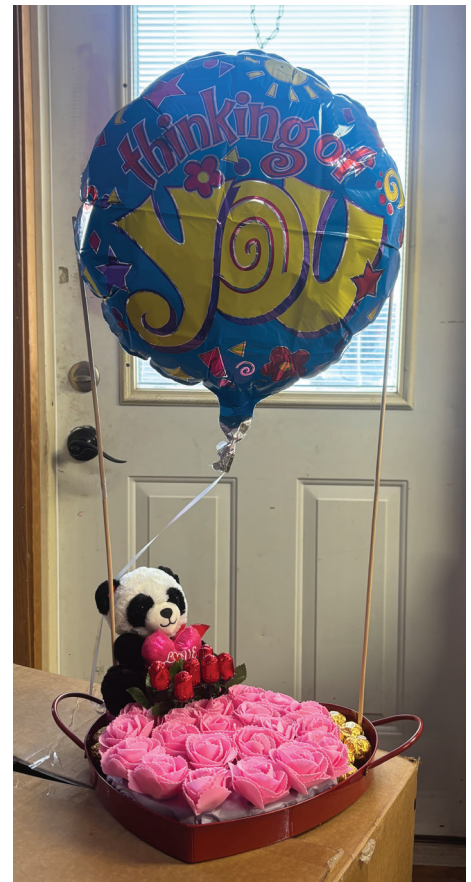
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\$40.00**



**Laffy Taffy Octopus cake
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**Relax and Unwind basket with two wine bottles, blanket, adult coloring books and word finds with crayons and pens and some different chocolates as shown here
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State House rejects liability protections for unapproved COVID therapies

'We did not get sent here by our people to sign their rights away,' one opponent says

BY: JOHN HULT

The South Dakota House of Representatives defeated a bill meant to serve as a liability shield for doctors and pharmacists who prescribe or dispense two drugs used off-label for COVID-19 treatment.

House Bill 1068, described by one opponent as a "COVID hangover bill," failed Thursday on a 28-40 vote, with two members excused.

Had it passed both chambers and earned a governor's signature, no provider acting "in good faith" could face liability for giving patients ivermectin, approved by the Food and Drug Administration to treat blood parasites, or hydroxychloroquine, approved for malaria, lupus and rheumatoid arthritis.

The drugs are not approved for use in the treatment of COVID-19, but pockets of patients, providers and some officials — including U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. — swear by them as treatments for the disease or a prophylactic against infection.

Republican Rep. Brandei Schaeffbauer of Aberdeen is one such devotee.

She told her fellow lawmakers she takes ivermectin during each legislative session. She forgot it at home this week, she said, and has "been sick these past few days" without it.

To get the drugs for her off-label purchase, Schaeffbauer said she signs a liability waiver, promising not to sue her doctor or pharmacist if something goes wrong.

Fort Pierre Republican Rep. Will Mortenson pointed to Schaeffbauer's comments more than once during his remarks in opposition.

People like "the good representative from Aberdeen" who want prescriptions for off-label uses ought to decide for themselves to waive their right to sue over complications, he said, and lawmakers ought to stay out of it.

"We did not get sent here by our people to sign their rights away, and that's what we're doing," said Mortenson, who called the bill a "COVID hangover."

Rep. Leslie Heinemann, R-Flandreau, didn't use that term, but he did draw a line from the pandemic to the debate on the House floor.

Some patients with willing doctors were denied the drugs in the early days of COVID-19, which Heinemann said eroded doctor-patient relationships and contributed to the spread of mistrust in a medical establishment that's yet to endorse them.

"I personally know physicians during that time period that were told by pharmacists through phone calls that they could not fill their ivermectin script or they would be under review by their own board of pharmacy," the retired dentist said.

The blanket liability protection drew persistent opposition, however. The "in good faith" standard for determining if a doctor or pharmacist deserves a shield from legal consequence is too low a bar, argued Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls.

Hughes, an attorney, said he remembers when a law school professor described "good faith" as "a pure heart and an empty head."

"What doctor or pharmacist doesn't have a pure heart" as they work to care for patients, he asked.

A doctor who acts in good faith can still be negligent, he said, for failing to adhere to a high standard of care. Under the bill, a doctor's negligence wouldn't be enough for a wronged patient to win a legal case.

"I'd love to support this bill," said Hughes, who said he sympathizes with those who struggled to get the medicines. "I really appreciate and respect the sponsor, but I'm going to have to vote no."

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.

Effort to require elections for excess school taxation falters in state House

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

PIERRE — A proposal to require local elections when a school board decides to exceed property tax limitations failed Wednesday in the South Dakota House on a 29-39 vote, and an effort to reconsider the bill fizzled on Thursday.

Its House sponsor, Rep. John Hughes, R-Sioux Falls, had announced an intent to seek a reconsideration, but ultimately gave up that effort.

School districts can already "opt out" of property tax limitations set by the state and raise more revenue, and local residents can petition that decision to a public vote.

The bill says the school board could decide on an opt-out with a two-thirds vote, but the decision would then go to a mandatory election. It would also require boards to outline how long the opt-out would run and the "total maximum dollar amount of taxes payable over the full term."

There are 79 school districts opt-outs across the state, according to the Legislative Research Council, resulting in \$43 million in excess property taxes.

Supporters of the bill, including Rep. Terri Jorgenson, R-Piedmont, said it increases transparency and local control for taxpayers.

"All this does, it simply adds taxpayer consent at the final step," Jorgenson said. "I think it's an unfair burden that if they want to have a voice, they have a very short window to go and get a petition, to go and get all their signatures, and they're paying the bills."

Some opponents to the bill said the reason school districts make the decision to opt out is that the state doesn't provide enough funding for their budgets.

"You know why they're having opt-outs? Because we're not doing our job here," said Rep. Roger DeGroot, a Republican from Brookings. "This is not about transparency, it's about control."

A few who spoke against the bill said they trust school board members and superintendents to make decisions that benefit the community, just like state representatives trust those on the legislative budgeting committee.

"All of us sitting here, we rely on our appropriators to make those good decisions with the state's money," said Rep. Tim Walburg, R-Madison. "Why would we not trust the school districts, the superintendent, the school board to do the same thing?"

Others expressed concern about how many people would turn out for an election. Republican Rep. Brian Mulder of Sioux Falls said that people who want to weigh in on budget decisions for their school district could show up to board meetings.

"People have the opportunity to influence these decisions, but they're not exercising that opportunity," he said. "So, I'm not convinced that they're going to exercise the opportunity to go vote either."

The South Dakota chapter of Americans for Prosperity said legislators "took a step in the wrong direction" by voting down the bill.

"In a time when property taxes are the largest issue for South Dakotans, we believe taxpayers should be able to weigh in before school districts raise their taxes above statutory limits," State Director Jennifer Beving said in a statement Wednesday.

The Senate supported the bill last month on a 20-14 vote. The bill's prime sponsor is Sen. Sue Peterson,

R-Sioux Falls.

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 Republican leaders argue about economic development in front of reporters

Disagreement comes as lawmakers consider plans to help or stall data centers

BY: SETH TUPPER

PIERRE — The divide in South Dakota's Republican Party over the government's role in economic development spilled into public view Thursday at the state Capitol as two of the party's top leaders argued in front of reporters.

The back-and-forth happened during the Republican legislative leadership team's weekly press conference. Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, was answering a question about proposals for a moratorium on construction or expansion of large data centers.

Backers of a moratorium worry that utilities may have to build new power generation sources to satisfy the electrical demand from data centers, and those costs could get passed on to other customers. There's also concern about the amount of water needed to cool data centers.

Mehlhaff said a moratorium would be an "artificial barrier to development" that he would not support. "You don't want to fear-monger on stuff, and I think we've seen an awful lot of that about just about every economic development idea that's come along in the last few years," Mehlhaff said, "and I think that's creating a very chilling atmosphere in South Dakota for developers."

Argument ensues

House Speaker Jon Hansen, R-Dell Rapids, who's seeking the party's nomination for governor, spoke next. "I would say in response to that, characterizing the citizens' concerns as fear —" Hansen began, apparently intending to disagree with Mehlhaff's characterization of a moratorium as fear-mongering.

Before Hansen could finish the thought, Mehlhaff cut him off.

"Mr. Speaker, I hope we don't have to have a debate on every issue," Mehlhaff said. "You've had your say on a lot of stuff, now I've made one, so I guess if these press conferences are going to be debates between the House and the Senate, that's what they'll be, but I don't think that's necessary."

"No," Hansen responded, "I'm simply stating that we've seen how these things have played out over the years" — a reference to other divisive economic development issues, including the proposed Summit Carbon Solutions carbon sequestration pipeline. Hansen referenced allegations by rural Aberdeen farmer Jared Bossly that pipeline land agents entered Bossly's house without permission.

Those and other allegedly aggressive actions by Summit resulted in extensive litigation between landowners and the company, including attempts by the company to use a court process known as eminent domain to gain land access.

While Hansen was discussing that, Mehlhaff interrupted again.

"Mr. Speaker, was there ever an arrest for that home invasion?" Mehlhaff said. "I've heard that over and over again. I was wondering if there was ever an arrest for an alleged home invasion?"

"Yeah, no, thanks for allowing me to speak," Hansen said. "I appreciate it. So, in that case, the people went into Jared's house, into his shop, onto his property. In that case, you had hundreds of South Dakota landowners who were sued. And now in this case, we're hearing concerns about rate increases of upwards to 200-plus percent for people's electric bills as a result of these data centers.

"So we're hearing real concerns from people," Hansen continued, "and that's the concerns that we're bringing to this legislative process."

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The argument ended with several moments of silence, and the press conference proceeded to other topics.

Earlier in the week, Hansen cast one of the nine committee votes to reject a proposed sales tax exemption for data center equipment and software purchases. The bill, from Rep. Kent Roe, R-Hayti, is intended to incentivize the construction of data centers in the state.

South Dakota's biggest data center consumes 30 megawatts of electricity, and the state has none of the vastly larger data centers that have proliferated elsewhere. Some of those bigger centers, often for cryptocurrency and artificial intelligence, need up to 1,000 megawatts of energy, which is equivalent to the demand from 800,000 residential customers.

Governor chimes in

Republican Gov. Larry Rhoden had his weekly legislative press conference separately on Thursday, and his comments further reflected the divide in the party.

When asked for his view on incentives for data centers, he said it's "hard to deny that data centers represent a big opportunity for South Dakota" and "in a lot of ways, it's pretty justifiable to provide some incentives.

"I think there's a lot of misinterpretation, as far as some of these incentives, when they call them 'corporate welfare,'" Rhoden said.

Hansen has pledged to end "corporate welfare," which is his description of the tax breaks and state-funded grants and loans given to large corporations.

Hansen is one of three people challenging Rhoden for the Republican nomination for governor in the June primary election. The others are U.S. Rep. Dusty Johnson, who has said he favors incentives for data centers with guardrails to protect other electrical ratepayers and water users, and businessman Toby Doeden, who has said data centers "have to come here on our terms" and has pledged to grow the economy to an extent that the state won't need to subsidize them.

A broader fight

Data centers are the latest front in an economic development fight among Republicans that has roots back to 2021, when Iowa-based Summit Carbon Solutions proposed its five-state pipeline to capture carbon dioxide from ethanol plants and transport it to North Dakota for underground storage. The multibillion-dollar project would capitalize on federal tax credits incentivizing the prevention of heat-trapping gases into the atmosphere.

Some Republicans have been supportive or neutral about the pipeline, while others have resisted it. Last year, pipeline opponents built enough support within the party to pass a law — signed by Rhoden — banning carbon pipeline projects from using eminent domain. The Summit project has been stalled ever since.

Republicans have also been split over the extent to which the Governor's Office of Economic Development should disburse state aid to private businesses, and the use of tax increment financing districts — known as TIFs — to aid local development.

A TIF district captures the higher property taxes generated by new development to pay off the debt incurred at a project's outset. Last month in Rapid City, a TIF district that had been approved by the city council was rejected nearly 3-to-1 by voters in a referendum election, with state Sen. Taffy Howard, R-Rapid City, helping to lead the effort to reject the plan.

Along with data center bills and legislation to restrain government aid for businesses, there are also bills to reform the use of TIF districts this legislative session, including from Howard. The session began in January and continues until next month.

Seth is editor-in-chief of South Dakota Searchlight. He was previously a supervising senior producer for South Dakota Public Broadcasting and a newspaper journalist in Rapid City and Mitchell.

State House endorses bill to align candidate petition deadlines

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

The South Dakota House of Representatives voted to support a bill on Thursday in Pierre to change a nominating petition deadline for state and local election candidates.

Lawmakers voted 64-4 to change the nominating petition deadline to the third Tuesday in March, rather than various dates currently in law, including March 31 for some candidates.

The bill originally failed on the floor this week but was revived after Rep. Rebecca Reimer, R-Chamberlain, removed an emergency clause that would have made the bill become law immediately. If approved by the Senate and signed by the governor, the bill will become law on July 1, the usual effective date of legislation, and won't impact current petition drives for the upcoming June primary election.

A nominating petition signed by registered voters is required for local and statewide South Dakota candidates to get on the ballot, with signature thresholds varying by position. Prospective candidates were allowed to begin circulating petitions in January.

Reimer said the bill was "cleanup work" intended to address challenges for county auditors created by a law adopted last year requiring local governments to hold elections on the same day as the primary or general election.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.

Trump Education Department bolsters protections for prayer in schools

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Education reinforced the right to prayer in public schools in guidance issued Thursday.

Under the guidance to state and local education agencies, students, teachers and school officials have "a right to pray in school as an expression of individual faith, as long as they're not doing so on behalf of the school," the department said.

President Donald Trump's administration has sought to protect religious liberty in public schools and beyond, and a growing number of GOP state legislators have tried to infuse Christianity in public education.

Trump announced the guidance during remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C., on Thursday, calling the move a "big deal."

The president predicted that Democrats would sue over the guidance, but said he was confident his administration would win any legal challenge.

The guidance also makes clear that "public schools may not sponsor prayer nor coerce or pressure students to pray."

In 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that school-sponsored prayer in public schools violates the Constitution.

The new guidance calls on school officials to "allow the individuals who make up a public school community to act and speak in accordance with their faith, provided they do not invade the rights of others, the school does not itself participate in religious action or speech as an institution, and the school does not favor secular over religious views or one religious view over another."

The guidance leans on a handful of recent Supreme Court rulings surrounding religious expression and religious freedom in public schools, such as *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*, which found that the actions of a Washington state high school football coach who prayed at the 50-yard line after games were constitutionally protected.

The Education Department is required by law to periodically reissue guidance on prayer in schools, according to the department.

Trump had previewed Thursday's guidance while speaking in September 2025 at a Religious Liberty Commission hearing.

The president established that commission in May 2025 in an effort to "safeguard and promote America's founding principle of religious freedom."

Education Secretary Linda McMahon said the administration is "proud to stand with students, parents, and faculty who wish to exercise their First Amendment rights in schools across our great nation," in a statement alongside the announcement.

"Our Constitution safeguards the free exercise of religion as one of the guiding principles of our republic, and we will vigorously protect that right in America's public schools," she said.

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.

US Senate Republicans block attempt to sue Trump administration over Epstein files

BY: ASHLEY MURRAY

WASHINGTON — Senate Republicans blocked a Democratic proposal Thursday to sue the Trump administration over allegations that it did not fully release the Epstein files, as mandated under a law unanimously approved by senators and signed by the president nearly three months ago.

Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., asked for unanimous consent on a resolution compelling the Republican-led Senate to challenge President Donald Trump in court to release more records from the government's investigation into convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein, who died in 2019 awaiting trial on federal sex trafficking charges.

Department of Justice Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche, Trump's former personal defense attorney, said Jan. 30 that the department had finished complying with the new law after a final release of 3 million pages, containing 2,000 videos and 180,000 images. In total, the department released about 3.5 million records since the law's passage.

The latest tranche revealed a global network of numerous men in powerful positions in communication with Epstein.

Late and redacted

The legal deadline to release the files was Dec. 19.

"Fifty days past the deadline, at best, according to the Department of Justice's own admissions, maybe half of all the available Epstein files have been released," Schumer said on the floor Thursday morning.

Schumer said that among the records released, many have been "redacted to an absurd degree."

"This is not what the law requires. This is a mockery of the truth and an insult to the survivors. What makes this all the more sickening is that in over 1,000 instances, the Justice Department failed to follow the law and leaked the identities of over 100 victims. But do you know who the Justice Department did seem to protect? Epstein's co-conspirators," Schumer continued.

The minority leader entered into the congressional record a letter he brought along from roughly 20 Epstein victims decrying the "reckless and dangerous" release of victims' identities.

Senate Majority Whip John Barrasso, R-Wyo., blocked the resolution, chalking it up as "another reckless political stunt designed to distract Americans from Democrats' dangerous plan to shut down the Department of Homeland Security."

Barrasso was referring to negotiations underway to fund DHS. Democrats have demanded changes to immigration enforcement tactics after two U.S. citizens were fatally shot by federal agents in Minneapolis,

and numerous other U.S. citizens were injured by federal agents during Trump's surge into blue states.

Sen. Jeff Merkley, D-Ore., criticized Barrasso's objection on the floor, calling it "morally wrong."

The White House did not respond to a request for comment.

A DOJ official told States Newsroom in an email that the resolution presented "a tired narrative."

"Just because you wish something to be true, doesn't mean it is. This Department produced more than 3.5 million pages in compliance with the law and, in full transparency, has disclosed to the public and to Congress what items were not responsive. I assume all members of Congress read the actual language before voting on it, but if not, our press release and letter to Congress clearly spells this out," the official wrote, including a link to the department's Jan. 30 press release.

'Hunger or thirst for information'

Blanche told reporters on Jan. 30, "There's a hunger or a thirst for information that I do not think will be satisfied by the review of these documents. There's nothing I can do about that."

He said no information uncovered in the files warranted new prosecutions.

The new law, dubbed by lawmakers as the Epstein Files Transparency Act, required the DOJ to make publicly available "all unclassified records, documents, communications, and investigative materials in DOJ's possession that relate to the investigation and prosecution of Jeffrey Epstein," including materials related to Epstein's accomplice Ghislaine Maxwell.

Epstein avoided federal charges in 2008 when he pleaded guilty to Florida state prostitution charges, including for the solicitation of a minor.

A 2007 draft of a federal indictment that laid out more robust charges was among the files released by the DOJ on Jan. 30.

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

SD House committee supports health care provider conscience exemption bill

BY: MAKENZIE HUBER

Health care providers would be able to refuse to perform services for patients under a bill South Dakota lawmakers endorsed on Thursday at the Capitol in Pierre.

Lawmakers on the House of Representatives' Health and Human Services Committee voted 8-5 to support House Bill 1153.

Rep. Leslie Heinemann, R-Flandreau, introduced the bill. He said it would allow health care providers to refuse to participate in services that violate their conscience and protect them from discrimination. Heinemann said some health care providers quit the profession or don't pursue certain specialties "due to a lack of tolerance for their moral, ethical or religious beliefs."

"It protects diversity of belief within the medical profession and benefits patients by protecting the supply of physicians and other medical providers within the health care system," Heinemann said.

Supporters suggested the legislation would apply to abortions, vaccinations and transgender surgeries, and said the bill would add protections beyond federal law or existing health care organization policies in the state.

Lobbyists representing health care systems, professional organizations, businesses and trial lawyers said the bill would lead to legal challenges, strain rural facilities and erode care for patients.

Alan Solano, vice president of governmental affairs with Monument Health, called the bill "overly broad, ill-defined and disruptive."

Justin Smith, a lobbyist representing the Greater Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce, the South Dakota Association of Youth Care Providers and the Infectious Disease Prevention Network, said the bill "protects providers, not patients."

"It is undisputed that this bill makes a patient's rights and needs secondary to whatever subjective conscience principles his treater might claim," Smith said.

Heinemann told lawmakers the exemption bill would still require providers to serve patients in emergency or life-threatening situations.

The bill heads to the House floor next.

Makenzie Huber is a lifelong South Dakotan who regularly reports on the intersection of politics and policy with health, education, social services and Indigenous affairs. Her work with South Dakota Searchlight earned her the title of South Dakota's Outstanding Young Journalist in 2024, and she was a 2024 finalist for the national Livingston Awards.

State Senate approves bill increasing punishment for disrupting worship; related bill fails in House

BY: MEGHAN O'BRIEN

PIERRE — South Dakota lawmakers have rejected one bill to increase penalties for disrupting worshipers and advanced another.

Both are reactions to a recent protest at a church in St. Paul, Minnesota, against the federal government's immigration enforcement actions in the Twin Cities.

One bill, introduced by Rep. Brandei Schaeffbauer, R-Aberdeen, lost Wednesday in the House on a 21-48 vote. The other, sponsored in coordination with the governor by Senate Majority Leader Jim Mehlhaff, R-Pierre, and House Majority Leader Scott Odenbach, R-Spearfish, passed in the Senate on the same day with a 30-4 vote.

Mehlhaff's legislation will be heard by a House committee next. It increases the punishment for any person "who, by threat or violence, intentionally prevents another person from performing any lawful act" associated with religion.

Doing so is currently a misdemeanor, punishable by up to a year of county jail time and a \$2,000 fine. The bill would raise the penalty in that existing law to a felony, making it punishable by two years in state prison and a \$4,000 fine.

"There are conflicting First Amendment rights to protest. You also have the First Amendment right to practice your religion," Mehlhaff told the Senate on Wednesday. "This is to address when those things clash."

Republican Sen. John Carley, of Piedmont, cast one of the four votes against the bill.

"I like the concept here, but I'm just worried it might have some unintended consequences," Carley said. "A felony is a very serious penalty, and it should be reserved for very serious things."

Schaeffbauer's bill would have created a new felony crime of entering or remaining in a place of worship with the intent to "menace or harass congregants or employees," or for "the purpose of political intimidation" or "the incitement of fear of violence in those attending." It also would have protected the 50 feet around a house of worship an hour before and after services.

The crime would have been a felony punishable by up to five years in state prison and a \$10,000 fine.

Rep. Peri Pourier, R-Rapid City, initially voted in favor of Schaeffbauer's bill in the House Judiciary Committee, but changed to a "no" vote Wednesday.

"What happened in Minnesota, I would bet anybody my whole paycheck that it would never happen in South Dakota," she told the House Wednesday. "Not only do we have the laws on the books, we also have different cultures."

At the protest last month in Minnesota, demonstrators disrupted a church service while protesting the operations of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, resulting in arrests and federal charges. A pastor of the church works for ICE, which has had thousands of agents in Minnesota conducting enforcement actions for weeks. While operating in the state, federal agents shot and killed two U.S. citizens in January.

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.

In setback for Trump, Congress in spending law rejects call to axe Education Department

BY: SHAUNEEN MIRANDA

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's attempts to dramatically slash funding for the U.S. Department of Education amid a broader push to dismantle the agency hit a major roadblock this week in the form of bipartisan approval of a spending law that gives the department a small raise.

The president signed a measure that funds the department at \$79 billion this fiscal year — roughly \$217 million more than the agency's fiscal year 2025 funding levels and a whopping \$12 billion above what Trump wanted.

Sen. Patty Murray of Washington state, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee, wrote in a social media post after the signing that the law was a direct rebuke of several Trump priorities, including eliminating the department.

"Our funding bills send a message to Trump," she wrote. "Congress will NOT abolish the Department of Education."

The measure also rejects efforts to dramatically reduce or fully slash funding for a host of programs administered by the department for low-income and disadvantaged students.

Trump and his administration have sought over the past year to take an axe to the 46-year-old agency as part of a quest to send education "back to the states." Much of the funding and oversight of schools already occurs at the state and local levels.

Those dismantling efforts included six interagency agreements with four other departments in November that would shift several Education responsibilities to those Cabinet-level agencies.

The department also saw mass layoffs initiated in March 2025 and a plan to dramatically downsize the agency ordered that same month — efforts that the U.S. Supreme Court temporarily greenlit in July.

The spending package also holds full-year funding for the departments of Defense, Labor, Health and Human Services, Housing and Urban Development, Transportation, State and Treasury. The measure includes a two-week stopgap measure for the Department of Homeland Security.

'Inefficiencies'

The measure does not offer ironclad language to prevent the outsourcing of the Education Department's responsibilities to other agencies — despite efforts from Senate Democrats to block such transfers.

However, in a joint explanatory statement alongside the measure, lawmakers expressed alarm over the "assignment of such programmatic responsibilities to agencies that do not have experience, expertise, or capacity to carry out these programs and activities and lack developed relationships and communications with relevant stakeholders, including States."

Lawmakers added they were "concerned that fragmenting responsibilities for education programs across multiple agencies will create inefficiencies, result in additional costs to the American taxpayer, and cause delays and administrative challenges in Federal funding reaching States, school districts, and schools."

Due to those concerns, the funding measure directs the Education Department and the agencies that are part of the transfers to provide biweekly briefings to lawmakers on the implementation of any inter-agency agreements.

The briefings are supposed to include information on "staffing transfers, implementation costs, metrics on the delivery of services" and the "availability of technical support for programs to grantees," among other matters.

The Education Department clarified when announcing the interagency agreements in November with the departments of Labor, Interior, Health and Human Services and State that it would "maintain all statutory responsibilities and will continue its oversight of these programs."

'Necessary' staffing levels

The funding agreement also mandates that the department "support staffing levels necessary to fulfill its statutory responsibilities including carrying out programs, projects, and activities funded in (the law) in a timely manner."

The department took heat last summer when it froze \$6.8 billion in funds for K-12 schools and informed states just a day before the money is typically sent out.

The funds were eventually unfrozen, following bipartisan pushback in Congress.

Pell Grant spared

The measure also maintains the total maximum annual award for the Pell Grant from the prior fiscal year at \$7,395, according to a summary from Democrats on the Senate Appropriations Committee. The government subsidy helps low-income students pay for college.

Trump's budget request called for cutting nearly \$1,700 from the maximum award for the 2026-2027 award year, a proposal that stoked alarm last year from leading House and Senate appropriators in both parties overseeing Education Department funding.

Funding levels maintained for TRIO, GEAR UP

The administration also called for defunding the Federal TRIO programs and the Gaining Early Awareness and Readiness for Undergraduate Programs, or GEAR UP, in fiscal 2026 — a move rejected in the measure.

The Federal TRIO Programs include federal outreach and student services programs to help support students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and GEAR UP aims to prepare low-income students for college.

Appropriators maintained funding for the programs at fiscal 2025 levels — with \$1.191 billion for TRIO and \$388 million for GEAR UP, per the Senate Democrats' summary.

The administration also sought to axe funding for the Child Care Access Means Parents in School Program, which, according to the Education Department, "supports the participation of low-income parents in postsecondary education through the provision of campus-based child care services."

Instead, the measure allocates \$75 million for the program.

The Education Department did not respond to a request for comment on the funding package.

The administration expressed its support for the entire, multi-bill package, in a Jan. 29 statement of administration policy that barely mentioned the education provisions.

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.

With electricity bills rising, some states consider new data center laws

Leaders in at least a dozen states have targeted data centers with separate, higher electric rates

BY: KEVIN HARDY

As Americans grow increasingly frustrated over their electricity bills, states are trying to keep the nation's growing number of data centers from causing higher energy costs for consumers.

For years, many states competed aggressively to land data centers, sprawling campuses full of the computer servers that store and transmit the data behind apps and websites. But many officials are now scrutinizing how those power-hungry projects might affect the electric bills of households, small businesses and other industries.

Oregon last year became one of the first states to enact a law requiring utilities to charge data centers

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different electric prices than other industries because of how they drive up the cost of energy production and transmission.

"We are now making data centers pay a higher rate commensurate with the amount of energy they're sucking out of the system," said Oregon state Rep. Tom Andersen, a Democrat.

Republican and Democratic leaders in at least a dozen states have targeted data centers with separate, higher electric rates to protect other customers. States also are requiring long-term commitments and financial guarantees through collateral before greenlighting infrastructure investments for new data center projects. But lawmakers acknowledge that numerous factors affect energy prices, so targeting data center-specific costs can be complicated.

An increasingly digital world and the rise of energy-intensive artificial intelligence has led to major expansion of data centers: Consultant McKinsey & Company expects companies to spend nearly \$7 trillion worldwide on data centers by 2030. But the industry is facing growing scrutiny, from neighbors who don't want to live near the massive server farms and from residents worried about how data centers will affect their own swelling utility bills.

Delaware legislation that would charge data centers higher rates advanced out of committee last week. On Tuesday, a Florida state Senate committee approved a bill that would create new rate structures for data centers.

In Oklahoma, a Republican state senator has proposed a moratorium on new data centers until late 2029, allowing the state to study how data centers affect utility rates, the environment and property values.

Separate legislation from state Rep. Brad Boles will seek to protect other ratepayers from the costs of data centers. Boles, the Republican chair of the state Energy and Natural Resources Oversight Committee, said his in-the-works measure would ensure data centers pay their fair share.

Boles told Stateline that his constituents are increasingly worried about data centers, with a dozen potential major ones proposed across the state.

"We're trying to ensure that those data centers pay for their own infrastructure and we don't shift that cost or burden to everyday Oklahomans," he said.

In Oregon, Andersen's legislation created a new rate structure for data centers with long-term contracts and required regulators to separate the costs of those facilities from other ratepayers.

But consumer advocates have already accused the state's largest utility of trying to skirt the new law by making residential customers pay part of the long-term cost of supplying large data centers in a pending rate case.

Andersen, a member of the state House Committee on Climate, Energy and Environment, said the new rate structure is unlikely to immediately lower consumer bills. Rather, it aims to curb future increases as data centers require more power generation and transmission.

"We're not going to change the rates that are being currently paid by the ratepayers and the users of the electricity," he said. "It's just going to stop future raises."

The data center boom

Rising utility bills continue to outpace inflation, sparking anger from consumers and more scrutiny from state regulators, governors and lawmakers.

The boom of data centers is frequently cited as a prime reason for rising electricity prices, as their operation requires more power generation, transmission and distribution upgrades. A Bloomberg News analysis in September found wholesale electricity costs as much as 267% more for a single month than it did five years ago in areas with significant data center activity.

Data center companies say they aren't the only reason prices are rising.

"It's inaccurate to draw a clear line between large load customers like data centers coming online and increases in prices. It's just not that simple," said Lucas Fykes, senior director of energy policy and regulatory counsel at the Data Center Coalition, a trade group representing data center owners and users, including Amazon, Meta and Visa.

He said many factors have contributed to higher electricity prices, including extreme weather events

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and the nation's aging electric grid.

Fykes said his organization opposes rate structures that treat data centers differently from other large electric users such as industrial sites. The organization is working with regulators as states increasingly implement practices to ensure residents and small businesses aren't on the hook for big energy investments if major projects including data centers don't come to fruition.

Fykes said the country is likely just in the "beginning innings" of a longer ramp-up in technology and power needs.

"We are also in a global race to build out data centers, to support AI, to support cloud infrastructure," he said. "It's important to make sure that we maintain those assets here in the United States."

That can pose competing interests for political leaders, including mayors, who have pushed hard to land investments from tech companies.

"We want to be leaders in AI, but we don't want the infrastructure needed to support it," said Rusty Paul, the mayor of Sandy Springs, Georgia, in the Atlanta metro area.

He was among several mayors addressing the issue of data centers at last month's winter meeting of the United States Conference of Mayors in Washington, D.C. On a data center panel, Paul acknowledged the effect of Georgia's tax incentives for data centers: "They're just popping up everywhere," he said.

But utilities and regulators are also making long overdue grid upgrades that aren't tied to data centers, he said.

"The cost of electricity is going up for everybody — and it's not all related to data centers," he said.

A bipartisan push

The Georgia Public Service Commission last year created new rules that officials said would protect ratepayers from data center costs. In addition to covering costs of power consumed at their facilities, data centers would have to fund the costs incurred by upstream generation, transmission and distribution, the regulator said.

But lawmakers aren't convinced those steps went far enough.

State Sen. Chuck Hufstetler, a Republican, is again pushing legislation that would solidify the regulator's rules into law. His bill would prohibit utilities from passing along the fuel, generation or transmission costs of data centers to other customers.

He told Stateline that the regulator's rules need to be codified into law so they can't be weakened later.

Hufstetler said rising utility bills are among the biggest issues facing his constituents. High prices played a key role in November's election, when Democrats flipped two seats on the state's Public Service Commission board — the first time Democrats won statewide constitutional office in nearly two decades.

"I saw people with MAGA hats going into the election polling places that were saying, 'I'm not voting for those guys that raised my rates,'" Hufstetler said, referring to the Republican incumbents who lost.

Hufstetler said the bill, which passed out of committee last year, has already gained major bipartisan support in the Senate, where it is sponsored by multiple Republicans and Democrats.

"This is very bipartisan," he said. "We have all heard from our people around the state of Georgia."

The Georgia Public Service Commission agrees in principle with the legislation, said agency spokesperson Tom Krause. But he said the regulator worries about losing flexibility if its rules are written into law.

"Not just this bill, but whenever the legislature codifies a rule that we put in place, we get a little nervous because it can tie our hands in special circumstances," he said.

A complex challenge

As part of implementing a law enacted last year, Maryland's utility regulator is weighing a new rate structure for data centers and other large load users.

Proposed regulations would require certain preapproval analysis for heavy power users, a separate rate tariff for data centers and collateral to ensure other ratepayers don't end up paying for major investments if projects do not come to fruition.

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Maryland's Office of People's Counsel, an independent agency representing residential utility users, said the proposed changes meet statutory requirements but could do more to protect consumers.

In a news release last month, Maryland People's Counsel David S. Lapp said residents are already facing higher costs from data centers from outside the state.

"While we push for better federal rules to address those costs, Maryland has the power—and customers a clear need—to make sure data centers within Maryland take on every cost that they impose on residential customers," Lapp said.

Democratic Gov. Wes Moore recently joined 12 other governors and the Trump administration in urging the regional grid operator, PJM Interconnection, to shield residents and businesses from the infrastructure costs from data centers.

Maryland state Del. Lorig Charkoudian, a Democrat, said the grid operator has for years failed residents in the 13 states plus the District of Columbia that it serves. By delaying renewable energy projects, she said, PJM has kept older, more expensive power plants online, driving up prices as data centers increase demand.

PJM's board last month rolled out a new data center plan that it said would improve demand forecasting, accelerate the addition of new generation projects and give states a larger role.

Charkoudian said states and utilities struggle to determine just how much power is needed. Data center users shop around for sites, which can cause wildly inaccurate forecasts of just how much power a utility will need.

"It actually has a very concrete financial impact on ratepayers," she told Stateline. "And so that's why one of the things that really could make a difference for ratepayers is if we actually had an accurate count of how much we're getting online."

While some of those challenges lie outside the realm of state control, Charkoudian said there are things the state can do, including the new rate structure for larger users. She's crafting a bill encouraging data centers to curtail their power usage during peak periods, such as hot days, when the electrical system is taxed by heavy usage of air conditioners, Maryland Matters reported.

Charkoudian said adding solar generation and storage are low-cost ways to respond quickly to demand. And states can avoid the need for more generation by doubling down on energy efficiency programs that lower demand and also consumer costs.

"The best time to fix this was five years ago," she said. "The next best time is right this minute, because it's only going to get worse."

Stateline reporter Robbie Sequeira contributed to this story. Stateline reporter Kevin Hardy can be reached at khardy@stateline.org.

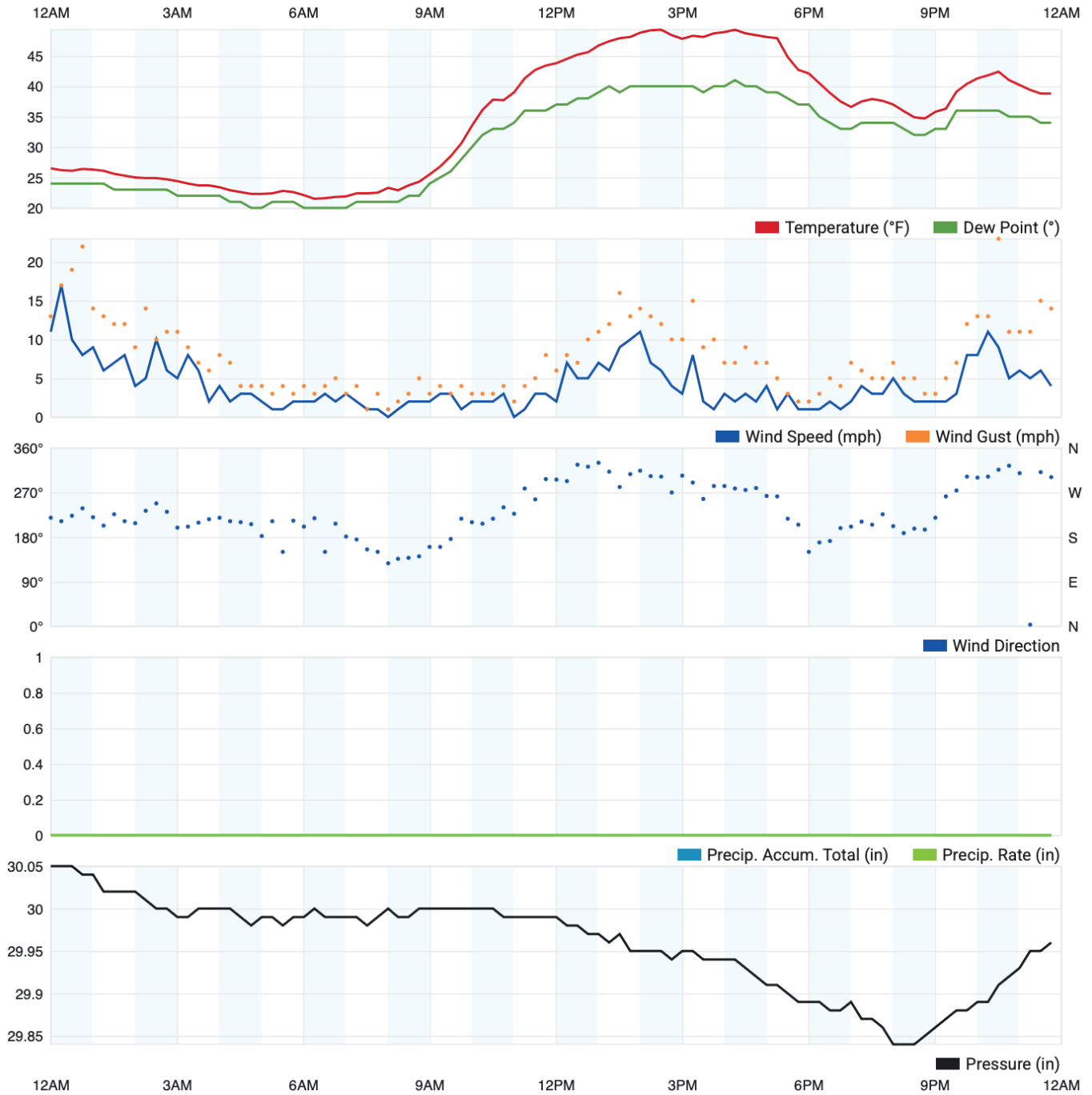
This story was originally produced by Stateline, which is part of States Newsroom, a nonprofit news network which includes South Dakota Searchlight, and is supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity. Kevin Hardy covers business, labor and rural issues for Stateline from the Midwest.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

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Friday

Friday Night

Saturday

Saturday Night

Sunday



High: 33 °F ↓

Slight Chance
Snow then
Mostly Cloudy



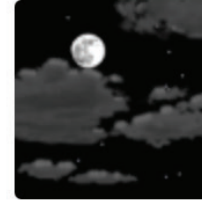
Low: 18 °F

Mostly Cloudy



High: 39 °F

Mostly Cloudy



Low: 24 °F

Partly Cloudy



High: 45 °F

Partly Sunny

Today



Highs: 25 to 42°F
Lows: 6 to 28°F

Temperatures will be steady/dropping through the day (especially east of the Missouri River).

Weekend Forecast

Saturday



Highs: 29 to 58°F

Sunday



Highs: 39 to 63°F

Warming temperatures through weekend.
The warmest temperatures will be over south central SD.

Mostly cloudy skies today will be accompanied by fairly steady temperatures west of the Missouri River or temperatures dropping through the day east of the Missouri River. Temperatures will start to warm through the weekend, getting up into 39 to 63 degrees by Sunday. The warmest temperatures will be over south central SD while far northeastern SD will see the coolest temperatures.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather

High Temp: 50 °F at 4:18 PM

Low Temp: 22 °F at 6:16 AM

Wind: 23 mph at 10:23 PM

Precip: : 0.00

Today's Info

Record High: 58 in 1987

Record Low: -33 in 1907

Average High: 26

Average Low: 3

Average Precip in Feb.: 0.12

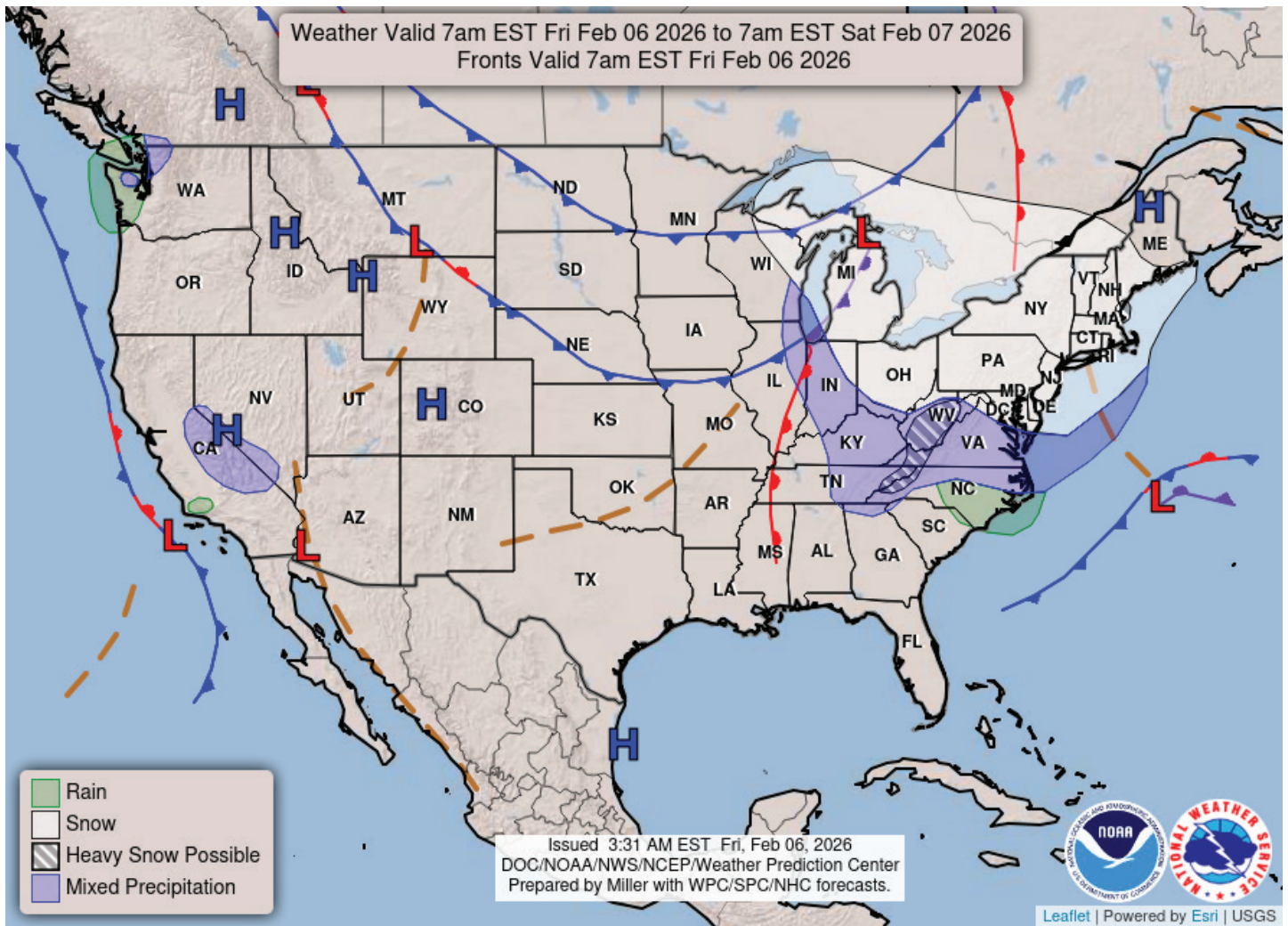
Precip to date in Feb.: 0.00

Average Precip to date: 0.67

Precip Year to Date: 0.00

Sunset Tonight: 5:45 pm

Sunrise Tomorrow: 7:45 am



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Today in Weather History

February 6, 1959: A man from Gary in Deuel County was in critical condition with frozen hands, feet, and arms after spending the night in his car in subzero weather.

February 6, 1987: Record warmth occurred across all of central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota and west-central Minnesota, with highs in the mid-50s to the lower 60s. Aberdeen, Kennebec, Mobridge, Pierre, Sisseton, Timber Lake, Watertown, and Wheaton all set record highs on this date in 1987. Pierre recorded the warmest temperature for the day with 62 degrees.

1807 — It was the famous "Cold Friday" in the Midwest and South. The temperature did not rise above zero in Ohio and Kentucky. (David Ludlum)

1958: The Munich air disaster occurred when British European Airways Flight 609 crashed on its third attempt to take off from a slush-covered runway at Munich-Riem Airport, West Germany. On the plane was the Manchester United football team, nicknamed the "Busby Babes," along with supporters and journalists. Twenty of the 44 on the aircraft died at the scene. The injured, some unconscious, were taken to the Rechts der Isar Hospital in Munich, where three more died, resulting in 23 fatalities with 21 survivors.

1978: A massive nor'easter buried the northeastern U.S. Storm totals' cities, including 18 inches in New York City, 16 inches at Philadelphia, and 14 inches in Baltimore. The Boston MA area received 25 to 30 inches in "The Great New England Blizzard." The mayor outlawed travel in the city for an entire week.

1987 — Brownsville, TX, was deluged with seven inches of rain in just two hours, and flooding in some parts of the city was worse than that caused by Hurricane Beulah in 1967. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1988 — Arctic cold invaded the south central and eastern U.S. Sixteen cities reported new record low temperatures for the date. Squalls in the Great Lakes Region produced a foot of snow at Arcade NY in three hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1989 — Forty-one cities in the western U.S. reported new record low temperatures for the date. Lows of -30 degrees at Ely NV and -33 degrees at Richfield UT were all-time records. Morning lows of 31 degrees at San Francisco CA and -15 degrees at Reno NV were records for February. Logan Canyon UT was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 54 degrees below zero, and Craig CO hit 51 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1990 — A second cold front brought more heavy snow to the high elevations of Oregon, with 12 inches reported at Sunset Summit. Ten inches of snow blanketed Crater Lake and Mount Bachelor. Heavy snow also blanketed northeastern Nevada and parts of Washington State. In Nevada, up to a foot of snow was reported between Spring Creek and Lamoille. Stevens Pass WA received 14 inches of snow in 24 hours. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

2010: On February 5-6, a severe nor'easter, commonly referred to as Snowmageddon, impacted the east coast from North Carolina to New York. Some snowfall amounts include; 32.9 inches at Washington Dulles International Airport; 28.5 inches at the Philadelphia International Airport; 21.1 inches at the Pittsburgh International Airport; 18.2 in Atlantic City; Trace in Central Park.

2020: The Esperanza Base, the northern tip of the Antarctic Peninsula, 63°23'S, reached 18.3°C (64.94°F), February 6th, 2020. The 18.3°C sets a new, all-time high temperature for the continent of Antarctica. The previous record was 17.5°C in 2015, also at Esperanza. Please Note: A verification process needs to be done before certifying as a new record.

Preparation Through Prayer

The early church discovered that God releases His power in response to prayer.

Acts 1:9-14: 9 And after He had said these things, He was lifted up while they were looking on, and a cloud received Him out of their sight.

10 And as they were gazing intently into the sky while He was going, behold, two men in white clothing stood beside them.

11 They also said, ``Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven.”

12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day’s journey away.

13 When they had entered the city, they went up to the upper room where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James.

14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

The book of Acts is an amazing record that shows not only the way God worked through the early church but also how central prayer was to its growth. Right after Jesus’ ascension, believers gathered and “devot[ed] themselves to prayer” (1:14).

Talking to God was their means of preparing for the work He planned for them. Jesus had told them the Father would give the Holy Spirit to those who ask (Luke 11:13). Then after the resurrection, He instructed them to stay in Jerusalem until they were “clothed with power from on high” (Luke 24:49).

To the degree we’re willing to admit our absolute helplessness to do God’s work, the Holy Spirit will empower us as we pray. When we are devoted to prayer, the Lord begins to work in our heart, preparing us for service. He provides the courage to face any challenge that might result, and the Spirit emboldens us to speak God’s Word (Acts 4:29, Acts 4:31).

God is looking for believers who understand the importance of prayer and realize the only way to fulfill His calling for the church is through His power. The church is not grown through programs but through the humble supplications of saints who gather together in utter dependence upon Him. That’s when God’s power is released and His will is accomplished.

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

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The Groton Independent

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WINNING NUMBERS

MEGA MILLIONS

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.03.26

5 11 22 25 69 21

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$346,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 38 Mins 1 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LOTTO AMERICA

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.04.26

2 14 30 43 45 10

All Star Bonus: 5x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$14,980,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 15 Hrs 53 Mins 1 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

LUCKY FOR LIFE

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.05.26

2 3 13 36 37 16

TOP PRIZE:
\$7,000/week

NEXT DRAW: 16 Hrs 8 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

DAKOTA CASH

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.04.26

10 11 16 22 26

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$253,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 8 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

DOUBLE PLAY

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.04.26

10 43 49 54 55 10

TOP PRIZE:
\$10,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 37 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

POWERBALL

WINNING NUMBERS:
02.04.26

27 29 30 37 58 15

Power Play: 2x

NEXT ESTIMATED JACKPOT:
\$102,000,000

NEXT DRAW: 1 Days 16 Hrs 37 Mins 0 Secs

[PREVIOUS RESULTS](#)

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News from the **AP** Associated Press

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Roncalli 52, Milbank 33
Avon 52, Bon Homme 25
Bennett County 65, Stanley County 7
Beresford 69, Akron-Westfield, Iowa 41
Brookings 55, Sioux Falls Lincoln 16
Cheyenne-Eagle Butte 94, Crow Creek Tribal School 34
Clark-Willow Lake 56, Sisseton 43
Custer 55, Hot Springs 24
DeSmet 68, Elkton-Lake Benton 33
Dell Rapids 69, Tri-Valley 59
Deubrook 60, Arlington 35
Elk Point-Jefferson 54, Dakota Valley 49
Freeman 53, Alcester-Hudson 34
Groton 45, Deuel 27
Harding County 74, Timber Lake 17
Hulett, Wyo. 43, Edgemont 40
Ipswich 51, Waverly-South Shore 17
Jones County 46, New Underwood 35
Lennox 68, Baltic 11
Leola-Frederick High School 39, Sunshine Bible Academy 13
Lyman 56, Highmore-Harrold 52
McCook Central-Montrose 47, Garretson 24
McIntosh High School 63, Philip 62
Mobridge-Pollock 55, Belle Fourche 18
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 45, Hanson 36
Northwestern 65, Aberdeen Christian 30
Parkston 57, WWSSC 47
Redfield 52, Webster 41, OT
Scotland/Menno 32, Platte-Geddes 21
Sioux Falls Washington 61, Watertown 35
St Thomas More 57, Winner 36
Tripp-Delmont-Armour 45, Wessington Springs 42
Vermillion 65, Gayville-Volin High School 43
Wagner 57, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 12
Wall 57, White River 56
Waubay/Summit 45, Warner 34
Yankton 62, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 41
Dakota Oyate Challenge=
Lower Brule 43, Flandreau Indian 30
Marty 68, Crazy Horse 27
Omaha Nation, Neb. 87, Tiospaye Topa 17
Tiospa Zina 59, Wakpala 38

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

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BOYS PREP BASKETBALL

Aberdeen Christian 71, Northwestern 60
Avon 83, Bon Homme 62
Centerville 47, Bridgewater-Emery 46
Centerville 47, Emery 46
Custer 40, Hot Springs 37
Dakota Valley 70, Elk Point-Jefferson 32
DeSmet 86, Elkton-Lake Benton 71
Deubrook 59, Arlington 37
Dupree 78, Bison 33
Flandreau 48, Sioux Valley 41
Freeman 65, Alcester-Hudson 41
Great Plains Lutheran 43, Wilmot 33
Groton 55, Deuel 24
Herried-Selby 62, Faith 48
Hulett, Wyo. 68, Edgemont 7
Ipswich 54, Waverly-South Shore 51
Iroquois-Lake Preston 61, Dell Rapids St Mary's 47
Lennox 58, Baltic 41
Mobridge-Pollock 43, Belle Fourche 27
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 62, Hanson 60
Oldham-Ramona-Rutland 60, Mitchell Christian 57
Parkston 33, Sanborn Central-Woonsocket 30
Platte-Geddes 66, Scotland/Menno 49
Sioux Falls Christian 72, Madison 29
Stanley County 69, Chamberlain 57
Timber Lake 56, Harding County 45
Todd County 81, Lakota Tech 37
Tri-Valley 51, Dell Rapids 50, OT
Vermillion 88, Gayville-Volin High School 33
Wagner 72, Andes Central/Dakota Christian 46
Wall 100, White River 57
Waubay/Summit 53, Warner 42
Webster 66, Redfield 42
Wessington Springs 71, Tripp-Delmont-Armour 34
Yankton 64, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 52
Dakota Oyate Challenge=
Crazy Horse 68, Wakpala 45
Lower Brule 65, Flandreau Indian 61
Marty 59, Tiospa Zina 46
Omaha Nation, Neb. 77, Tiospaye Topa 34

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

Civil War scholar and retired Gettysburg College professor Gabor Boritt dies at 86

GETTYSBURG, Pa. (AP) — History professor Gabor S. Boritt, a Hungarian immigrant to the United States who wrote widely about the Civil War and President Abraham Lincoln, has died. He was 86.

Boritt had been a professor at Gettysburg College in Pennsylvania for many years, founding the Civil War Institute and helping establish the \$50,000 Lincoln Prize for scholarship related to the Civil War.

He died Monday in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, according to his son.

Boritt was born in Budapest in 1940 and survived World War II, although relatives were killed in the Auschwitz Nazi death camp. He was sent to an orphanage after the war and in 1956 joined the Hungarian Revolution as a 16-year-old, his family recalled.

After the uprising was crushed, he made it to the United States, where he worked in a New York hat factory before furthering his education in South Dakota and earning a history doctorate from Boston University.

He taught at several universities before joining the faculty at Gettysburg in 1981. Boritt served on the board of the Gettysburg Foundation and was involved in the construction of a new visitor's center at Gettysburg National Military Park.

He was awarded a National Humanities Medal by President George W. Bush in 2008.

A screening of "Budapest to Gettysburg," a documentary about his life created by his son, Jake Boritt, will be held on Lincoln's Birthday, Feb. 12, in Gettysburg.

A deputy chief of Russian military intelligence was shot and wounded in Moscow

MOSCOW (AP) — A deputy chief of Russia's military intelligence was shot and wounded in Moscow on Friday in an attack that follows a series of assassinations of senior military officers that Russia has blamed on Ukraine.

Lt. Gen. Vladimir Alekseyev was shot several times by an unidentified assailant at an apartment building in Moscow's northwest and hospitalized, Investigative Committee spokesperson Svetlana Petrenko said in a statement.

Petrenko didn't say who could be behind the attack on the 64-year-old who has served as the first deputy head of Russia's military intelligence since 2011. He was decorated with the Hero of Russia medal for his role in Moscow's military campaign in Syria and in June 2023 was filmed speaking to mercenary chief Yevgeny Prigozhin when his Wagner Group seized the military headquarters in the southern city of Rostov-on-Don during his botched mutiny.

The shooting came a day after Russian, Ukrainian and U.S. negotiators wrapped up two days of talks in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, aimed at ending the nearly four-year conflict in Ukraine. The Russian delegation was led by Alekseyev's boss, military intelligence chief Adm. Igor Kostyukov.

President Vladimir Putin was informed about the attack, said Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, who added that law enforcement agencies need to step up protection of senior military officers during the conflict in Ukraine.

Since Moscow sent troops into Ukraine nearly four years ago, Russian authorities have blamed Kyiv for several assassinations of military officers and public figures in Russia. Ukraine has claimed responsibility for some of them. It has not yet commented on the shooting of Alekseyev.

In December, a car bomb killed Lt. Gen. Fasil Sarvarov, head of the Operational Training Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces' General Staff.

In April, another senior Russian military officer, Lt. Gen. Yaroslav Moskalik, a deputy head of the main operational department in the General Staff, was killed by an explosive device placed in his car parked near his apartment building just outside Moscow.

A Russian man who previously lived in Ukraine pleaded guilty to carrying out the attack and said that he had been paid by Ukraine's security services.

Days after Moskalik's killing, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said he received a report from the head of Ukraine's foreign intelligence agency on the "liquidation" of top Russian military figures, adding that "justice inevitably comes" although he didn't mention Moskalik's name.

In December 2024, Lt. Gen. Igor Kirillov, the chief of the military's nuclear, biological and chemical protection forces, was killed by a bomb hidden on an electric scooter outside his apartment building. Kirillov's assistant also died. Ukraine's security service claimed responsibility for the attack.

Oman mediates indirect US-Iran talks over Tehran's nuclear program

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

MUSCAT, Oman (AP) — Oman mediated indirect talks Friday between Iran and the United States over the Islamic Republic's nuclear program, seeking to deescalate tensions between the nations after Washington bombed Iranian nuclear sites and Tehran launched a bloody crackdown on nationwide protests.

Oman issued a public statement acknowledging the talks after Associated Press journalists watched Iranian and American officials separately visit a palace on the outskirts of Muscat to speak to the sultanate's foreign minister, Badr al-Busaidi.

It wasn't immediately clear if that was the end of the talks for the day. However, the palace stood empty after the convoys left.

The two countries returned Friday to Oman, a sultanate on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, months after rounds of meetings turned to ash following Israel's launch of a 12-day war against Iran back in June. The U.S. bombed Iranian nuclear sites during that war, likely destroying many of the centrifuges that spun uranium to near weapons-grade purity. Israel's attacks devastated Iran's air defenses and targeted its ballistic missile arsenal as well.

U.S. officials like Secretary of State Marco Rubio believe Iran's theocracy is now at its weakest point since its 1979 Islamic Revolution after nationwide protests last month represented the greatest challenge to 86-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's rule. Khamenei's forces responded with a crackdown that killed thousands and reportedly saw tens of thousands arrested — and spurred new military threats by U.S. President Donald Trump to target the country.

With the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln and other warships in the region, along with more fighter jets, the U.S. now likely has the military firepower to launch an attack if it wanted. But whether attacks could be enough to force Iran to change its ways — or potentially topple its government — remains far from a sure thing.

Meanwhile, Gulf Arab nations fear an attack could spark a regional war dragging them in as well. That threat is real — already, U.S. forces shot down an Iranian drone near the Lincoln and Iran attempted to stop a U.S.-flagged ship in the Strait of Hormuz.

Omani palace hosts talks

The palace, near Muscat's international airport, had been used by Oman in earlier talks between Iran and the U.S. in 2025. AP journalists saw Iranian officials at the palace and later returning to their hotel.

Only after the Iranian vehicles left did another convoy including an SUV flying the American flag enter the palace grounds, where it stayed for about an hour and a half.

After that, Oman's Foreign Ministry published a statement saying al-Busaidi met separately with Araghchi, then with U.S. Mideast special envoy Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner, President Donald Trump's son-in-law.

"The consultations focused on preparing the appropriate circumstances for resuming the diplomatic and technical negotiations by ensuring the importance of these negotiations, in light of the parties' determination to ensure their success in achieving sustainable security and stability," the Omani announcement said.

Neither the Americans nor the Iranians offered any readout of the meetings.

Few details on talks ahead of meeting

Details remained sparse even before the talks began. Officials at Oman's borders on Thursday showed particular concern over anyone carrying cameras into the sultanate before the negotiations.

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On the Iranian side, Araghchi wrote on X that "Iran enters diplomacy with open eyes and a steady memory of the past year."

"Commitments need to be honored," he wrote. "Equal standing, mutual respect and mutual interest are not rhetoric — they are a must and the pillars of a durable agreement."

A top adviser to Khamenei also appeared to offer the theocracy's support to the 63-year-old career diplomat.

Araghchi "is a skilled, strategic and trustworthy negotiator at the highest levels of decision-making and military intelligence," Ali Shamkhani wrote on X. "Soldiers of the nation in the armed forces & generals of diplomacy, acting under the order of the Leader, will safeguard the nation's interests."

On the U.S. side, the talks led by Witkoff, a 68-year-old billionaire New York real estate mogul and long-time friend to Trump. Traveling with Witkoff on his Mideast trip so far is Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law who in recent weeks has shared proposals for the Gaza Strip and took part in trilateral talks with Russia and Ukraine in Abu Dhabi earlier on the trip.

The two men had traveled from Abu Dhabi to Qatar on Thursday night for meetings there, the Qatari-funded satellite news network Al Jazeera reported. Qatar, which shares an offshore natural gas field in the Persian Gulf with Iran, also hosts a major U.S. military installation that Iran attacked in the June war.

Nuclear program on the table at the least

It remains unclear just what terms Iran will be willing to negotiate at the talks. Tehran has maintained that these talks only will be on its nuclear program. However, Al Jazeera reported that diplomats from Egypt, Turkey and Qatar offered Iran a proposal in which Tehran would halt enrichment for three years, send its highly enriched uranium out of the country and pledge "not initiate the use of ballistic missiles."

Russia had signaled it would take the uranium, but Shamkhani in an interview earlier this week had said ending the program or shipping out the uranium were nonstarters.

Rubio, America's top diplomat, said Wednesday that the talks needed to include all those issues.

"I'm not sure you can reach a deal with these guys, but we're going to try to find out," he said. ____

The Associated Press receives support for nuclear security coverage from the Carnegie Corporation of New York and Outrider Foundation. The AP is solely responsible for all content.

Man whose mother was found among 189 decaying bodies tells the story

By JESSE BEDAYN Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. (AP) — Derrick Johnson buried his mother's ashes beneath a golden dewdrop tree with purple blossoms at his home on Maui's Haleakalā Volcano, fulfilling her wish of a final resting place looking over her grandchildren.

Then the FBI called.

It was Feb. 4, 2024, and Johnson was teaching an eighth grade gym class.

"Are you the son of Ellen Lopes?" a woman asked, Johnson recalled in an interview with The Associated Press.

There had been an incident, and an FBI agent would fly out to explain, the caller said. Then she asked: "Did you use Return to Nature for a funeral home?"

"You should probably google them," she added.

In the clatter of the weight room, Johnson typed "Return to Nature" into his cellphone. Dozens of news reports appeared, details popping out in a blur.

Hundreds of bodies stacked on top of each other. Inches of body decomposition fluid. Swarms of bugs. Investigators traumatized. Governor declares state of emergency.

Johnson felt nauseated and his chest constricted, forcing the breath from his lungs. He pushed himself out of the building as another teacher heard his cries and came running.

Two FBI agents visited Johnson the following week, confirming his mother's body was among 189 that

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Return to Nature's owners, Jon and Carie Hallford, had stashed in a Colorado building between 2019 and Oct. 4, 2023, when the bodies were found.

It was one of the largest discoveries of decaying bodies at a funeral home in the U.S. Lawmakers overhauled the state's lax funeral home regulations. And besides handing over fake ashes to grieving families, the Hallfords also admitted to defrauding the federal government out of nearly \$900,000 in pandemic-era aid for small businesses.

Even as the Hallfords' bills went unpaid, authorities said they spent lavishly on Tiffany jewelry, luxury cars and laser-body sculpting, pocketing about \$130,000 clients paid for cremations.

They were arrested in Oklahoma in November 2023 and charged with abusing nearly 200 corpses.

Hundreds of families learned from officials that the ashes they ceremonially spread or kept close weren't actually their loved ones' remains. The bodies of their mothers, fathers, grandparents, children and babies had moldered in a room-temperature building in Colorado.

Jon Hallford will be sentenced Friday, facing between 30 to 50 years in prison, and Carie Hallford in April after a judge accepted their plea agreements in December. Attorneys for Jon and Carie Hallford did not respond to an AP request for comment.

Johnson, 45, who's suffered panic attacks since the FBI called, promised himself that he would speak at Hallford's sentencing and ask for the maximum penalty.

"When the judge passes out how long you're going to jail, and you walk away in cuffs," he said, "you're gonna hear me."

'She lied'

Jon and Carie Hallford were a husband-and-wife team who advertised "green burials" without embalming as well as cremation at their Return to Nature funeral home in Colorado Springs.

She would greet grieving families, guiding them through their loved ones' final journey. He was less seen.

Johnson called the funeral home in early February 2023, the week his mother died. Carie Hallford assured him she would take good care of his mother, Johnson said.

Days later, she handed Johnson a blue box containing a zip-tied plastic bag with gray powder, saying those were his mother's ashes.

"She lied to me over the phone. She lied to me through email. She lied to me in person," Johnson told the AP.

The following day, the box lay surrounded by flowers and photos of Ellen Marie Shriver-Lopes at a memorial service at a Holiday Inn in Colorado Springs.

Johnson sprinkled rose petals over it as a preacher said: "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust."

Caught on video

On Sept. 9, 2023, surveillance footage showed a man appearing to be Jon Hallford walk inside a building owned by Return to Nature in the town of Penrose, outside Colorado Springs, according to an arrest affidavit.

Camera footage inside showed a body lying on a gurney wearing a diaper and hospital socks. The man flipped it onto the floor.

Then he "appeared to wipe the remaining decomposition from the gurney onto other bodies in the room," before wheeling what appeared to be two more bodies into the building, the affidavit said.

In a text to his wife, Hallford said, "while I was making the transfer, I got people juice on me," according to court testimony.

The neighborhood mom

Johnson grew up with his mother in an affordable-housing complex in Colorado Springs, where she knew everyone.

Johnson's father wasn't around much; at 5 years old, Johnson remembers seeing him punch his mom, sending her careening into a table, then onto a guitar, breaking it.

It was Lopes who taught Johnson to shave and hollered from the bleachers at his football games.

Neighborhood kids called her "mom," some sleeping on the couch when they needed a place to stay and a warm meal. She would chat with Jehovah's Witnesses because she didn't want to be rude. With a

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life spent in social work, Lopes would say: "If you have the ability and you have the voice to help: Help."

Johnson spoke with his mother nearly everyday. After diabetes left her blind and bedridden at age 65, she'd ask Johnson to describe what her grandchildren looked like over the phone.

It was Super Bowl Sunday in 2023 when her heart stopped.

Johnson, who had flown in from Hawaii to be at her bedside, clutched her warm hand and held it until it was cold.

A gruesome discovery

Detective Sgt. Michael Jolliffe and Laura Allen, the county's deputy coroner, stood outside the Penrose building on Oct. 3, 2023, according to the 50-page arrest affidavit.

A sign on the door read "Return to Nature Funeral Home" and listed a phone number. When Jolliffe called it, it was disconnected. Cracked concrete and yellow stalks of grass encircled the building. At back was a shabby hearse with expired registration. A window air conditioner hummed.

Someone had told Jolliffe of a rank smell coming from the building the day before, the affidavit said.

One neighbor told an AP reporter they thought it came from a septic tank; another said her daughter's dog always headed to the building whenever it got off-leash.

It was reminiscent of rancid manure or rotting fish, and struck anyone downwind of the building.

Jolliffe and Allen spotted a dark stain under the door and on the building's stucco exterior. They thought it looked like fluids they had seen during investigations with decaying bodies, the affidavit said.

But the building's windows were covered and they couldn't see inside.

Allen contacted the Colorado Department of Regulatory Agencies, which oversees funeral homes, which got in touch with Jon Hallford. Hallford agreed to show an inspector inside the next afternoon.

Inspector Joseph Berry arrived, but Hallford didn't show.

Berry found a small opening in one of the window coverings, the affidavit said. Peering through, he saw white plastic bags that looked like body bags on the floor.

A judge issued a search warrant that week.

Bodies stacked high

Donning protective suits, gloves, boots and respirators, investigators entered the 2,500-square-foot (232-square-meter) building on Oct. 5, 2023, according to the affidavit.

Inside, they found a large bone grinder and next to it a bag of Quikrete that investigators suspected was used to mimic ashes. Bodies were stacked in nearly a dozen rooms, including the bathroom, sometimes so high they blocked doorways, the affidavit said.

There were 189.

Some had decayed for years, others several months, according to the affidavit. Many were in body bags, some wrapped in sheets and duct tape. Others were half-exposed, on gurneys or in plastic totes, or lay with no covering, it said.

Investigators believed the Hallfords were experimenting with water cremation, which can dissolve a body in several hours, the document said. There were swarms of bugs and maggots.

Body bags were filled with fluid, according to the affidavit. Some had ripped. Five-gallon buckets had been placed to catch the leaks. Removal teams "trudged through layers of human decomposition on the floor," it said.

Investigators identified bodies using fingerprints, hospital bracelets and medical implants, the affidavit said. It said one body was supposed to be buried in Pikes Peak National Cemetery.

Investigators exhumed the wooden casket at the burial site of the U.S. Army veteran, who served in Vietnam and the Persian Gulf. Inside was a woman's deteriorated body, wrapped in duct tape and plastic sheets.

The veteran's body was discovered in the Penrose building, covered in maggots.

'Ashes to ashes'

Following the call from the FBI, Johnson promised himself he would speak at the Hallfords' sentencing. But he struggled to talk about what had happened even with close friends, let alone in front of a judge

and the Hallfords.

For months, Johnson obsessed over the case, reading dozens of news reports, often glued to his phone until one of his children would interrupt him to play.

When he shut his eyes, he said he imagined trudging through the building with "maggots, flies, centipedes. There's rats, they're feasting." He asked a preacher if his mother's soul had been trapped there. She reassured him it hadn't. When an episode of the zombie show "The Walking Dead" came on, he broke down.

Johnson started seeing a therapist and was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. He joined Zoom meetings with other victims' relatives as the number grew from dozens to hundreds.

After Lopes' body was identified, Johnson flew in March 2024 to Colorado, where his mother's remains lay in a brown box in a crematorium.

"I don't think you blame me, but I still want to tell you I'm sorry," he recalled saying, placing his hand on the box.

Then Lopes' body was loaded into the cremator and Johnson pushed the button.

Justice

Johnson has slowly improved with therapy, engaging more with his students and children. He practiced speaking at the Hallfords' sentencings while in therapy. Closing his eyes, he envisioned standing in front of the judge — and the Hallfords.

"Justice is, it's the part that is missing from this whole equation," he said. "Maybe somehow this justice frees me."

"And then there's part of me that's scared it won't, because it probably won't."

Bitcoin falls 8% and Asian shares mostly slip after Wall Street is hit by tech stock losses

By CHAN HO-HIM AP Business Writer

HONG KONG (AP) — U.S. futures and Asian shares traded mostly lower on Friday, tracking Wall Street's losses as technology stocks again dragged on markets.

Bitcoin sank to roughly half its record price, giving back all it gained since U.S. President Donald Trump won the White House for his second term.

Tokyo's Nikkei 225 was up 0.8% to 54,253.68, recovering from losses earlier this week, with technology-related stocks leading gains. SoftBank Group rose 2.2% and chipmaker Tokyo Electron rose 2.6%. Japan will also be holding its general election on Sunday, in which Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi expects to win a stronger public mandate for her policies.

Shares of Toyota Motor were up 2%. The carmaker said Friday its CEO Koji Sato will be stepping down in April, and is to be replaced by Chief Financial Officer Kenta Kon.

South Korea's Kospi lost 1.4% to 5,089.14, weighed down by tech shares. Samsung Electronics, the country's biggest listed company, fell 0.4%. Chipmaker SK Hynix was also down 0.4%.

Hong Kong's Hang Seng fell 1.4% to 26,519.60. The Shanghai Composite index was down 0.3% to 4,065.58.

In Australia, the S&P/ASX 200 shed 2% to 8,708.80.

Taiwan's Taiex was mostly flat. India's Sensex traded 0.1% lower.

Against the backdrop of the technology sell-off this week, bitcoin, the world's largest cryptocurrency, saw dimming enthusiasm and was trading about 8% lower at just under \$65,000 early Friday, after it briefly sank over 12% to below \$64,000 on Thursday. That's down from a record of above \$124,000 in October.

The future for the S&P 500 was 0.2% lower, while that for the Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 0.1%.

On Thursday, the S&P 500 fell 1.2% to 6,798.40, its sixth loss in the seven days. The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell 1.2% to 48,908.72. The Nasdaq composite dropped 1.6% to 22,540.59.

Technology stocks were among the worst hit as concerns persist over whether massive AI investments by many of the Big Tech firms will pay off.

Chipmaker Qualcomm sank 8.5% despite better-than-expected quarterly revenues. Alphabet lost 0.5%

as investors were focused on its huge spendings on AI.

Amazon fell 11% in after hours trading Thursday after it announced plans to boost capital spending by more than 50% to \$200 billion in AI and other areas.

American artificial intelligence startup Anthropic's new AI tools also fueled the sell-off of software stocks on Wall Street this week, as its sophistication means many traditional software development services and products could be disrupted or replaced.

Gold and silver prices have been volatile this week following a monthlong rally as investors moved into safe haven assets prompted by factors including elevated geopolitical tensions. Gold prices fell 0.6% on Friday to \$4,858.60 per ounce, after nearing \$5,600 last week.

Silver prices dropped 5.5% to \$72.52 per ounce after rising earlier this week. It lost more than 31% last Friday.

In other dealings early Friday, U.S. benchmark crude oil gained 35 cents to \$63.64 a barrel. Brent crude, the international standard, rose 36 cents to \$67.91 a barrel.

The U.S. dollar fell to 156.74 Japanese yen from 157.03 yen. The euro was trading at \$1.1789, up from \$1.1777.

Hong Kong ex-media tycoon Jimmy Lai will be sentenced Monday after national security conviction

By KANIS LEUNG Associated Press

HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong's pro-democracy former media tycoon Jimmy Lai will be sentenced Monday following his conviction in December under a Beijing-imposed national security law.

Lai, the 78-year-old founder of the now-defunct Apple Daily newspaper, could face up to life in prison in the case that has stirred criticism from some foreign governments.

The judiciary said Friday on its website that it's calling for the sentencing session at 10 a.m. Monday.

Lai was an outspoken critic of China's ruling Communist Party and was arrested in 2020 under the national security law that Beijing deemed necessary for the city's stability following anti-government protests the previous year.

His trial was widely seen as an indicator of the decline of press freedom in the former British colony, which returned to Chinese rule in 1997. But the city's government insists the case has nothing to do with media freedom.

The sentencing could create tensions between Beijing and foreign governments. Lai's conviction already drew criticism from the U.S. and Britain. After the December verdict, U.S. President Donald Trump, who had raised Lai's case with China, said he felt "so badly." U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer's administration has called for the release of Lai, who is a British citizen.

Hong Kong's Chief Justice Andrew Cheung said in January that calls for prematurely releasing a defendant based on political causes or identity circumvent legal procedures to ensure accountability and "strike at the very heart of the rule of law itself."

Lai was found guilty of conspiring with others to collude with foreign forces and conspiracy to publish seditious articles. He was accused of conspiring with senior executives of Apple Daily and others to ask foreign forces to impose sanctions or blockades or engage in other hostile activities against Hong Kong or China.

Lai pleaded not guilty to all charges, while the six former Apple Daily journalists and two activists who are co-defendants entered pleas that could result in reduced sentences. They all are expected to return to court Monday to hear their fate.

Lai previously was convicted of several lesser offenses related to fraud allegations and his actions in 2019. He is serving a nearly six-year prison term for the fraud case.

FACT FOCUS: Trump says tariffs have created an economic miracle.

The facts tell a different story

By PAUL WISEMAN and CHRISTOPHER RUGABER AP Economics Writers

WASHINGTON (AP) — Looking back on the first year of his second term, President Donald Trump boasts that he has resurrected the American economy by imposing big import taxes on foreign products. He made his case in a recent opinion piece in *The Wall Street Journal*, chiding the paper and critics, including mainstream economists, who predicted that tariffs would backfire, raising prices and threatening growth. "Instead," he wrote, "they have created an American economic miracle."

But the proof he offers is often off-base or wrong altogether.

Here's a look at the facts around Trump's assessment of tariffs.

CLAIM: "Just over one year ago, we were a 'DEAD' country. Now, we are the 'HOTTEST' country anywhere in the world!"

THE FACTS: This is a standard statement from Trump. But the U.S. economy was hardly "dead" when Trump returned to office last year. And in Trump's second term, it's performed strongly — after getting off to a bumpy start.

In 2024, the last year of the Biden presidency, American gross domestic product grew 2.8%, adjusted for inflation, faster than any wealthy country in the world except Spain. It also expanded at a healthy rate from 2021 through 2023.

The numbers for all of 2025 aren't out yet. But during the first three quarters of the year, Trump's tariffs — or the threat of them — delivered mixed results for the American economy.

From January to March, U.S. GDP actually shrank for the first time in three years. The main culprit was easy to identify: a surge in imports, which are subtracted from GDP, as American companies rushed to buy foreign products before Trump could impose tariffs on them.

But growth rebounded in the second half of the year. From April through June, the economy expanded at a healthy 3.8% pace. And from July through September, it grew even faster — 4.4%. A big part of the surge was a drop in imports, likely reflecting Trump's tariffs as well as the fact that importers had already stocked up at the start of the year. Strong consumer spending also drove economic growth.

Trump also likes to point to solid gains in the U.S. stock market. He noted that stocks hit new highs 52 times in 2025. It's true that the American stock market did well last year. But it underperformed many foreign stock markets. The benchmark S&P 500 index climbed 17% — a nice gain but short of a 71% surge in South Korea, 29% in Hong Kong, 26% in Japan, 22% in Germany and 21% in the United Kingdom.

CLAIM: "Annual core inflation for the past three months has dropped to just 1.4% — far lower than almost anyone, other than me, had predicted."

THE FACTS: The president is using cherry-picked data to vastly exaggerate where inflation stands.

His figure for annual inflation in the past three months -- which excludes the volatile food and energy prices -- is low, but reflects data distorted by the government shutdown in October and November, which disrupted the government's data collection and forced the agency that compiles the figures to plug in rough estimates in some categories that artificially lowered overall inflation.

Annual core inflation for the final six months of 2025 is higher at 2.6%. That is down from January 2025's level but about where it was in October 2024. Overall, inflation has leveled off this year, and was 3% in September before the government shutdown, the same as it had been in January 2025.

It's true that inflation hasn't been as high as many economists worried it would be when Trump started rolling out tariffs last spring, but that is partly because many of the "Liberation Day" tariffs were withdrawn, reduced or riddled with exemptions. When Democrats won some high-profile elections last year by highlighting "affordability" concerns, the administration rolled back existing or planned tariffs on coffee, beef and kitchen cabinets, for example, a backhanded acknowledgment that the duties were raising prices.

The impact of tariffs can be more clearly seen in core goods prices, which also exclude food and energy. Before the pandemic, core goods costs typically barely rose — or even fell — each year, but last December they were 1.4% higher than a year earlier. That was the largest increase, outside the pandemic, since 2011.

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Alberto Cavallo, an economist at Harvard and the author of a study on the impact of tariffs cited by Trump in his op-ed, has found that Trump's tariffs have boosted overall inflation by roughly three-quarters of a percentage point. _____

CLAIM: "The data shows that the burden, or 'incidence,' of the tariffs has fallen overwhelmingly on foreign producers and middlemen, including large corporations that are not from the U.S. According to a recent study by the Harvard Business School, these groups are paying at least 80% of tariff costs."

THE FACTS: The study Trump cited appears to conclude the opposite of what Trump claimed. Authored by Cavallo and two colleagues, it finds that "U.S. consumers were bearing roughly 43% of the tariff-induced border cost after seven months, with the remainder absorbed mostly by U.S. firms." Cavallo said by email that import prices hadn't fallen much, "which suggests foreign exporters did not reduce their pre-tariff prices enough to shoulder a large share of the burden." _____ TRUMP'S CLAIM: "We have slashed our monthly trade deficit by an astonishing 77%."

THE FACTS: This claim involves more cherry-picking, reflecting the percentage drop from a very high trade deficit in January 2025, when the president took office, to a super-low deficit in October.

The story is more complicated than the president makes it. The trade deficit — the gap between what the U.S. sells other countries and what it buys from them — has actually risen since he returned to the White House.

From January through November in 2025, the U.S. accumulated a trade deficit of nearly \$840 billion, up 4% from the same period of 2024. In the first three months of 2025, importers rushed to buy foreign products — before Trump could slap tariffs on them. After that, monthly trade deficits came in consistently lower than they were in 2024. But the January-March import surge was so big that the 2025 year-to-date trade deficit still exceeds 2024's.

CLAIM: "I have successfully wielded the tariff tool to secure colossal Investments in America, like no other country has ever seen before. ... In less than one year, we have secured commitments for more than \$18 trillion, a number that is unfathomable to many."

THE FACTS: Trump did, in fact, use the tariff threat to pry investment commitments from America's major trading partners. The European Union, for instance, pledged \$600 billion over four years.

But Trump hasn't said how he came up with \$18 trillion. The White House has published a figure of \$9.6 trillion, which includes private and public investment commitments from other countries.

Researchers at the Peterson Institute for International Economics last month calculated the investment pledges at \$5 trillion from the EU, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Switzerland, Liechtenstein and the Persian Gulf states of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

And they raised doubts about whether the money will actually materialize, partly because the agreements are vague and sometimes because the countries would strain to afford the commitments.

But all the numbers are huge nonetheless. Total private investment in the United States was most recently running at a \$5.4 trillion annual pace. In 2024, the last year for which figures are available, total foreign direct investment in the United States amounted to \$151 billion. Direct investment includes money sunk into such things as factories and offices but not financial investments like stocks and bonds.

Savannah Guthrie's demand for mom's 'proof of life' is complicated in this era of AI and deepfakes
By BARBARA ORTUTAY and ED WHITE Associated Press

When Savannah Guthrie made a heart-wrenching plea to the kidnapper of her 84-year-old mother to send "proof of life," she addressed the possibility of people creating deepfakes.

"We live in a world where voices and images are easily manipulated," she said.

Before artificial intelligence tools proliferated — making it possible to realistically impersonate someone, in photos, sound and video — "proof of life" could simply mean sending a grainy image of a person who's been abducted.

That's no longer true.

"With AI these days you can make videos that appear to be very real. So we can't just take a video and

trust that that's proof of life because of advancements in AI," Heith Janke, the FBI chief in Phoenix, said at a news conference Thursday.

Hoaxes — whether high or low-tech — have long challenged law enforcement, especially when it comes to high-profile cases such as Nancy Guthrie's disappearance last weekend from her home in the Tucson area.

As technology has advanced, criminals have grown savvy and used it to their benefit, confusing police and the public and masking their identities. The FBI in December warned that people posing as kidnapers can provide what appears to be a real photo or video of a loved one, along with demands for money.

Police have not said that they have received any deepfake images of Guthrie. At least three news organizations have reported receiving purported ransom notes that they have given to investigators, who said they are taking them seriously.

Investigators said they believe she's "still out there," but they have not identified any suspects.

Separately, a California man was charged Thursday with sending text messages to the Guthrie family seeking bitcoin after following the case on television. There's no indication that he's suspected of having a role in the disappearance, according to a court filing.

She appeared in an emotional video on Instagram Wednesday, sitting in between her sister and brother. Her voice cracked as she spoke directly to the kidnapper, saying the family is "ready to talk" and "ready to listen" but also wanted to know that their mother is alive.

Images of Nancy Guthrie, publicly shared by family, could be used to create deepfakes, said former FBI agent Katherine Schweit.

She said ransom demands over history have evolved from phone calls and handwritten notes to email, texts and other digital tools. A century ago, ransom notes were analog. For example, when the toddler son of famous aviator Charles Lindbergh was kidnapped, a piece of paper demanding \$50,000 was found on a windowsill.

"Investigative techniques accumulate over time," Schweit said. "There's never less to do as years go by; there's more to do. Digital and forensic work is a perfect example. It just adds to the other shoe-leather work we would have done in years past. ... Nothing can be dismissed. Everything has to be run to ground."

Schweit said directly addressing a kidnapper, like Savannah Guthrie did in her video, is a tactical move.

"The goal is to have the family or law enforcement speak directly to the victim and the perpetrator, and ask the perpetrator: What do you need? How can we solve this? Let's move this forward," she said.

Janke suggested to reporters that the FBI may have had some influence on Guthrie's decision to release a video message.

"We have an expertise when it comes to kidnappings, and when families want advice, consultation, expertise, we will provide that," he said. "But the ultimate decisions — on what they say and how they put that out — rests with the family itself."

In Minnesota, sending a child to school is an act of faith for immigrant families

By BIANCA VÁZQUEZ TONESS AP Education Writer

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — In some ways, 10-year-old Giancarlo is one of the lucky ones. He still goes to school.

Each morning, he and his family bundle up and leave their Minneapolis apartment to wait for his bus. His little brother hefts on his backpack, even though he stopped going to day care weeks ago because his mom is too afraid to take him.

As they wait behind a wrought-iron fence, Giancarlo's mother pulls the boys into the shadow of a tree to pray. It's the only time she stops scanning the street for immigration agents.

"God, please protect my son when he's not at home," she says in Spanish. She spoke with The Associated Press on condition of partial anonymity for the family, because she fears being targeted by immigration authorities.

For many immigrant families in Minnesota, sending a child to school requires faith that federal immigration officers deployed around the state won't detain them. Thousands of children are staying home, often

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for lack of door-to-door transportation — or simply trust.

The fear has turned into reality. Many parents and some children have been detained, including 5-year-old Liam Conejo Ramos, who with his father, originally from Ecuador, was taken into custody in the Minneapolis suburb of Columbia Heights as he was arriving home from school. They were sent to a detention facility in Texas but returned after a judge ordered their release.

Schools, parents and community groups have mobilized to help students get to class so they can learn, socialize and have steady access to meals. And for those who are still sending their children, the trip to and from school is one of the only risks they're willing to take.

"I don't feel safe with him going to school," Giancarlo's mother said, shaking her head. "But every day he wakes up and wants to go. He wants to be with his friends."

School remains a haven in a time of tumult

Giancarlo's Minneapolis elementary school is the best thing going for him these days. There's soccer to play at recess. The recorder to learn. Giancarlo has set his eyes on learning the flute next year when fifth graders choose an instrument. He has "demasiado" — "too many" — best friends to name.

But his mother and brother's home confinement weighs on him. He saves half the food he gets at school breakfast and lunch to share with them, and he's lost four pounds this year. He takes extra care to bring pizza or hamburgers, treats the family used to eat in restaurants when his mom, an asylum-seeker from Latin America, was still working and they felt safe leaving the house. Giancarlo has also applied for asylum and his brother, Yair, has U.S. citizenship.

Sometimes only seven of Giancarlo's classmates show up when there should be close to 30. "The teachers cry," he said. "It's sad."

With as many as 3,000 federal officers roaming the state this year, some immigrant parents have made a bet that their children are safer riding or walking with white Minnesotans who were strangers just weeks ago — rather than in their own cars or while holding their hands.

One mother, an immigrant from Mexico, has given up her housecleaning job, and her husband stopped going to his construction job to minimize their chances of being detained. Her 10-year-old, U.S.-born daughter is the only one leaving the house, getting a ride with another student's parents to her private Christian school in Minneapolis.

"It raises my blood pressure," the mother said. She spoke on condition of anonymity out of fear of being targeted by immigration authorities.

Absenteeism has soared across schools in the Twin Cities area

Under longstanding guidance that was thrown out by the Trump administration, schools and other "sensitive places" such as hospitals and churches previously were considered off-limits for Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents and other immigration officials. Children, no matter their immigration status, have a constitutional right to attend public school.

This winter, school absenteeism and the demand for online learning have surged as immigration officers showed up in school parking lots.

In St. Paul, over 9,000 students were absent on Jan. 14, more than a quarter of the 33,000-student district, according to data obtained by the AP. In Fridley, a Minneapolis suburb, school attendance has dropped by nearly a third, according to a lawsuit the district filed this week trying to block immigration enforcement operations near schools.

Kids sent letters to St. Paul Superintendent Stacie Stanley begging her to offer online learning. Her voice shook as she read a letter from an elementary school student: "I don't feel safe coming to school because of ICE."

When the district introduced a temporary virtual learning option, over 3,500 students enrolled in the first 90 minutes. That number has since risen to more than 7,500 students.

An escort from school — and assurance for a small girl

After school on Wednesday, around 20 teachers and a retired principal packed into the front office at Valley View Elementary School — where Liam Conejo Ramos attends prekindergarten — for a briefing

before walking home children who live nearby. School officials say several other students and over two dozen parents have been detained.

"We live in a place where ICE is everywhere," said Rene Argueta, the school's family liaison. Argueta, himself an immigrant from El Salvador, organized the teachers walking and driving students to and from their homes.

The day before, the group had run into federal officers in the neighborhood at dismissal time. Argueta felt it necessary to calm some of the teachers upset by the encounter.

"Your only goal is to bring the students home, no matter what you see," he told the group. "We don't approach ICE. We don't take out our phones."

After distributing walkie-talkies, Argueta and two other teachers met a group of 12 kids waiting for them in the hallway. Argueta took the hand of the youngest child, a boy in prekindergarten, and led the group outside.

Toward the back of the line, second grade teacher Jenna Scott chatted with a former student, now a third grader. She tried to keep the conversation light.

"I'm so excited to see your house," Scott told her.

"Have you signed up for parent-teacher conference?"

"No, miss. ICE," the girl said.

"I know. Tell your parents you can do it online this time."

The third grader then ran to her home. Afterward, Scott said the 10-minute walk is a delicate dance. "You don't want to scare the kids, but you also want them to walk quickly."

The day before, Argueta said, they were walking the students home when they heard cars honking to warn that immigration agents were nearby. One little girl who was walking ahead started to panic and ran back toward Argueta.

"ICE viene," or "ICE is coming," she yelled.

He took her hand and kept walking. She asked if he was afraid.

No, he said.

She asked if he had papers, if he was in the country legally. Argueta has a green card and permission to work, but he lied. He told her he didn't, so she wouldn't feel alone.

Her hand relaxed in his. She smiled again.

He held her hand until they got to her doorstep and she went inside with her mother.

Savannah Guthrie's family renews plea to mother's kidnapper, while sheriff says they have no suspect

By SEJAL GOVINDARAO, JACQUES BILLEAUD and JOHN SEEWER Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. (AP) — "Today" show host Savannah Guthrie's brother on Thursday renewed the family's plea for their mother's kidnapper to contact them, hours after an Arizona sheriff said investigators don't have proof Nancy Guthrie is alive but believe "she's still out there."

"Whoever is out there holding our mother, we want to hear from you. We haven't heard anything directly," Camron Guthrie said in a video posted on social media.

"We need you to reach out and we need a way to communicate with you so we can move forward," but first the family needs to know the kidnapper has their mother, he said, echoing a statement his famous sister read the day before.

Five days into the desperate search for 84-year-old Nancy Guthrie, authorities have not identified any suspects or persons of interest, Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos said.

Authorities think she was taken against her will from her home in Tucson over the weekend. DNA tests showed blood found on Guthrie's front porch was a match to her, the sheriff said.

"Right now, we believe Nancy is still out there. We want her home," Nanos said at a news conference earlier Thursday. He acknowledged, however, that authorities have no evidence she's OK.

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Demands for ransom

Investigators said they are taking seriously notes seeking ransom that were sent to some media outlets. It's unclear if all of the notes were identical. Heith Janke, the FBI chief in Phoenix, said details included a demand for money with a Thursday evening deadline and a second deadline for Monday if the first one wasn't met. At least one note mentioned a floodlight at Guthrie's home and an Apple watch, Janke said. "To anyone who may be involved, do the right thing. This is an 84-year-old grandma," Janke said.

At least three media organizations reported receiving purported ransom notes, which they handed over to investigators. Authorities made an arrest after one ransom note turned out to be fake, the sheriff said.

A note e-mailed Monday to the KOLD-TV newsroom in Tucson included information that only the abductor would know, anchor Mary Coleman told CNN.

"When we saw some of those details, it was clear after a couple of sentences that this might not be a hoax," she said.

The sheriff said it's possible Nancy Guthrie was targeted, but if she was, investigators don't know if that's because her daughter is one of television's most visible anchors.

Authorities say any decision on whether to fulfill ransom demands ultimately is up to the family.

A day earlier, Savannah Guthrie and her siblings released a message to her mother's kidnapper, saying they are ready to talk but want proof their mom is still alive. There's been no response to their pleas so far.

New timeline of Guthrie's disappearance

Investigators gave a more detailed timeline from the hours after Nancy Guthrie was last seen Saturday night. She was eating dinner and playing games with family members before one of them dropped her off at her home in a upscale neighborhood that sits on hilly, desert terrain, the sheriff said.

About four hours later, just before 2 a.m. Sunday, the home's doorbell camera was disconnected, Nanos said. But Guthrie did not have an active subscription, so the doorbell company was unable to recover any footage.

Software data recorded movement at the home minutes later, the sheriff said, acknowledging that the motion could have come from an animal.

Then at 2:28 a.m. the app on Guthrie's pacemaker was disconnected from her phone.

Search enters a fifth day

Guthrie was reported missing shortly before noon Sunday after she didn't show up at a church.

While she is able to drive and her mind is sharp, the sheriff said she has difficulty walking even short distances. She also requires daily medicine that's vital to her health, he has said.

A sheriff's dispatcher said during the search Sunday that Guthrie has high blood pressure, a pacemaker and heart issues, according to audio from broadcastify.com.

Investigators searched in and around Guthrie's home again for several hours Wednesday.

Authorities are bringing more resources and people into the investigation, and the FBI announced Thursday it was offering up to \$50,000 for information. A day earlier, President Donald Trump posted on social media that he was directing federal authorities to help where they can.

The kidnapping has attracted the attention of the American public, much like other famous abductions in U.S. history.

Savannah Guthrie's emotional plea

Savannah Guthrie has hosted "Today" — NBC's flagship morning show — for more than a decade and had been set to co-anchor the network's coverage of Friday's opening ceremony for the Winter Olympics. For now, she's staying close to her mother's home.

She joined her two siblings in an emotional plea on social media Wednesday to say they're ready to talk to whoever sent the ransom notes.

"We need to know without a doubt that she is alive and that you have her. We want to hear from you and we are ready to listen. Please reach out to us," she said while fighting off tears.

With her voice cracking, she addressed her mother directly, saying the family was praying for her and that people were looking for her. She was flanked by Camron and their sister, Annie.

"Mamma, If you're listening, we need you to come home. We miss you," Annie Guthrie said.

Analilia Mejia, Tom Malinowski race in New Jersey's special Democratic primary too early to call

By MIKE CATALINI Associated Press

TRENTON, N.J. (AP) — The race in New Jersey between a onetime political director for Sen. Bernie Sanders and a former congressman was too early to call Thursday, in a special House Democratic primary for a seat that was vacated after Mikie Sherill was elected governor.

Former U.S. Rep. Tom Malinowski started election night with a significant lead over Analilia Mejia, based largely on early results from mail-in ballots. The margin narrowed as results from votes cast that day were tallied.

With more than 61,000 votes counted, Mejia led Malinowski by 486, or less than 1 percentage point.

All three counties in the district report some mail-in ballots yet to be processed. Also, mail-in ballots postmarked by election day can arrive as late as Wednesday and still be counted.

Malinowski did better than Mejia among the mail-in ballots already counted in all three counties, leaving the outcome of the race uncertain.

The Democratic winner will face Randolph Mayor Joe Hathaway, who was unopposed in the Republican primary, on April 16.

Malinowski served two terms in the House before losing a bid for reelection in a different district in 2022. He had the endorsement of New Jersey Democratic Sen. Andy Kim, who has built support among progressive groups.

Mejia, a former head of the Working Families Alliance in the state and political director for Sanders during his 2020 presidential run, had the Vermont independent senator's endorsement as well as that of U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio Cortez of New York. She also worked in President Joe Biden's Labor Department as deputy director of the women's bureau.

Both Malinowski and Mejia were well ahead of the next-closest candidates: Brendan Gill, an elected commissioner in Essex County who has close ties to former Gov. Phil Murphy; and Tahesha Way, who served as lieutenant governor and secretary of state for two terms under Murphy until last month.

The other candidates were John Bartlett, Zach Beecher, J-L Cauvin, Marc Chaaban, Cammie Croft, Dean Dafis, Jeff Grayzel, Justin Strickland and Anna Lee Williams.

The district covers parts of Essex, Morris and Passaic counties in northern New Jersey, including some of New York City's wealthier suburbs.

The special primary and April general election will determine who serves the remainder of Sherrill's term, which ends next January. There will be a regular primary in June and general election in November for the next two-year term.

Sherrill, also a Democrat, represented the district for four terms after her election in 2018. She won despite the region's historical loyalty to the GOP, a dynamic that began to shift during President Donald Trump's first term.

Matthew Stafford edges Drake Maye for the AP NFL Most Valuable Player award

By ROB MAADDI Pro Football Writer

SAN FRANCISCO (AP) — Matthew Stafford walked away with the AP NFL Most Valuable Player award and a declaration that he's returning to the Los Angeles Rams for another season.

Stafford edged Drake Maye for the MVP award on Thursday night in the closest race since Peyton Manning and Steve McNair were co-winners in 2003.

Stafford received 24 of 50 first-place votes while Maye got 23. But Maye has a chance to go home this week with a Vince Lombardi Trophy. He leads the New England Patriots against the Seattle Seahawks in the Super Bowl on Sunday.

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Stafford, who turns 38 on Saturday, wants another opportunity to try to win his second Super Bowl ring with the Rams.

"Oh yeah, I'll be back. It was such an amazing season and I play with such a great group of guys and great group of coaches that I was lucky enough to finish this season healthy, and I wanna make sure that I go out there and see what happens next year," Stafford told the AP.

Stafford brought his four daughters — all dressed in identical black-and-white dresses — to the stage to accept the award.

He thanked his team and saved his wife and daughters for last: "You're unbelievable cheerleaders for me. I appreciate it. I am so happy to have you at the games on the sideline with me, and I can't wait for you to cheer me on next year when we're out there kicking (butt)."

It was Stafford's way of announcing he will be back next season after contemplating retirement.

Myles Garrett was a unanimous choice for the AP NFL Defensive Player of the Year award after setting a season record for sacks with 23.

All-Pro wide receiver Jaxon Smith-Njigba beat out Christian McCaffrey for the AP NFL Offensive Player of the Year award.

New England's Mike Vrabel beat out Jacksonville's Liam Coen for the AP NFL Coach of the Year award, becoming the seventh coach to win it with two different teams.

McCaffrey became the first running back to win the AP NFL Comeback Player of the Year award in 24 years.

Browns linebacker Carson Schwegler was a runaway winner for the AP NFL Defensive Rookie of the Year award.

Panthers wide receiver Tetairoa McMillan ran away with the AP NFL Offensive Rookie of the Year award.

Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels won the AP NFL Assistant Coach of the Year award in the first season of his third stint with the team.

A nationwide panel of 50 media members who regularly cover the league completed voting before the playoffs began. Votes were tabulated by the accounting firm Lutz and Carr.

Voters selected a top 5 for the eight AP NFL awards. First-place votes were worth 10 points. Second-through fifth-place votes were worth 5, 3, 2 and 1 points.

Josh Allen, the 2024 NFL MVP, received two first-place MVP votes, and Justin Herbert got the other one.

Stafford, who earned first-team All-Pro honors for the first time in his 17-year career, finished with 366 points to Maye's 361. Allen placed third with 91 points, Christian McCaffrey (71) was fourth and Trevor Lawrence (49) came in fifth.

It's McCaffrey's second top-five finish in three years, more than any other non-quarterback since the weighted point system was implemented in 2022.

Stafford led the NFL with 4,707 yards passing and 46 TDs. He threw eight picks and finished second to Maye with a 109.2 passer rating. Stafford and the Los Angeles Rams lost to Seattle in the NFC championship game.

Maye had 4,394 yards passing, 31 TDs and eight picks. The second-year pro led the league in passer rating (113.5) and completion percentage (72).

Coach of the Year

Vrabel can get his first Super Bowl title as a head coach Sunday if the Patriots beat the Seahawks. He received 19 first-place votes to Coen's 16 and finished with 302 points.

Vrabel, the 2021 Coach of the Year winner with the Titans, led the Patriots from worst to first in the AFC East, a 10-win turnaround in his first season in New England.

Coen had 239 points after leading the Jacksonville Jaguars to 13 wins and an AFC South title in his first season.

Seattle's Mike Macdonald got eight first-place votes and finished third (191). Chicago's Ben Johnson received one first-place vote and came in fourth (145). San Francisco's Kyle Shanahan had six first-place votes to place fifth (140).

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Defensive Player of the Year

Garrett received all 50 first-place votes to become the ninth player to win DPOY multiple times and second unanimous choice following J.J. Watt, who did it in 2014. Cleveland's edge rusher also was a unanimous All-Pro selection. Garrett previously won the award in 2023.

"It doesn't just start with me," he said. "It starts with great teammates, a great organization, great coaches being able to put us in position. I'm thankful for every single one of teammates to help get me up here. It's not possible without them."

Texans edge rusher Will Anderson Jr. finished second with 77 points, Packers edge rusher Micah Parsons came in third (63) followed by Broncos edge rusher Nik Bonitto (52) and Lions edge rusher Aidan Hutchinson (42).

Garrett surpassed both Michael Strahan (22.5) and T.J. Watt (22.5) when he sacked Joe Burrow in the final game of the regular season.

Offensive Player of the Year

Smith-Njigba got 14 first-place votes to McCaffrey's 12 and finished with 272 points. McCaffrey, who won the AP NFL Comeback Player of the Year award, had 223 points.

Smith-Njigba caught 119 passes and led the league with 1,793 yards receiving. He had 10 TDs.

Rams wide receiver Puka Nacua, a unanimous All-Pro like Smith-Njigba, finished third with eight first-place votes and 170 points. Falcons All-Pro running back Bijan Robinson was right behind him with six first-place votes and 168 points.

Comeback Player of the Year

McCaffrey, San Francisco's All-Pro do-it-all back, received 31 first-place votes and 395 points, outgaining Aidan Hutchinson. Garrison Hearst was the last running back to win it in 2001.

Hutchinson got nine first-place votes and 221 points. Dak Prescott came in third with six first-place votes and 167 points. Lawrence got two first-place votes and finished fourth (130). Stefon Diggs came in fifth (40).

Philip Rivers and Chris Olave each received one first-place vote.

McCaffrey played in just four games in 2024 due to bilateral Achilles tendinitis followed by a season-ending PCL knee injury. He returned to play every game for the 49ers and had 2,126 yards from scrimmage and 17 TDs.

Defensive Rookie of the Year

Schwesinger received 40 first-place votes and had 441 points to become the sixth player in the last 45 seasons to win the award after not being picked in the first round. Shaq Leonard (2018) and DeMeco Ryans (2006) were the only others in the last 20 seasons. Cleveland selected Schwesinger in the second round at No. 33 overall.

Versatile Seahawks defensive back Nick Emmanwori got seven first-place votes and finished second (199).

Offensive Rookie of the Year

McMillan earned 41 first-place votes after catching 70 passes for 1,014 yards and seven TDs.

Saints quarterback Tyler Shough got five first-place votes and finished second with 168 points, way behind McMillan's 445.

Assistant Coach of the Year

McDaniels received 17 of 50 first-place votes and finished with 249 points. Broncos defensive coordinator Vance Joseph placed second with 10 first-place votes and 176 points.

US strikes another alleged drug-trafficking boat in Eastern Pacific

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. military said Thursday that it has carried out another deadly strike on a vessel accused of trafficking drugs in the eastern Pacific Ocean.

U.S. Southern Command said on social media that the boat "was transiting along known narco-trafficking routes in the Eastern Pacific and was engaged in narco-trafficking operations." It said the strike killed two people. A video linked to the post shows a boat moving through the water before exploding in flames.

The strike was announced just hours after U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth declared that "some top cartel drug-traffickers" in the region "have decided to cease all narcotics operations INDEFINITELY due to

recent (highly effective) kinetic strikes in the Caribbean.” However, Hegseth did not provide any details or information to back up this claim, made in a post on his personal account on social media.

Neither U.S. Southern Command nor the Pentagon would answer follow-up questions about Hegseth’s claim.

The boat attacks, which began in September 2025, have slowed in frequency since January — a month that only saw one strike after the raid that captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. By contrast, the Pentagon struck more than dozen boats in December 2025.

Thursday’s attack raises the death toll from the Trump administration’s strikes on alleged drug boats to 128 people. Last week, the military said that figure was up to 126 people, with the inclusion of those presumed dead after being lost at sea. That figure included 116 people who were killed immediately in at least 36 attacks carried out since early September in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean, U.S. Southern Command said. Ten others are believed dead because searchers did not locate them following a strike.

Meanwhile, the families of two Trinidadian nationals killed in a Trump administration boat strike in October sued the federal government last week, calling the attack a war crime and part of an “unprecedented and manifestly unlawful U.S. military campaign.” The suit is believed to be the first wrongful death case arising from the campaign and will test the legal justification of the attacks, which many experts say are a brazen violation of the laws of armed conflict.

President Donald Trump has said the U.S. is in “armed conflict” with cartels in Latin America and has justified the attacks as a necessary escalation to stem the flow of drugs. But his administration has offered little evidence to support its claims of killing “narcoterrorists.”

Epstein emails show he helped arrange White House visit for Woody Allen

By HILLEL ITALIE AP National Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — In 2015, Woody Allen and his wife, Soon-Yi Previn, went on a trip to Washington, D.C. With the help of their friend Jeffrey Epstein, they were able to tour the White House.

Allen’s friendship with Epstein has been known for years, but emails in the huge trove of records released by the Justice Department in recent days illustrate that relationship in new depth.

The filmmaker, his wife and Epstein were neighbors in New York City, and the three dined together often, records show. They offered each other emotional support during periods when they were being criticized in the media. They commiserated about being accused — unfairly, they told each other — of sexual misconduct.

And in 2015, Epstein used his connections to another friend who had been in President Barack Obama’s administration to help the couple get a White House tour.

“Could you show soon yi the White House,” Epstein wrote in a May 2015 email to former White House counsel Kathy Ruemmler. “I assume woody would be too politically sensitive?”

“I am sure I could show both of them the White House,” Ruemmler responded, although she doubted whether Epstein, who in 2008 had pleaded guilty to soliciting prostitution from an underage girl, would be allowed in.

“You are too politically sensitive, I think,” she added.

White House records show that Allen, Previn and Ruemmler visited on Dec. 27, a Sunday. Obama was in Hawaii at the time.

Ruemmler and Allen were among a long list of notable people who maintained friendships with Epstein for years, even though he was a registered sex offender who had been accused of abusing children, and whose legal problems had been widely covered in newspapers.

Some of the guests who accompanied Allen and Previn to dinners with Epstein included talk show host Dick Cavett, linguist Noam Chomsky and the late comedian David Brenner. Epstein also attended screenings of Allen’s movies and, according to emails, would visit with Allen so he could watch him edit his latest film.

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"Wide variety of interesting people at every dinner," was how Allen described some of their gatherings in a letter commissioned for a 2016 Epstein birthday party. "It's always interesting and the food is sumptuous and abundant. Lots of dishes, plenty of choices, numerous desserts, well served. I say well served often it's by some professional houseman and just as often by several young women reminding one of Castle Dracula where (actor Bela) Lugosi has three young female vampires who service the place."

A message sent to an assistant for Allen and Previn via email seeking comment wasn't immediately returned. Epstein killed himself in 2019 while awaiting trial on sex trafficking charges.

Emails suggest that Previn, too, had a close relationship to Epstein and she often served as the intermediary between Epstein and Allen.

Numerous exchanges among Allen, Previn and Epstein refer to the scandals that began in the early 1990s when Allen acknowledged he was having an affair with Previn, the adopted daughter of his then-girlfriend Mia Farrow. Around the same time, he was investigated by state authorities over allegations he had assaulted their adopted daughter, Dylan Farrow, while visiting Mia's Connecticut home.

A Connecticut prosecutor said in 1993 that there was "probable cause" to charge Allen with molesting Dylan, but that he decided not to pursue the case.

Allen, who married Previn in 1997 and has since adopted two daughters, has denied any wrongdoing. Dylan's allegations returned to the news in 2014 when an open letter from her was published in The New York Times. Allen has since been largely ostracized by the American film community.

In emails in 2016, Epstein, Previn and Allen compared their own scandals to another celebrity in the news at the time: Bill Cosby, who had denied allegations that he drugged and sexually assaulting numerous women.

"The crowd needs a witch to burn, and there are not many left," Epstein wrote.

Allen replied, in a message relayed through Previn, that his own situation is "radically different" from Cosby's.

"I do expect (and get) many ugly unfair accusations, (but) he has to battle 50 women and criminal charges," Allen said, according to Previn's email. "I have one irate mother whose case was investigated and discredited," he said, referring to Mia Farrow.

Epstein replied that the public scorn Allen received was more likely related to his relationship with Previn, which he called a "publicly broken taboo."

"Everything else is noise," he added.

Allen, in comments relayed through Previn, responded that if the couple's taboo relationship was the issue, "there's nothing to be done."

"I'm certainly not going to dump her and I'm not going to apologize because I don't feel either of us did anything we have to apologize for," he says. "Our romantic life is our business and not the business of the public so it's a hopeless situation because there's no way out if that's what they're holding against us."

Epstein advised his friends to just enjoy themselves and in life.

"Some actors or actresses might decline a role," Epstein wrote. "But, so what."

Allen hasn't been accused of having any involvement in Epstein's alleged sexual abuse of girls and women.

Trump administration launches TrumpRx website for discounted drugs

By ALI SWENSON Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — The Trump administration on Thursday launched TrumpRx, a website it says will help patients buy prescription drugs directly at a discounted rate at a time when health care and the cost of living are growing concerns for Americans.

"You're going to save a fortune," President Donald Trump said at the site's unveiling. "And this is also so good for overall health care."

The government-hosted website is not a platform for buying medications. Instead, it's set up as a facili-

tator, pointing Americans to drugmakers' direct-to-consumer websites, where they can make purchases. It also provides coupons to use at pharmacies. The site launches with over 40 medications, including weight-loss drugs such as Ozempic and Wegovy.

The site is part of a larger effort by the Trump administration to show it's tackling the challenges of high costs. Affordability has emerged as a political vulnerability for Trump and his Republican allies going into November's midterm elections, as Americans remain worried about the cost of housing, groceries, utilities and other staples of middle-class identity.

Trump stressed that the lower prices were made possible by his pressuring of pharmaceutical companies on prices, saying he demanded that they charge the same costs in the U.S. as in other nations. He said prescription drug costs will increase in foreign countries as a result.

"We're tired of subsidizing the world," Trump said at the evening event on the White House campus that lasted roughly 20 minutes.

The administration is touting substantial discounts, though it's unclear just how much impact the changes will have for family budgets. The site includes the disclaimer that prices "may be even lower" for people with insurance, as it lists the "out-of-pocket price." Also, some consumers might be able to use available generics that cost less than brand-name medications.

Still, Dr. Mehmet Oz, administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, hyped the website as being transformative. He said the lower prices for Ozempic and Wegovy would cause the country to collectively lose 100 million pounds this year. He suggested that lower prices for the fertility drug Gonal-F would trigger pregnancies nationwide.

"We're going to have a lot of Trump babies with these costs," Oz said.

The president first teased TrumpRx in September while announcing the first of his more than 15 deals with pharmaceutical companies to lower drug prices to match the lowest price offered in other developed nations. He said in December the website would provide "massive discounts to all consumers" — though it's unclear whether the prices available on drugmakers' websites will routinely be any lower than what many consumers could get through their insurance coverage.

The website's Thursday release came after it faced multiple delays, for reasons the administration hasn't publicly shared. Last fall, Oz told Trump the site would share prices for consumers before the end of the year. An expected launch in late January was also pushed back.

The president has spent the past several months seeking to spotlight his efforts to lower drug prices for Americans. He's done that through deals with major pharmaceutical companies, including some of the biggest drugmakers like Pfizer, Eli Lilly and Merck, which have agreed to lower prices of their Medicaid drugs to so-called "most favored nations" pricing. As part of the deals, many of the companies' new drugs are also to be launched at discounted rates for consumer markets through TrumpRx.

Many of the details of Trump's deals with manufacturers remain unclear, and drug prices for patients in the U.S. can depend on many factors, including the competition a treatment faces and insurance coverage. Most people have coverage through work, the individual insurance market or government programs like Medicaid and Medicare, which shield them from much of the cost.

Trump's administration also has negotiated lower prices for several prescription drugs for Medicare enrollees, through a direct negotiation program created by a 2022 law.

UK's Starmer didn't know Jeffrey Epstein. But the prime minister's job is under threat

By JILL LAWLESS Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Keir Starmer never met Jeffrey Epstein. But the British prime minister's job is under threat because of the fallout from the late sex offender's global web of relationships.

Friendship with Epstein has already brought down a British royal — Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, formerly known as Prince Andrew — and U.K. ambassador to Washington Peter Mandelson, fired by Starmer over his links to the financier.

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Now new revelations have plunged Starmer's center-left government into turmoil.

The prime minister is facing mounting pressure from within his governing Labour Party over his decision in 2024 to appoint Mandelson, a veteran Labour politician, to the Washington role despite his ties to Epstein. Just how close those ties were has been exposed in newly released documents that have dominated headlines in the U.K.

Starmer apologized on Thursday to Epstein's victims, saying Mandelson had repeatedly lied and "portrayed Epstein as someone he barely knew."

"I am sorry, sorry for what was done to you, sorry that so many people with power failed you," Starmer said. "Sorry for having believed Mandelson's lies and appointed him."

Critics believe it's an error that could end Starmer's premiership.

"He is now essentially a boxer on the ropes," said Rob Ford, professor of political science at the University of Manchester. "His administration could fall over tomorrow, or it could stagger on for months or even years. (But) his authority is seriously shot."

Mandelson a risky appointment

Starmer fired Mandelson, 72, in September after emails were published showing that he maintained a friendship with Epstein after the late financier's 2008 conviction for sex offenses involving a minor. Epstein committed suicide in a jail cell in 2019 while awaiting trial on U.S. federal charges accusing him of sexually abusing dozens of girls.

Documents published last week by the U.S. Justice Department contain new revelations, including papers suggesting Mandelson shared sensitive government information with Epstein after the 2008 global financial crisis, and records of payments totaling \$75,000 in 2003 and 2004 from Epstein to accounts linked to Mandelson or his husband Reinaldo Avila da Silva.

There are also chatty, jokey messages pointing to a much closer relationship with Epstein than Mandelson had disclosed.

British police are investigating Mandelson over potential misconduct in public office. He is not accused of any sexual offenses and says he never witnessed any sexual wrongdoing,

Mandelson was chosen as ambassador because his trade expertise, contacts and mastery of the political "dark arts" were considered assets in dealing with U.S. President Donald Trump's second administration.

Critics say Starmer was, at best, naive in not recognizing the risks involved. Aside from his association with Epstein, Mandelson twice had to resign from senior government posts because of scandals over money or ethics.

'His judgment is questionable'

In the House of Commons on Wednesday, Starmer answered "Yes" when asked whether the vetting process in 2024 had revealed that Mandelson's friendship with Epstein continued after the latter's 2008 conviction.

The answer sent shock waves through the chamber. On Thursday Starmer said he had meant only that it had "been known publicly for some time that they knew each other."

The government plans to release files related to the vetting process that it hopes will exonerate Starmer and show Mandelson lied. But the government is not entirely in control of the process. Some documents are likely to be held back because of the police investigation. Others will be reviewed by Parliament's independent Intelligence and Security Committee for potential national security implications.

Labour lawmaker Paula Barker said the prime minister "has shown that his judgment is questionable."

"I think he has a very long way to go to rebuild trust and confidence with the public, and trust and confidence within our party," she told the BBC.

A string of setbacks

Starmer has faced a string of setbacks since he led Labour to a landslide election victory in July 2024. He has struggled to deliver promised economic growth, repair tattered public services and ease the cost of living. He pledged a return to honest government after 14 years of scandal-tarred Conservative rule, but has been beset by missteps and U-turns over welfare cuts and other unpopular policies.

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Despite his struggles on the home front, Starmer has been praised for his work on the world stage. He has played a key role in maintaining European support for Ukraine, and in keeping Trump engaged with peace efforts and NATO. He has also worked to rebuild ties with the European Union after the U.K.'s acrimonious departure from the bloc in 2020.

Labour consistently lags behind the hard-right Reform UK party in opinion polls, and its failure to improve had sparked talk of a leadership challenge, even before the Mandelson revelations.

The Epstein files may have brought a challenge closer, but key rivals are holding back, for now.

Senior lawmaker Angela Rayner, a popular figure on the left of the party, is still stinging after being forced to resign as deputy prime minister in September for failing to pay enough tax on a home purchase. Health Secretary Wes Streeting, a star of Labour's right, was close to Mandelson in the past.

Some Labour lawmakers are calling for Starmer to fire his top aide Morgan McSweeney, a powerful backroom figure mistrusted by many Labour lawmakers, and widely seen as a key force behind Mandelson's appointment.

Legislator Karl Turner said the prime minister should "get rid of those advisers who frankly have given terrible advice to him over these weeks and months."

On Thursday Starmer vowed to carry on doing the "vital work" of governing.

But more potential flashpoints loom. Labour may lose a long-held seat in Parliament in a Feb. 26 special election in Greater Manchester. The party is also expected to fare badly in regional and local elections in May.

Ford said that "whenever the moment comes when Starmer does finally leave, either of his own volition or because his MPs oust him ... It will all be traced back to appointing Peter Mandelson."

3 dead, 6 hurt after 92-year-old driver hits bicyclist and crashes into Los Angeles grocery store

By CHRISTOPHER WEBER and JULIE WATSON Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Three people were killed and six others were hurt after a 92-year-old driver collided with a bicyclist and then lost control and slammed into a grocery store Thursday in the Los Angeles neighborhood of Westwood, authorities said.

The woman driving a Toyota Prius hit the bicyclist shortly after noon and then continued for another block before swerving into the bakery section of a 99 Ranch Market and then coming to a stop, trapping several people underneath the vehicle, police and fire officials said.

Capt. Anthony Espinoza of the Los Angeles Police Department called the crash "an unfortunate accident," and said it is not believed to have been intentional.

Two men, ages 30 and 55, and a 42-year-old woman, who were all inside the bakery at the time, died at the scene, the Los Angeles Fire Department said in its report. Two men, both 35, were taken to the hospital in critical condition, and two other men, ages 38 and 37, were in fair condition, according to the department.

The bicyclist and the driver declined offers to be taken to the hospital, the fire department said.

The driver was a 92-year-old woman, Los Angeles Fire Department spokesperson Lyndsey Lantz told The Associated Press. Officials said she was cooperating with investigators and was undergoing a medical evaluation.

TV news footage showed a silver Prius fully inside the store, its trunk popped open. Next to it was a bright yellow sign directing shoppers to Korean street food and desserts. A popular Asian supermarket chain with about two dozen stores in California, the 99 Ranch Market store that was damaged is about a mile from the University of California, Los Angeles, campus.

"I can't tell you how many coffees I've gotten in that bakery," Sean Divekar, 32, told the Los Angeles Times, becoming emotional as he learned people were killed.

The Gaza ceasefire began months ago. Here's why the fighting persists

By SAM METZ Associated Press

JERUSALEM (AP) — As the bodies of two dozen Palestinians killed in Israeli strikes arrived at hospitals in Gaza on Wednesday, the director of one asked a question that has echoed across the war-ravaged territory for months.

"Where is the ceasefire? Where are the mediators?" Shifa Hospital's Mohamed Abu Selmiya wrote on Facebook.

At least 556 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli strikes since a U.S.-brokered truce came into effect in October, including 24 on Wednesday and 30 on Saturday, according to Gaza's Health Ministry. Four Israeli soldiers have been killed in Gaza in the same period, with more injured, including a soldier whom the military said was severely wounded when militants opened fire near the ceasefire line in northern Gaza overnight.

Other aspects of the agreement have stalled, including the deployment of an international security force, Hamas' disarmament and the start of Gaza's reconstruction. The opening of the Rafah border crossing between Gaza and Egypt raised hope of further progress, but fewer than 50 people were allowed to cross on Monday.

Hostages freed as other issues languish

In October, after months of stalled negotiations, Israel and Hamas accepted a 20-point plan proposed by U.S. President Donald Trump aimed at ending the war unleashed by Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack into Israel. At the time, Trump said it would lead to a "Strong, Durable, and Everlasting Peace."

Hamas freed all the living hostages it still held at the outset of the deal in exchange for thousands of Palestinian prisoners held by Israel and the remains of others.

But the larger issues the agreement sought to address, including the future governance of the strip, were met with reservations, and the U.S. offered no firm timeline.

The return of the remains of hostages meanwhile stretched far beyond the 72-hour timeline outlined in the agreement. Israel recovered the body of the last hostage only last week, after accusing Hamas and other militant groups of violating the ceasefire by failing to return all of the bodies. The militants said they were unable to immediately locate all the remains because of the massive destruction caused by the war — a claim Israel rejected.

The ceasefire also called for an immediate influx of humanitarian aid, including equipment to clear rubble and rehabilitate infrastructure. The United Nations and humanitarian groups say aid deliveries to Gaza's 2 million Palestinians have fallen short due to customs clearance problems and other delays. COGAT, the Israeli military body overseeing aid to Gaza, has called the U.N.'s claims "simply a lie."

Ceasefire holds despite accusations

Violence has sharply declined since the ceasefire paused a war in which more than 71,800 Palestinians have been killed, according to the Gaza Health Ministry. The ministry is part of the Hamas-led government and maintains detailed records seen as generally reliable by U.N. agencies and independent experts.

Hamas-led militants killed some 1,200 people in the initial October 2023 attack and took around 250 hostage.

Both sides say the agreement is still in effect and use the word "ceasefire" in their communications. But Israel accuses Hamas fighters of operating beyond the truce line splitting Gaza in half, threatening its troops and occasionally opening fire, while Hamas accuses Israeli forces of gunfire and strikes on residential areas far from the line.

Palestinians have called on U.S. and Arab mediators to get Israel to stop carrying out deadly strikes, which often kill civilians. Among those killed on Wednesday were five children, including two babies. Hamas, which accuses Israel of hundreds of violations, called it a "grave circumvention of the ceasefire agreement."

In a joint statement on Sunday, eight Arab and Muslim countries condemned Israel's actions since the agreement took effect and urged restraint from all sides "to preserve and sustain the ceasefire."

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Israel says it is responding to daily violations committed by Hamas and acting to protect its troops. "While Hamas' actions undermine the ceasefire, Israel remains fully committed to upholding it," the military said in a statement on Wednesday.

"One of the scenarios the (military) has to be ready for is Hamas is using a deception tactic like they did before October 7 and rearming and preparing for an attack when it's comfortable for them," said Lt. Col. Nadav Shoshani, a military spokesperson.

Some signs of progress

The return of the remains of the last hostage, the limited opening of the Rafah crossing, and the naming of a Palestinian committee to govern Gaza and oversee its reconstruction showed a willingness to advance the agreement despite the violence.

Last month, U.S. envoy Steve Witkoff, who played a key role in brokering the truce, said it was time for "transitioning from ceasefire to demilitarization, technocratic governance, and reconstruction."

That will require Israel and Hamas to grapple with major issues on which they have been sharply divided, including whether Israel will fully withdraw from Gaza and Hamas will lay down its arms.

Though political leaders are holding onto the term "ceasefire" and have yet to withdraw from the process, there is growing despair in Gaza.

On Saturday, Atallah Abu Hadaiyed heard explosions in Gaza City during his morning prayers and ran outside to find his cousins lying on the ground as flames curled around them.

"We don't know if we're at war or at peace," he said from a displacement camp, as tarpaulin strips blew off the tent behind him.

US and Russia agree to reestablish military dialogue after Ukraine talks

By KAMILA HRABCHUK and EMMA BURROWS Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — The U.S. and Russia agreed Thursday to reestablish high-level military dialogue for the first time in more than four years in another sign of warming relations between the two countries since President Donald Trump returned to office and sought to end the war in Ukraine.

High-level military communication was suspended in late 2021, as tension between Moscow and Washington rose ahead of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Trump then campaigned for a second term on promises that he would swiftly end the fighting. Many of his proposals for peace have heavily favored the Kremlin, including requiring Ukraine to cede territory to Russia.

The restored communication channel "will provide a consistent military-to-military contact as the parties continue to work towards a lasting peace," the U.S. European Command said in a statement. The agreement emerged from a meeting between senior Russian and American military officials in the capital of the United Arab Emirates.

U.S. Gen. Alexis Grynkewich, who is the commander in Europe of both U.S. and NATO forces, was in Abu Dhabi, where talks between American, Russian and Ukrainian officials on ending the war entered a second day.

Meanwhile, Moscow escalated its attacks on Ukraine's power grid in an apparent effort to deny civilians power and to weaken public support for the fight, while hostilities continued along the roughly 1,000-kilometer (600-mile) front line snaking through eastern and southern parts of Ukraine.

An effort to ease tensions

The resumption of the military hotline marks an effort to ease tensions that soared after the start of the war and to avoid collisions between Russian and U.S. forces.

In one such incident in March 2023, the American military said it ditched an Air Force MQ-9 Reaper drone in the Black Sea after a pair of Russian fighter jets dumped fuel on it, and then one of them struck its propeller while flying in international airspace.

Moscow has denied that its warplanes hit the drone, alleging that it crashed while making a sharp maneuver. The Kremlin said its aircraft reacted to a violation of a no-fly zone Russia has established in the

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area near Crimea.

Moscow has repeatedly voiced concern about intelligence flights by the U.S. and other NATO aircraft over the Black Sea, and some Russian officials charged that the American surveillance flights helped gather intelligence that allowed Ukraine to strike Russian targets.

NATO members have been increasingly worried about intrusions into allied airspace. Some European officials described the incidents as Moscow testing NATO's response.

In September, a swarm of Russian drones flew into Poland's airspace, prompting NATO aircraft to scramble to intercept them and shoot down some of the devices. It was the first direct encounter between NATO and Moscow since the full-scale invasion. Later that month, NATO jets escorted three Russian warplanes out of Estonia's airspace.

Russia, Ukraine exchange prisoners following talks

The delegations from Moscow and Kyiv were joined Thursday in Abu Dhabi by U.S. special envoy Steve Witkoff and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, according to Rustem Umerov, Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council chief, who was present at the meeting.

They were also at last month's talks in the same place as the Trump administration tries to steer Russia and Ukraine toward a settlement.

Officials have provided no information about any progress in the discussions.

Following the talks on Thursday, however, Russia and Ukraine said they carried out a prisoner exchange.

The Russian Defense Ministry said it brought 157 Russian servicemen back from Ukrainian captivity, as well as three Russian nationals captured during Kyiv's incursion into Russia's Kursk region. Ukrainian officials said 150 Ukrainian servicemen and seven civilians returned from Russian captivity.

The Russian Defense Ministry said the released Russian soldiers are currently in Belarus, getting medical assistance, before being taken back to Russia "for treatment and rehabilitation."

Ukrainian human rights ombudsman Dmytro Lubinets said that among the 150 service members who returned from Russian captivity, 18 were "illegally sentenced by Russia." He said that "overall, those released are in a difficult psychological condition, and some are critically underweight."

Zelenskyy says 55,000 Ukrainian troops killed in the war

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said 55,000 Ukrainian troops have died since Russia's invasion. "And there is a large number of people whom Ukraine considers missing," he added in an interview broadcast late Wednesday by French TV channel France 2.

The last time Zelenskyy gave a figure for battlefield deaths, in early 2025, he said 46,000 Ukrainian troops had been killed.

Zelenskyy has repeatedly said his country needs security guarantees from the U.S. and Europe to deter any postwar Russian attacks.

Ukrainians must feel that there is genuine progress toward peace and "not toward a scenario in which the Russians exploit everything to their advantage and continue their strikes," Zelenskyy said on social media late Wednesday.

Last year saw a 31% increase in Ukrainian civilian casualties compared with 2024, the advocacy group Human Rights Watch said in a report published Wednesday.

Almost 15,000 Ukrainian civilians have been killed and just over 40,000 wounded since the start of the war through last December, according to the United Nations Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine.

In other developments:

Russian troops have lost access to their Starlink satellite internet terminals on the front line, Ukrainian Economic Minister Mykhailo Fedorov said Thursday, after Ukraine asked Elon Musk's SpaceX to help deny Russia use of the service in Ukraine.

Russian forces have consequently lost command-and-control capabilities and navigation for drones, and assaults have stopped in many sectors, according to Fedorov's adviser Serhii Beskrestnov. Russian officials made no immediate comment.

Ukraine is registering its civilian and military Starlink users on a database, allowing approved devices to function while unregistered terminals are disabled inside Ukraine.

Also, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said during a visit to Kyiv that he agreed with Zelenskyy to develop the joint production of ammunition at plants in their countries.

Zelenskyy said Poland plans to increase supplies to Ukraine of liquefied natural gas, and the countries are exploring an exchange of weaponry, with Kyiv possibly receiving Polish MiG fighter jets and Warsaw receiving Ukrainian drones.

Russia fired 183 drones and two ballistic missiles at Ukraine overnight, according to the Ukrainian air force. Three people were injured, officials said.

The Russian Defense Ministry said its air defenses downed 95 Ukrainian drones overnight over several regions, the Azov Sea and Crimea, which Russia illegally annexed in 2014.

Homeland Security shutdown grows more likely as Republicans rebuff Democrats' ICE demands

By MARY CLARE JALONICK and LISA MASCARO Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Majority Leader John Thune said Thursday that demands made by Democrats for new restrictions on federal immigration officers are “unrealistic” and warned that the Department of Homeland Security will shut down next week if they do not work with Republicans and the White House.

Democrats say they will not vote for a DHS spending bill when funding runs out unless there are “dramatic changes” at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and other federal law enforcement agencies in the wake of the fatal shootings of two protesters in Minneapolis last month.

The Democratic leaders, Sen. Chuck Schumer and Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, released an expanded list of 10 detailed proposals on Wednesday night for restraining President Donald Trump’s aggressive campaign of immigration enforcement. Among the demands are a requirement for judicial warrants, better identification of DHS officers, new use of force standards and a stop to racial profiling.

Congress is trying to renegotiate the DHS spending bill after Trump last week agreed to a Democratic request that it be separated from a larger spending measure and extended at current levels for two weeks while the two parties negotiate. The deal came after ICU nurse Alex Pretti was shot and killed by a U.S. Border Patrol officer in Minneapolis on Jan. 24, and some Republicans agreed that new restrictions were necessary.

But with nearly a week gone, a shutdown is becoming increasingly likely starting Feb. 14 as Republicans have been cool to most of the Democrats’ requests.

“This is not a blank check situation where Republicans just do agree to a list of Democrat demands,” said Thune, R-S.D. “The only way to get reforms to ICE is to agree to a bill.”

As of now, Thune said, “we aren’t anywhere close to having any sort of an agreement.”

In addition to ICE and U.S. Customs and Border Protection, the homeland security bill includes funding for the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Transportation Security Administration. If DHS shuts down, Thune said, “there’s a very good chance we could see more travel problems” similar to the 43-day government closure last year.

Democratic demands

Schumer, D-N.Y., said he is “astounded to hear” Republicans say his party’s proposals were political or unworkable.

“It’s about people’s basic rights, it’s about people’s safety,” Schumer said. If Republicans do not like the ideas, he said, “they need to explain why.”

Schumer and Jeffries, D-N.Y., have made several demands, including no masks for officers, judicial warrants and better federal coordination with local authorities. The list they released Wednesday added several new items, including a stricter use-of-force policy, legal safeguards at detention centers and a prohibition on tracking protesters with body-worn cameras.

Democrats say Congress should end indiscriminate arrests, “improve warrant procedures and standards,” ensure the law is clear that officers cannot enter private property without a judicial warrant and require that before a person can be detained, it’s verified that the person is not a U.S. citizen.

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They also want an end to racial profiling, saying DHS officers should be prohibited from stopping, questioning or searching people "based on an individual's presence at certain locations, their job, their spoken language and accent or their race and ethnicity."

For officers conducting immigration enforcement, Democrats say that in addition to officers taking off their masks and showing identification, DHS should regulate and standardize uniforms and equipment to bring them in line with other law enforcement agencies.

Republican pushback

Schumer called it a "gut check moment for Congress" as the immigration enforcement operations have rocked Minneapolis and other U.S. cities. But Republicans were dismissive.

Wyoming's John Barrasso, the No. 2 Republican senator, said the demands are "radical and extreme" and a "far-left wish list."

Sen. Katie Britt, who is helping lead negotiations, said the list is "a ridiculous Christmas list of demands" and warned that time is running out before the deadline.

"I encourage them to talk to the White House," she said. "We only have one week left."

Down to the last funding bill

Thune has also encouraged Democrats and the White House to talk. It is unclear whether they are or whether Democrats would be willing to back down on any of their demands.

Some Republicans have demands of their own, including adding legislation that would require proof of citizenship before Americans register to vote and restrictions on cities that they say do not do enough to crack down on illegal immigration.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., said it is up to Republicans to ensure the government doesn't shut down because they are in charge.

"The American people want this abuse to stop," Murphy said.

Some look to limit shutdown pain

Other lawmakers are searching for options to prevent another partial shutdown.

One idea being floated is to essentially fund some of the other agencies within DHS -- the Coast Guard, airport operations under TSA and disaster assistance from FEMA.

"Why not take that off the table?" said Republican Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina, whose state is in need of FEMA funds from recent disasters.

"If it doesn't look like they can get it done," he said about the immigration enforcement overhaul. "I really think they should look at a la carte funding of agencies."

Some Democrats have said they agree, but Thune said Thursday that splitting apart the DHS appropriations bill to single out ICE would "defund law enforcement."

Splitting the bill would mean essentially cutting ICE loose by allowing it to go without its routine federal funding because the agency already has such a robust budget from Trump's tax and spending cut bill from last year.

ICE is expected to receive about \$10 billion in the annual appropriations bill, a fraction of the \$175 billion-plus for homeland security for the administration's mass deportation agenda.

Falling tech stocks and a plunge for bitcoin hit Wall Street

By STAN CHOË AP Business Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Sharp drops hit Wall Street on Thursday as technology stocks fell and bitcoin plunged again to roughly half its record price set last fall. Several discouraging reports on the U.S. job market also knocked down yields in the bond market.

The S&P 500 fell 1.2% for its sixth loss in the seven days since it set an all-time high. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 592 points, or 1.2%, and the Nasdaq composite sank 1.6%.

Qualcomm fell 8.5% for one of the market's bigger losses even though the chip company topped analysts' expectations for profit and revenue in the latest quarter. Its forecast for profit in the current quarter fell short of analysts' expectations as an industrywide shortage of memory pushes some handset makers

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to cut back on orders.

In the bond market, Treasury yields sank after a report said the number of U.S. workers applying for unemployment benefits jumped last week by more than economists expected. That could be a signal that the pace of layoffs is accelerating.

Some economists suggested last week's rise could be statistical noise, and the total number remains relatively low compared with history. But a separate report said that layoffs announced by U.S.-based employers surged last month. The 108,435 was the highest number for a month since October, according to global outplacement and executive coaching firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

For a January, it's the worst since 2009 during the Great Recession.

A third report from the U.S. government said that employers were advertising the lowest number of job openings in December in more than five years.

Weakness in the job market could push the Federal Reserve to cut interest rates to support the economy, even if it also risks worsening inflation. Treasury yields fell across the board in response.

The yield on the 10-year Treasury sank to 4.19% from 4.29% late Wednesday. That's a notable move for the bond market.

The moves were even sharper in commodities markets.

Silver's price dropped 9.1% in its latest wild swing since its record-breaking momentum suddenly halted last week.

Gold's price fell 1.2% to settle at \$4,889.50 per ounce. It's been careening back and forth since roughly doubling in price over 12 months. It neared \$5,600 last week and then fell below \$4,500 on Monday.

Both gold and silver had been screaming higher as investors piled into places they thought would be safer amid worries about political turmoil, a U.S. stock market that critics called expensive and huge debt loads for governments worldwide. But nothing can keep rising at such extreme rates forever, and critics had been calling for a pullback.

Bitcoin, which is pitched as "digital gold," also sank. Like gold, bitcoin produces no profits or dividends, and its price depends on what investors will pay for it. It briefly fell more than 12% below \$64,000, down from its record above \$124,000 set in October.

The tumbling prices dragged down stocks of companies enmeshed in the crypto industry. Coinbase Global, the crypto trading platform, fell 13.3%. Strategy, which has made a business of buying and holding bitcoin, tumbled 17.1%.

Outside of crypto, Alphabet dragged on the market and slipped 0.5%, after paring an earlier loss of 8%, even though the parent company of Google, YouTube and other businesses reported a stronger profit for the latest quarter than analysts expected. Investors focused instead on how much Alphabet is spending on artificial-intelligence technology and questioned whether it will all prove worth it.

Alphabet said its spending on equipment and other investments could double this year to roughly \$180 billion. That blew past analysts' expectations of less than \$119 billion, according to FactSet.

Estee Lauder also topped Wall Street targets, and it raised some of its financial forecasts for the full fiscal year. But analysts said investors may have been expecting even more, as the company shepherds through its turnaround efforts and the punishing effects of tariffs. The New York cosmetic company's shares fell 19.2%.

On the winning side of Wall Street were companies that stand to benefit from big spending by Alphabet and others continuing the AI frenzy. Chip company Broadcom added 0.8%

McKesson jumped 16.5% after reporting stronger profit and revenue for the latest quarter than analysts expected. The health care company also raised its forecasted range for profit this fiscal year.

All told, the S&P 500 fell 84.32 points to 6,798.40. The Dow Jones Industrial Average dropped 592.58 to 48,908.72, and the Nasdaq composite sank 363.99 to 22,540.59.

In stock markets abroad, indexes fell across much of Europe and Asia.

London's FTSE 100 dropped 0.9% after the Bank of England held interest rates there steady. France's CAC 40 fell 0.3%, and Germany's DAX lost 0.5% after the European Central Bank likewise stood pat on

interest rates.

South Korea's Kospi tumbled 3.9% for one of the world's biggest moves and dropped from its all-time high. Samsung Electronics fell 5.8%, just two days after it had surged 11.4%.

Minneapolis man is charged with threatening and cyberstalking ICE officers

By STEVE KARNOWSKI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A Minneapolis man was arrested Thursday on charges of cyberstalking and threatening to kill or assault Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers involved in the crackdown in Minnesota.

Federal prosecutors said in a statement that Kyle Wagner, 37, of Minneapolis, was charged by complaint, and that a decision to seek an indictment, which is necessary to take the case to trial, would be made soon.

Court records in Detroit, Michigan, where the case was filed, did not list an attorney who could speak on Wagner's behalf. The complaint was filed on Tuesday and unsealed Thursday.

Attorney General Pamela Bondi alleged in a statement that Wagner doxed and threatened law enforcement officers, claimed an affiliation with antifa and "encouraged bloodshed in the streets."

And at the White House on Thursday, press secretary Karoline Leavitt held up Weber's photo at the daily briefing and said such conduct by "left-wing agitators" won't go unpunished.

"And if people are illegally obstructing our federal law enforcement operations, if they are targeting, doxing, harassing and vilifying ICE agents, they are going to be held accountable like this individual here who, again, is a self-proclaimed member of antifa. He is a domestic terrorist, and he will be held accountable in the United States," Leavitt told reporters.

President Donald Trump announced in September that he would designate antifa a "major terrorist organization." Antifa, short for "anti-fascists," is an umbrella term for far-left-leaning militant groups and is not a singular entity. It consists of groups that resist fascists and neo-Nazis, especially at demonstrations.

When Trump administration border czar Tom Homan announced Wednesday that about 700 federal officers deployed to Minnesota would be withdrawn immediately, he said a larger pullout would occur only after there's more cooperation and protesters stop interfering with federal personnel.

According to prosecutors, Wagner repeatedly posted on Facebook and Instagram encouraging his followers to "forcibly confront, assault, impede, oppose, and resist federal officers" whom he referred to as the "gestapo" and "murderers."

The complaint alleges Wagner posted a video last month that directly threatened ICE officers with an obscenity-laden rant. "I've already bled for this city, I've already fought for this city, this is nothing new, we're ready this time," he said, concluding that he was "coming for" ICE.

The complaint further alleges that Wagner advocated for physical confrontation in another post, stating: "Anywhere we have an opportunity to get our hands on them, we need to put our hands on them."

It also details how Wagner used his Instagram account to dox a person identified only as a "pro-ICE individual" by publishing a phone number, birth month and year, and address in the Detroit suburb of Oak Park, Michigan. The complaint says Wagner later admitted that he doxed the victim's parents' house.

Federal prosecutors didn't immediately respond to a request for comment on why the case was filed in Michigan instead of Minnesota. The alleged doxing was the only Michigan connection listed in the complaint.

The U.S. Attorney's office in Minnesota has been hit by the resignations of several prosecutors in recent weeks amid frustrations with the surge and its handling of the shooting deaths of two people by government officers. One lawyer, who told a judge that her job "sucks," was removed from her post.

Trump's chief federal prosecutor for Minnesota, Dan Rosen, told a federal appeals court in a recent filing that his office is facing a "flood of new litigation" and is struggling to keep up just with immigration cases, while his division that handles civil cases is down 50%.

Rosen wrote that his office has canceled other civil enforcement work "and is operating in a reactive mode." He also said his attorneys are "appearing daily for hearings on contempt motions. The Court is

setting deadlines within hours, including weekends and holidays. Paralegals are continuously working overtime. Lawyers are continuously working overtime.”

Russia says it regrets expiration of last nuclear arms treaty, but Trump says he wants a new pact

By VLADIMIR ISACHENKOV Associated Press

MOSCOW (AP) — The Kremlin said Thursday it regretted the expiration of the last remaining nuclear arms pact between Russia and the United States, while U.S. President Donald Trump declared he was against keeping its limits and wants a better deal.

The pact’s termination left no caps on the two largest atomic arsenals for the first time in more than a half-century, fueling fears of an unconstrained nuclear arms race.

Russian President Vladimir Putin last year declared his readiness to stick to the treaty’s limits for another year if Washington followed suit, but Trump has ignored the offer and argued that he wants China to be a part of a new pact — something Beijing has rebuffed.

“Rather than extend ‘NEW START’ (A badly negotiated deal by the United States that, aside from everything else, is being grossly violated), we should have our Nuclear Experts work on a new, improved, and modernized Treaty that can last long into the future,” Trump posted on his Truth Social network.

Putin discussed the pact’s expiration with Chinese leader Xi Jinping on Wednesday, noting the U.S. failure to respond to his proposal to extend its limits and saying that Russia “will act in a balanced and responsible manner based on thorough analysis of the security situation,” Kremlin adviser Yuri Ushakov said.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Moscow views the treaty’s expiration Thursday “negatively” and regrets it. He said Russia will maintain its “responsible, thorough approach to stability when it comes to nuclear weapons,” adding that “of course, it will be guided primarily by its national interests.”

Peskov emphasized that “if we receive constructive responses, we will certainly conduct a dialogue.”

With the end of the treaty, Moscow “remains ready to take decisive military-technical measures to counter potential additional threats to the national security,” the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

Even as New START expires, the U.S. and Russia agreed Thursday to reestablish high-level, military-to-military dialogue following a meeting between senior officials from both sides in Abu Dhabi, the U.S. military command in Europe said. The link was suspended in 2021 as relations between Moscow and Washington grew increasingly strained before Russia sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022.

Details of the pact

New START, signed in 2010 by then-President Barack Obama and his Russian counterpart, Dmitry Medvedev, restricted each side to no more than 1,550 nuclear warheads on no more than 700 missiles and bombers — deployed and ready for use. It was originally supposed to expire in 2021 but was extended for five more years.

The pact envisioned sweeping on-site inspections to verify compliance, although they stopped in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic and never resumed.

In February 2023, Putin suspended Moscow’s participation, saying Russia couldn’t allow U.S. inspections of its nuclear sites at a time when Washington and its NATO allies have openly declared Moscow’s defeat in Ukraine as their goal. At the same time, the Kremlin emphasized it wasn’t withdrawing from the pact altogether, pledging to respect its caps on nuclear weapons.

In offering in September to abide by New START’s limits for a year to buy time for both sides to negotiate a successor agreement, Putin said the treaty’s expiration would be destabilizing and could fuel nuclear proliferation.

New START was the last remaining pact in a long series of agreements between Moscow and Washington to limit their nuclear arsenals, starting with the SALT I in 1972.

Trump wants China in a pact

Trump has indicated he would like to keep limits on nuclear weapons but wants to involve China in a potential new treaty.

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U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Wednesday that Trump has made clear "in order to have true arms control in the 21st century, it's impossible to do something that doesn't include China because of their vast and rapidly growing stockpile."

In his first term, Trump tried and failed to push for a three-way nuclear pact involving China. Beijing has balked at any restrictions on its smaller but growing nuclear arsenal, while urging the U.S. to resume nuclear talks with Russia.

"China's nuclear forces are not at all on the same scale as those of the U.S. and Russia, and thus China will not participate in nuclear disarmament negotiations at the current stage," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Lin Jian said Thursday.

He said China regrets the expiration of New START and calls on the U.S. to resume nuclear dialogue with Russia soon. Beijing, he said, urges the U.S. to respond positively to Moscow's suggestion that the two sides continue observing the core limits of the treaty for now.

Peskov reaffirmed Thursday that Moscow respects Beijing's position. He and other Russian officials have repeatedly argued that any attempt to negotiate a broader nuclear pact instead of a U.S.-Russian deal should also involve nuclear arsenals of NATO members France and the U.K.

Arms control advocates bemoaned the end of New START and warned of the imminent threat of a new arms race.

"If the Trump administration continues to stiff-arm nuclear arms control diplomacy with Russia and decides to increase the number of nuclear weapons in the U.S. deployed strategic arsenal, it will only lead Russia to follow suit and encourage China to accelerate its ongoing strategic buildup in an attempt to maintain a strategic nuclear retaliatory strike capability vis-a-vis the United States," said Daryl Kimball, executive director of the Arms Control Association in Washington. "Such a scenario could lead to a years-long, dangerous three-way nuclear arms buildup."

What to know as Iran and US prepare for nuclear talks in Oman

By JON GAMBRELL Associated Press

MUSCAT, Oman (AP) — Iran and the United States will hold talks Friday in Oman, their latest over Tehran's nuclear program after Israel launched a 12-day war on the country in June and the Islamic Republic launched a bloody crackdown on nationwide protests.

U.S. President Donald Trump has kept up pressure on Iran, moving aircraft carriers and other military assets to the Gulf and suggesting the U.S. could attack Iran over the killing of peaceful demonstrators or if Tehran launches mass executions over the protests. Trump has pushed Iran's nuclear program back into the frame as well after the June war disrupted five rounds of talks held in Rome and Muscat, Oman, last year.

Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi departed for Oman for the talks with the United States on Thursday evening, his spokesperson Esmail Baghaei confirmed.

Baghaei wrote in a post on social platform X that despite previous breakdown of talks between Tehran and Washington and military action last June, Iranian officials are hoping to reach an "honorable" agreement on the nuclear issue.

"At the same time, we have a responsibility not to miss any opportunity to utilize diplomacy in order to secure the interests of the Iranian nation and safeguard peace and tranquility in the region," Baghaei said.

Just hours ahead of Friday's meeting, many questions hovered over the talks, including the scope of the agenda. While negotiations are expected to focus on Iran's nuclear program, Secretary of State Marco Rubio this week said the U.S. hoped to discuss other concerns, including Iran's ballistic missiles, support for proxy networks across the region and the "treatment of their own people." Iran has said it wants talks to focus solely on the nuclear issue.

Trump began the diplomacy initially by writing a letter last year to Iran's 86-year-old Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei to jump start these talks. Khamenei has warned Iran would respond to any attack with an attack of its own, particularly as the theocracy he commands reels following the protests.

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Here's what to know about Iran's nuclear program and the tensions that have stalked relations between Tehran and Washington since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Trump writes letter to Khamenei

Trump dispatched the letter to Khamenei on March 5, 2025, then gave a television interview the next day in which he acknowledged sending it. He said: "I've written them a letter saying, 'I hope you're going to negotiate because if we have to go in militarily, it's going to be a terrible thing.'"

Since returning to the White House, the president has been pushing for talks while ratcheting up sanctions and suggesting a military strike by Israel or the U.S. could target Iranian nuclear sites.

A previous letter from Trump during his first term drew an angry retort from the supreme leader.

But Trump's letters to North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in his first term led to face-to-face meetings, though no deals to limit Pyongyang's atomic bombs and a missile program capable of reaching the continental U.S.

Oman mediated previous talks

Oman, a sultanate on the eastern edge of the Arabian Peninsula, has mediated talks between Araghchi and U.S. Mideast envoy Steve Witkoff. The two men have met face to face after indirect talks, a rare occurrence due to the decades of tensions between the countries.

It hasn't been all smooth, however. Witkoff at one point made a television appearance in which he suggested 3.67% enrichment for Iran could be something the countries could agree on. But that's exactly the terms set by the 2015 nuclear deal struck under former U.S. President Barack Obama, from which Trump unilaterally withdrew America. Witkoff, Trump and other American officials in the time since have maintained Iran can have no enrichment under any deal, something to which Tehran insists it won't agree.

Those negotiations ended, however, with Israel launching the war in June on Iran.

The 12-day war and nationwide protests

Israel launched what became a 12-day war on Iran in June that included the U.S. bombing Iranian nuclear sites. Iran later acknowledged in November that the attacks saw it halt all uranium enrichment in the country, though inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency have been unable to visit the bombed sites.

Iran soon experienced protests that began in late December over the collapse of the country's rial currency. Those demonstrations soon became nationwide, sparking Tehran to launch a bloody crackdown that killed thousands and saw tens of thousands detained by authorities.

Iran's nuclear program worries the West

Iran has insisted for decades that its nuclear program is peaceful. However, its officials increasingly threaten to pursue a nuclear weapon. Iran now enriches uranium to near weapons-grade levels of 60%, the only country in the world without a nuclear weapons program to do so.

Under the original 2015 nuclear deal, Iran was allowed to enrich uranium up to 3.67% purity and to maintain a uranium stockpile of 300 kilograms (661 pounds). The last report by the International Atomic Energy Agency on Iran's program put its stockpile at some 9,870 kilograms (21,760 pounds), with a fraction of it enriched to 60%.

U.S. intelligence agencies assess that Iran has yet to begin a weapons program, but has "undertaken activities that better position it to produce a nuclear device, if it chooses to do so." Iranian officials have threatened to pursue the bomb.

Israel, a close American ally, believes Iran is pursuing a weapon. It wants to see the nuclear program scrapped, as well as a halt in its ballistic missile program and support for anti-Israel militant groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas.

Decades of tense relations between Iran and the US

Iran was once one of the U.S.'s top allies in the Mideast under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who purchased American military weapons and allowed CIA technicians to run secret listening posts monitoring the neighboring Soviet Union. The CIA had fomented a 1953 coup that cemented the shah's rule.

But in January 1979, the shah, fatally ill with cancer, fled Iran as mass demonstrations swelled against

his rule. The Islamic Revolution followed, led by Grand Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, and created Iran's theocratic government.

Later that year, university students overran the U.S. Embassy in Tehran, seeking the shah's extradition and sparking the 444-day hostage crisis that saw diplomatic relations between Iran and the U.S. severed. The Iran-Iraq war of the 1980s saw the U.S. back Saddam Hussein. The "Tanker War" during that conflict saw the U.S. launch a one-day assault that crippled Iran at sea, while the U.S. later shot down an Iranian commercial airliner that the U.S. military said it mistook for a warplane.

Iran and the U.S. have seesawed between enmity and grudging diplomacy in the years since, with relations peaking when Tehran made the 2015 nuclear deal with world powers. But Trump unilaterally withdrew the U.S. from the accord in 2018, sparking tensions in the Mideast that persist today.

Can apes play pretend? Scientists use an imaginary tea party to find out

By ADITHI RAMAKRISHNAN AP Science Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — By age 2, most kids know how to play pretend. They turn their bedrooms into far-away castles and hold make-believe tea parties.

The ability to make something out of nothing may seem uniquely human — a bedrock of creativity that's led to new kinds of art, music and more.

Now, for the first time, an experiment hints that an ape in captivity can have an imagination.

"What's really exciting about this work is that it suggests that the roots of this capacity for imagination are not unique to our species," said study co-author Christopher Krupenye with Johns Hopkins University.

Enter Kanzi, a bonobo who was raised in a lab and became a whiz at communicating with humans using graphic symbols. He combined different symbols to make them mean new things and learned how to create simple stone tools.

Scientists wondered whether Kanzi had the capacity to play pretend — that is, act like something is real while knowing it's not. They'd heard reports of female chimpanzees in the wild holding sticks as though they were babies and chimps in captivity dragging imaginary blocks on the ground after playing with real ones.

But imagination is abstract, so it's hard to know what's going on in the apes' heads. They could just be imitating researchers or mistaking imaginary objects for the real thing.

Researchers adapted the playbook for studying young children to stage a juice party for Kanzi. They poured imaginary juice from a pitcher into two cups, then pretended to empty just one. They asked Kanzi which cup he wanted and he pointed to the cup still containing pretend juice 68% of the time.

To make sure Kanzi wasn't confusing real with fake, they also ran a test with actual juice. Kanzi chose the real juice over the pretend almost 80% of the time, "which suggests that he really can tell the difference between real juice and imaginary juice," said Amalia Bastos, a study co-author from the University of St. Andrews in Scotland.

A third experiment placing fake grapes into two jars had similar positive results.

But not all scientists are convinced that Kanzi is playing pretend like humans do. There's a difference between envisioning juice being poured into a cup and maintaining the pretense that it's real, said Duke University comparative psychologist Michael Tomasello.

"To be convinced of that I would need to see Kanzi actually pretend to pour water into a container himself," Tomasello wrote in an email. He had no role in the study, which was published Thursday in the journal *Science*.

Kanzi grew up among humans, so it's hard to say whether his abilities extend to all apes or are because of his special upbringing. He died last year at the age of 44.

Many great ape species in the wild are critically endangered and it'll take more research to understand what their minds are capable of.

"Kanzi opened this path for a lot of future studies," Bastos said.

Chairman of prominent law firm Paul Weiss resigns after release of emails linking him to Epstein

By MEG KINNARD Associated Press

Brad Karp, chairman of one of the country's most prestigious law firms, has resigned from his position after the release of emails revealing his exchanges with Jeffrey Epstein, a high-profile departure in the fallout among those with ties to the late convicted sex offender.

A statement Wednesday from Paul, Weiss, Rifkind, Wharton & Garrison did not explicitly mention any connection Karp had with Epstein, whom the firm has said it never represented. But Karp, who will remain at the firm where he has practiced for 40 years and served as chairman since 2008, said "recent reporting has created a distraction and has placed a focus on me that is not in the best interests" of Paul Weiss.

The Department of Justice last week released the largest batch of documents so far from its Epstein investigative files in compliance with a new law intended to reveal what the government knew about the millionaire financier's sexual abuse of young girls, as well as his interactions with rich and powerful people.

Former President Bill Clinton and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton have agreed to testify before a House committee investigating Epstein after Republicans pressed for criminal contempt of Congress charges against them. Bill Clinton, like a number of other high-powered men including President Donald Trump, had a well-documented relationship with Epstein in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Neither Trump nor Clinton has been credibly accused of wrongdoing in their interactions with the late financier.

The fallout has spread beyond the United States. A top official in Slovakia resigned after photos and emails revealed he had met with Epstein in the years after Epstein was released from jail, and British Prime Minister Keir Starmer issued an apology for appointing an ambassador to Washington who had ties to Epstein.

Among the newly released documents was a July 22, 2015, email in which Karp thanked Epstein for hosting an evening that the lawyer said was "once in a lifetime" and one he would "never forget." Epstein responded that Karp was "always welcome," adding, "there are many many nights of unique talents. you will be invited often."

Later that day, Epstein told Karp he wanted to connect him with Larry Summers, whom he described as "funny and warm." Summers is a former treasury secretary and Harvard University president who has been ostracized from a number of organizations after Epstein files made public earlier showed his close relationship with Epstein.

In 2016, Karp was trying to help his son, who was interested in a film career, and reached out to Epstein in hopes of making a connection with Woody Allen. Karp's son sent several follow-up messages to Epstein, but it was not clear whether they connected further. In 2018, Karp was invited for dinner with Epstein. Karp said he could arrange to have a car outside to take him back to his office for a video call, before rejoining the dinner.

"Im easy," Epstein, in suggesting arrangements. "I know you are," Karp replied.

The messages between the two continued through the years.

In February 2019, Karp emailed with Epstein seeking advice on behalf of John Havens, the former Citigroup president who, according to Karp's message, needed "immediate help" before Haven's name came out in what turned out to be a Florida massage parlor investigation. Epstein also offered help finding a local lawyer for New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft in the matter, with Karp suggesting Kraft needed "the best there is."

Both Kraft and Havens were among 300 men accused of being patrons of massage parlors engaging in prostitution.

A month later, Karp was apparently reviewing a draft court filing in which Epstein's lawyers argued that his plea deal in a decade-old federal sex abuse investigation in Florida should not be reopened.

"The draft motion is in great shape. It's overwhelmingly persuasive. Truly," Karp wrote in a March 3, 2019, email to Epstein, according to documents published online by the Justice Department. "I particularly liked the argument that the 'victims' lied in wait and sat on their rights for their strategic advantage, knowing you were in prison, before they came forward."

Epstein pleaded guilty to state charges in that case, spent 13 months in jail, paid settlements to victims and became a registered sex offender.

Paul Weiss was founded in 1875. The storied New York firm has advanced the cause of civil rights, handled the legal affairs of corporate power brokers and grown into a multibillion-dollar global enterprise.

In his return to the White House, Trump has sought to exercise retribution against firms whose lawyers have performed legal work with which he disagrees. Paul Weiss was among the targets. In March 2025, the Republican president issued an executive order threatening the suspension of security clearances for its attorneys as well as the termination of any federal contracts involving the firm.

That order noted that a former Paul Weiss attorney, Mark Pomerantz, had been a central player in an investigation by the Manhattan district attorney's office into Trump's finances before Trump became president.

Karp was initially prepared to sue over the order, saying his firm "would not be able to survive a protracted dispute with the Administration." Karp later cut a deal with Trump, saying that he did so to save the firm. The move was ridiculed by lawyers outside Paul Weiss, and more than 140 alums of the firm signed a letter assailing it as well.

What to know after scores were killed in Nigeria while abducted Christians came home

By DYEPKAZAH SHIBAYAN, MARK BANCHEREAU and OPE ADETAYO Associated Press

ABUJA, Nigeria (AP) — Nigeria is battling militants and it's causing a terrible security situation.

Gunmen believed to be Islamic extremists killed scores of people in a western Nigerian state that is becoming a new hot spot for the violence that affects large parts of Africa's most populous country.

Local officials said at least 162 people died in the Tuesday attack and that the victims in the Muslim-majority villages of Woro and Nuku in Kwara state were targeted for refusing extremist ideology. The gunmen razed homes and looted shops.

The attack is the latest in a surge in violence in Kwara, as well as other conflict hot spots, despite recent support from the U.S. military.

Separately on Thursday, the governor of Kaduna state announced that all 183 Christians abducted from churches last month are free. He did not give details of how this was achieved.

Groups may ally with each other to fight the government

Nigeria is facing a protracted fight with dozens of local armed groups increasingly battling for turf, including Islamist sects like the homegrown Boko Haram and its breakaway faction Islamic State West Africa Province. There is also the Islamic State group-linked Lakurawa, as well as other "bandit" groups that specialize in kidnapping for ransom and in illegal mining.

Recently, the crisis has worsened to include other militants from the neighboring Sahel region, including the Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin, which claimed its first attack on Nigerian soil last year.

Analysts say Nigeria's recent military campaigns against the armed groups in the north, added to the growing competition within the groups, have contributed to the groups moving to new areas like Kwara through vast forests where it is difficult to hunt them.

"We may likely see the situation where these groups may come together to confront their common enemy, which is the state," said Malik Samuel, a security researcher at Good Governance Africa.

Attacks come as US intensifies response to the security crisis

The United States is supporting Nigeria in its military campaigns against the armed groups, despite some disagreements.

This week, the head of U.S. Africa Command said a small team of U.S. military officers are in Nigeria, focused on intelligence support.

Nigeria has been in the diplomatic crosshairs of the U.S. in recent months following threats by U.S. President Donald Trump to attack the country, alleging it is not doing enough to protect its Christian citizens.

While Christians have been among those targeted, analysts say the majority of victims of the armed groups are Muslims in Nigeria's north, where most attacks occur.

But the U.S.-Nigeria tensions have since eased and the two countries have begun to cooperate. In December, U.S. forces launched airstrikes on IS-affiliated militants in Nigeria.

Last month, Nigeria's government also said the U.S. has pledged to deliver military equipment purchased by the country but not yet delivered due to concerns about possible human rights abuses by Nigeria's security forces.

Kwara is emerging as a new frontier for armed groups, analysts say

Kwara State Gov. AbdulRahman AbdulRazaq said Tuesday's attack was likely carried out in response to recent counterterrorism operations in the region. Some of these operations have been launched based on intelligence from local communities.

Mohammed Omar Bio, a federal lawmaker from the district, blamed the attack on Lakurawa, whose members were targeted by the U.S. strikes in December, forcing some of them to flee to areas like Kwara.

Experts say that Kwara, which has seen a recent spike in deadly attacks and kidnappings, is fast becoming a new frontier for armed groups seeking to expand.

Companies can now claim 'no artificial colors' if they add plant-based color to food

By JONEL ALECCIA AP Health Writer

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration is relaxing rules that restrict when food companies can claim their products have no artificial colors.

The agency announced Thursday that food labels may claim to have "no artificial colors" when they are free of petroleum-based dyes, even when they contain dyes derived from natural sources such as plants. In the past, the FDA has allowed companies to make those claims only when products "had no added color whatsoever," the agency said in a statement.

The move is another step toward the Trump administration's aim to phase out synthetic dyes from the nation's food supply.

In a joint statement, Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and FDA Commissioner Marty Makary said the move would encourage companies to switch to natural rather than synthetic colors if they can claim their products contain no artificial colors.

"We are taking away that hindrance and making it easier for companies to use these colors in the foods our families eat every day," Makary said in a statement.

Kennedy and Makary have urged U.S. companies to voluntarily remove synthetic dyes from their products — and many food makers, such as PepsiCo and Nestle, have complied. In addition, some states have taken steps to ban artificial dyes from school meals.

The move drew praise from Consumer Brands, a trade group for packaged foods, which said "all natural ingredients should continue to follow a rigorous science and risk-based evaluation process."

"This is a positive example of the FDA taking the lead on ingredient safety and transparency," Sarah Gallo, the group's senior vice president, said in a statement.

But the label change could mislead consumers, said Sarah Sorscher, director of regulatory affairs for the Center for Science in the Public Interest, an advocacy group. It would allow a claim of "no artificial colors" for any color additive that is not a petroleum-based certified color, including potentially harmful additives such as titanium dioxide.

Also on Thursday, the FDA said it had approved a new natural dye, beetroot red, and expanded the use of spirulina extract, a color derived from algae that provides a blue hue in foods. The FDA currently allows roughly three dozen natural dyes in food products. The agency banned a controversial dye known as Red No. 3 last year and has proposed banning a rarely-used hue, Orange B.

The agency also recently said it would review the six remaining petroleum-based dyes frequently used in the U.S. food supply: Green No. 3, Red No. 40, Yellow No. 5, Yellow No. 6, Blue No. 1 and Blue No. 2.

Health advocates have long called for the removal of artificial dyes from foods, citing inconclusive studies that found they could cause neurobehavioral problems, including hyperactivity and attention issues

in some children. Other health experts have noted that bright synthetic colors are a key component of ultraprocessed foods marketed to children, increasing consumption of added sugar, fat and sodium that can lead to health problems.

Still, the FDA's website on Thursday continued to acknowledge limited evidence for harms from artificial colors. "The totality of scientific evidence shows that most children have no adverse effects when consuming foods containing color additives, but some evidence suggests that certain children may be sensitive to them," the site said.

Pandemic disruptions to health care worsened cancer survival, study suggests

By MIKE STOBBE AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — During the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, experts worried that disruptions to cancer diagnosis and treatment would cost lives. A new study suggests they were right.

The federally funded study published Thursday by the medical journal JAMA Oncology is being called the first to assess the effects of pandemic-related disruptions on the short-term survival of cancer patients.

Researchers found that people diagnosed with cancer in 2020 and 2021 had worse short-term survival than those diagnosed between 2015 and 2019. That was true across a range of cancers, and whether they were diagnosed at a late or early stage.

Of course, COVID-19 itself was especially dangerous to patients already weakened by cancer, but the researchers worked to filter out deaths mainly attributed to the coronavirus, so they could see if other factors played a role.

The researchers were not able to definitively show what drove worse survival, said Todd Burus of the University of Kentucky, the study's lead author.

"But disruptions to the health care system were probably a key contributor," said Burus, who specializes in medical data analysis.

COVID-19 forced many people to postpone cancer screenings — colonoscopies, mammograms and lung scans — as the coronavirus overwhelmed doctors and hospitals, especially in 2020.

Earlier research had shown that overall cancer death rates in the U.S. continued to decline throughout the pandemic, and there weren't huge shifts in late diagnoses.

Recinda Sherman, a researcher on that earlier paper, applauded the new work.

"As this study is the first to document pandemic-related, cause-specific survival, I think it is important," said Sherman, of the North American Association of Central Cancer Registries. "The more we understand about the impact of COVID-19, the better we will be able to prepare for the next one."

How could overall cancer death rates decline in 2020 and 2021, while short-term survival worsen for newly diagnosed patients?

Cancer prevention, diagnosis and treatment measures that for years had been pushing cancer death rates down did not suddenly disappear during the pandemic, Burus noted.

"We didn't forget how to do those things," he said. "But disruptions could have changed access, could have changed how quickly people were getting treated."

Further research will show if any impact was lasting, said Hyuna Sung, senior principal scientist and cancer epidemiologist at the American Cancer Society.

"Transient declines in survival that quickly recover may have little impact on long-term mortality trends," she said.

The new study tapped national cancer registry data to focus more specifically on patients who had a first diagnosis of a malignant cancer in 2020 and 2021. More than 1 million people were diagnosed with cancer in those two years, and about 144,000 died within one year, according to the researchers' data.

The researchers looked at one-year survival rates for those patients, checking for what stage they were at the time of diagnosis.

They calculated that one-year survival was lower for both early- and late-stage diagnoses, for all can-

cer sites combined. Most worrisome were large differences seen in colorectal, prostate and pancreatic cancers, they said.

Overall, the researchers found that more than 96% of people who got an early-stage cancer diagnosis in 2020 and 2021 — and more than 74% of those with a late-stage diagnosis — survived more than a year. Those rates were slightly lower than would have been expected based on 2015-2019 trends, resulting in about 17,400 more deaths than expected.

A timeline of the Jeffrey Epstein investigation and the fight to make the government's files public

By The Associated Press undefined

For much of two decades, police, FBI agents and prosecutors investigated allegations that Jeffrey Epstein sexually abused underage girls. Now, the Justice Department has released much of what they found to the public.

The millions of documents comprise the most detailed look yet at the inner workings of the multiple investigations into Epstein and his longtime confidant Ghislaine Maxwell.

Those documents include some of the earliest police reports taken by police in Palm Beach, Florida, as well as recordings of some of Epstein's victims speaking on the phone and to investigators. And it includes internal Justice Department emails from as recently as a few months ago.

Here is a timeline of the Epstein investigations and the efforts to open up the government's files:

The investigation begins

March 2005: Palm Beach police begin investigating Epstein after the family of a 14-year-old girl reports she was molested at his mansion. Multiple underage girls, many of them high school students, would later tell police that Epstein hired them to give sexual massages.

May 2006: Police officials sign paperwork to charge Epstein with multiple counts of unlawful sex with a minor, but the county's top prosecutor, State Attorney Barry Krischer, takes the unusual step of sending the case to a grand jury.

July 2006: Epstein is arrested after a grand jury indicts him on a count of soliciting prostitution. The relatively minor charge upsets Palm Beach police leaders, who publicly accuse Krischer of giving Epstein special treatment. The FBI begins an investigation.

2007: Federal prosecutors prepare an indictment, but for a year Epstein's lawyers engage in talks with the U.S. attorney in Miami, Alexander Acosta, about a deal that would avoid federal prosecution. Epstein's lawyers decry his accusers as unreliable.

Secret deal leads to a light jail term

June 2008: Epstein pleads guilty to state charges: one count of soliciting prostitution and one count of soliciting prostitution from someone under the age of 18. He is sentenced to 18 months in jail. Under a secret arrangement, the U.S. attorney's office agrees not to prosecute Epstein for federal crimes. Epstein serves most of his sentence in a work-release program that allows him to leave jail during the day.

May 2009: One of Epstein's accusers, Virginia Roberts Giuffre, files a lawsuit claiming Epstein and Maxwell arranged for her to have sexual encounters with "royalty, politicians, academicians, businessmen" and others. The lawsuit doesn't name the men.

July 2009: Epstein is released from jail. For the next decade, Epstein's accusers wage a legal fight to get his federal non-prosecution agreement voided.

News media and lawsuits keep public interest high

March 2, 2011: The Daily Mail publishes an interview with Giuffre in which she describes traveling with Epstein to London at age 17 and spending a night dancing with Andrew Mountbatten-Windsor, then known as Prince Andrew. The story and a photo of the prince with his arm around Giuffre creates a crisis for the royal family. FBI agents subsequently interview Giuffre.

Dec. 30, 2014: Giuffre's lawyers file court papers claiming she had sexual encounters with Mountbatten-Windsor and other men, including "foreign presidents, a well-known Prime Minister, and other world lead-

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ers." All those men deny the allegations.

November 2018: The Miami Herald revisits the handling of Epstein's case in a series of stories focusing partly on the role of Acosta — who by this point is President Donald Trump's labor secretary. The coverage intensifies public interest in Epstein.

New York prosecutors revive case

Dec. 6, 2018: FBI agents and the U.S. attorney's office in Manhattan begin a new investigation into Epstein.

July 6, 2019: Epstein is arrested on new sex trafficking charges brought by the prosecutors in New York, who have concluded they aren't bound by the earlier non-prosecution agreement with Epstein in Florida. Days later, Acosta resigns as labor secretary.

Aug. 10, 2019: Epstein kills himself in his jail cell in New York.

July 2, 2020: Federal prosecutors in New York charge Maxwell with sex crimes, saying she helped recruit and abuse Epstein's victims.

Dec. 30, 2021: After a monthlong trial, a jury convicts Maxwell of sex trafficking and other crimes.

June 28, 2022: Maxwell is sentenced to 20 years in prison.

January, 2024: Public interest in the Epstein case surges again after a judge makes more court records public in a related lawsuit.

A new president and a fresh political crisis

Jan. 20, 2025: Trump, who was friends and neighbors with Epstein for years, becomes president again. During his 2024 campaign, he had suggested that he'd seek to open more government files on Epstein.

February 2025: Attorney General Pam Bondi suggests in a Fox News Channel interview that an Epstein "client list" is sitting on her desk. The Justice Department distributes binders marked "declassified" to far-right influencers, but much of the information had long been public.

April 25, 2025: Giuffre dies by suicide.

July 7, 2025: The Justice Department says Epstein didn't maintain a "client list" and it won't make any more files related to his sex trafficking investigation public.

July 15, 2025: Reps. Ro Khanna, D-Calif., and Thomas Massie, R-Ky., introduce the Epstein Files Transparency Act, which would force the Justice Department to make its investigative files on Epstein public.

July 17, 2025: The Wall Street Journal describes a sexually suggestive letter that the newspaper says bore Trump's name and was included in a 2003 album for Epstein's 50th birthday. Trump denies writing the letter and sues the newspaper.

July 24-25, 2025: In an effort to put a political crisis to rest, Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche interviews Maxwell. She denies wrongdoing and says she never saw Trump involved in any sexually inappropriate activity. Afterward, she is moved from a low-security prison in Florida to a minimum-security prison camp in Texas.

A prince loses his royal title

Oct. 21, 2025: Giuffre's posthumous memoir is published. In it, she revisits her claims that Epstein and Maxwell sexually trafficked her to powerful men, including Mountbatten-Windsor.

Oct. 30, 2025: King Charles III strips Mountbatten-Windsor of his remaining titles, meaning he can no longer be referred to as "prince," and evicts him from his royal residence.

Nov. 12, 2025: A House committee releases a trove of email correspondence between Epstein and others, including Mountbatten-Windsor, Trump ally Steve Bannon, ex-Treasury Secretary Larry Summers and LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman. In one 2019 email to a journalist, Epstein wrote that Trump "knew about the girls" but didn't explain what he meant by that.

Nov. 14, 2025: At Trump's urging, Bondi announces that the U.S. attorney in Manhattan will investigate Epstein's ties to some of the Republican president's political foes, including former President Bill Clinton, a Democrat; Summers; and Hoffman, a prominent Democratic donor. None of those men has been accused of misconduct by Epstein's accusers.

Nov. 18, 2025: Congress passes the Epstein Files Transparency Act. Trump signs it into law the next day.

Dec. 19, 2025: The Justice Department begins releasing records. The batch includes snapshots that Epstein kept in his home of various famous people he met over the years, including Trump and Clinton.

After releasing just a sliver of the available documents, though, the Justice Department halts disclosures, saying it needs more time to review the records.

Jan. 30, 2025.: The Justice Department begins releasing what Blanche says are more than 3 million pages of documents, 2,000 videos and 180,000 images. The files are posted to the department's website.

US job openings fall to 6.5 million, fewest since 2020, as labor market remains sluggish

By PAUL WISEMAN AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) — U.S. job openings fell to the lowest level in more than five years, another sign that the American labor market remains sluggish.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that vacancies fell to 6.5 million in December — from 6.9 million in November and the fewest since September 2020. Layoffs rose slightly. The number of people quitting their jobs — which shows confidence in their prospects — was basically unchanged at 3.2 million.

December openings came in lower than economists had forecast.

The economy is in a puzzling place. Growth is strong: Gross domestic product — the nation's output of goods and services — advanced from July through September at the fastest pace in two years. But the job market is lackluster: Employers have added just 28,000 jobs a month since March. In the 2021-2023 hiring boom that followed COVID-19 lockdowns, by contrast, they were creating 400,000 jobs a month.

When the Labor Department releases hiring and unemployment numbers for January next Wednesday, they are expected to show the companies, government agencies and nonprofits added about 70,000 jobs last month — modest but up from 50,000 in December.

On Wednesday, payroll processor ADP reported that private employers added just 22,000 jobs last month, far fewer than forecasters had expected. And the outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas said Thursday that companies slashed more than 108,000 jobs last month, the most since October and the worst January for job cuts since 2009.

"The hiring recession isn't going to end anytime soon," Heather Long, chief economist at Navy Federal Credit Union, wrote in a commentary. "Job openings in December just fell to their lowest level since September 2020. It's yet another sign of how little hiring — or interest in hiring — is happening in this economy."

Economists are trying to figure out if hiring will accelerate to catch up to strong growth or if growth will slow to reflect a weak labor market or if advances in artificial intelligence and automation mean that the economy can roar ahead without creating many jobs.

Slotkin rejects Justice Department request for interview on Democrats' video about 'illegal orders'

By JOEY CAPPELLETTI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Democratic Sen. Elissa Slotkin of Michigan is refusing to voluntarily comply with a Justice Department investigation into a video she organized urging U.S. military members to resist "illegal orders" — escalating a dispute that President Donald Trump has publicly pushed.

In letters first obtained by The Associated Press, Slotkin's lawyer informed U.S. Attorney for the District of Columbia Jeanine Pirro that the senator would not agree to a voluntary interview about the video. Slotkin's legal team also requested that Pirro preserve all documents related to the matter for "anticipated litigation."

Slotkin's lawyer separately wrote to Attorney General Pam Bondi, declining to sit for an FBI interview about the video and urging her to immediately terminate any inquiry.

The refusal marks a potential turning point in the standoff, shifting the burden onto the Justice Department to decide whether it will escalate an investigation into sitting members of Congress or retreat from an inquiry now being openly challenged.

"I did this to go on offense," Slotkin said in an interview Wednesday. "And to put them in a position where they're tap dancing. To put them in a position where they have to own their choices of using a U.S. attorney's office to come after a senator."

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'It's not gonna stop unless I fight back'

Last November, Slotkin joined five other Democratic lawmakers — all of whom previously served in the military or at intelligence agencies — in posting a 90-second video urging U.S. service members to follow established military protocols and reject orders they believe to be unlawful.

The lawmakers said Trump's Republican administration was "pitting our uniformed military and intelligence community professionals against American citizens" and called on troops to "stand up for our laws."

The video sparked a firestorm in Republican circles and soon drew the attention of Trump, who accused the lawmakers of sedition and said their actions were "punishable by death."

The Pentagon later announced it had opened an investigation into Arizona Sen. Mark Kelly, a former Navy pilot who appeared in the video. The FBI then contacted the lawmakers seeking interviews, signaling a broader Justice Department inquiry.

Slotkin said multiple legal advisers initially urged caution.

"Maybe if you keep quiet, this will all go away over Christmas," Slotkin said she was told.

But in January, the matter flared again, with the lawmakers saying they were contacted by the U.S. attorney's office for the District of Columbia.

Meanwhile, security threats mounted. Slotkin said her farm in Michigan received a bomb threat, her brother was assigned a police detail due to threats and her parents were swatted in the middle of the night.

Her father, who died in January after a long battle with cancer, "could barely walk and he's dealing with the cops in his home," she said.

Slotkin said a "switch went off" in her and she became angry: "And I said, 'It's not gonna stop unless I fight back.'"

Democratic senators draw a line

The requests from the FBI and the Justice Department have been voluntary. Slotkin said that her legal team had communicated with prosecutors but that officials "keep asking for a personal interview."

Slotkin's lawyer, Preet Bharara, in the letter to Pirro declined the interview request and asked that she "immediately terminate any open investigation and cease any further inquiry concerning the video." In the other letter, Bharara urged Bondi to use her authority to direct Pirro to close the inquiry.

Bharara wrote that Slotkin's constitutional rights had been infringed and said litigation is being considered.

"All options are most definitely on the table," Slotkin said. Asked whether she would comply with a subpoena, she paused before responding: "I'd take a hard look at it."

Bharara, who's representing Slotkin in the case, is a former U.S. attorney in New York who was fired by Trump in 2017 during his first administration. He's also representing Democratic Sen. Adam Schiff of California in a separate case involving the Justice Department.

Kelly has similarly pushed back, suing the Pentagon last month over attempts to punish him for the video. On Tuesday, a federal judge said that he knows of no U.S. Supreme Court precedent to justify the Pentagon's censuring of Kelly as he weighed whether to intervene.

Slotkin said she's in contact with the other lawmakers who appeared in the video, but she wouldn't say what their plans were in the investigations.

A rising profile

Trump has frequently and consistently targeted his political opponents. In some cases, those attacks have had the unintended consequence of elevating their national standing.

In Kelly's case, he raised more than \$12.5 million in the final months of 2025 following the "illegal orders" video controversy, according to campaign finance filings.

Slotkin, like Kelly, has been mentioned among Democrats who could emerge as presidential contenders in 2028.

She previously represented one of the nation's most competitive House districts before winning a Senate seat in Michigan in 2024, even as Trump carried the state.

Slotkin delivered the Democratic response to Trump's address to Congress last year and has since urged her party to confront him more aggressively, saying Democrats had lost their "alpha energy" and calling on them to "go nuclear" against Trump's redistricting push.

"If I'm encouraging other people to take risk, how can I not then accept risk myself?" Slotkin said. "I think you've got to show people that we're not going to lay down and take it."

Justice Department steps up pressure on cartels' financial networks as launderers turn to crypto

By ALANNA DURKIN RICHER Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department is taking direct aim at the financial lifelines of Mexico's most violent drug cartels, targeting money brokers who prosecutors say have adapted to intensified enforcement by increasingly routing drug profits through cryptocurrency from American cities to cartel leaders in Mexico.

The cases of four defendants recently sent from Mexico to the U.S. for prosecution provide a glimpse into shadowy money laundering networks that allow the Jalisco New Generation Cartel and other violent groups to continue pumping dangerous drugs into American communities. The prosecutions underscore the Justice Department's efforts to turn up the pressure on cartels and stay ahead of their sophisticated and ever-evolving tactics to launder money across the border without detection.

By targeting alleged money brokers — rather than street-level traffickers — prosecutors say they are aiming at a choke point they believe is essential to the cartels sustaining their operations as law enforcement pressure mounts on more visible drug routes.

"If you cut off the money, you hurt the cartels, and that's what we're trying to do," A. Tysen Duva, the assistant attorney general in charge of the Justice Department's criminal division, said in an interview with The Associated Press.

Since the beginning of President Donald Trump's second administration, the Mexican government has turned over more than 90 high-level defendants with ties to cartels in three transfers now at the center of a legal debate in Mexico. The defendants were wanted by U.S. prosecutors for crimes including drug trafficking, human smuggling and money laundering.

Senior Justice Department officials say bringing cartel figures to the United States is designed to do more than be a deterrent message. It could also lead to indictments against other high-level leaders if defendants cooperate, allowing prosecutors to reach higher into cartel leadership. Under Trump's Republican administration, the Justice Department has restructured the Criminal Division to integrate narcotics prosecutors with anti-money laundering experts to better target cartels and to reflect a broader shift toward targeting the financial systems that sustain their operations.

The latest transfers to the U.S. include alleged Mexico-based money brokers, who authorities say oversee the movement of drug proceeds and pocket a percentage of the money that returns to the cartels as a commission, according to court papers. The brokers arrange for cash to be picked up in cities across the U.S. and conceal the money to get it across the border, often through digital assets as law enforcement has cut off other methods.

Prosecutors "want to hear on the distribution side how it works, who is involved, and seek additional indictments, and on the money laundering side, exactly the methods that they are using to get the money out of the United States through the U.S. banks," Duva said. "There's bulk cash smuggling that has been going on since the beginning of time, and then also sort of the newer trend of taking the cash, buying cryptocurrency, and then trading that cryptocurrency."

Eduardo Rigoberto Velasco Calderon, Eliomar Segura Torres, Manuel Ignacio Correa and Cesar Linares-Orozco face money laundering conspiracy charges in indictments filed in Kentucky's federal court. An attorney for Linares-Orozco declined to comment in an email to the AP, and no attorneys were listed in court papers for the other defendants.

The January transfer of 37 defendants from Mexico to the U.S. marked the third of its kind under Trump's second term. Observers have described the transfers as an offering by Mexican authorities to offset mounting threats by Trump to take military action against cartels.

A group of lawyers and family members of cartel figures have accused Mexico of breaking the law by

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sending them without an extradition order. Mexico's government has maintained the transfers were legal, carried out in the name of national security.

Today in History: February 6, Queen Elizabeth II accedes to throne

By The Associated Press undefined

Today is Friday, Feb. 6, the 37th day of 2026. There are 328 days left in the year.

Today in history:

On Feb. 6, 1952, Britain's King George VI, 56, died at Sandringham House in Norfolk, England; he was succeeded as monarch by his 25-year-old eldest daughter, who became Queen Elizabeth II.

Also on this date:

In 1778, during the American Revolutionary War, the United States won official recognition and military support from France with the signing of the Treaty of Alliance in Paris.

In 1862, during the Civil War, Fort Henry in Tennessee fell to Union forces.

In 1899, a peace treaty between the United States and Spain was ratified by the U.S. Senate; the treaty ended the Spanish-American War and ceded the Philippines, Puerto Rico and Guam to the United States.

In 1921, "The Kid," Charlie Chaplin's first feature-length film, was released across the United States.

In 1998, Washington National Airport was renamed Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, honoring the former president on his 87th birthday.

In 2013, toy maker Hasbro Inc. announced that Monopoly fans had voted online to add a cat token to the board game, replacing the iron.

In 2022, Queen Elizabeth II celebrated the 70th anniversary of her ascendance to the British throne, an unprecedented reign that made her a symbol of stability in the United Kingdom.

In 2023, a powerful 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Turkey and Syria, toppling thousands of buildings and trapping residents under mounds of rubble; the death toll would eventually surpass 50,000.

Today's birthdays: Actor Mike Farrell is 87. Former NBC News anchorman Tom Brokaw is 86. Singer Fabian is 83. Filmmaker Jim Sheridan is 77. Tennis Hall of Famer Manuel Orantes is 77. Actor Kathy Najimy is 69. Actor-director Robert Townsend is 69. Rock singer Axl Rose (Guns N' Roses) is 64. Singer Rick Astley is 60. Actor Charlie Heaton is 32. Actor Shelby Simmons is 24.